

NECESSARY ABSENCE: FAMILIAL DISTANCE AND THE ADULT IMMIGRANT CHILD IN  
KOREAN AMERICAN FICTION

by

Alexandria Faulkenbury

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Director of Thesis: Dr. Su-ching Huang

Major Department: English

In the novels *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee, *The Interpreter* by Suki Kim, and *Free Food for Millionaires* by Min Jin Lee, adult immigrant children feature as protagonists and experience moments of life-defining difficulty and distance associated with their parental relationships. Having come to the U.S. as young children, the protagonists are members of the 1.5 generation and retain some memories of their home country while lacking the deep-seated connections of their parents. They also find themselves caught between first generation immigrants who feel strongly connected to their home country and their second generation peers who feel more connected to the U.S. The absences caused by this in-between status become catalysts for characters addressing the disconnect between their adult selves and their aging or deceased parents. The reconciliation of these disconnections often leads to further examination of competing cultures in these characters' lives as they struggle to form distinct identities. These divides highlight the chasm between the American dream and the daily realities faced by immigrants in the U.S. and point to larger themes of loss, identity, and family that can be more broadly applied.



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Alexandria Faulkenbury

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by

Alexandria Faulkenbury

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF

THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_

(Su-ching Huang, PhD)

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

(Richard Taylor, PhD)

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

(Jessica Bardill, PhD)

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT

OF (English): \_\_\_\_\_

(Donald Palumbo, PhD)

DEAN OF THE

GRADUATE SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

## DEDICATION

To Evan —Words have failed me in adequately capturing your contributions to my work, so I'll keep it simple. Thank you. You're my favorite.

And to Clara —I could never have finished this work without the joyful and necessary distractions that only a toddler can offer. Mommy loves you!

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## INTRODUCTION

I have spent most of my life moving. When I was growing up, my father's profession meant that we never lived anywhere longer than three years, frequently less. And the nature of his job took us all over the world, so I lived most of my formative years outside the United States. In my junior year of high school, a new assignment took us from Hong Kong back to the U.S. for a yearlong stay. Before I left, my high school counselor warned me about the reverse culture shock of going home again, but being an all-knowing teenager, I did not give it much thought. However, when I arrived in the U.S., I felt completely lost in this place I called home. In fact, I felt like I no longer had a home. I even had a difficult time explaining these feelings to my parents, who spent most of their adult lives in the U.S. before going abroad. I simply could not find the words to express why I, an American, felt so out of place here. Eventually, we moved and when I returned to the U.S. for college I had a smoother re-entry, but the memory of that anxiety and my inability to express those emotions to my parents has stayed with me. So when I read Suki Kim's book, *Without You There Is No Us*, I felt drawn to her observations on home and loss. Though the book focuses on her yearlong sojourn in North Korea, she touches on her family's immigration to the U.S. from South Korea when she was thirteen. She writes, "When you lose your home at a young age, you spend your life looking for its replacement" (S. Kim, *Without You There Is No Us* 10). I connected with this sentiment, albeit on a small scale, in the memories of that first move back to the U.S., but I was also intrigued by the idea that these feelings could follow an individual into adulthood and color decisions and daily life. And, having experienced the difficulty of connecting with my own parents on the subject, I wanted to know how these feelings of loss played out within the Korean immigrant family, particularly in parent-

child relationships. Therefore, for this study, I sought out novels that focused on the disruption of family and home in Korean American families.

Focusing on three novels about Korean American immigrants, this study explores literal and figurative gaps between immigrant children and their parents and considers how relational distance can create cultural displacement in adulthood. In the novels *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee, *The Interpreter* by Suki Kim, and *Free Food for Millionaires* by Min Jin Lee, adult immigrant children feature as protagonists and experience moments of life-defining difficulty and distance associated with their parental relationships. Often these absences are unavoidable, even necessary, for parents trying to give their children the better life they sought in coming to the U.S., but the consequences are long lasting. Frequently, death becomes a permanent distance marker between parent and child as seen in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. Though his father dies when he is an adult, the death of Henry's mother during his childhood dramatically alters his sense of home and plays a significant role in how he relates to both himself and his father as Korean American. In *The Interpreter*, Suzy Park's parents are strangers to their daughters long before their deaths as they work grueling hours in a twenty-four-hour market, frequently leaving Suzy alone in their empty home. Consequently, she cannot remember their faces in the daylight because she so rarely saw them before dark (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 110). At other times, the absence results from generational conflict compounded by physical abuse and neglect. In *Free Food for Millionaires*, Casey's parents are both alive and well, but unspoken communication and physical altercations between parent and child drives a wedge in their relationship and force Casey from the family home. In all of these cases, the distances created in childhood increase in adulthood and are, in some ways, necessary to the development of the protagonist. To put it another way, these absences become catalysts for characters addressing the disconnect between

their adult selves and their aging or deceased parents. The reconciliation of these disconnections often leads to further examination of opposing cultures in these characters' lives as they struggle to form distinct identities. The clash of these cultural identities speaks to both the longing for and rejection of a homeland that feels worlds away and the burden of an equally alienating position in U.S. society. These divides also highlight the chasm between the American dream and the daily realities faced by immigrants in the U.S.

Writings on the Asian American immigrant experience have often neglected the children who immigrate with their parents and have instead focused on the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Elaine Kim asserts that most Asian American literature is "written primarily by American-born, American-educated Asians whose first language is English" (88). As such, she states, much of Asian American literature "is focused on claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity" (E. Kim 88). Likewise, Min Zhou argues that from a sociological perspective, children of immigrants "lack meaningful connections to their 'old' world ... They instead are prone to evaluate themselves ... by the standards of their new country" (64). However, immigrant children who come to the U.S. with their parents, and the adults they become, often find themselves in the space between American born children and their immigrant parents. And Korean Americans in particular have a complex connection to the in-between space that exists between their past and present.

The idea of the lost home and its effects on the family carries throughout the history of Korea and Korean American immigration. While I will not give a detailed history of Korea and Korean immigration into the U.S., some historical context is necessary to understand themes of loss and familial distance in Korean American literature. In 1910, Koreans quite literally lost their homeland as Japan forced the Korean government to sign an annexation agreement making

Korea a colony of Japan (Hurh 1329). With the colonization of Korea, the country “had its cultural heritage and identity uprooted when the Japanese government prohibited the use of Korean language and forced Koreans to change to Japanese-style names” (Hurh 1332). Further loss arrived in 1950 with the onset of the Korean War. Families, like Suki Kim’s, were forever separated from one another, wealth and status were lost, and homes were destroyed in the division of North and South Korea (Hurh 1337).

Even after immigrating to the U.S., Korean Americans experienced exclusion and distance. Typically, Korean immigration to the U.S. is categorized in three waves with the first wave beginning in 1903. This first wave brought primarily men, and later their wives, to work on sugar plantations in Hawai’i. Comprising the second wave, “post-Korean War immigration” was largely made up of the Korean wives of American soldiers and Korean War orphans who arrived between 1951 and 1964. The third wave began with the 1965 Immigration Act and has represented the largest wave of Korean immigration into the U.S. (Hurh 1337). Both before and throughout Korean immigration to the U.S., laws have been enforced to ensure Korean and other Asian Americans of their marginalized place in their new country. One such law was the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely limited entry of Asian immigrants into the U.S. (Hurh 1329). Writing about the 1924 act and other limiting laws on Asian Americans, Tracey Dianne Wood notes, “Asian Americans have been legally and socially excluded from participation in America’s domestic life, and while these bans on citizenship and immigration were finally lifted after 1965, the feeling of social exclusion has not disappeared” (170). To put it another way, even as Korean immigrants left a homeland with a history of loss, those feelings of exclusion from the ‘family’ of the nation were there to greet them upon their arrival to the U.S. and have remained a reminder of their relegation to the margins of society ever since.

Though Korean Americans have moved to locations all over the United States, the three novels covered here all take place in and around New York City. Much has been written about the Korean American population of Los Angeles, but New York City provides a particularly salient setting for novels about the 1.5 generation. As Phillip Kasinitz writes, “New York, more than most places, has historically honored the sort of hybridity and innovation that comes easily to the 1.5 generation” (Kasinitz). And indeed, New York City does seem to offer options that would appeal to someone continually asked to choose between identities. It is known as a place where an individual can become anyone they wish. There is a neighborhood for everyone and a shop that caters to every need. And yet, New York City’s seemingly limitless choices can also paralyze those who may wish for a narrower field of options. For the adult immigrant children in the novels covered here, New York City, in some ways, represents the competing cultures in their lives. Henry Park in *Native Speaker* loves the streets of New York because the many languages spoken remind of his Korean mother and father and their multi-lingual interactions with customers in their grocery store. But that linguistic variety exists in a different New York City from the glittering high-rise buildings where he works, and he always worries he will slip up and be told he does not belong. Likewise, Suzy Park loves the anonymity offered by the city, but it ultimately leads to her isolation. Finally, Casey Han enjoys the glitzy shops on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, but loathes her parents’ dimly lit apartment in Queens. New York City does indeed offer hybridity to its inhabitants, but sometimes the numerous options it affords overwhelms those who want a simple choice. Therefore, New York City provides an exceptional background for the Korean American families in the novels covered here as they struggle to make decisions concerning their lives and identities.

Though this study examines the children of Korean immigrants, their larger history remains a part of their lives through their parents, so it cannot be ignored in an analysis of their familial relationships. Noting the connections between familial distance and the collective past of Korean Americans in literature, Lincoln Stone contends, “the new [Korean American] literature emphasizes the complexities, struggles, and layering of various facets of one’s identity, which are shaped at least in part by the history and the politics of the Korean homeland” (47). In other words, the immigrant children of these first-generation Korean Americans grow up with the very real understanding of their parents’ suffering and sacrifice, which contributes to their identity. At the same time, their memories of Korea are often murky or non-existent, and they struggle with connections to their homeland while simultaneously determining how to be active members of U.S. society.

This understanding, or lack thereof, of their collective past greatly influences how the children of Korean immigrants comprehend themselves and their relationships to their family and home. In her exploration of the children of Korean immigrants, Kyeyoung Park argues, “what is significant for increasing numbers of Korean American youth is not the struggle with the issue of identity but the formation of the Korean American community, starting with the family” (159). But I argue that there is no separate between the two because the struggle for issues of identity are intimately rooted in questions of home and family. Therefore, the understanding of disruptions in the family structure aids in the comprehension of one’s identity. A further connection between these issues can be seen in Wood’s argument that Korean American literature uses notions of family and home to highlight issues of identity and belonging, but what sets it apart from other strands of Asian American literature is the “absence of family” (172). In short, the exploration of Korean American literature must reconcile familial

distance with ideas of belonging and identity to come to an effective understanding of its subject matter. The collective tragedies of Korean history, the disruption of the home and family through relocation to the U.S., and intergenerational conflict all contribute to these absences and the feelings of displacement they cause.

The immigrant children who embody this sense of cultural displacement are often referred to as the 1.5 generation. The term “1.5 generation” first came into use in the 1970s, but it was the editor of the *Korea Times English Edition*, K.W. Lee, who first described the generation in print (K. Park 140). Since its inception, the term has gone through multiple definitions, but loosely refers to children who relocated to the U.S. from Korea with their parents at a young age. The age range to qualify for the 1.5 generation has been contested over the years with Won Moo Hurh arguing that only children who leave Korea between the ages of eleven and sixteen fit the label (K. Park 140). Kyeyoung Park, on the other hand, observes that the Korean American community offers more flexibility in how it defines its own 1.5-generation members (140). Additionally, some second-generation Korean Americans experience the feelings of displacement within the family as keenly as anyone in the 1.5 generation. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to use Park’s definition of the 1.5 generation: “people of Korean descent to who came to the U.S. as minors (infants, children, or adolescents) or are U.S. born, and who practice aspects of biculturalism/multiculturalism involving Korean and American cultures, often with conflict” (K. Park 158). This more expansive definition allows both Henry Park of *Native Speaker*, who is born in the U.S., and Casey Han of *Free Food for Millionaires*, who arrives at age six, to be examined as members of the 1.5 generation. Regardless of age upon arrival, this generation feels they are neither fully first generation nor second generation Americans, hence the moniker, “1.5.”

Just as the 1.5 generation must deal with the pull between two cultures, so they must also contend with the expectations from both their Korean parents and their new home country. Therefore, it is also important to examine Korean American family connections and disconnections to the United States as a nation. Noting the association between the two, Erin Ninh writes, “An effective understanding of the Asian American subject’s relation to the nation must therefore come to terms with the immigrant family as that nation’s intermediary and agent” (11). To put it another way, it is impossible to understand how a Korean American views his or her citizenship without first understanding the relationship of that individual to their family. This connection is so strong, in part, because both the Asian American family and its individual members are subjected to the standards of the model minority. The model minority is a term coined by William Peterson in 1966 to describe the “successful achievements of Asian Americans in especially socioeconomic status and education, despite their history of hardship and racial discrimination” (Kang 702). However, the term has often been problematic for Asian Americans because while they are labeled a model minority to demonstrate “America’s color-blind meritocracy and openness,” they continue to face the stigma of being “seen as alien to American culture regardless of nativity or citizenship” (Chang 15). Additionally, many Asian Americans are wary of the stereotype because, as Sarah Lee notes, their personal lives and the lives of those they know do not measure up to the standards of the model minority, despite their attempts to achieve it (S. Lee 91). This theme of desired success versus dismissal of unattainable goals runs throughout modern Korean American literature, which “speaks to the present reality of Korean Americans continuing to battle the feeling of Other, and as a consequence, growing ambivalent about full assimilation” (Stone 75). In *The Interpreter*, Suzy Park offers an example of this ambivalence. She recognizes that her biculturalism can be seen as an advantage,



connecting her to two cultures simultaneously, but all she feels about it is “a persistent hollowness” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 166).

Running in tandem to the pressures of the model minority for Asian American children is the responsibility to the family, or filial piety. Filial piety is the idea that children should give ultimate respect to their parents and elders and care for their parents as their parents cared for them, even into old age and death (Stein 268). It is a vital tenant of Confucianism, and is seen as one of the building blocks of a robust and stable society alongside harmony, justice, and moderation, among others (Stein 268). Taking care of the family is seen as a particular responsibility of the eldest child, but it touches the entire family. For Asian American children, the combination of expectations from the model minority and filial piety can be daunting. Both stress community and sacrifice, but growing up with the values of American individualism can pull these same duty-bound children in the opposite direction. They are encouraged to strike out on their own and make something of themselves despite risks and lost family ties, but are continually reminded of their duty to culture and family and the expectation that they will succeed, not just for themselves, but for their entire family. With such differing value systems competing for their devotion, it is no wonder that Asian American children like Suzy Park find themselves more and more ambivalent about their identities and their future.

Though there are many options for investigating the ambivalence within Korean American familial relationships, I have chosen to explore this issue through fiction. The need to look at novels springs from the wide and varied world that fiction, and in particular Korean American fiction, offers. As Min Song observes, “Because Asian American writers in particular, for whatever reason, seem troubled by their racial entanglements, they draw from these entanglements to produce something innovative, fascinating, and richly complex. Even when

their works stumble and are uneven ... these works are nevertheless usually worth the time it takes to read and think deeply about” (*The Children of 1965* 23). Korean American novels are worth the time Song notes they require because they offer narratives of struggle that speak differently to readers than transcribed interviews or charts and statistics. In fact, a 2006 study on the reading of fiction versus non-fiction observes, “Comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehension of peers in the actual world, while the comprehension of expository non-fiction shares no such parallels” (Mar et al. 694). In other words, novels force readers to stop and survey the world around them with more introspection and understanding in a way that non-fiction does not. In all the novels I explore in this study, the dislocation from both home and family triggers issues of belonging and identity. And though those themes are heavily prevalent in Korean American literature, they can also be more broadly applied. Noting this far-reaching appeal, Elaine Kim writes, “However impermeable, Asian American literature is universal” (11). Therefore, if Korean American novels and the dilemmas faced by characters within those novels can lead to a better understanding of families, immigrant or otherwise, and their complexities, then they deserve the exploration offered here.

To begin my study of these themes and issues, chapter one examines the novel *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee. In it I explore Lee’s central character, Henry Park, and his distanced relationship from both his father and his home following the death of his mother and his increased assimilation in the U.S. Despite Henry’s American birth following his parents’ flight from Korea, as an adult he embodies the spirit of the 1.5 generation and feels like an outsider in both Korean and American groups. I further explore this alienation through Henry’s projection of father-like characteristics onto a fellow Korean immigrant he has been assigned to spy on.

Henry's relationship with the target of his betrayal, John Kwang, leads Henry to reconsider his relationship with his father and motivates a confrontation of his competing cultural identities.

Chapter two examines the novel *The Interpreter* by Suki Kim and the protagonist Suzy Park's adulthood seclusion following her parents' death. *The Interpreter* provides a contrast to *Native Speaker* because it introduces absences in both the parental relationship and the sibling relationship Suzy shares with her sister, Grace. Suzy's self-imposed isolation shields her from the painful absence of both her family and a true sense of home. Furthermore, Suzy's engagement with these issues through a search for both her parents' killer and her missing sister forces a reexamination of the absences that have long made up her family's checkered past.

Chapter three focuses on the novel *Free Food for Millionaires* by Min Jin Lee. This chapter examines the clash of culture and class in Casey's adulthood relationship with her parents and the ways in which the familial distance in Casey's life differs from the other novels examined. I also argue that Casey's lack of definitive change and foundation by the novel's end underscores the continual process of identity formation, particularly among adult immigrant children. By situating class and culture simultaneously in connection and tension with one another, this chapter adds another layer of complexity to both the immigrant family and the individual adult immigrant child.

Finally, this thesis concludes that Chang-rae Lee, Suki Kim, and Min Jin Lee use loss, absence, and distance in their novels to reflect the ambiguity of identity and the realities of the American dream in the lives of adult immigrant children. The conclusion also points readers toward the larger themes of loss and identity within the three novels explored here. For though my family is in many ways different from the families represented by the authors in this study, I found the loss of my own ideals about home reflected in their works. The desire for belonging,

family, and home are uniquely situated in Korean American literature, but a close study of three Korean American novels illuminates the poignancy and accessibility of these themes for all readers.

## CHAPTER ONE: A NECESSARY BRIDGE: PATERNAL RELATIONSHIPS IN

### CHANG-RAE LEE'S *NATIVE SPEAKER*

Memories overwhelm the early pages of *Native Speaker*. They soar the heights of love's beginnings and dissolve into regret over crumbling relationships. At the center of these remembrances is Chang-rae Lee's protagonist, Henry Park. Prompted to "speak the evidence" of his life, Henry shares the collapse of his marriage, the loss of his son, and the vast distance that separates him from his father. (Lee, *Native Speaker* 6). This deluge seems uncharacteristic for Henry, a man who feels more comfortable mining others' secrets than sharing his own. As a spy for Glimmer and Company, Henry develops relationships with notable immigrants and reports their confidences back to his boss. Glimmer and Company's mantra is to "always resist history, at least our own," and Henry applies this charge vigorously, calling his work "a string of serial identity" (Lee, *NS* 5, 28). Although *Native Speaker* is ostensibly a spy novel, the source of Henry's unusual admissions in the opening pages provides the real mystery of the story. But as his confessions continue, Henry reveals even that mystery, pointing to John Kwang as the catalyst for his internal confrontation.

Henry approaches Kwang, an up-and-coming Korean American politician and his latest target for Glimmer and Company, as an assignment, but their relationship becomes much more. Kwang represents a vision of what could be, what Henry "imagined a Korean would be" (Lee, *NS* 304). In Kwang, Henry sees someone who has overcome the barriers of his past and offers up its secrets like an open book. This quality draws Henry to Kwang and allows him to access those parts of himself he usually keeps quiet. Different from the other two novels explored in this thesis, which follow adult daughters, *Native Speaker* focuses on a son and his relationship with his father. Therefore, as Henry's relationship with Kwang deepens, their encounters trigger

memories of Henry's relationship with his father. These memories, and his reflection on them, bridge the gulf between Henry and his father. In short, Kwang becomes a way for Henry to revisit his past and further examine long-suppressed memories. By bridging the distance between himself and his father via John Kwang, Henry confronts, perhaps for the first time, the contradictory strands of his identity and the effects of his Korean American upbringing on his adult life. By crafting this bridge through memory and revelation in a novel otherwise built on secret keeping, Lee highlights the ways that cultural identity blurs demarcations between past and present and family and nation.

Henry's distant relationship with his father and his cultural displacement begins not simply with Henry's past, but with the larger history of his family. Discussing his own background in an interview with *Amerasia*, Chang-rae Lee comments, "My daily life is the life of an American. But I've always had something Korean there – a Korean core ... I've never lived in Korea, so what I know about the culture is just from my parents" (Lee, "Language and Identity" 216). So too does Henry Park struggle with his "Korean core," feeling alternately mystified and exasperated by his Korean father's traditions but never feeling fully separate from them either. This in-between state creates a detachment from his father that only grows as Henry ages. Touching on similar intergenerational conflict, Erin Ninh writes that an Asian American's relationship to the U.S. is, in part, defined by his relationship to his family (11). The immigrant family brokers their child's identity by filtering cultural understanding of both the U.S. and their home country through parental experiences. In Henry's case, his relationship with his father mediates his understanding of himself as both Korean and American. Henry's father, a New York City grocer and a "Confucian of high order" raises Henry to value silence and all it can communicate (Lee, *NS* 6). Henry takes after his father in that he speaks more in silences than in

words, but neither man ever fully communicates his feelings or emotions. At one point in the novel, Henry references the problem in a memory of his father's relationship with his son Mitt, whose death at age seven creates a rift between Henry and his wife. Reflecting on the relationship between grandfather and grandson, he notes, "their communication was somehow wholly untroubled ... they could build a bridge because they needed one" (Lee, *NS* 239). Henry's relationship with his father stands in sharp contrast: "I was too close to the old man, we were always within striking distance of each other" (Lee, *NS* 239). The friction proves too much for Henry and instead of bridge building, he shuts down, and the distance between father and son grows.

Henry's displacement finds additional roots in the loss of Henry's mother, which Henry describes as "more of a disappearance than a death" (Lee, *NS* 88). The stoic reaction of Henry's father to the death, the way he seems "instantly recovered," instills in Henry a continual longing for that same emotional resolve (Lee, *NS* 59). In the weeks following his mother's death Henry remembers eating silently with his father, "wanting to show him that I could be as steely as he ... that I would tolerate no mysteries either, no shadowy wounds or scars of the heart" (Lee, *NS* 59). Henry learns that these "culturally driven silences" and conversational omissions are crucial to "preserve the dignity and respect of the family" even if they leave little room for his true feelings (Om 43). By communicating to Henry a dissatisfaction with emotional displays, his father implies that Henry's mourning is unwarranted, and worse, a display of weakness (Om 43). This reluctance toward emotion is not unique in Henry's family. In Grace Yoo and Barbara Kim's book, *Caring Across Generations*, Connie, a Korean American who immigrated to the U.S. with her parents, echoes Henry's sentiments: "In my family ... we're very strategic ... as soon as you feel bad you had to figure out how to not feel bad anymore" (47). Yoo and Kim further describe

Connie's struggle to recognize emotion as a process and how "a combination of her parents' personality and the consequences of political, economic, and social upheaval" makes it easier to retreat into silence and secrecy (47). In the same way, Henry spends extreme amounts of "emotional labor" (Yoo and Kim 5) in his youth trying to match his poker-faced father, so much so that suppression becomes his mode of choice later in life.

In Henry's efforts to be as removed from his feelings as his father, he creates remoteness in the relationship, making his home life less welcoming and adding to his sense of isolation. This emotional detachment resonates with Juliana Chang's sentiments that the family home can cause separation despite its objective to create an inclusive and communal space (17). This "interiority," meant to create a bond between the home's inhabitants, can instead generate contradictory feelings of the home space as "intimate yet estranged, familiar, yet alien" (Chang 17). Accordingly, Henry's home becomes a site of contestation over his identity as he struggles to work out the familiar and foreign within its walls and within himself. In a similar approach, Carla Peterson turns the home into a metaphor in which each family member becomes a citizen working out "what is normal and what is deviant" for membership in, or exclusion from, the nation (115). This metaphor plays into Ninh's assessment of the family as the go-between in the adult child's relationship with the nation (11), and Henry confronts both his familial and national identity through his paternal relationship. Therefore, in processing his relationship with his father, Henry works out his American identity as well. Peterson's metaphor also fits with Chang's later assessment that both institutions of family and nation feature fantasies of stability (4). These fantasies are understood through an examination of "the economic and social dimensions of sustaining the family" (Chang 4). When "sustaining the family" becomes a traumatic experience, the resulting conflict acts as a roadmap for understanding later national and



cultural identity (Chang 4). In applying this theory to Lee's *Native Speaker*, the death of Henry's mother shatters stability at home and "sustaining the family" becomes more a battle of silent perseverance between Henry and his father, which sets up Henry's emotional and cultural displacement later in life.

With his sense of isolation deeply engrained in adulthood, Henry's introduction to John Kwang becomes the stimulus for a reassessment of his relationship with his father. Henry meets Kwang shortly after starting work on the politician's campaign. Right away, Henry notes that Kwang's "neatly clipped black hair" reminds him of his father. In turn, Kwang welcomes Henry by looking at him "as if he were seeing a memory" (Lee, *NS* 134). Henry believes that these "ready connections" foster closeness between the two men and a rudimentary cultural understanding of one another (Lee, *NS* 134). Christian Moraru writes that this cultural connection between Henry and Kwang helps Henry "step over the gap" of detachment he usually maintains in relationships (70). And overcoming that detachment with Kwang, who looks like Henry's father but behaves so differently, helps Henry rediscover some of his buried remembrances. Henry acknowledges this unique relationship and its effect on his life, saying, "My recollection and sight are focusing elsewhere now. I am seeing a different story ... The teller I know, can keep his face in the shadows only so long. We want him to come out, step into the light, bare himself" (Lee, *NS* 204). Through Henry and Kwang's relationship, Lee brings Henry, his "teller," into the light and makes him confront his past.

Aside from the obvious similarities to his father, Kwang attracts Henry because he seems to embody a type of Korean American neither Henry nor his father could ever fully become. When Henry learns Kwang's backstory, "his family not mercifully surrendered or refuged but obliterated" during the Korean War, followed by a flight to the U.S., and ending with Kwang

“beaten nearly to death and robbed of all his saving,” he feels deeply moved (Lee, *NS* 211). The story recalls memories of his father, but the most arresting feature of the story for Henry is Kwang’s ownership of his American citizenship. He marvels that Kwang, “began to think of America as a part of him, maybe even his own, and this for me was the crucial leap of his character, deep flaw or not” (Lee, *NS* 211). Kwang’s agency makes him more attractive even if it ultimately makes him flawed. He takes on English as “his new home language” and the United States becomes not only his new nation, but also, in effect, his new family. Henry notes that Kwang loves not only his wife and children but “the pure idea of family,” and consequently sees his campaign staff and even the boroughs they canvas as a part of that family (Lee, *NS* 146). In this way, Kwang embodies Peterson’s metaphor of family and nation as he tries to expand the definition of inclusion in both his family and his adopted nation.

Because Kwang approaches his citizenship in such a radically different way from Henry or his father, the connections between the two force Henry to reevaluate his own notions of citizenship and belonging. Despite the fact that Henry admittedly knows little about his father’s background, he revisits the little he does know through Kwang’s personal history. Henry knows that like Kwang, his father arrived with very little and was also robbed and badly beaten. He knows his father earned a master’s degree in engineering but never learns the precise reason for his father’s departure aside from a mention of “‘the big network’ in Korean business, how someone from the rural regions of the country could only go so far in Seoul” (Lee, *NS* 57). His father does not mention the “guided capitalism” of 1960s Korea that resulted in “a mass exodus of those who had been displaced or uprooted in their own country” and possibly prompted his departure (Hurh 1339). Henry also knows that his father, like Kwang, experienced the Korean War, but he never learns the details of his involvement. With few facts about the War from his

father and a class project on the line, Henry consults his junior encyclopedia and delivers a report on “how lucky all of us Koreans were” to be saved by the Americans (Lee, *NS* 242-43). Without detailed knowledge of his father’s suffering in the Korean War, Henry only learns about the “bad” Koreans, and this stilted knowledge shapes how he views himself in light of his Korean heritage (Lee, *NS* 243). Aside from choking up at the mention of the War, Henry’s father does not share his experiences in the detail that Henry receives from Kwang and cannot give Henry any alternative associations of Koreans during the War. Without knowledge of these contextualizing facts, Henry assumes his father’s life was “all about money” and holds little sympathy for his daily struggles or background (Lee, *NS* 49).

Henry’s failure to connect to his father’s history affects both the relationship between the father and son and Henry’s cultural identity. Yoo and Kim touch on the “knowledge gaps” of Korean American families in their work on the lives of adult immigrant children (43). 1.5-generation Korean Americans, Yoo and Kim write, grow up in the United States with an Americanized viewpoint on the Korean War, but rarely get their parents’ perspective because of the difficulty of the subject matter (43). Therefore, Henry’s classmates and textbooks color his knowledge of the War and this affects how he understands both his father and himself. This relationship can be better understood by looking again at Ninh’s writing on the immigrant family as the go-between for their children and the nation (11). The empty spaces in Henry’s background are a direct outcome of the painful history Henry’s father refuses to revisit. Because Henry’s father’s past is a part of Henry, the suppression of his Korean War experience shapes the way Henry understands his citizenship as lesser than his “American” classmates (Lee, *NS* 243). Therefore, Henry’s fractured identity results, at least in part, from both his family’s traumatic past and his father’s reluctance to make that past an active part of Henry’s adolescence. Henry’s

experience with Kwang plays out differently because Kwang's detailed disclosure provides a roadmap of his citizenship and agency in his relationship with the U.S. But in the storied arc of Kwang's citizenship, Henry finds space to reflect on his father's past and fills in some of the emotional gaps of his family history.

In spite of their differences, the similarities in their backgrounds further cement the connections between Kwang and Henry, giving Henry an extended opportunity to reevaluate his past. Relishing the ease with which Kwang understands his background, Henry recalls, "I didn't have to tell John Kwang the first thing about my father and our life ... it felt good not to have to explain" (Lee, *NS* 182). Henry enjoys this respite because he usually struggles to clarify his past: "The problem, you realize, is that while you have been raised to speak quietly and little, the notions of where you come from and who you are need a maximal approach" (Lee, *NS* 182). Both Ninh and Yoo and Kim contend with the difficulty that adult immigrant children experience when explaining their unique familial configurations. Ninh approaches the subject from an economic standpoint, stating, "the parents' experience of material hardship becomes the reasoning upon which family dynamics are structured" (28). Yoo and Kim take a more emotional approach arguing that parents' past experiences with war, prejudice, and other hurdles shape how they create family structures (5). The resulting family dynamics often mean the children of immigrants have a very different upbringing from their peers and do not have the language or desire to accurately describe it. Henry's upbringing is no different, and rather than trying to explain, he avoids the topic altogether. Kwang understands Henry's background not only because of their cultural similarities, but because Kwang has been shaped by similar factors to Henry's father and relates to his difficult family dynamics.

For Henry, language, in combination with his family structure, becomes a central marker in identifying himself as an outsider. Fittingly, speech is one of the starkest differences between Kwang and Henry's father. Despite loving his discourse, Henry finds that Kwang's "beautiful, almost formal" English triggers painful memories of his own struggles with the language (Lee, *NS* 23). In one memory, an adolescent Henry speaks in front of a mirror while puzzling over his reflection: "I could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking" (Lee, *NS* 180). As an adult, Henry feels equally unconvinced about Kwang and always looks for, "the errant tone ... the minor mistake that would tell of his original race" (Lee, *NS* 179). These mistakes are all too noticeable in his father's speech, which he describes as a "crash and bang and stop ... always hurtling by" (Lee, *NS* 337). Henry finds himself caught somewhere between the two. While he speaks nearly perfect English as an adult, he does so with a continued fear of mistakes and at a cost to his Korean. He must also endure questioning looks about the authenticity of his speech from fellow Americans because they cannot reconcile his speech with his face. And yet, Henry feels the same way about Kwang, noting the "mysterious dubbing" quality of his speech (Lee, *NS* 179). In other words, Henry's practiced speech never relieves his inability to see himself or others like him as truly American. Lisa Sun-Hee Park writes that the assimilation myth surrounding Asian Americans purports "a seemingly positive image of personal success and social integration" (L. Park 16). Lee turns this notion on its head through Kwang and Henry's relationship. Kwang seemingly brings the images of personal success and social integration together, but Henry still searches out his "original race" in his speech (Lee, *NS* 179). Furthermore, Henry never sees his father as completely successful, despite his wealth, in large part because of his failure to master the English language. Consequently, Henry never sees himself as a truly integrated citizen because of his own struggles with language.

Writing on Henry's use of language, Daniel Kim contends that, "Henry's melancholy attaches itself to a kind of language that he, as a wholly assimilated American subject, no longer speaks" (253). Because Henry no longer struggles with the English language, Kim asserts, he misses the broken English of his father. And yet, Lee makes clear that his protagonist struggles not only with the English language, but also with Korean, making his aversion to both the speech of his father and Kwang more of an internal reckoning than a nostalgic longing. Describing his entrance into public school, Henry relives having to leave, "the private realm of our house and tongue" (Lee, *NS* 233). For Henry, the safety and insular quality of his early home life acts as its own nation, and navigating a new language is almost as jarring as if he were entering the U.S. for the first time. This abrupt introduction to English creates continued feelings of inadequacy in Henry. As an adult, he points out the shortcomings of his English: "I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers ... Sometimes I'll still say *riddle* for *little*, or *bent* for *vent*" (Lee, *NS* 234). Conversely, when dining at a Korean restaurant, Henry considers speaking in Korean to the waitress but thinks better of it because he is "half afraid of disappointing her with some fumble of poorly accented words" (Lee, *NS* 316). Despite Henry's Korean background and his practiced English, he continues to struggle in both languages, leaving him feeling stranded in a no-man's land. While Henry may no longer speak the same English as his father, his struggle with both English and Korean keeps him from being the "wholly assimilated American" Kim writes about (D. Kim 253).

Correspondingly, David Palumbo-Liu argues that Asian Americans, as observed through a close reading of several Japanese American novels, are unable to embrace all the perks of American citizenship because their identities are so often forced into hyphenation (i.e. Asian-American) (87). Rather than having access to all the power and authority of life as an "American," they

must grapple with the hyphenating of their identity and the contradictions it causes at every turn (Palumbo-Liu 87). This contradiction is also the case with Henry, who works so hard to perfect his speech, but still feels inadequate. His well-versed English should give him all the privileges and opportunities afforded to native speakers, but it only creates more question marks in his life.

As Henry draws closer to Kwang, he begins to look at Kwang as a father figure, furthering the comparison and evaluation of Henry and his father's relationship. This closely directly conflicts, however, with Henry's assignment to inform on Kwang, and as his connections to and through Kwang grow stronger, Henry struggles with this moral dilemma. Though he continues sending reports of Kwang's daily activity to his office, he knows it is useless data. He cannot yet bring himself to truly report on Kwang because it feels like "an exposure of a different order, as if [he] were offering a private fact about [his] father" (Lee, *NS* 147). So close do the two men become that at one point Henry even wonders what it would have been like to grow up with a father like Kwang. He suggests that he might have grown up a "more physical person" and could possibly offer the reassurance others crave from him with a more engaged father (*NS* 170). But instead, Henry's upbringing engenders a love of "every order of silence borne of the tongue and the heart and the mind" (Lee, *NS* 170). Kwang embraces his history in speeches and lauds memory in his daily life. Every night he memorizes the names of all his donors, a practice Henry calls "a chosen kind of suffering involving hours of practice and concentration by which you gradually come to know yourself" (Lee, *NS* 177). By contrast, Henry takes after his father, who uses silence as his preferred method of communication and hides both his identity and memories under a series of false identities until his relationship with Kwang takes root.

These revived memories illuminate parts of Henry and his father that Henry did not previously know or recognize. So his reflections, like Kwang's memorizations, become a disciplined study of himself and his father. Noting the similarities between father and son, Henry's wife Lelia calls her husband a less "brutal" version of his father (Lee, *NS* 58). Henry internalizes this comment and wonders about his paternal relationship, so different from the warm and engaging interaction he often shares with Kwang. He thinks, "For most of my youth I wasn't entirely sure that he had the capacity to love" (Lee, *NS* 58). Tina Om takes issue with this line, arguing, "it shows Henry's western way of thinking: love should be verbalized and physically displayed. Henry adopts 'Anglo' ideals because he is immersed into that society" (44). And yet, Lelia's comments about Henry's father being "a more brutal version" of Henry indicate a different conclusion. Rather than prove that Henry has wholly embraced the western ideology of love as Om argues, this passage demonstrates Henry's struggle between the distance inherited from his father and his engaging interactions with Kwang. Lelia's comments and Henry's reaction highlights the struggle between the two, not the simple rejection of his father's culture and way of life.

Henry's struggle with his father's values and his American ideals creates a dual identity that is further illuminated as his relationship with Kwang becomes strained. At the height of his campaign's popularity, someone bombs Kwang's office, killing his assistant Eduardo and a housekeeper. The death rattles both Kwang and Henry, and Henry assumes that responsibility lies with Glimmer and Company. Kwang refuses to comment about it and the incident begins the unraveling of his political career. In the turmoil, he sends his wife and children to their home in upstate New York. This action surprises Henry, who feels Kwang to be the type of man to keep his family close. Later, when Henry brings up this course of action, an argument breaks out



between the two men. Kwang yells at Henry, “*Why not yell at me? ... Don’t think of me as elder; come, strike out at me with your words, or something else ... I am not your father. I am not your friend*” (Lee, *NS* 300). In the moment Henry readies for a fight and feels “that hot ore of [his] father’s rage” (Lee, *NS* 300). The two stay locked in a standoff until Kwang brushes off the fight by offering Henry a drink. The confrontation recalls a similar fight between Henry and his father. In high school, Henry’s father assumes a girlfriend of Henry’s dates him only for his family’s money, which leads to a yelling match between father and son. Henry recalls: “We turned on each other, suddenly ready to go, and I could tell he was as astonished as I was to be glaring this way at his only blood. He took a step back, afraid of what might have happened” (Lee, *NS* 74). In both fights, Henry readies himself for physical conflict, but the older man ends the altercation before it escalates.

The fight with Kwang, and the memory it recalls of similar fights with his father, connects Henry to elements of both his Korean and American identities. Noticing Kwang’s decision to forget the fight, Henry remarks, “his American life shows through so clearly. Another Korean man of his generation would not forgive the moment so quickly, if ever at all” (Lee, *NS* 301). And yet, Henry’s father also moves on from the fight, continuing to provide for and parent his son. Calling Kwang’s decision to forgive the fight a symbol of his “American life” suggests that Henry’s father’s actions also reflect a certain quality of acculturation. Having always outwardly refused any form of assimilation, the realization of Henry’s father’s forgiveness comes as something of a shock. Henry, who keeps both fights logged in his memory even after his elders have forgiven him, ultimately reacts to both arguments in a more “Korean” fashion than his father or Kwang (Lee, *NS* 300). Christian Moraru writes that Henry is always “a half step ahead” of Kwang because “America, Henry’s home, has transformed Henry, a first-

generation U.S. national, more than Kwang, for whom Korea remains the home to fall back on” (71). Despite Henry’s birth in the U.S., his reactions to the argument with Kwang call this statement into question. Henry grapples with elements of his father in himself as he labels the anger he feels “my father’s rage” but he also notices his father and Kwang’s ability to deescalate the fight (Lee, *NS* 300). Therefore, rather than being ahead of Kwang because of his assimilation, the fights demonstrate Henry’s battle between those “first generation U.S. national” impulses and the pull of his Korean heritage.

Even at its breaking point, the relationship between Kwang and Henry elicits comparisons between Henry and his father that blur the past and present and confront Henry’s notions of identity. As Kwang’s campaign rapidly deteriorates, Henry’s boss demands useable evidence on the politician. Henry eventually delivers a list of participants in Kwang’s *geh*, a Korean money club in which money is paid in by each member and redistributed through a weekly drawing. Having taken over the *geh* following Eduardo’s death, Henry has access to all participant information. When Henry discovers it was Kwang who set up the bombing to kill Eduardo, a spy himself, he vows to take the knowledge to his grave. In his final report Henry omits knowledge of the bomb’s perpetrator as a “final offering to Kwang,” which he calls “the sole way of giving I have known in my life” (Lee, *NS* 314). However, the revelation of the *geh* participant list results in the deportation of many undocumented immigrants and becomes a final nail in Kwang’s political coffin. Henry’s betrayal follows his father’s custom of also exploiting his fellow immigrants by paying his shop workers well below the minimum wage and offering few benefits. Om makes the case that this comparison does little more than give Henry “the validation he needs” to see his actions in a more positive light, and concludes that Henry’s father’s actions “cannot be compared to the blatant masks Henry wears” (45). Yet Henry

acknowledges the common practice of exploitation in immigrant communities, calling it an “ugly immigrant truth” (Lee, *NS* 320). Appropriately, he concludes that his father would see his perfidy in “a rigidly practical light, as if they were similar to that daily survival he came to endure” (Lee, *NS* 319). Henry’s comparison further solidifies his connection with his father and puts them on more equal footing, but Henry’s acknowledgement of his father’s struggle indicates that the association does more than simply validate Henry’s choices. While Om justifies Henry’s father’s exploitations in the name of “financial stability,” Henry’s actions for Glimmer and Company work towards those same goals because Kwang is, despite their relationship, a job. Furthermore, Henry endures his own “daily survival” in making the difficult decision to betray that relationship. Rather than endorse Henry’s actions, the comparison gives Henry a deeper understanding of the difficult decisions his father and other immigrants often face in the U.S.

Henry’s betrayal and Kwang’s retreat from the public eye makes Henry realize that he lacks a true understanding of both Kwang and his father. This realization occurs simultaneously with the understanding that he will always be tethered to his past, despite attempts to avoid it. Thinking of his relationship with Kwang, he admits: “I had him in my sights. I believed I had a grasp of his identity ... what I saw in him I had not thought to seek, but will search out now for the long remainder of my days” (Lee, *NS* 141). Of his father he says, “My father was a trickster ... Any moment I had him square in sights, he’d surprise me with the dip, a shake, a move from the street that I’d never heard or seen” (Lee, *NS* 336). Both men have something about them that Henry can never quite decipher. Reflecting on his part in the deportation of so many individuals and families, Henry cannot help but consider how his own life has been shaped by a similar immigrant story: “I can never stop considering the pitch and drift of their forlorn boats on the sea, the movements that must be endless, promising nothing to their numbers within” (Lee, *NS*

335). He longs for the “cries and shouts of those who were taken away” and wants to serve whatever sentence they deliver for his act of infidelity against them (Lee, *NS* 337). Though he does not know all the particulars of his father’s arrival to the U.S., his experience with other immigrants via Kwang gives Henry a window to the commonalities of the immigrant experience and he internalizes those encounters as a part of his identity, saying, “the more I see and remember the more their story is the same. The story is mine” (Lee, *NS* 279). By connecting with the stories of other immigrants, Henry connects to his own past.

During the breakdown of his bond with Kwang, Henry confronts head on the difficult aspects of his identity and the intersections of that identity with his father and his Korean background. Following Henry’s revelation of Kwang’s money club, Kwang gets in a drunken car accident with an underage and undocumented Korean girl that leaves him bruised and her in a coma. As he returns home, all those who once cheered him now turn on him, shouting insults and hurling cans. Rather than join in, Henry attempts to stop them: “I strike at them. I strike at everything that shouts and calls” (Lee, *NS* 343). This interaction stands in direct contrast to one of Henry’s last interactions with his father. In that encounter, Henry uses his father’s lack of speech after a stroke to do his own protesting: “I spoke at him, this propped-up father figure, half intending an emotional torture. I ticked through the whole long register of my disaffections, hit all the ready categories . . . to speak once and for all the less than holy versions of who he was” (Lee, *NS* 48). Through his relationship with Kwang, Henry realizes that his life is not so different than his father’s, but he buries the darker shades of himself under stoicism and fictional identities. In finally sharing the truth of his life, Henry reveals all the “less than holy versions” of himself in the same way he calls out those things in his father. With Kwang, and the benefit of time and reflection, Henry now stands on the other side of the fence. Feeling that Kwang

provides the hope of an identity “which may also be mine,” Henry adopts the attacks on Kwang as attacks on himself (Lee, *NS* 328). Having been both the attacker and the attacked, he now better understands the imperfections of his father, Kwang, and himself.

In his past, Henry looked on his father’s daily life with “abject shame,” but after his time with Kwang, he sees that life as more akin to his own (Lee, *NS* 53). In his final moments with Kwang, Henry takes ownership over his contradictory citizenship and recalls the Confucian training of his father: “that everyone is at once a noble and a servant and then just a man” (Lee, *NS* 148). He accepts his American impulses but realizes they will always be tied to a past bigger and deeper than he knows. He recognizes as well the part his father played in creating his identity and the way their pasts are forever intertwined. Therefore, instead of joining the crowd when the throws and punches start flying, Henry defends Kwang. He swings at everything and everyone around him and welcomes those that strike him as proof of his loyalty, despite his betrayal of Kwang.

Through his relationship with and subsequent betrayal of John Kwang, Henry realizes that no perfect model of citizenship for Korean Americans exists. At one point in the novel, Henry laments that Kwang was so “effortlessly Korean, effortlessly American” (Lee, *NS* 328). This ability to transcend and appeal to both groups gives Henry hope, but the hope dims with Kwang’s downfall. Chang argues that *Native Speaker* “refute[s] the hegemonic notion that the child of U.S. immigrants represents a hopeful future” (22). And the end of Henry and Kwang’s relationship seems to confirm this argument as Kwang hides from Henry’s gaze. However, even if Kwang’s downfall does not offer traditional hope, Henry’s experiences with him offer acceptance and forward motion. Though Henry does not reconcile his relationship with Kwang or his father, he takes action and finds acceptance in the lack of resolution.

The novel ends without a clear answer to Henry's problems, but he accepts and acknowledges the trying aspects of his past. As Tina Chen states, "For Henry there is no 'solution' to the dilemma of his identity" (658). But through memory he appreciates the many pieces that make him up: "the old laments of my mother and father, and mine as a confused school boy ... They speak to me, as John Kwang always could, not simply in new accents or notes but in the ancient untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope" (Lee, *NS* 304). Henry finds beauty in the mingling of their speech and "they lead him to see the value and the Americanness of the language spoken by his father and other immigrants" (D. Kim 246). Reconsidering his father's life through the lens of his experience with Kwang, Henry recognizes his father in himself and better understands his identity through their relationship. He, of the "serial identities," recognizes that his father also "had to retool his life ... invent again the man he wanted to be" (Lee, *NS* 333). This realization does not diminish the negative features of their relationship, but Henry accepts the various pieces of his past and holds his father in "awe and contempt and pity," an intricate web of contradictory emotions that expresses his feelings not only for his father, but for his larger past and, in some sense, himself (Lee, *NS* 333). Michelle Rhee calls Henry's grappling with unresolved elements of his identity an attempt by Lee to "dismantle the stereotype of the model minority" (158). And in fact, Lee directly confronts this stereotype through Henry's second-person address toward the end of the novel: "But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson ... we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous ... Here is all of my American education" (Lee, *NS* 320). Henry takes ownership over his citizenship and all the flaws that it encompasses. He rejects an easy understanding of his father and Kwang as wholly troubled or wholly heroic. In giving Henry this ownership, Lee dispels myths of the model minority

immigrant, instead examining the intersections between family, citizenship, and identity. Rather than reconciliations, there are only “all the difficult names of who we are” that Lelia reads out as the novel ends (Lee. *NS* 349). The names do not cease being difficult, but their acknowledged existence indicates an acceptance and ownership over them.

Ultimately, Kwang becomes another memory of Henry’s past. Just as he revisits his father’s house following his death, so too does Henry revisit Kwang’s empty home following his political death. His relationship is never fully resolved with either man, but they remain pieces of him. In the beginning of the novel Henry reflects on his childhood family dynamics: “that fine and terrible ordering, how it variously casts you as the golden child, the slave-son ... the venerable father, the long-dead god. But I know, too, of the basic comfort in this familial precision ... The truth, finally, is who can tell it” (Lee, *NS* 6-7). In taking on the role of the truth teller, Henry reveals how these contradictory notions exist in one family. By entering a relationship with John Kwang, he recognizes elements of himself and his father in Kwang, and this allows a connection, if only temporarily, to bridge some of the gaps in his paternal relationship. As with his son Mitt, Henry’s bridge to his father becomes a necessity. In an adult life void of history and authentic identity, the bridge created by Kwang gives Henry the grounding to deal with the complexities of his life. Chapter two will build on these themes of familial distance and betrayal, but will shift focus to Suzy Park, the adult daughter at the heart of *The Interpreter*. While the two novels share similarities, *The Interpreter* further probes the connections between family, nation, and home by situating betrayal at the heart of one family’s search for home.

Lee’s accomplishment in *Native Speaker* is not crafting a classic spy novel, but rather demonstrating acceptance and ownership over the unresolved aspects of life. In finding

resolution in the unresolved, Henry takes a lesson from his father and his son, who never let the missing pieces of their dialog inhibit their communication. Henry spends much of his adult life simply ignoring the nagging edges of his life in favor of borrowed characters who leave no trails. In doing so, he loses his ability to understand himself and his Korean American identity. He enjoys the “honorable-seeming absence” because he knows no other way and revisiting his ghosts is too painful a task (Lee, *NS* 202). But when confronted with those ghosts via John Kwang, Henry deals with memories and history he thought he would never revisit. By growing closer to Kwang, Henry uncovers the difficult and absent spaces in his past, eventually resulting in acceptance, if not reconciliation. By giving Henry agency through his past, Lee demonstrates the ways in which family and culture shape identity. By pulling back the curtain on the difficulties faced by adult immigrant children like Henry, he comments on the often unresolved realities in the American immigrant experience and gives new understanding to those who find themselves caught in the in-between.



## CHAPTER TWO: A NECESSARY LOSS: THE FAMILIAL PAST IN SUKI KIM'S

### *THE INTERPRETER*

In an often-cited quote, Suki Kim muses about the premise of her first novel, *The Interpreter*: “I really wanted to write an American book . . . And to me, what America is about, in some ways, is killing your parents” (Langer). Kim’s striking quote speaks to larger American notions of individuality and autonomy that demand separation between child and parent. Indeed, the American Dream is built on the idea of making it on one’s own. For children of immigrants, however, this independence often conflicts with the cultural values of their parents. In *Caring Across Generations*, Yoo and Kim write that this constant pull between “self-sufficiency” and the more communal mindset of their parents resurfaces in immigrant children throughout childhood and adulthood (51). For their part, parents sacrifice much for their children, counting loss of status and material wealth as necessary to their children’s well-being, but their aggressive pursuit of the “American Dream” often has serious consequences in the lives of those children. In *The Interpreter*, Suzy Park’s simultaneous pull toward the past of her parents and a future without them sets up a familial quest that addresses her competing cultural identities.

Caught in the middle of these conflicting identities, Suzy, a twenty-nine year old interpreter for the New York Court system, begins the novel in a state of isolation. Her parents have been dead for five years, killed in the alleged burglary of their New York City grocery store. She has few friends and her sister Grace has not spoken to her since their parents’ funeral. However, the reappearance of evidence in her parents’ murder and her sister’s subsequent disappearance puncture her seclusion, and Suzy uncovers a family legacy of betrayal and secrets in which her sister Grace emerges as both a significant player in the dissolution of the family and the catalyst that moves Suzy’s life forward. With the uncovering of each secret, Suzy negotiates

the realities of her past, her fractured family, and her equally splintered identity. While *Native Speaker* scratches the surface of betrayal in the Korean American community, *The Interpreter* explores secrecy and disloyalty as the very building blocks of the Park family. By examining the immigrant family through lenses of betrayal and isolation, *The Interpreter* confronts the consequences of the American dream in the lives of the children who must reconcile their parents' choices in their own lives.

The opening pages of *The Interpreter* lay the groundwork for the absence and guilt in Suzy's past by further highlighting her solitude. When the novel begins, Suzy contemplates eating at a McDonald's while she waits for a court reporting assignment. She thinks, "Looking in is easy, to stand out in the rain and take note of what unfurls from a distance" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 4). But, much like Henry Park initially resists his own history, Suzy quickly chastises herself for considering the lives of the diners: "But this is a terrible habit, to wonder upon a past, to dig into a history of anything, anyone, even a passing stranger" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 7). Despite Suzy's initial reluctance to probe her past or the pasts of others, Juliana Chang calls narratives like *The Interpreter*, "ethnic acts of confronting the alien at the core of the nation" (183). To put it another way, Suzy's isolation and the search that follows uncover the "traumatic disturbance" that constitutes the process of citizenship (Chang 183). These "ethnic acts" Chang describes are those actions taken by individuals in search of the deeper ethnicity within their American citizenship. Tracy Wood reads the scene in McDonald's as an example of Suzy's exclusion from the nation, noting, "McDonald's as the quintessential American family restaurant serves as a paradigmatic backdrop to foreground larger issues of citizenship and belonging, and in this scene she is not welcome into the American family" (192). But Suzy's reaction upon entering the McDonald's implies a more complicated experience: "Everyone's in it together, a

communal experience, this day, this life. It is not her life, though. She does not know this. She does not want this” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 4). Rather than simply demonstrate Suzy’s exclusion from the U.S., her final thought illustrates an active rejection of the humble familial setting. By detaching from the vaguely domestic experience of dining at a cheap restaurant like McDonalds, Suzy removes the association between herself and the image of the cash-strapped immigrant family and buries any resurgence of guilt or about her past.

Despite Suzy’s rejection of the domestic, her gradual and all-encompassing isolation makes her hyper aware of the familial memories that can penetrate it. When Suzy begins receiving mysterious phone calls that drop on the fourth ring, the penetration of her solitude awakens a new fear within her. Despite his death, she still fears “hearing her father’s silence on the other end of the line” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 20). After the implosion of her relationship with her parents, Suzy can fathom no other possible greeting from her father. Her parents’ discovery of her college affair with Damian, her advisor’s white husband, causes Suzy’s father to call her a whore and disown her. In retaliation, Suzy shouts, ““*I wish I wasn’t your daughter*”” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 33). She later regrets this exchange and the fact that she “chose Damian over everything else,” including her family (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 64). Reflecting on the disastrous relationship, she feels cheated: “it seems impossible now that she should be alone ... She thought the choice was one or the other ... It never occurred to her that she would lose both, that she would not be able to keep the one even after sacrificing the other” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 55). At her parents’ funeral this segregation increases: “No one spoke to Suzy ... It was as if they considered her also dead, as if respecting the wishes of her parents” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 27). Whereas Henry finds himself cut off from a larger Korean community because his family moves into a more affluent and mostly white neighborhood, Suzy finds herself cut off

from a community with which she had only marginal attachments. Logically then, the isolation should be less painful for Suzy, never having been that attached in the first place, but after the demise of her relationship with Damian and her parents' death, being shunned at her parents' funeral makes Suzy feel truly alone.

The infiltration of her solitude by the mysterious calls propels Suzy into a renewed search for her parents' killer and spotlights unresolved memories of her past. After ignoring the cryptic phone calls, Suzy takes a case interpreting for Lee Sung Shik, a Korean merchant accused of unfair labor practices. During Lee Sung Shik's deposition, he mentions the Korean community's disdain for Suzy's parents. Intrigued by his candor, Suzy presses Lee and he implies foul play in their murder: "They said it was some sort of a random shooting. But I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't ... That Park guy, he had it coming" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 96). Once again, despite Suzy's best attempts to isolate herself, the extent to which she has shielded herself from her past means that any small mention of it can cause shock waves as she processes information she has refused to confront over the years. The revelation that her parents' death may not be an open and shut case, combined with a message about a new lead from a detective, and the puzzling phone calls prompts a renewed interest in her parents' life.

Suzy's reintroduction to her parents' murder also prompts a reminder of her distant sister and their unsettled relationship. In addition to the dropped phone calls, someone reaches out to Suzy by sending a bouquet of irises, her mother's favorite flower, every year on the anniversary of her parents' death with no card or return address (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 30). Combined with the calls, the irises drive Suzy to call Grace despite their lack of communication. After discovering Grace's phone has been disconnected, Suzy decides to visit the school in New Jersey where Grace teaches. While at the school, Suzy encounters potent reminders of her past. She

describes a teenage girl in the hallway as, “A true FOB...they looked frightened when white boys spoke to them and avoided girls like Suzy and Grace whom they secretly called “Twinkie,” an insult meant to imply the girls were yellow on the outside, but white on the inside (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 120). This girl, so fully immersed in Korean culture, threatens Suzy because Suzy does not have a stake in any culture. Her only cultural connection is to her sister Grace, who shares her inability to firmly plant herself in one culture. In fact, she calls Grace her only ally and her pilgrimage to Grace’s school demonstrates her need to recall that sense of belonging in a tumultuous period of her life. Therefore, it is all the more shocking when Suzy discovers that Grace is not at the school, and the woman covering her classes tells Suzy that Grace has gotten married. Unable to reach her sister and growing desperate, Suzy further opens the door to her past in her search for answers.

Suzy calls Grace her only ally because she feels largely detached from her parents’ Korean culture. This inability to connect to her parents’ culture stems chiefly from their absence in her life. Even before their deaths, Suzy struggles with memories of their lives. She “cannot remember the sound of Dad’s laugh. She never longs for Mom’s Nina Ricci perfume. She never craves the empty late afternoons when Grace had gone out and her parents were still not home from work. She can barely picture her parents’ faces in the daylight; she rarely saw them before dark” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 110). And in childhood, her parents give few insights to Suzy or Grace about themselves, their past, or their lives in the U.S. Her parents offer little clarification for their insistence on Korean language and rules and, much like Henry’s father, their former lives exist in a vacuum. Her father’s drunken rants are the only time Suzy can piece together information about his past: “Dad had been an orphan. A War orphan, a leftover from the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, he used to say. He’d been all alone from birth, and yet he’d managed to get himself to

the richest country in the world, so how about that! – Dad would grunt at little Suzy and Grace” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 164). Whereas Henry only witnesses his father discuss the Korean War once, Suzy repeatedly hears her father’s succinct account of his past but never gets additional information. And Suzy hears something else in his tale: “He seemed to be fighting the urge to remember and yet could not stop recalling the demons from his Korean past ... What Suzy saw was a kind of sorrow, so raw that it felt contagious” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 164). Suzy’s mother is no different. When questioned about her sudden disconnection from her Korean relatives, she shuts down the conversation, telling Suzy to “stay out of the adults’ affairs” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 165). Jung-Hwa Oh opines that Suzy struggles at home because of “the intolerable Korean traditional culture of patriarchy” (52). Yet, Suzy’s recollections of her father’s contagious sorrow suggest something more. The threat of their father’s distress washing over them, their mother’s silence, and their utter lack of context for their parents’ behavior creates a suffocating home environment for the Park girls. Therefore, their parents’ unspoken and painful past complicates Suzy and Grace’s experiences more than traditional patriarchal culture. Wood argues for Suzy’s exclusion from “the American family,” but Suzy also finds herself excluded from her actual family, which sheds light on her rejection of the familial later in life (192). David Eng and Shinhee Han argue that the very fabric of the U.S. brings together excluded “histories and identities” and those histories can only return as “a type of ghostly presence” (347-48). For Suzy, this notion of exclusion works on both a national and familial level, creating her marginalized identity. In adulthood, the “ghostly presence” of her isolated childhood cannot stay buried and resurfaces with her parents’ case.

Her parents’ aloofness and Suzy’s inability to probe them creates a clear division in the parental relationship that extends itself into other areas of Suzy’s life. Though Suzy’s parents

refuse to let their daughters speak English at home and drill them on the importance of being Korean, Suzy never feels truly Korean. Arriving in the U.S. at age five, her sister age six, Suzy has very few memories of her home in Korea. Her only clear recollection is of an elevator in her family's apartment. She remembers the "tiny" elevator and "the mirror that had hung on its wall. She always wanted to look at that mirror, but ... she could never reach it ... Sometimes Dad would give her a lift ... but then she was too high up on his shoulders, and the mirror reflected only her dangling feet" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 43). Even in her memories of Korea, Suzy feels she does not quite fit as she can never fully see herself in the mirror. This memory reappears anytime she enters an elevator and "immediately feel[s] a lack, or pang of something distant and impossible to name" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 43). The pain Suzy feels emulates the inexplicable grief she witnesses in her father and returns in adulthood as the "ghostly presence" of exclusion from her parents' life (Eng and Han 348). Similarly, because this strange sorrow is tied to Korea for both Suzy and her father, Suzy's understanding of herself as a Korean roots itself in exclusion.

The tendency to keep her Korean identity at a distance stems not only from Suzy's distant parental relationship, but also from her parents' use of Korea as the ultimate authority figure. In addition to the grief in her father's drunken confessions, Suzy also picks up on the anger Korea provokes in her parents. She remembers, "Something terrible seemed to have haunted them both. Something resembling fear that stirred Dad's rage and Mom's pointed absence, and always the two girls were made to sit and watch. Everything always came to the same end. The reason was Korea." Though Suzy's parents call on Korea as the solution to any problem, Suzy knows they have no real intention of returning to their home country. Suzy calls it "a crutch ... to keep the girls on their terms" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 122). In this regard, Erin Ninh's assessment that

parental experiences shape familial structures illuminates elements of Suzy's relationship with her parents (28). Suzy's parents' mysterious anger keeps the U.S. at bay for both the Parks and their daughters. With all elements of U.S. culture outlawed by their parents, the U.S. naturally becomes the prohibited prize the girls seek and Korea becomes the past they cannot shake.

In addition to exclusions within the family, the Parks' nomadic lifestyle removes them from the Korean American community, further limiting Suzy's understanding of her Korean identity. She reflects multiple times on her family's increased mobility and directly contributes this lifestyle to her feelings of detachment. Tortured by a past that could have been, she agonizes over her childhood: "Had she stayed in just one neighborhood long enough, had she been allowed to build intimacy with one friend, one neighbor, one relative, perhaps this perpetual Korea ... might have seemed more relevant" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 165). Searching for connections in any area of her life, Suzy questions her father about the family business: "Turnover seemed unusually frequent. When Suzy asked Dad why, she was told to stay out of their business. ... Before that, they kept changing jobs almost every year ... It was as if they were on the run" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 93). Suzy's lack of stability echoes the application of Chang's theory on the secrecy of home in *Native Speaker* (17). While Henry's home becomes a place of secrecy following his mother's death, Suzy never creates a home, never develops a sense of interiority in any one place, and therefore every home in which she tries to settle becomes a new site of mystery and navigation.

This lack of stability keeps Suzy and her sister under the authority of their parents, which only further isolates the girls. When Suzy's mom suggests that Grace and Suzy work in the store, her father shouts, "I'm not slaving away in this goddamn country to have my kids cut up melons!" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 143-44). Though he believes his sacrifice will ultimately give



his daughters a better life, it also means further seclusion from any sense of community. His rationale and its effects can be better understood through Ninh's breakdown of the argument that because parents' choices are made with noble objectives, their authority morphs into a form of love that cannot and should not elicit negative emotions from their children (8). Ninh contradicts the idea that the good intentions of immigrant parents erase any hardships that may result from their decisions. Instead, she writes, "criticism that takes to task subjection within the family is well-situated to appraise its intersectionality with other apparatuses of power" (8). In other words, understanding familial authority's negative effects on a child paints a clearer picture of how that child interacts with other power structures in their life. In the Park family, looking at the consequences of her parents' well-meaning intentions offers a better understanding of Suzy's isolation not just in childhood, but in adulthood as well.

These emotional consequences extend beyond the parental relationship and affect Suzy's relationship with Grace. Without a real connection to her parents in childhood, Suzy often looks to her older sister for support. Chang writes that this dynamic of "older children ... helping to raise younger siblings" often happens in immigrant families where parents' have long hours and little free time (21). But Grace, equally affected by the fractured family, wants no part in Suzy's support system. When Suzy thinks back over her relationship with Grace, she realizes that despite her assertion that "they must have once been close" all she really feels is "distance" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 58). Reminiscing, Suzy realizes just how often Grace actively pulled away from the family, even as Suzy tried to cling to her like a life raft. When Suzy gives Grace a book for a birthday gift, Grace rejects it, telling Suzy she does not want her little sister picking out what she reads. Suzy marks this exchange as the first time she realizes that "reading was a refuge ... an excuse to avoid facing the family, and Grace would not let Suzy be an accomplice" (S.

Kim, *The Interpreter* 107). Because she is older, Grace also becomes the primary interpreter for her parents. Interpreting often requires Grace to skip school and spend long hours with her parents. Upon returning home, Suzy remembers “the red in Grace’s eyes, as though she’d cried all the way” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 109). But when their mother suggests that Suzy try interpreting, Grace snaps, ““She’s too slow, she’ll never figure it out,”” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 145). When Grace leaves for college, she gives all her clothes to Suzy, but Suzy knows that the gift is really “a silent declaration of the end of sisterhood” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 207). Suzy’s detachment from her parents is exasperated by the detachment she feels from Grace, the only family member with whom she desperately wants a connection. When she realizes Grace wants no part of that connection, she recedes to the margins of the family.

While Grace sustains the family as the Parks’ primary translator, she also actively rebels against the family structure, which further displaces her younger sister. After Grace goes on a diet, her father force-feeds her dumplings, shouting about the hard work it took to put the food on the table (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 169). Suzy and her mother watch without intervening, but Suzy recalls that Grace’s “silent rebellion broke the code of whatever had held the family together. By rejecting the food they all shared, Grace was declaring herself separate, apart” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 169). Grace’s silent revolt causes a further breakdown in family relations as Suzy notes, “That might have been the beginning of their silent dinners” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 169). By disrupting the little semblance of family the Parks have, Grace further isolates her younger sister. Shortly after the dumpling incident, Grace leaves for college. Before she leaves, Suzy realizes that “The only thing she knew was that if Grace had had a choice she would not have wanted to be her sister, or more clearly, her parents’ daughter, and it was this realization that always came between the sisters ... a clear desire for separation” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter*

169). Grace's understanding of family aligns with Carla Peterson's argument that "family is not a 'state' but a malleable process . . . the family is seen as a system of inclusion that reserves the right to exclude" (113). Suzy, on the other hand, longs for the stability of a set and guaranteed family and sees Grace as her failsafe friend. Therefore, Grace's attempts to exclude herself from the family alienate Suzy. And being unable to join her sister in her self-imposed exile, Suzy finds herself excluded from yet another relationship.

While Suzy feels excluded from her family and her Korean heritage, her equally detached experience with U.S. culture exacerbates her struggle. Despite Grace's withdrawal, the one unifying factor between the sisters was always their wish to be "American girls" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 122). Drawing on this hope for assimilation, Eng and Han contend that immigrating entails a period of mourning and suggest investing in something new, like the American dream, as a cure for that mourning (679). But Suzy denies mourning the Korea of her past and therefore cannot move forward or attain her vision of the American dream. Despite moving to the U.S. at a young age and longing to be a part of the culture, Suzy "did not feel that she came from one particular place" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 43). And in college she discovers that American culture is just as unknown to her as Korean culture: "Thanksgiving dinners, Egnog, Mary Tyler Moore, Monopoly . . . such loaded American symbols meant nothing to her. They brought back no dear memory" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 165). This realization cuts Suzy to the core as she and Grace spend their youth wanting to be "full-fledged American darlings, more golden than the girl next door . . . sweeter than the All-American sweethearts" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 122). Upon realizing her disconnection, Suzy thinks of her "parents' Korea, which stuck to them like an ugly tattoo" and calls her fantasy "a misguided dream" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 122). The image of the tattoo highlights how Suzy feels that it brands her and keeps her from being the "All-

American girl” she so desperately wants to be. Though “misguided,” the fantasy unites the sisters and further intertwines notions of family and culture in Suzy’s life. But Grace deflates the dream when she leaves for college and Suzy finds herself in a home that “became a refuge for two overworked immigrants and Suzy, the interpreter of their forsaken lives” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 144). With the elimination of Suzy’s All-American fantasy, also comes the shattering of familial hopes, as the American dream is the only unifying factor in Grace and Suzy’s lives. Without it, Grace becomes distant and Suzy sinks further into isolation.

Rejections from her family and both sides of her cultural identity leave Suzy unable to connect with the one group who should provide support: the 1.5 generation. In her article “Growing Up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrants,” Min Zhou explains the theory of the “1.5 generation,” arguing that the term characterizes “the children who straddle old and new worlds but are fully part of neither” (66). While the definition concisely sums up Suzy’s detachment from the world around her, she isolates herself even from those who should be her peers. Reading a student magazine in Grace’s school about being in the 1.5 generation, Suzy concocts her own definition of the term: “1.5 still meant real Koreans, she thought. Ones who were born and raised in Korea long enough; one whose fluent English will never forget its accent; one who, without a second thought would root for the Korean team...definitely not Suzy who had never even made the proper minority” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 126). Suzy sees even the 1.5 generation as an inclusive club that has excluded her and preemptively discards her membership by counting the ways she does not fit in. By rejecting her place in the 1.5 generation, Suzy rejects a citizenship that acknowledges her dual identities and takes up residence in the margins of both her cultural and familial identities.

This intermingling of family and culture also plays a role in Suzy’s understanding of

citizenship and her search for her family's roots. While having lunch, Suzy's college friend Jen comments, "What does it mean to adopt a new citizenship?" (Kim, *The Interpreter* 163). The comment gives Suzy pause and she wonders about her family's citizenship: "Since she herself was a citizen, wouldn't her parents and Grace be as well? When did they all become citizens?" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 163). Suzy's lack of knowledge about her citizenship stems directly from the distance within the family. By never opening up to their daughters about their home in Korea or their lives in the U.S, Suzy's parents' surround their daughters on all sides with the unknown. Therefore, even her citizenship in the U.S. becomes a question mark and she covets the "sense of entitlement, the certainty of belonging" that Jen possesses (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 161). As the "ultimate emblem of the American dream" Jen is "the image of what Suzy was not, what Suzy could never be" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 160). By painting Jen as the poster child for American citizenship, Suzy once again excludes herself from the running. Her access to multiple cultures leaves her feeling nothing but empty and her tendency to see her dual identity as a hindrance rather than an asset demonstrates "the downside of multiculturalism" (S.Y. Kim 196). When Suzy asks her boyfriend to investigate her citizenship paperwork, the search results are mysterious. Her family members are all listed as citizens, but the record is strangely sparse: "No past record of green cards or even visas ... the file draws a blank" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 216). Suzy's American citizenship mimics her family structure in that it exists, but in name only. She knows she is a citizen, just as she knows she is her parents' daughter, but the numerous question marks strung between the two leave Suzy feeling a further absence between herself and her family as she cannot decipher the family's beginnings in the U.S.

In lieu of any concrete attachments, Suzy creates fantasies about her family that cover the litany of absence and loss in her history. In her imagination, Suzy "is on her way to see Mom and

Dad. She imagines their new home, a pastel oceanfront house ... Mom picking up Suzy at the train station in her brand-new Jeep ... Suzy would present a bag of Korean groceries which her parents would open in delight” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 46). The imaginary Parks are far more assimilated into American culture than in reality. In fact, in Suzy’s fantasy it is her parents who have embraced all the trappings of American life, a beachfront home and an American car, while Suzy is the obedient Korean daughter who brings home material reminders of Korea. Citing Suzy’s Montauk fantasy, Chang observes that it is this fictional daughter as cultural curator that allows Suzy to connect with her parents and express love and desire rather than burden and guilt over their deaths and their unresolved relationship (155). In reality, Suzy feels she is not even a part of the minority, but in her fantasy, she mimics “the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society” (Eng and Han 677). Because her fantasy allows Suzy to place herself firmly within a certain cultural identity, she can release her feelings of isolation, guilt, and pain in favor of love and familial warmth. Not only does Suzy take on characteristics of the model minority stereotype, the fantasy also allows her to have a recognizable and engaging interaction with her parents. In another imaginary scenario, Suzy coopts her roommate Caleb’s parental woes: “She pretends it is she who is fighting with her parents, who insists on bringing Damian home for Thanksgiving, who sits here telling whoever how ridiculous, how silly her parents are” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 105). Once again, this fantasy allows Suzy to interact with her parents in a way she never thought possible during their lifetimes. Gone are the difficult explanations of her nomadic upbringing, replaced with trivial spats and enjoyable conversations with her parents. These fictions also demonstrate Suzy’s desire for a connection to family, despite her outward appearance of defiant detachment.

With each clue unlocking new memories, the realities of Suzy’s life shine through her

rose-colored imagination. While visiting the site of her parents' scattered ashes, Suzy imagines their reaction to her latest relationship, an affair with another married white man. She fantasizes about her mother's reaction: "*My dear Suzy, my girl, my poor daughter, where have we gone wrong, where did we go wrong with you?*" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 67). However, she immediately recognizes a false tone in her alternate universe because her mother "would never say anything so self-deprecating, would play dumb instead ... turn to Dad, who would take one final look at Suzy with ... an anger that should never be directed by a father towards his daughter ... *Whore, whore to a white man, a white married man, don't ever come back*" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 67). Instead of continually playing out her fantasy, Suzy substitutes the imagined with the realities of her past. In doing so, she revisits that past and the guilt she feels for her perceived failings as a daughter. Ninh comments on the manifestation of this guilt. She writes, "it is finally ingratitude which comprises the culturally impossible – with all due irony, that offense of which a daughter is always accused but which she does not know how to commit" (155). In other words, though parents often condemn daughters for being ungrateful, the cultural hardwiring of the daughter makes this impossible. It simply manifests itself differently. For example, it may present as guilt in the "disobedient daughter" but might translate into parental care in the "obedient daughter" (Ninh 155). In Suzy's case, despite being the more obedient daughter, her parents' shocking murder and her inability to resolve their relationship before their deaths creates a surge of guilt that keeps her from moving forward, so she remains stuck in their silent shadow. After visiting her parents' final home, unseen until Grace's disappearance, Suzy tries to find the roots of her guilt: "She never held Mom's hand and asked her why irises brought a smile to her face. She never let Dad explain what made him leave Korea ... She could not embrace this place called America while they never forgot to remind her what was not Korea

... She could not become American as long as she remained their daughter” (S.Kim, *The Interpreter* 212). While acknowledging her own part in the dissolution of their relationship, Suzy also points out her overwhelming desire for a place in the “American family” at the expense of a more defined role in her own family (Wood 192). This admission helps Suzy address her guilt for wanting something her parents never desired for their daughters. While they wanted a better life for Suzy and Grace, Suzy clearly remembers her father’s admonitions that “there was always a line between the family and the rest of the world” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 82).

As she delves deeper into the mystery of her parents’ death, Suzy untangles elements of her relationship with her parents. When Suzy visits her parents’ accountant for her family’s records, she stumbles upon a Korean restaurant she knows. Having come to the restaurant frequently in college, the restaurant’s famous soup takes on a different feeling after her parent’s death: “On certain rainy days, she would wander into this corner of the city ... as if she was looking to fill a certain longing, a certain desperation. Yet, by the time the food arrived ... she could not bear the sudden rush of Korean flavors. ... It fell upon her like a sad awakening” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 196-97). Just as Chang-rae Lee remarks that his, and Henry’s, Korean culture comes from his parents, so too is Suzy’s understanding of her Korean culture filtered through her family (Lee, “Language and Identity” 216). The rush of flavors and memories produced by the restaurant proves to be too much for Suzy because it brings back memories of her parents and the way she understands herself through them. Attempts to move forward and discover her parents’ killer only bring Suzy back to her past and leave her feeling further alienated from the Korean culture she never fully loses or embraces. Exploring this lack of connection among Korean Americans like Suzy, Won Moo Hurh argues that 1.5-generation Korean Americans frequently feel an “existential ambivalence” about culture and typically fall



into one of two groups when dealing with that ambivalence. Some of them take “advantage of the best in both Korean and American cultures. For others, however, it may lead to an existential limbo, in which one perceives a marginal self-identity for oneself”(1375). Rather than taking advantage of both cultures, Suzy feels paralyzed by them. And yet these reencounters with Korean culture stir very real longings and memories within her, demonstrating that her parents’ culture, despite her feelings of abandonment, still resides within her. It is this knowledge that builds guilt within Suzy and the search for her parents’ killer “becomes imperative for her to continue to live” (S.Y. Kim 202).

Suzy’s struggle with guilt, family, and cultural identity boils over when she uncovers the truth about her parents’ past. After meeting with a detective on the case, Suzy discovers that the police suspect a gang called the Korean Killers, KK for short, of murdering her parents. Determined to get to the bottom of both her parents’ murder and her sisters’ disappearance, Suzy visits a club frequented by the KK and learns that Grace spent much of her youth there, with a KK member named DJ. These clues do not solve the mystery, but instead lead Suzy to Kim Young Su, a former business partner of Suzy’s parents. During their conversation, he reveals his belief that a soured business deal that ended with the Parks calling immigration authorities on Kim Young Su caused his wife’s suicide. (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 239). At last Suzy learns the truth behind her parents’ enigmatic lives: they sold out other immigrants in exchange for their own citizenship (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 239). Not only did they report fellow immigrants for deportation, which Suzy calls “a vicious act,” but they also forced Grace to be their interpreter at meetings with the INS (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 240). The magnitude of their sins slowly sinks in as Suzy thinks, “How many people did her parents sacrifice to obtain their citizenship?” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 239). The discovery destroys Suzy’s portrait of the

American dream at work in her own family: “She never thought twice when her parents bought a store, a house. She believed that it was the result of their hard work. But hard work, did it really pay off for all immigrants?” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 240). Once the revelation of her parents’ betrayal and her sister’s forced participation come to light, she finds herself believing that “it was her parents who drove her here ... who wanted her to hear everything, who are now asking her to make judgment on their lives, which she is finally convinced, could not have been saved” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 241). Chang calls this revelation a turning point to understand “the social alienation of Suzy’s hyper private life as deriving from her parents’ social alienation” (163). Cut off from their community by their misdeeds, the Parks seclude their daughters as well. The revelation also helps Suzy better understand her relationship with Grace and her role in the family (163).

As Suzy reflects on her parents’ sins, and Grace’s role in them, a new portrait of her sister emerges and stirs Suzy’s first hope for a future. Rather than thinking her sister was too “slow” to interpret for their parents, Suzy realizes that Grace actually shields her from the brunt of the physical and emotional labor required from her parents. As Chang notes, “many immigrant parents depend on their children, who are more linguistically flexible, to sustain the family” (22). By refusing to let Suzy handle the interpreting while she was home, a young Grace sustains the family for Suzy. And during a visit home from college, Grace tells Suzy, “One day, if you find yourself alone, will you remember that I am too? Because you and I, we’re like twins” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 211). This moment stands out in Suzy’s memory as the only intimacy between the sisters. In adulthood, the “unassailable distances” between Suzy and Grace make the possibility of reconciliation seem impossible, but after the revelation of her family’s past, Suzy decides she must find her sister (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 169). To find Grace, Suzy visits her

sister's Korean American church and meets Maria, Grace's only friend from college (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 258). After talking with Maria, Suzy discovers that, like herself, Grace has masked the pain of her past. In Grace's case, she completely ignores it and writes Maria countless letters about her wonderful family and her great relationship with her parents (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 260). Suzy is almost as shocked by the characterization of Grace as joyful daughter as she is by the revelation of her parents' informing, thinking "Grace hadn't even begun facing the truth ... Grace might have told herself that none of it had happened, that her parents had never used her for their crimes, that they had never violated her conscience" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 260). When Maria's daughter shows Suzy a doll (also named Suzie) Grace gave her and says, "She made me promise to take good care of her, because Suzie's all alone in the whole wide world," Suzy realizes that Grace has not completely shut her out but actually recognizes and empathizes with Suzy's isolation (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 262). By identifying Grace's equally alienated past, Suzy gains a better understanding of her sister and the dynamics of their relationship.

Though Suzy sees the possibility for a new familial connection with Grace, she must still reconcile the betrayal underlying her family legacy. Michelle Rhee notes that just as Chang-rae Lee undermines the myth of the model minority through Henry's narrative, so too does Kim reverse the notion in *The Interpreter*: "Asian Americans become model citizens in precisely the same way that model citizenship can be dismantled: through betrayal" (Rhee 163). Similarly, Suzy feels her parents' betrayal sullies both their own citizenship and the citizenship of their daughters. She now understands that it was not dedication and hard work that got her parents ahead, but a carefully cultivated image and calculating deception. No longer does she see them as stuck in "an absolute immigrant portrait" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 144). They become instead

what Ninh calls “the opportunist, survivalist” immigrant, “whose relentless adaptation process is driven by the pragmatics of household governance, and the demands of thriving in capitalist America” (22). To put it simply, Suzy’s parents do whatever it takes to secure their citizenship and citizenship for their children. Their decisions allow them to move ahead in the U.S. but have massive implications for their children. Understanding the grave actions her parents took to give their daughters a better life in the U.S. gives Suzy a better understanding of their fierce loyalty to Korea. Rather than using Korea to keep the girls in line, the Parks express dedication to their home country in an attempt to exorcise their own demons. Her father’s deep sorrow and her mother’s passivity take on clearer meanings as Suzy understands they were running from the consequences of their crimes against the Korean American community (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 244).

Once Suzy unravels her parents’ death, she further unpacks the baggage of her past. After a sudden realization that her sister sends the mysterious bouquet each year in an attempt to connect with Suzy, she darts out of the art museum she is visiting with Caleb. By abandoning the life of isolation she built as represented by her time with Caleb, Suzy makes an active decision to overcome the many exclusions in her life. Thomas Filbin calls this decision “the vehicle that frees her from her state of suspended animation” (560). In other words, Suzy’s need to reconcile her cultural identity with the one person who understands her outweighs the pull of her ambivalence about both cultures. Later, while searching in the library, Suzy sees a news clipping about a boating accident off the coast of Montauk and the pieces fall into place: Grace’s KK boyfriend, DJ, shot her parents and then disappeared. When he turned up again at Grace’s school years later, Grace took action: “Since when does a good Korean girl marry the one who’s shot her parents ... Bury him in the same water, that would be Grace’s revenge” (S. Kim, *The*

*Interpreter* 293). With the mystery of her parents' death solved, and Grace still missing, Suzy boards a train to Montauk. On the train ride she catches a glimpse of herself in the reflection of the window and realizes that the lines between her sister, the "beauty...the brave one...the first interpreter," and herself have blurred in her pursuit of the truth (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 292). She recognizes that she and Grace have been running in different directions, but always away from the empty space left by their fractured family. She understands that throughout childhood and adulthood she and Grace have similarly struggled to reconcile these empty spaces in their lives but "couldn't find their way no matter how they tried ... unless their parents went away" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 293).

By ending her journey with another search, Suzy continues her pursuit for resolution. Though she learns the truth of her parents' life and death, the novel ends with a fresh unknown: Grace's disappearance. Despite recognizing the similarities between herself and Grace, Suzy differentiates them by noting, "Suzy and Grace are not twins. Her guilt is still tucked inside her unspoken. Suzy will continue to live" (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 286). She will continue to live because she still hopes for the clear identification of family and home and the possibility of a new position in that family. Wood argues that in Korean American literature, "redemption in the present can be achieved only by acknowledging and embracing the past" (30). However, though Suzy acknowledges her past, she does not embrace it. No longer the daughter on the margins, as Suzy speeds toward Montauk she notes that until Grace's birthday, "they will remain the same. Two girls with no parents, such fine American beauties" (S. Kim 294). By seeking to forge a new family dynamic in her search for Grace, Suzy echoes Suki Kim's sentiments that becoming American is about "killing your parents" (Langer).

Despite the harsh reality of Suzy's past at the end of the novel, she crafts a new version

of her American dream. An American dream in which she and her sister are equals and the necessary loss of her parents propels her into a more active life. But because “the distinctions between . . . resolution and complication are blurred,” the novel’s ending does not offer clarity on whether Suzy will find Grace or whether their relationship will improve (S.Y. Kim 203). Rather than deconstruct the multilayered discoveries of her family’s past and embrace the duality of her identity, Suzy imagines an alternate world where she and Grace create the life they always longed for, all while knowing that the truth is never that easy (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 294). Just as Henry accepts “the difficult names of who we are” without a solution for making those names less difficult, so Suzy embarks on the search for Grace and a new familial identity with no guarantee of its success (Lee, *Native Speaker* 349). By ending with a new beginning, *The Interpreter* implies that the search for identity and belonging never fully ends, but continually moves forward, as Suzy’s train, onto an untold destination.

While *The Interpreter* and *Native Speaker* study issues of familial and cultural distance through figurative connections with parents who are deceased, the next chapter, which explores *Free Food for Millionaires*, will tackle these issues in the lives of adult immigrant children through physical dialogue with parents still very much alive. While Suzy and Henry’s parents can only be characterized through their children’s memories, Casey Han’s parents are not only alive, but also lend their voices to the narrative. *Free Food for Millionaires* presents a portrait of the immigrant family in multiple perspectives and provides a contrast to *Native Speaker* and *The Interpreter*’s dealings with the past and the parental relationship.

## CHAPTER THREE: A NECESSARY DEBT: CLASS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MIN JIN

### LEE'S *FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES*

In an attempt to avoid the clichés that often plague Asian American literature, Min Jin Lee populates *Free Food for Millionaires* with distinct and varied personalities. She writes, “I wanted very much to reveal the complicated individuals who make up the Korean Americans I know” (M. Lee 576). Subsequently, Lee creates Casey Han, a “Korean immigrant who’d grown up in a dim, blue-collar neighborhood in Queens” but “hope[s] for a bright, glittering life beyond the workhorse struggles of her parents” (1). Casey, a recent Princeton graduate, attempts to move beyond her parents’ life and negotiates her identity as a Korean American living in New York City. Much like Suzy and Henry, Casey navigates the complications of identity through familial relationships. But unlike these previous protagonists, Casey’s negotiations take place in real-time dialogue with her parents, Joseph and Leah, who are afforded their own perspectives in the novel and further complicate stereotypes of the Korean American family. Additionally, more so than in Suzy or Henry’s narratives, Casey understands her cultural identity through her family’s class and its limitations on her aspirations. To avoid facing this fact, Casey hides her inner turmoil under luxury goods and maxed-out credit cards. This distance between desire and reality creates communication gaps between Casey and her parents, and these shifting relationships complicate her identity. While death becomes both a distancing and unifying factor in Henry and Suzy’s relationships with their parents, the clash of class and culture becomes the stimulus that both pulls Casey away from her parents and the channel through which she better understands them and herself. While *The Interpreter* briefly touches on class in Suzy’s desire for luxury goods, and many of Henry’s memories relate to his father’s desire to amass wealth for the family, Casey defines herself outright through material possessions and debt, and this self-definition strains the

relationship with her parents, who manage a dry cleaning business. By exploring class in relation to both cultural and familial identity, *Free Food for Millionaires* adds yet another tangle to the intricate web of the immigrant family and demonstrates the ways class affects relationships.

Casey views her life in two distinct spheres, her parents' small Queens' apartment, and her life outside it. The clash of these opposing environments fuels her desire to leave her parents' life behind. When she earns a place at Princeton University, it seems as if all her desires for a life beyond her parents are being fulfilled. She eats at the best spots in town and lives in dormitories that make her ashamed of her family's modest apartment in Queens. After continually comparing her family's home to Princeton, she decides to stop the practice as "she could not afford to look too critically at what was home, because it hurt" (M. Lee 15). Writing on longing and desire in Asian American literature, Min Hyoung Song contends that dreams, like Casey's desire for wealth and status, must be hidden away because they "say too much about what one lacks, about how disappointing one's life is, about how frustrating it is to feel ill at ease in a world in which others seem to exist almost effortlessly" (*The Children of 1965* 106). Accordingly, Casey stops comparing her dorm with her home because the distance between the two is too painful and the comparison only calls to mind the gap between her desired future and her past. Apart from her ritzy dormitory, Casey enjoys a circle of wealthy friends that includes her best friend, Virginia, who leaves shortly after graduation to live on her parents' income in Italy and her "white American boyfriend," Jay Currie (M. Lee 4). She also works part-time for Sabine, a wealthy Korean American who went to school with Leah and runs an exclusive department store. Surrounding herself with rich friends makes Casey feel less appreciative of the home her parents provide, and class division becomes a very real problem for the Hans and their eldest daughter.



Casey simultaneously recognizes the ties between her culture and class and tries to distance herself from them. When dining at an expensive restaurant, she contemplates the elaborate sugar cubes that accompany her coffee and remembers longing for Domino Dots sugar in the grocery store as a child, but “never considered asking her mother to buy a box; it seemed so costly and frivolous” (M. Lee 293). This memory calls to mind Sara Lee’s observations about children of working-class Korean Americans: “Even at an early age, [they] were clearly aware of their class position” (90). For Casey, the daughter of working-class Korean immigrants, this knowledge arrives during a childhood shopping trip with her mother and she makes an early connection between her cultural background and class. Growing up with the understanding of the frivolity of buying name-brand sugar gives Casey a hyperawareness of her family’s inability to “raise themselves out of poverty without public assistance or special consideration,” and this failure disqualifies them for official membership in the model minority (Ninh 9). Later in life, Casey attempts to distance herself from this letdown by striving to be seen as a wealthy and successful Korean American, a bone fide member of the model minority. However, even Casey’s desire to fit into the model minority makes her feel lesser than her white Princeton peers because, as Yoonmee Chang notes, the very notion of the model minority hinges on the notion of difference because it cannot exist without the reminder of the Asian cultures behind it (5). Consequently, Casey worries about being found out as a fraud and, “inside she believe[s] that she could be asked to leave at any moment, and what would she do but leave quietly with the knowledge that this was what happened to girls like her?” (M. Lee 293). This fear of being found out pushes her to strive for the appearance of affluence and cultural status even when maintaining that appearance becomes financially detrimental.

Despite her attending Princeton, Casey's attempts to rise above her parents' class are continually grounded by her cultural connection to that class. Responding to Virginia's teasing about the care she takes with her clothes, Casey says: "Well, gee, honey, but you never get confused for a Japanese tourist, nanny, mail-order bride, or nail salon girl when you walk into a store, do you?" (M. Lee 69). Here, Casey draws a clear correlation between her class and her culture. Not wanting to be confused with a presumably lower-class Asian American, Casey dresses to impress in order to distance herself from her parents and other Asian Americans like them. In Casey's mind, her Korean heritage marks her as 'other' and she uses clothing to overcome that stigma. She acknowledges that some people connect her ethnicity to a certain class unless they have markers to make them think otherwise, which she offers through her expensive clothes and accessories. Virginia does not understand this impulse because she does not have to combat the same cultural stereotypes as Casey. This intense focus on appearance plays into Ninh's assertion that for an Asian American to meet "the socioeconomic or professional measures of the model minority" is not as important as their desire to be perceived as meeting that standard (9). To put it another way, it does not matter if Casey does not make enough money to raise her status; it matters more that she wants others to think she does. Because Casey wants others to believe she has achieved greater status, she uses clothing to make herself appear well off, despite her family's financial struggles.

In addition to increasing her debt, Casey's desire for the appearance of wealth and prestige limits her ability to recognize and internalize the struggles of others. She continually fears that her peers think less of her as she notes when speaking to her father: "Do you have any idea what it's like to have people who are supposed to be your equals look through you like you're made of glass and what they see inside looks filthy to them?" (M. Lee 11). Ironically, her

father is all too aware of that feeling as Joseph spent his childhood in a wealthy and prominent family before being orphaned and forced to survive on scavenged garbage during and after the Korean War (M. Lee 7). The cultural shame associated with such a fall in status, at least in part, prompts Joseph's departure to the U.S. to make a better life for himself. Therefore, Casey's comments only drive home the painful connection between culture and class for her father and sets up a violent confrontation with him. After revealing that she has been rejected from the one investment bank to which she applied, and having secretly deferred her acceptance to Columbia Law School, Casey appears rudderless. Joseph finds this aimless wandering unacceptable, and he reminds his daughter, "I can't support you forever ... Your father is not a millionaire" (M. Lee 7). And though Casey rejects a secure future in law school because it seems "unappealing," her first thought at her father's comment is, "And whose fault is that?" (M. Lee 7). Writing on money's influence in familial relationships, Song notes that often, it is "*within* the family unit" that "class cleavages emerge" ("Class" 28). In the Han family, this division emerges as Casey's goals and motivations for her life diverge from her parents'. While Joseph and Casey both want a successful life, they approach success in different ways and talk past each other. In this way, Joseph and Casey's similar objectives cause conflict between the father and daughter as neither communicates effectively.

Due to their lack of effective communication, Casey fails to recognize the similarities between her and her father's goals of cultural and economic reinvention. Not content to let their argument go, Joseph tries to make Casey understand the weight of her life in the U.S. by recapping his difficult youth in Korea. Casey has heard this story before and though she "[is] not indifferent to her father's pain ... His losses weren't her losses" (M. Lee 8). Strikingly different than the tight-lipped fathers in *The Interpreter* and *Native Speaker*, Joseph cannot stop telling

stories about his past. As Joseph talks, he gets “lost in the memory of standing in a dusty corner of Pusan’s marketplace” (M. Lee 8). Far altered from the stereotypical parental figures of Asian American literature that Ninh calls “authorities opaque to insight” and “impervious to interpretation,” (49) Joseph’s memories are on full display in *Free Food for Millionaires*. As Leah notes, “his stories were how he kept his memories alive,” and he desires to pass on those memories to his daughters (M. Lee 9). Yet, in contrast to Henry and Suzy, who both long for more information about their parents’ lives, Casey rejects the stories as mundane and inconsequential to her goals. Joseph feels he is doing a service to his daughter by sharing his history, which is also her history. But his stories feel pointless to Casey: “She’d never suffer the way he did. Wasn’t that the point of them coming to America, after all?” This perception gap between Casey and her father can be attributed to many things, not the least of which is Casey’s sense that the U.S. has walled her off from her parents’ problems simply because it is not Korea. Once again, this notion holds a certain amount of irony as Casey’s struggle to define herself economically and culturally recalls her father’s self-redefinition following his loss of wealth and status in Korea. But because Casey cannot see the connections between herself and her father, she cannot accept the importance of her father’s past in her life.

Casey and her parents lack effective communication because they place different values on the cultural, economic, and familial aspects of their identities. Tired of hearing Joseph’s stories, Casey elevates her own suffering as the immigrant child of poor Koreans among her rich white friends at Princeton. In effect, she throws her family’s lower-class status in Joseph’s face. She shouts, “Do you know what it’s like to ace my courses and to make and keep friends when they think you’re nothing because you’re from nowhere?” (M. Lee 9). Rather than find commonality in her struggle in the United States with her father’s struggle in Korea, Casey

becomes defensive. And rather than understand his daughter's difficulties, Joseph assumes she is ungrateful and wonders where he went wrong (M. Lee 16). Ninh calls such intergenerational struggles "a conflict of interests ... symptomatic of a social and economic unit whose agents are differentially vested in power" (6). Put in the context of the Han family, Casey sees her status among her affluent friends as a greater symbol of her success and power while Joseph views the complete and financially stable family as the greater marker of achievement. These divergent views highlight the cultural differences between the father and daughter. While both want economic success, the social responsibility to family that Joseph invokes stems, at least in part, from the tradition of family being "the basic social unit in Korean culture" (Hurh 1344). By contrast, Casey experiences not only the pull of her Korean culture, but also her U.S. culture, which glorifies the success of the individual. Therefore, Casey's struggle for acceptance at Princeton feels like a greater hardship than her father's suffering in establishing his family in the U.S. This confrontation escalates when Joseph strikes Casey and calls her spoiled. She refutes his claim by wondering why the success she has already achieved is not good enough for her father. In response, Joseph hits her "so hard that Casey fell" before throwing her out of his house (M. Lee 16).

Joseph's gruff characterization and inner monologue throughout the fight weds the economic expectations of the model minority with the cultural expectations of filial piety. After Casey leaves the room, Joseph reasons, "Fighting was useless now. He'd failed as a father, and she'd died as someone to watch over" (M. Lee 16). Rather than awaken Joseph to his daughter's sense of failure, Casey's comments anger Joseph and he interprets them as a rejection of what Ninh calls "the parental rhetoric of having sacrificed to come to this country for the sake of [his] children" (39). For Joseph, Casey's privileged lifestyle at an Ivy League School results directly

from the sacrifices he and his wife made in leaving Korea and he cannot accept the notion of an ungrateful daughter (M. Lee 16). Paul McGrath calls Joseph “a patriarchal figure whose domination of the women in his life” ultimately forces Casey from home (126), but Joseph’s internal turmoil challenges this interpretation. Joseph, who encourages his children to speak English and attend college and who “would never have held them back from any height they wanted to scale,” wants Casey to have a successful life. In fact, he wants his daughter to achieve the model minority status that has eluded him (M. Lee 16). However, as Ninh asserts, “the model minority paradigm can hardly be articulated, even in synopsis, without resort to a language of filiality” (11). The language of filiality, or filial piety, involves the “central part of a Confucian value system concerned with the need to produce beneficial behavioral patterns from children who are expected to care for their parents” (Stein 268). In other words, model minority economic discourse mirrors the language of the culture-bound familial obligation important to the Hans and other Korean Americans. Joseph expects Casey to take her place in the model minority because of the sacrifices he and his wife made to give their daughters that opportunity. As Ninh further comments, the cultural idea of filial obligation situates the “the parent-child relation as a debtor-creditor relation,” but Casey’s apparent lack of effort towards repayment crushes her father because it serves as a reminder of his own failure (16). And though Casey wants to fulfill similar goals, their miscommunication and opposing views adds fuel to the fires of their hostility. Therefore, while Joseph’s methods have severe consequences for his daughters, his image as dominating patriarch does not completely hold up. As seen in the analysis of Suzy’s parental relationships, even the best intentions can have dire consequences for children, and Casey is no different. Her father’s physical violence and harsh words create almost irreparable distance

between them. However, Joseph's perspective makes him more than a one-sided caricature because his desire for Casey to succeed takes root in both cultural and economic expectations.

Though the conflict between culture and class fractures Casey's paternal relationship, she longs to keep her family intact because the alternative would disqualify them from belonging in the nation. As soon as she leaves her parents' home, an instinct to protect them kicks in. After heading to her boyfriend Jay's house, only to find him in bed with two women, Casey contemplates where to go next. She considers Virginia's parents and her boss, Sabine: "To them [Virginia's parents], her father would be criminal. Her boss, Sabine, who lived less than five blocks away from the Crafts, would've called the police on Joseph" (M. Lee 39). Despite her father's violence, Casey has no desire to turn him into the authorities. Though her friends would see their actions as helpful, Casey feels they would be intruding into an area they know little about. Writing on familial interactions in Asian American literature, Juliana Chang observes, "Asian Americans are considered an acceptable presence so long as they align themselves with 'family values' and contribute to the fantasy of the nation itself as a harmonious family" (15). In Casey's case, going to her friends would acknowledge that the Hans were no longer a "harmonious" Asian American family and they would lose status. Therefore, Casey neglects to reveal her father's violence, feeling loyalty to him despite her swelling face.

The desire to keep her family violence under wraps also stems from Casey's longing for approval and acceptance. In the midst of their fight, Casey recognizes that she believes, "As her father, [Joseph] deserved respect and obedience – this Confucian crap was bred in her bones" (M. Lee 15). This "Confucian crap" complicates Casey's understanding of herself in relation to her parents, and she feels loyalty to her family, even if she does not always feel connected to their past. Paralleling Casey's conflicting emotions, Pyong Min and Thomas Chung, in their

work on the 1.5 generation, interview a young woman who describes her struggle as the daughter of Korean immigrants: “my desire to be ‘Korean’ was synonymous with my desire to please my parents” (158). Similarly, Casey’s desire to break away from her father conflicts with a longing to please her parents. Evident in her proclamation that she never feels “good enough,” this longing also shows up in her refusal to take action against her father (M. Lee 16). Furthermore, Casey’s understanding of herself as Korean and “different” is further engrained by her mother’s admonishment that “in America, if your parents disciplined you and the teachers at school found out, the state would put you in an orphanage. Consequently, Casey and Tina never told anyone anything” (M. Lee 31). By keeping their family life hidden from the outside world as children, Casey and Tina unwittingly perpetuate the “harmonious family” illusion of the model minority that Casey later fears violating (J. Chang 15).

Feeling trapped within her social and cultural constraints, Casey hides her problems under the guise of luxury. With few housing options after her fight with Joseph, Casey checks herself into a lavish hotel in New York City (M. Lee 38). The next day she runs into Ella Shim, the daughter of a wealthy family friend, at a posh department store called Baynard’s. Frustrated by Ella’s apparent ease in life and realizing “[s]he had no business at Baynard’s” because “she was—the daughter of people who cleaned clothes for a living,” Casey impulsively maxes out the remainder of her credit card limit on designer clothes (M. Lee 44). As becomes frequent in Casey’s life, the interaction with Ella, a wealthy Asian American who Casey views as belonging in Baynard’s, informs Casey’s understanding of herself and her family as working-class Korean Americans. Consequently, Casey purchases expensive clothes in an effort to maintain her appearance as a part of the model minority that Ella effortlessly embodies. Exploring related connections between money and relationships, Juliana Chang opines that families are



traditionally supposed to be made up of “personal emotions and acts such as unconditional love, care, and nurturance,” so the injection of “profit, loss, and competition” in a family corrodes its structure (21). For Casey, a perceived lack of unconditional love leaves a void that she attempts to fill by spending money, one of the very things, according to Juliana Chang, that will further eat away at her family ties. In this way, Casey retreats from her family because she does not feel loved at home, but the debt she gains only further distances her from them.

The mother daughter relationship between Casey and Leah offers additional observations on class and culture as Leah attempts to serve as the intermediary in Ninh’s parent-child/debtor-creditor analogy (16). Though Leah is Casey’s mother and therefore a creditor in the analogy, she tries to help Casey rectify her filial debts to her family. However, money still presents issues in the relationship, and its connection to Casey’s guilt becomes another dividing factor between mother and daughter. After the fight, Leah visits her daughter at the apartment Casey shares with Jay. As always, money becomes a central part of the exchange, and Leah offers Casey an envelope of money won through her *geh*.<sup>1</sup> The money from the *geh* adds another link between class and culture as the Korean tradition eschews typical credit lines in the U.S. and serves as a kind of cultural credit union among working-class Korean Americans. In *Native Speaker*, Henry’s father also gets his first infusion of cash from a *geh*, only to drift away from the money club and the friends associated with it when he accumulates more wealth. The *geh* uses a cultural tradition to bridge economic difficulties faced by cash-strapped Korean immigrants. Yet Casey tries to give back the envelope because she knows “Tina would need this money for tuition, and there was her father’s retirement to consider” (M. Lee 124). Casey refuses the money, not

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<sup>1</sup> A *geh* is a Korean cultural practice that involves a rotating money club in which participants contribute money weekly with one recipient winning the lump sum each week (Hurh 1344).

because she lacks need, but because she feels guilty taking money that should support her family. This guilt also recalls Ninh's parent-child /debtor-creditor analogy. As the eternal debtor, Casey cannot accept money that will only add to her filial debt.

Though Leah offers Casey financial help, Casey's guilt over both her financial and familial debt perpetuates itself in a seemingly endless cycle. During their exchange, Leah internally pleads with her daughter over her failure to make up with her father: "Do you know how hard your father works? Everything he ever did was for you girls ... You have broken his heart. He has given up on you, and now it is your turn to fight him for his love" (M. Lee 124). Casey holds her own internal dialogue but retreats into memories of Korea when "her mother used to walk her to kindergarten" and Casey wished she "could run fast and catch up with *Umma*" after her mother left her at school (M. Lee 127-28). This memory evokes Casey's fear of being truly separated from her family. Even in her estranged relationship, her greatest concern over her rising debts is not her lack of money, but her inability to provide for her family as the eldest daughter in a Korean American family and the guilt that accompanies it. This connection between money and guilt becomes a running theme in Casey's life as elsewhere in the novel she describes "sinking in an ocean of shame" for not throwing her father's *hwegap* (sixtieth birthday) and later feels "worthless" because her debt prevents her from supporting her parents (M. Lee 165, 208). Therefore, Casey's fear of not measuring up to her cultural obligations keep her from truly connecting with her mother, and Casey's literal and cultural debts are joined. She cannot seem to lessen her filial debt to her parents without additional money, but the guilt that accompanies this metaphorical debt creates a sense of shame that keeps her from accepting financial help, creating a link in which she never gets ahead.

Casey's continual guilt and anxiety further complicate her relationship with her mother, which leads to internal turmoil over her own identity. After the visit, Casey deals with the fallout from Jay's interactions with Leah. Despite her pleas for him to stay out of sight until she finds a reasonable time to introduce him, he barges into the conversation at precisely the wrong time. This unwelcome intrusion creates additional awkwardness for Leah, who does not know how to react to the sudden knowledge of her daughter's relationship. Jay's actions infuriate Casey:

How could he possibly understand what it would mean for her mother to find him here? She suddenly hated him for being an American and herself for feeling so foreign when she was with him. She hated his ideas of rugged individualism, self-determination – this vain idea that life was what you made of it .... If her rotten choices hurt her, well then, she'd be willing to take that wager, but it was hard to think of letting her parents down again and again. But her choices were always hurting her parents, or so they said. Yet Casey was an American, too, she had a strong desire to be happy and to have love, and she'd never considered such wishes to be Korean ones. (Lee 122)

Casey's contradictory statements about the incompatibility of happiness and Korean culture can be better understood by approaching them from two angles. First, Casey's thoughts take root in her fear of not belonging. Jeffrey Santa Ana comments on the idea of belonging in American culture when he writes, "To aspire to the American Dream is thus to desire the good life of material comfort and protection from hardship, loss, and precarity ... happiness may be understood to consist of ... experiencing the achievements of success and belonging" (5). He continues by zeroing in on Asian Americans' acceptance of the model minority convention as a form of belonging: "In doing this, Asian Americans assert an understanding that the pursuit of

happiness and economic relations shape the aspiration to belong” (24). As a working-class Korean American, Casey does not experience the material comforts that make up the formula for happiness or the American Dream, but in her desire to appear as a member of the model minority, she equates happiness with belonging and economic success. Therefore, because she does not feel she belongs economically or culturally, due to her working-class Korean American heritage, she assumes happiness cannot be a Korean wish. Second, her thoughts reveal how conflicted she remains over her dueling cultural identities. Confronting Jay’s stubbornness, Casey acknowledges the complexity of being Korean and American. However, the features she loathes in Jay also feature in her identity, and she struggles in the space between the two. Paul McGrath calls this limbo an “unrecognizable space of multiple subjectivity,” as Casey does not know where to rest her allegiance, with Jay, her mother, or somewhere else entirely (128). As such, her internal struggle surfaces in anger towards Jay.

Because of this internal struggle, Casey always chooses a path or action that causes discord with those she is close to. Casey’s “self-determination” keeps her from choosing her parents’ financial paths for her life, leading to more conflict. She reflects: “it was her decision not to choose law or medicine ... That’s what you were supposed to do in America -- find yourself, find the goddamn color of your parachute” (M. Lee 168). Once again, Casey invokes individualistic elements of American culture as a direct response to her family’s more collective Korean outlook on profession and class. And even as she recognizes the flaws of American individualism and its conflict with her Korean culture, she cannot let go of it. Kyeyoung Park comments on similar contradictions in identity formation in her observations of the 1.5 generation. She states: “Among 1.5er Korean Americans, identities are fluid and constantly evolving to some extent ... the process of identity formation among these Korean Americans is

situational and complex, and yet contradictory and compartmentalized” (157). To put it another way, Casey’s inner identity struggle reflects her status in the 1.5 generation. At other times in their relationship she finds Jay’s hyper-American qualities desirable, but when held in contrast to her mother’s Korean sensibilities, they seem naïve at best and harmful at worst. Her anger towards Jay mirrors her inner turmoil and suggests the growing pains of the ever-evolving identity Kyeyoung Park describes (157).

As Casey deciphers her Korean American identity, she realizes that simply gaining wealth will not dissolve the tangles between class and culture in her life. After hearing about Jay and Casey’s engagement, Sabine invites them to dinner. While there, Jay compliments Sabine on her youthful looks at the expense of Leah’s mother, who has noticeably gray hair. This comment makes a giggling Sabine offer pity for Leah’s stressful working-class life (M. Lee 134). Casey feels embarrassed by this interchange, and “she hated Jay suddenly” for “displaying his resentment [towards her parents] at the Gottesmans’ coral-lacquered dining room,” which contrasts harshly with the Hans’ “Formica-topped table” (M. Lee 134, 2). In contrast to Casey and her parents, Sabine has actually fulfilled the model minority stereotype by becoming a thriving and wealthy Korean American. Therefore, Sabine’s pity for Leah’s premature gray hair leaves Casey feeling even more embarrassed for her parents and the working-class status they cannot hide. Accordingly, she feels “like a serf at a queen’s table” (M. Lee 134). Sarah Lee touches on this embarrassment when she notes, “the ‘positive’ model minority definitions of the Korean American collective ... characterize[s] all Koreans as upwardly mobile,” but “working-class Korean Americans knew that this ‘model minority’ image did not reflect their own experiences” (S. Lee 91). Sarah Lee’s observations are apparent at Sabine’s dinner party as Casey understands that neither she nor her parents fit into the model minority mold that Sabine

so effortlessly embodies, and this knowledge makes her more noticeably aware of her family's class in relation to their Korean American culture.

While struggling between the lure of luxury and her increasing debt, Casey finds new connections to her working-class Korean American identity. During their dinner, Sabine offers to throw a wedding for Casey and Jay, and Casey, usually enticed by such offers of wealth, hesitates. While Jay excitedly plans their wedding, Casey becomes defensive and thinks, "I have parents of my own" (M. Lee 137). She feels protective over her parents because she knows how hard they work despite being "unable to get ahead" and she relates to their struggle in her own financial woes (M. Lee 31). Furthermore, Sabine's dinner demonstrates the way in which "cross-class interactions work not to dissolve class boundaries but to buttress them" (Lott 51). Instead of lessening the class differences between herself and Casey, Sabine's offer only makes Casey more self-conscious of her working-class roots. Interestingly, despite also coming from a working-class family, Jay does not share her sudden self-consciousness. Their disparate responses recall S. Lee's argument that working-class Korean Americans are hyper-aware of their class because it rarely reflects the model minority stereotype they have been encouraged by society to fill (S. Lee 90). Jay does not have the pressure of the model minority stereotype underpinning his identity. But because Casey's life as a Korean American is subject to model minority standards, her cultural identity becomes intimately tied to her wealth and social status. Elsewhere in the novel, when Leah finds out that Casey is staying with Sabine, she too reacts with a resigned understanding of the class difference between herself and her former classmate. She thinks, "Maybe Casey was right to look up a person like Sabine, who was a success in America" (M. Lee 497). Because Leah does not consider herself a success in the U.S., it makes her less

confident in her relationship with her daughter just as Casey becomes less confident when Sabine brings her family's working-class background to the forefront of the conversation.

As she considers her parents in relation to her own experiences, Casey confronts additional situations that force her to reconcile her culture and class. She next sees her parents at her sister Tina's wedding rehearsal dinner, where a large part of the evening revolves around the gift exchange between the families. Casey notes that her mother spends six thousand dollars from her retirement savings and months of agonizing on gifts for Tina's in-laws because "engagements could be broken off if inferior presents were given" (M. Lee 273). Leah gives such expensive gifts because Tina's fiancé's family comes from a *yangban*<sup>2</sup> or wealthy, upper-class family. Casey even helps pick out Tina's outfit with the goal of making her sister look like a "girl raised in a prosperous *yangban* family" (M. Lee 266). In effect, Casey's dressing of Tina mimics her own attempts to appear as a prosperous member of the model minority. And the Korean social class traditions underlying the wedding dinner only make the connection more salient. Sarah Lee further highlights this correlation in her assertion that "working-class Korean Americans clearly understand their ethnic identity issues to be confounded with their class status and background" (S. Lee 90). As a working-class Korean American who originated in a *yangban* family, Joseph knows this fact well, and Casey recalls his past during their meeting with Tina's in-laws (M. Lee 266). After the exchange, a blatant disparity is apparent in the gifts. Casey, ever one to take note of cost, calculates that the Baeks' gifts had cost just five hundred dollars at Macy's. She observes that "they weren't people who shopped at Macy's normally ... They'd gone out of their way to let her family know its place" (M. Lee 275). Once again, the

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<sup>2</sup> The term *yangban* refers to the upper-class elite of Korea. Though used primarily before 1910 to denote high ranking government officials, the term has come to represent those of high social standing and still exerts influence in Korea today (Karisson).

intermingling of these disparate social classes causes discord, not an easing of the tension, and it strengthens the connection between Joseph, Leah, and Casey, who tells Tina, “They think we’re shit because we’re poor” (M. Lee 283). Knowing both the wealthy and working-class sides of the coin, Casey understands the harm done by the lesser gifts and hurts for her family.

Despite the clash between Casey’s culture and her desire for a higher social class, connections between the two prompt new ways of dealing with her guilt as it relates to both financial and cultural responsibility. After another lapse in communication, Casey receives a call from Ella informing her that Leah is in the hospital due to a miscarriage (M. Lee 512). Once Casey arrives at the hospital, she finds her anxious father questioning her about the effectiveness of his vasectomy and looking for reassurance. They sit next to one another and “[s]uddenly, it seemed natural for him to pat her on the back ... At first Casey stiffened at his touch, then she relaxed” (M. Lee 513). Despite her tears, Casey’s reaction suggests that she welcomes the gentle touch that contrasts with the violent abuse she suffers in the novel’s opening. In coming to Joseph’s aid, Casey breaks down walls between them and shifts her attention from worries about money to worries about her family. Though money has often kept Casey from reaching out to her family, her mother’s unexpected hospital stay overwhelms her fears. Likewise, after years of fighting, Joseph resigns himself to the unruly ways of his eldest daughter: “He knew by now that if he said red, she would say blue. So he would say nothing” (M. Lee 472). Joseph’s silence temporarily mitigates the tension between the father and daughter, though it does not necessarily improve their communication.

Reuniting with her parents temporarily lessens the tension in the Han family and allows Casey to reclaim her space as the eldest daughter, thereby paying back some, if not all, of her filial debt. Within minutes of entering her mother’s hospital room, Casey learns that Leah was



raped by her choir director, Charles Hong. She responds with sympathy: "I'm very sorry this happened to you ... It's not your fault ... I don't think less of you" (M. Lee 516). Where earlier exchanges between the mother and daughter consist of terse statements and unspoken emotion, the circumstances of Leah's hospital stay force them into a frank discussion. They also make Casey refocus her energies on the troubles in her family and think less about her own problems. Related to Casey's self-focus, Song theorizes that characters in Asian American literature often experience a "passionate relationship to one's own exclusion" (*The Children of 1965* 105). Such exclusion manifests itself in Casey's attempts to move away from the culture and class of her Korean parents. She believes her situation is unique, and much like Suzy, feels isolated even from her peers. But in the novel's final parental exchange, Casey relaxes her self-marginalization to comfort her father and reassure her mother. The exchange not only allows Casey and her parents to bridge some of the distance in their relationship, it also allows Casey to fulfill her duties as the eldest daughter and lessen some of her filial debt. When Tina offers to fly to New York from California to take care of their mother, Joseph tells her that Casey can take care of *Umma*, which, in combination with their hospital reunion, restores Casey's position as the eldest daughter (M. Lee 518). Leah's miscarriage bypasses any apology and discussion around Casey's debt and creates a sense of stability in the family.

Though Casey mends some of the holes in her relationship with her parents, class and culture continue to be a sticking point in their relationship. Unlike Suzy and Henry's parental relationships, Casey's relationship with her parents has the opportunity for further development and growth, despite their challenges. In the novel's final pages she reveals that she plans to turn down a lucrative job offer and leave business school. Because she shares this news as a spur-of-the-moment confession, it is unlikely that she has told her parents about her decision (M. Lee

558). With massive debts and no plan B, Casey's narrative ends as it began: in a state of indecision. Given the novel's opening confrontation between Casey and her father, the implications of her final choice could plunge Casey into further financial and filial debt. As always, the pull of her responsibility as a Korean American daughter weighs on Casey's mind, and even though she does not want to go back to business school, she feels "as if she were leaving something undone" by not finishing what she started, a character trait instilled by her parents (M. Lee 559). This uncertainty lends weight to Lee's novel according to Song, who argues that works by Asian American authors are satisfying because their uncertainty about the future often mirrors deep-seated uncertainties within the reader (*The Children of 1965* 23). The same could be said for Suzy and Henry, who also end their narratives with undefined, yet hopeful, futures. Accordingly, Casey's continually evolving relationship with her parents and her fluid identity leave the novel open to multiple possibilities and interpretations. By leaving readers unsure about Casey's relationships and future, the novel demonstrates Song's theory of ambivalence.

In *Free Food for Millionaires*, Min Jin Lee uses the real-time chronicles of Casey and her parents' relationship to explore the clash of culture and class in the immigrant family. As seen in previous explorations of the 1.5 generation, Casey's evolving identity hinges on the confrontations and silences in her familial relationships. Never fully reconciled, Casey's relationship with her parents mirrors her evolving understanding of her Korean American identity. Always striving to please her parents while being pulled toward dreams that conflict with that goal, Casey often takes two steps forward and one step back. This stutter-step progression makes for slow growth, but allows readers to better understand the inner workings of one immigrant family's structure and dynamics. By affording Casey's parents' their own

perspectives in the novel, Min Jin Lee comments on the multifaceted Korean American community and complicates traditional understandings of parent-child relationships. By focusing on a family who embodies the intersections of immigration, class, and generational conflict, *Free Food for Millionaires* gives voice to issues that often go unspoken. The uncertainty in Casey's life mirrors the indefinite process of identity formation for 1.5-generation Korean Americans and underscores some of the root problems in the intergenerational conflict seen in all three novels discussed in this thesis. As Suzy and Henry end their journeys with hope for the future, but many questions still on the horizon, so too does Casey head into the novel's final pages with numerous question marks. Fittingly, the reader last sees her coloring flowers in chalk on the sidewalk. In this impermanent medium, she draws herself another new start.

## CONCLUSION

When I reflect on my first move back to the U.S., I see more than just the calendar I painstakingly marked down for the 400 days of our stay. I see my fear of not fitting in in a place I had always called home and the anxiety I felt whenever anyone asked where I was from. And I remember the ever-present reality that were I to actually make friends, I would only leave them soon after, perpetuating my extensive list of long-distance friendships. I see my younger sister who, unlike me, flourished in the U.S. and excelled at a school where she felt comfortable for the first time. And I see my parents who, in their excitement to share the cherished traditions of their youth with us, did not realize that homecoming dances and Friday night football might not mean as much to teenagers who had never been exposed to them. In short, I see the struggles of a family trying to make sense of a home that felt both familiar and foreign at the same time. Understanding that complexity and its role in shaping my life has been a lesson learned, in part, through observations of other families, including the fictional families in this study. Throughout the writing of this thesis I have come to value not just the complicated strands of my own family, but the delicate balance that makes up any household. Min Jin Lee expresses related thoughts when she writes, “It was extremely important to me that the Korean American men and women I know and love in my life were given a fair shake in terms of their complexity” (576). Writing about the varied individuals in her own community, Lee argues, fills in gaps about her life that may otherwise be characterized by misguided or incorrect information (576). To put it another way, Lee’s characters serve as a reminder that individuals and families are almost always more complicated than they seem. In the preceding chapters, I sought to draw out similar complexities in the varied characters and households of three Korean American novels.

When I began this study, I wanted to know how familial relationships, particularly those among adult immigrant children and their parents, are disrupted by both the figurative and literal loss of home within the context of Korean American fiction. I found that while families process these events differently, the absences created by such losses almost always contribute to distances within parental relationships and a sense of displacement among the adult children. While this displacement can contribute negatively to the lives of the adult 1.5-generation members, it also serves as a jumping-off point for the re-evaluation of familial and cultural identities in light of adulthood experiences and reflection. Similar motifs are present in all three of the novels covered here, but each narrative offers a unique look at the family structure and its trigger points. In drawing on the inner workings of three Korean American families, the authors of these novels highlight not only the immigrant experience in the U.S., but also the effects those experiences have on the family unit.

In the world of Asian American literature, much has been made of the mother-daughter relationship, but *Native Speaker* examines a different link. It focuses on the father-son relationship and the ways it affects Henry Park's understanding of both his family and himself. The insurmountable differences between Henry's father and his boss, John Kwang, are used to peel back the layers of his identity and force him to reconcile the absences in his family. Henry loses a mother, a son, a father, and, for a time, a wife. His is a family repeatedly fractured and reassembled in new ways. This rupturing causes Henry to retreat from the intimate spaces of the home, and he, instead, holds them at arm's length. By exploring Henry's relationship with his father through his relationship with John Kwang, the novel travels through all of Henry's relationships and draws not just on Henry's past, but his family's past, and John Kwang's past as

well. In this way, *Native Speaker* demonstrates connections between familial, personal, and community identities.

Like *Native Speaker*, *The Interpreter* explores a family fractured by death and silence, but also closely examines the consequences of parental decisions in the lives of their adult children. In addition to confronting the breakdown of her relationship with her parents following their decision to disown her, Suzy Park must navigate mysteries surrounding their subsequent deaths, her sister's disappearance, and the very roots of the Park family's status as citizens. As her sister, Grace, emerges as a key player in the buried past of their family, she also becomes a beacon of hope to Suzy, the only semblance of family and normalcy she has left. And as Suzy discovers that the Parks reported on other immigrants in exchange for their citizenship, her parents become not only a cog in the wheel of the U.S. government, but also unwitting participants in their own family's destruction. Against this backdrop, Suzy must determine who she will be and how she will live her life. By continuing her search for Grace after the novel ends, Suzy demonstrates a desire to overcome that destruction and create a new family dynamic with her sister. Interweaving familial and national connections, *The Interpreter* dissects the silences and absences in one family to reveal a darker world beneath, and in doing so, illuminates the sometimes-tragic cost of citizenship.

Finally, *Free Food for Millionaires* offers a look at familial distance in a fully intact family with no secretive past. From the outside, the Han family—hardworking Joseph, faithful Leah, and successful daughters, Casey and Tina—harbors few mysteries. However, the complexities of the Han family surface as each family member delivers their own perspective in the novel. Casey longs to move beyond the confines of her parents' working-class existence, Joseph deals with his disappointment through verbal and physical abuse, and Leah finds herself

caught between her husband and her daughter. The introduction of class and the expectations of the model minority present another disruption to the household and highlight the intersection of multiple issues at work in the Han family. While it may be tempting to look at cultural or generational conflict as singular causes for the reoccurring theme of the absent family in Korean American literature, *Free Food for Millionaires* demonstrates how the combination of multiple issues can illuminate otherwise hidden distance within a family.

These novels, and others like them, offer a glimpse into the complex lives of Korean Americans, but they also provide multifaceted narratives of family. They work on multiple levels to speak to both cultural particulars and broader human experiences. Noting this broad application, Greg Choy writes, “Though certain themes might resonate with those often elucidated in Asian American literature, to read those themes solely or primarily through an Asian American cultural lens is to read them with partial blinders” (554). Exploring belonging, loss, family, identity, and home in these novels removes those blinders and opens the door for their themes to reach beyond studies of literature and into readers’ everyday lives. My move back to the U.S. as a teenager pales in comparison to some of the traumatic events in the novels covered here, but I cannot help but see my own family, in all our complexity, within their pages. In short, the familial distance explored in these novels illuminates Korean American family dynamics while presenting multidimensional characters who speak to the larger issues explored in each text. In doing so, they reveal the realities of immigrant life in the U.S. and the intricacies of the family in all its many shapes and forms.

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