"This Doesn't Mean What You'll Think": *Native Speaker*, Allegory, Race

ELDA E. TSOU

You are surreptitious
B+ student of life
first thing hummer of Wagner and Strauss
illegal alien
emotional alien
genre bug
Yellow peril: neo-American
great in bed
overrated
poppa's boy
sentimentalist
anti-romantic
____ analyst (you fill in)
stranger
follower
traitor
spy

—Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

WHEN MICHAEL DENNING OBSERVES THAT SPY STORIES MAY not actually be about spies, he describes an allegorical predicament.[1] Double meaning is traditionally associated with allegory, and whether we are speaking of the simple coded speech of espionage or the more complex medieval structure, allegory often also suggests a disjuncture of meaning. Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) presents a narrator leading a double life as a Korean American and a spy. The novel makes use of multiple structures of signification to suggest that allegory, espionage, and race are modes describing a world in which nothing is what it seems and requiring a sophisticated reader alert to the potential of false seeming.

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Henry Park, the protagonist and narrator, is employed by a private intelligence agency specializing in "ethnic coverage" (18). He and his fellow operatives are assigned to their respective ethnic groups at the behest of multinational corporations and foreign governments. Against the backdrop of New York City in the 1990s, complex themes of alienation, assimilation, and racial difference are channeled into Henry's growing inability to perform the role-playing necessary to his profession and into his tenuous efforts to reconcile with his estranged wife, Lelia, a white speech therapist, after the death of their mixed-race son.

Native Speaker is a first-person narrative consisting of the spy-narrator's confession to the reader. It commences with Lelia's departure for a trial separation. While she is away, Henry starts to reevaluate his profession, his upbringing by Korean immigrant parents, and his lifelong effort to assimilate into America, to become a native speaker of the land. A series of flashbacks to previous missions and to early scenes from his marriage and childhood culminate in a disastrous assignment to infiltrate the mayoral campaign of John Kwang, an immigrant Korean politician from the multicultural borough of Queens. By novel's end, Kwang's career has been ended by a raid of his undocumented supporters by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and a disillusioned Henry quits the agency to assist Lelia in the multicultural classroom.

Criticism about *Native Speaker* tends to be more concerned with sociopolitical and cultural analysis than with questions of form.[2] In particular, the study of Asian American literature has tended to privilege a referential approach to literature—by *referential*, loosely defined, I mean the stable and self-evident correspondence between sign and meaning—and this reading practice is usually accompanied by the expectation that the work's primary concern is Asian America. But such assumptions must be reexamined in the light of *Native Speaker*'s peculiar figurative strategies, which work to confound the normative sense of referentiality. On the other hand, the sparse discussions of the novel's figurative activity have tended to make a differently problematic move, one also challenged by the novel, because they understand the novel as illustrating general or even universal concerns.[3] The novel's opening pages complicate both these critical trends. *Native Speaker* begins by troubling the referential status of the infamous list (reproduced as my epigraph) that represents Lelia's efforts to describe her spouse. Lelia gives it to him when she leaves, with the caution "This doesn't mean what you'll think" (4). Since her parting advice is followed by his confession of duplicity, it is odd that neither the referential status of the list nor the narrative that follows has been critically examined. Indeed, because the novel's scholarship tends to proceed as if no tension between the novel's manifest content and its form exists, it is unable to reckon with the novel's various formal attempts to challenge its identification with its subject matter, whether that is spies, Korean Americans, or Asian America. I argue that *Native Speaker*'s central problematic is not Asian America but allegory and that allegory best describes the novel's concern with various modes of hiding in plain sight, a range of activities that disguise their artfulness by posing as referential. Through allegory, race, and literary form, the novel asks crucial questions about seeing and reading across various orders of the visible and the unseen.

Native Speaker uses various means to invite the reader to consider allegory as the route into it. The motif of espionage is an obvious signal of potential double meanings, and it is complicated by the additional conceit of the ethnic spy. The protagonist works for a private intelligence agency, not the state, and his racial appearance serves as his alibi, a disguise that consists of the apparent lack of disguise. His narration, too, creates a similar kind of misdirection as it employs referential language to speak otherwise. In this sense, we

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can better understand Lelia's directive—"This doesn't mean what you'll think"—as both an intelligence truism and an exhortation to think allegorically about entities like race and Asian American literature. The novel cautions us about the duplicity of representation by giving us this particular spy as a narrator and by repeatedly staging referential texts that call into question their own evidentiary status. If the list is one such text, a referential text at its most minimal, Henry's various endeavors to make sense of it—love poem? amnesty? (5)—illuminate the novel's use of allegory and Asian America to vex normative expectations about referentiality.

Allegory is customarily defined as saying one thing and meaning another. According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, earlier usages, medieval or early modern, for example, understood this dual meaning to be "part of an obvious double order of correlated references, one literal and the second allegorical" (394). If previous uses of allegory stressed the correspondence and identity between its levels of signification, modern allegory is conceived in terms of alienation, distance, and difference. The noncoincidence of levels of signification in the poststructuralist version of allegory can produce destabilization or subversion, and this understanding shapes my approach to allegory's role in Lee's novel. I draw on Paul de Man's deconstructive reading of allegory as a supplementary narrative produced by the figurative activity in the text. At this secondary level of signification, the narrative that results from the text's deconstruction of its own primary tropes is "folded back upon" itself, in de Man's phrase, to denounce the errors and thus "unreadability" of its prior narrative (*Allegories* 205). In this sense, allegory is less mystified because it not only generates a commentary on its own operations but also openly acknowledges its status as a rhetorical device.

In the context of Asian American literature, I understand allegory as designating a mode of representation that dissembles by disguising itself as literal or referential. Another way to describe narrative strategies in which the semblance of transparency is a formal effect is "modalities of concealment."[4] My purpose here is not to argue for Lee's novel as an allegory in either the generic or deconstructive sense but to show how profoundly our understanding of it changes when we attend to its figurative activity. By understanding *Native Speaker* as the formal expression of a specific historical experience, one called Asian America, we can better understand the freight of its chosen figures—espionage, allegory, race—and the complexity of its figurative activity, all of which work to undermine the self-evident as a default frame of reference. My approach is energized by the new formalism, which has revitalized scholarly efforts to theorize the relation between form and social formations.[5] At the same time I wish to demonstrate how an Asian American novel gives its own pressure to allegory by politicizing obscurity as a kind of privilege extended only to certain subjects, even as it insists on the unpredictability of race and gender as referents. Focused through allegory, *Native Speaker* makes a commentary on questions of seeing and reading that exceed the specific context of Asian America, but because it gives these questions a particular form (racialized, gendered, and classed), it lends new political urgency to more traditional allegorical concerns.

In the last few decades, Asian American studies and cultural studies have been powerful interventions in how we think culture and its relation to power. Their insistence that race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation are crucial to the study of cultural phenomena is of utmost importance, and should continue to be, but when the approach to literature proceeds at the expense of form, the unintended result, as Ellen Rooney has pointed out, is the diminished strength of these "politicized readings" (26). While Asian American literary study has increasingly engaged

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with questions of form and aesthetics, referential approaches still tend to predominate.[6] The consequences are serious: race and ethnicity are normalized as default frames of reference. Rey Chow has criticized this move as "coercive mimeticism" (107), the process whereby the ethnic subject, under a politics of representation mandated by late capitalism, engages in the compulsory mimicry of an ethnic ideal in order to be. Reading practices that require Asian American literature to be mimetic participate, albeit unwittingly, in a logic that mystifies race and literature as symbols, even though Asian American scholars criticize the same logic elsewhere as a crude form of identity politics. Reading for allegory in *Native Speaker* denaturalizes the assumption that race and ethnicity are a priori facts reflected by language, and because this approach insists that texts featuring ethnic subjects are signs that require formal interpretation, it destabilizes the premise that such texts are readable only as evidence.[7]

Hiding in Plain Sight

In Lelia's list, *Native Speaker* asks us to consider the overlap between Asian America and allegory exhibited by their remarkably similar concerns regarding obscurity, hidden meaning, and deception. Her list makes use of allegorical traits—surreptitious, alien, even antiromantic—as Asian American descriptors. I am particularly interested in how this shared affinity helps us think differently about race and ethnic literature as modes whose formal and political activities have been disguised by appearing as natural ways of seeing, thinking, or reading. Allegory has a reputation for being obscure, unnatural, abstract, or artificial. Its association with "other speech" can be found in its etymology (ἄλλος 'other,' ἀγορεύειν 'to speak'). Theresa Kelley observes that "[a]llegory *is* alien, its ancient rhetorical status as 'other speech' survives all other adjustments" and that it becomes the "abjected 'other' to be cast out in the name of modernity" (5, 3). It is this otherness that renders allegory a fitting if ominous figure for Asian America, which has a long history of being identified with foreignness, alienness, and inscrutability.[8] Gary Okihiro has traced this orientalist discourse to ancient Greek ideas about Asia. In the context of the United States, notions of the Asian figure as the unassimilable alien and perpetual foreigner are evident in the legal status of Asian-origin immigrants as aliens ineligible for citizenship until 1952. At one extreme, the presumed obscurity of Asian American intention is indexed by state efforts to contain it or make it speak—notorious examples are Japanese internment, the loyalty questionnaire, the Chinese Confession Program, the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, and the special registration of male Muslim immigrants; at the other end, anxieties around racialized opacity have produced an Asian American subject obliged to declare or confess its referential transparency.[9] The allegorical tradition generates similar responses, as readers complain about both its obscurity and its mechanical referentiality.

If allegory and the Asian American figure appear alien or obscure, they do so only in contexts that have naturalized their opposites: realism or ordinary language in opposition to allegory, whiteness disguised as the abstract citizen in opposition to the Asian American figure. So perhaps what they actually indicate is a more fundamental anxiety about the reliability of referentiality itself, a notion that Angus Fletcher supports when he remarks that allegory "destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words 'mean what they say'" (2). The two form a powerful alliance in their shared potential for dispelling the illusion of referential transparency and for disclosing the presence of a hitherto unnamed norm. The term *Asian America*, for example, has been perpetually vexed by its inability to denote its heterogeneous referents, but scholars like Kandice Chuh have

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urged us to consider this inadequacy as offering critical traction for thinking referentiality "otherwise." Kelley imputes a similar force to allegory, arguing that its "wayward, provisional and openly factitious" qualities enable it to "open self-enclosed symbols or systems and thus break out of the 'habitus' of culture, whose patterns of received knowledge would otherwise close off inquiry" (11). If nothing else, the juxtaposition of allegory with the Asian American figure can recuperate a productive tension for a referential inscrutability; at the very least, it makes evident the limits of our present reading practices and gestures toward the work yet to be done.

Henryspeak

George Puttenham's renaming of allegory in the Renaissance as the "Figure of False Semblant" anticipates the affinities that *Native Speaker* establishes among espionage, allegory, and Asian America.[10] These affinities are brought into alignment by the missing addendum to Lelia's list, "False speaker of language," which plays on Orwellian doublespeak as well as Henry's status as a nonnative English speaker. In one strained conversation, Lelia inquires about his current assignment, and Henry responds by describing it as "*sensitive* and *evolving* but going well" (6). When the novel has her call this Henryspeak, it acknowledges the narrator's ability to exploit the expectations brought to bear on referential language—words say what they mean and mean what they say—to say something else entirely. Henryspeak taps into the ancient allegorical sense of enigma, in which hidden meaning lies paradoxically in plain sight, nowhere evident except in the words themselves.[11]

The introduction of Henryspeak leads immediately into the narrator's confession, which concludes the first chapter of the novel and in which what is secret is hidden by appearing as the all too evident. The confession remembers a troubled Asian American history, wherein the Asian American subject acts out its interpellation as the racial other through the compulsion, in Chow's words, to "represent, to examine, to confess about oneself incessantly" (114).[12] We know from Foucault that confession is a vexed form insofar as it produces an array of devices—the self, experience, referential language—that it relies on but cannot verify. It is fitting then that the novel has the narrator confess nothing more than what is already apparent: "I lied to Lelia. For as long as I could I lied. I will speak the evidence now. My father, a Confucian of high order, would commend me for finally honoring that which is wholly evident" (6). Playing on two senses of *evidence* ("what is readily apparent" and "proof"), his "evidence" involves no new revelation.[13] Seeming to volunteer a confession, he presents only what is "wholly evident," what is already obvious. Acknowledging this linguistic elusiveness with an ironic aside ("honoring that which is wholly evident"), he suggests that no hidden truth, no deeper meaning, will be made known, since "[t]he truth, finally, is who can tell it" (7). Availing himself of the strictest sense of the referential and speaking only what is already evident, he manages to speak altogether otherwise. Here the novel plays with the purest form of the referential, which, taken too literally, becomes instead a form of "other speaking"—that is, allegorical.

In the second part of his confession, the narrator addresses the reader directly: "And yet you may know me. I am an amiable man. I can be most personable, if not charming and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me." This disclosure too is carefully worded by connecting the literalness of language, the words on the page, to the curious effect of being unseen: "In this sense I am not a seducer. I am hardly seen. I won't speak untruths to you, I won't pass easy compliments or odious

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offerings of flattery. I make do with on-hand materials, what I can chip out of you, your natural ore" (7). Again the narrator does not lie ("I won't speak untruths") but manages nevertheless not to speak truly. Never speaking falsely, adding nothing that is extraneous or false, he says only what is already evident. Hiding in plain sight, this spy is hardly seen. Hard to see because he offers only what is evident, he resists being seen (through). Speaking literally, he contrives to speak otherwise.

Maureen Quilligan clarifies what is happening here when she reminds us that in the context of allegory the literal meaning of the text is in fact metaphoric (67), since *literal* literally means "letteral," in the sense of literacy or letters. Arguing that "[t]he 'other' named by the term *allos* . . . is not some other hovering above the words of the text, but the possibility of an otherness, a polysemy, inherent in the very words on the page" (26), she insists that "[t]he key to the story's meaning lies in the text's language—its most *literal* aspect" (68).[14] Returning us to the "most literal aspect" of the text as the place of the other, Quilligan offers us a reading of the literal as figurative, a scenario employed to great effect by the novel. Echoing Kelley's insight that allegory "needs to be read, not simply looked at" (86), Henryspeak suggests that the "most literal aspect" of the words on the page (their arrangement, their ordering—in short, their form) can be too plain to see. In this way, it suggests a possible route for reading form in Asian American writing.

Looping: An Allegory for Reading

If the novel presents Henryspeak as a kind of figurative activity that hides in plain sight, its psychoanalytic episodes stage a more complex version of concealment by giving us tropes that behave allegorically: they perform on one level as tropes, as figurative language; on another, they offer a perspective on their own activities. In these episodes, Henry has been assigned to Dr. Emile Luzan, a Filipino psychoanalyst and Marcos supporter. Henry pretends to be a businessman with depression, and the mission is initially successful. As the sessions continue, however, he is increasingly caught up in the pretense, and the assignment is eventually terminated. Later we learn that Luzan dies in a suspicious boating accident. These scenes tend to be read referentially, as offering information about Asian American subjectivity, but various devices work to discourage this approach.[15] One such device is the naive reader, a figure warning us against the expectation that racial signs will correspond to equivalent meanings. Luzan and Kwang, the spy's marks, are notable examples. When the narrator observes Kwang's first glimpse of him, he remarks, "What I saw now was the face of a recognition, the same face that Emile Luzan offered me" (133). The naive reader perceives the racial sign as a form of evidence, mistaking the "visible" as all there is to see. In discussing the limits of this "spatial logic," Barbara Johnson asks us to reconsider what seeing is in the "context of the act-of-reading(-literature)," if we no longer conceive of space as homogeneous or finite (213). In *Native Speaker*, these questions of seeing and reading are further complicated by the addition of race. Usually the psychoanalyst is a figure of expert reading, but the novel's analyst practices a woefully inadequate, and ultimately fatal, model of depth reading. Operating under a referential notion of race, Luzan confuses the spy's alibi with his psyche. "Dr. Luzan," the narrator tells us, "kept delving further into my psyche, plumbing the depths" (22).

The modern notion of race emerged in the course of the nineteenth century as the result of an epistemological shift redefining race as biology. As Robyn Wiegman argues, skin color becomes the visual evidence of difference even as the source of this difference is not, strictly speaking, visible, for it has been relocated to the hidden recesses of the body's

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interior. As a result, disciplinary operations teaching the eye not only what but also how to see produce what she calls the "referential illusion of modern vision" (37). The spy in *Native Speaker* is well aware that the evidence of race can be manipulated as a ruse. His alibi, after all, depends on the seeming congruence between racial appearance and ethnic feeling when in fact it is the disjuncture between sign and meaning that makes the ruse possible in the first place. Indeed, the illusion of referential transparency, of identity, is one the experienced spy cannot afford. Remembering his novice days, the narrator remarks, "For the first few assignments, you feel perfectly transparent, as if the man or woman in question can witness every leap of your heart. You think they can sense every false move. But in successive turns you grow an opacity, a pearllike glow whose surface can repel all manner of heat and light." The veteran spy learns to set aside his fear that the target will "see through him" (133)—the illusion, that is, of referential transparency—by cultivating the "at least two attitudes of mind" that Fletcher identifies with the accomplished allegorical reader (18).

Any impulse we might have to read the psychoanalytic episodes as referring directly to a historical Asian American subject is resisted by the novel, which contests the notion that its characters are subjects acting or telling under their own power. Portraying the narrator as "unraveling" and a "fraying mesh" (181, 314), the novel insists that he is nothing more than a textile (from *texere* 'to weave') whose weaving is beyond his own control. Its staging of the narrator as a fiction and not a locus of Asian American agency begins with the first mention of the Luzan mission: "It was when Lelia was away. I was one of his patients. I was a successful mortgage broker, married, seemingly poised at the sweet prime of my life. But I was troubled" (21). As the passage transitions from the first to the second and third sentences, the narrator function and the alibi switch places, but the reader cannot tell which is speaking, since there is no clear referent for "I." The appearance of identity between the self that is narrating and the alibi it is describing is produced on the grammatical level by the same first-person pronoun. Showing this "I" to be an effect of language, the passage puts into question the model of agency that it implies. In a novel preoccupied with the difficulties of performing or impersonating identity, the indiscernible shift between the "I" and its other suggests that the conscious control over reading and writing designated by "I" is nothing but a ruse of grammar.

The spy too is lured by the illusion of agency. In his initial description of the Luzan sessions, he describes himself as "switching": "I was developing into a model case. Of course I was switching between him and me, getting piecemeals of the doctor with projections in an almost classical mode" (22). In psychoanalytic terms, these projections are understood as the results of an unconscious defense mechanism called transference, a process occurring during treatment when patient and doctor displace unconscious wishes onto each other. In "The Dynamics of Transference," Freud identifies the phenomenon with a larger process of displacement and distortion in relation to dreams: the unconscious expresses, in disguised form, material that would otherwise be blocked. Seeking to understand why transference appears as resistance during the course of treatment, Freud suggests, "Transference in the analytic treatment invariably appears to us in the first instance as the strongest weapon of the resistance, and we may conclude that the intensity and persistence of the transference are *an effect and an expression* of the resistance" (104; my emphasis). The term *switching* implies the self-determining cogito of liberal humanism, a model of the sovereign individual that psychoanalysis has persistently tried to disturb. As the scene unfolds, something like the unconscious process of transference begins to interrupt the spy's narrative, and it becomes increasingly clear

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that the narrator's account of his conscious control is not to be trusted. By the end of the scene, the distinction originally made by the narrator between self (the referential) and alibi (the fiction) falls apart entirely, and no certain agency can be credited for the operation of the "I" and its narrative.

Indeed, the novel suggests that the narrator himself is nothing more than a product of textile tropes: "For the first time I found myself at moments running short of my story, my chosen narrative. Normally I would have ceased matters. . . . But inexplicably I began stringing the legend back upon myself. I was no longer extrapolating; I was looping it through the core" (22). For a first-person narrator, the loss of narrative control—"inexplicably," something the narrator cannot explain—represents not a loss of self, as some critics have suggested, but rather a process (call it form, grammar, the unconscious) that he does not know and cannot see. What operates the action of the passage is not the agency of "I" but a set of figures—stringing, looping—whose cumulative effect is to problematize the narrator as a "subject." By declaring its representation of Asian American identity to be a text composed of figures, the novel exhorts us, as Kelley does regarding allegory, that such texts are figures that must be read and not simply looked at.[16]

When the novel replaces switching with looping, it signals to us that the action of this passage is to be attributed to a force other than the agent, the "I" or author called Henry Park, implying that these terms are just alibis for a fiction of narrative control. Something other than an author is "inexplicably" behind the narrative, but this structuring principle is nowhere visible except as the "author." In other words, this principle resembles transference itself, which Freud initially considered an obstacle to analysis but eventually came to believe was in fact the structure of analysis: "It cannot be disputed that controlling the phenomena of transference presents the psycho-analyst with the greatest difficulties. But it should not be forgotten that it is precisely they that do us the inestimable service of making the patient's hidden and forgotten erotic impulses immediate and manifest" (108). Kelley suggests the latent allegorical resonances here when she reminds us that another of allegory's traditional tasks is to "make absent things seem present" (15). Insofar as transference, allegory, and race present "difficulties," as Freud puts it, by making manifest what is hidden and obscuring it at the same time, they can be thought of as different modes of concealment.

For Judith Butler, subjectivity itself is a product of this figurative subterfuge. Inaugurated by a "figure of turning" (3), the subject of and to power is produced by a turning against or turning on the self, expressed in the form of guilt or conscience. Here Butler plays on the sense of figurative language as a turn from normal or proper usage (from Gk. τρόπος 'a turn').[17] Since the conversion into a subject consists of this very turning and has no preexisting referent, the "paradox of subjection" implies a "paradox of referentiality," since "we must refer to what does not yet exist" (4). Neither trope nor subject can be evaluated on strictly positivist or referential grounds, since they are themselves both figures and figures for figuration. When we consider that Butler's tropological structure is followed by a second rhetorical maneuver, a metaleptic reversal enabling subjects produced as effects of power to imagine themselves as authors of power, it becomes increasingly clear that *Native Speaker* has in its sights a larger fiction of authorship. To argue, as I have, that Asian American referents are obscure and erratic at best or that a literary text enacts its own version of Butler's "paradox of referentiality" does not mean that referentiality does not matter for *Native Speaker*. It is far from irrelevant because looping and opacity are efforts to think the allegorical problem of figurative referentiality through race. In fact, by presenting a subject

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whose guilt consists of being presumed alien, the novel reminds us that the Asian American subject is the product of unequal relations of power that have constituted it as a figure of turning. Simultaneously the novel also argues against the abstract scenario of subjectivity that Butler helps us imagine by insisting on a specific history of subjection, one defined by a relentless referentiality.[18]

Looping and its correlates do not lead us directly to an Asian American subject, yet Asian America does make an appearance—obliquely, as a kind of figurative activity given historical form by the term *Asian America*. *Native Speaker* calls on a set of tropes that move in similar ways ("looping," "stringing back," "successive turns") to figure the figuration of Asian America as betrayal, espionage, and opacity—that is, turning. Subjectivity in the abstract may very well be produced by the motion of turning against, but the history of Asian American subjectivity illustrates the political consequences of being identified as the figure of turning. This is a subject, if we recall, persistently cast in the role of spy, traitor, or foreigner. In literary terms, however, figurative opacity is a virtue. These turning tropes in *Native Speaker* thus perform a double duty: they serve as the figure for Asian America, and they index its figuration as oriental inscrutability by a hegemonic whiteness imagining itself as racially transparent.[19] When Asian America is historicized as the product of specific economic, political, and figurative forces, we can better "imagine otherwise," in Chuh's phrase, our political and intellectual projects. Looping and its correlates perform one final task. As tropes, they describe the narrator's activity as a kind of turning or looping; as allegories in the deconstructive sense, they offer a set of instructions for reading the Asian American text. In utilizing these tropes to call into question its referential authority, *Native Speaker* echoes nicely de Man's textile trope for allegory as a self-referential text "folded back upon" itself.

The novel concludes these psychoanalytic episodes by converting the subject identified with espionage and betrayal into an agent of critique. Earlier, it described the role-playing of the ethnic spy as a series of "successive turns" in which he "grow[s] an opacity, a pearl-like glow" (133). In the final Luzan scene, the same figure is used to describe betrayal. "In the second hour," the narrator says, "I turned the conversation back on Dr. Luzan" (208). If betrayal moves like allegory, insofar as it folds back to comment on itself, might we understand the subject of betrayal as charting the possibility of a critically oppositional trajectory of reference? Crystal Parikh argues for such a reading of betrayal, proposing that we view it as a "cultural critique" allegorizing the conditions under which the Asian American (and Latino/a) subject emerges as a subject of betrayal (1–28). In the following lyrical passage, the novel gestures toward this possibility by having the narrator hail an unnamed addressee—an apostrophized America? the anonymous reader?—in order to reposition betrayal as an original American mode: "But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom. . . . You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history . . . only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. . . . Here is all of my American education" (320). The narrator understands his acts of betrayal as imitating a prior betrayal, that of white America, which has turned against its own immigrant past. "My ugly immigrant's truth," he claims earlier, "is that I have exploited my own" (319). If betrayal constitutes American subjectivity, then it is only by being the subject of betrayal—that is, being "Asian American"—that the spy ironically turns "American."[20] This latest installment of turning—"I call them back to you"—mimics the original betrayal. It re-turns it, calls it back home. The ethnic spy's turning resembles betrayal, but its effect is to call the accent and idiom of the norm

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to account by imitating them. By being too good a mimic, as Homi Bhabha might put it, the Asian American subject exposes the ugly immigrant truth founding the nation, but does so only by emulating it. Calling back is a movement that resembles looping, in the sense that it too doubles back on (betrays) its original referent. The referent for these modes is not the Asian American subject but that abstract, forgotten antecedent—you? America?—that called Asian American subjectivity into being.

White Language

In previous scenes, the novel's allegorical work consisted of making manifest the mechanisms behind evidence and agency. In the final scene I discuss, this allegorical task is accomplished by marking the unmarked trope: native speaking. *Native Speaker* has persistently staged the desire to be unmarked, to be self-evident, even as it has revealed the illusion of transparency to consist of rhetorical maneuvers that work to repel being seen (through). Three versions of the unmarked are brought together in the figure of Lelia, the novel's self-acknowledged "standard-bearer" (12): the native speaker, an accent without accent; whiteness, a race without race; and referential language, a language without mystery. But even as the novel demonstrates the political urgency of staging Lelia as the mouthpiece for "other speech," or allegory, it worries about the allegorical propensity to obscure what should remain evident. In this way, *Native Speaker* demonstrates the perils of ignoring form in the pursuit of politics; it issues a trenchant critique of reading practices that disaggregate race, referentiality, and figurative language.

The novel ends in a multicultural public classroom, envisioned as a utopian space in which nonnative speaking is encouraged, no corrective speech exercises occur, and all the students are welcomed as Americans.[21] This scene rewrites an earlier one in which Henry's white teachers discipline his unruly tongue. Here Lelia is depicted as "horsing with the language," and the primarily foreign-language-speaking students are all hailed as "good citizens." Indeed, it is Lelia who receives the "American education," for she is the one who learns reading, writing, and "calling all the difficult names of who we are" (320, 349). While the novel is certainly engaged in a project of writing the marginalized subject back into a national narrative, I want to suggest a different reading. I propose that when the novel's eponymous referent is understood as Lelia and not Henry, a more extensive critique emerges. I argued above that the novel uses allegory to sketch an elliptical and unpredictable path for reference, and I showed how allegory challenges the normative expectations brought to bear on race and language. In this final section, allegory leads us to what I call "white language," the novel's far-ranging critique of the fantasy of invisibility, referentiality, and transparency.[22]

The early twenty-first century has been heralded as a postracial era, but, as David Eng has astutely observed, "race is said to be irrelevant to the law, to political doctrines of the liberal individual, and to US citizens as abstract and equal subjects" even as new combinations of economic, racial, and sexual inequities are produced nationally and globally (4–5). In this age of color blindness, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism, race is invisible in new and powerful ways. In the context of espionage, we discover a similar "fantasy of invisibility," one that John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg associate with the "voyeurism, self-concealment, and license" defining the traditional figure of the British or American spy (13). *Native Speaker* shows us how these qualities obtain only for the subject privileged by a certain version of whiteness (middle-class, male, heterosexual). Tina Chen captures the condition of the ethnic spy with the term "in/visibility," an allusion to Ralph

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Ellison's playful critique of African American hypervisibility. She argues that for the ethnic subject, the "hypervisibility of race is the precondition for the ways in which one is misseen or unseen" (160). In the post-9/11 world, where Asian bodies are once again inscrutable and only certain citizens are granted the privilege of being seen as transparent, *Native Speaker*'s caution about the danger of the self-evident and the transparent is prescient.

How might we understand Lelia's "job," as the novel puts it, as a native speaker in relation to her portrayal as someone who "can't hide a single thing" (12, 158)? The narrator believes that her quality of being perfectly referential is what he loves most about her, declaring that "she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy" (159). Her apparent transparency is explained as her lack of mystery. In an early scene, a younger Lelia and Henry play a guessing game of identity. When Henry easily deduces her geographic origins, she protests, "An ordinary white girl has no mystery anymore, literally nothing to her name." He replies, "There is always a mystery. . . . You just have to know where to look" (10). The mystery of the white subject, unlike that of the racialized subject, looks like nothing and is easily seen through. John Fiske refers to this as "ex-nomination," the technique by which whiteness refuses to be named and arrogates to itself the power of the norm and the universal (42). David Lloyd shows how whiteness takes shape from nineteenth-century theories of the aesthetic, which posited both an abstract subject and a narrative of representation understood as progressing from differences to identity in a process of increasing formal abstraction. He argues, "Whiteness is the metaphor for the metaphorical production of the Subject as one devoid of properties rather than the natural sign of difference to which the attributes of civilization and culture are in turn attached" (77). Insofar as whiteness and formalization both appear devoid of properties, they share the logic of metaphor, the classical rhetorical trope associated with the assertion of identity over difference.

If metaphor makes possible the mystification of whiteness and form, it is here that allegory can help us. The novel goes about this task by marking Lelia as the subject of linguistic, racial, and gendered difference and ends by turning her literally into a figure of other speech. First, the scene names her—"a pale white woman"—to index her difference from the multicultural classroom and to make visible a racial designation that typically appears as the absence of race. The scene marks her again by queering her speech: she "reads a tall tale in her gentlest, queerest voice" (349). In queering the native speaker's accent, the novel hints at a different genealogy: the history of norming this particular accent has been forgotten; this forgetting is memorialized as a lack of accent.[23] Finally, the novel turns Lelia into a figure of nonnative speaking, and it ends with the haunting line, "Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are" (349). The native speaker, once identified with a normative referentiality, is now a figure of other-speaking. The scene ends with another list, as Lelia uses her class list to write each student's name on a sticker. If the list beginning the novel's action represents the (white) native speaker's attempt to read and write the Asian American as other, the list appearing in this scene rewrites liberal citizenship. The (white) native speaker learns to read and write from below, and the national culture is imagined as founded on irreducible, nonnative differences.

In marking whiteness as nonnative, this scene remembers all the differences erased in the formalization of abstract equality. It invokes the forgetting of America's nonnative and immigrant past and gestures toward the forcible erasure of an even earlier native (indigenous) past. By queering the white female

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subject, *Native Speaker* rewrites the dominant racial, linguistic, and cultural norms, but her conversion (from *vertere* 'to turn') into the figure of other-speaking is accomplished by obscuring the same "dozen and lovely native languages" to which she gives voice. As the figure for other-speaking—allegory—Lelia figures nonnative speaking, but the process of figuring or formalizing other speech also obscures it. Similarly, the act of queering the sympathetic white mother is progressive, but it also alludes to what Eng has critiqued as queer liberalism, the putative extension of rights to intimacy and privacy that are based on, and reenact, the forgetting of a longer history of racialization and capitalist exploitation. In this way, *Native Speaker* suggests the troubling prospects of a seemingly inevitable formalization by making the sympathetic white mother the normalizing figure through which these differences must pass to be articulated. Focusing on either the reformed native speaker or its other, the nonnative speaker, produces differently problematic scenarios: the former installs a queer liberalism, the latter generates ethnic essentialism. By refusing to adjudicate the proper referent for the native speaker of its title—is it Lelia? Henry? Kwang?—the novel allows each to bring the others to crisis and thus opens up the literary possibilities of reference itself.[24]

If Asian America is a fiction, in the double sense that it is a fictional construct and that it consists, quite literally, of fiction, then what kind of reading or mode of representation would the "fiction of Asian American literature," as Susan Koshy calls it, require beyond its declaration as such? What shape might our critical awareness of this fiction take, given the heightened political stakes of inscrutability that are so powerfully evident in the post-9/11 world?[25] *Native Speaker* assembles an assortment of legacies—allegory, race, espionage—to figure the difficulty of reading this fiction. If looping or turning offers one difficult trope among many for figuring a set of historical experiences called "Asian American," then as a form of doubling back, such a trope also works to transform the "text" of America. My reading of Lee's novel has tried to clear a space for the tension between its representation of the desire to be unmarked, to be readable, and the rhetorical strategies that persistently stage the inscrutability of the Asian American figure. I have argued that only when we fix our attention on the formal activities of the novel can we discern the particularities of this desire to be seen (through) as the attributes of an abstract subject inaugurated by the figurations of white language. In the context of an uneven social landscape made formidably more so by the ongoing war on terror, cultivating the difficulties of the referential in literary texts may seem frivolous if not elitist or simply out of touch, but at such fraught moments the task of worrying the illusions of referential transparency, patiently and persistently, is most urgent.

Notes

For their help with the writing of this essay, I wish to thank Amy King, Kent Ono, Susan Koshy, Robert Dale Parker, Scott Combs, Stephen Sicari, and my writing group: Thuy Linh Tu, James Kim, Wen Jin, and Jeffrey Santa Ana.

1. Denning calls the spy thriller a "cover story for our culture," arguing that the genre's "focus on the world of espionage does not necessarily make it about spies" (1, 29).

2. I have grouped different scholarly concerns into readings that foreground form or figurative activity and those that pursue sociocultural analysis. For the former, see Arac; Chen; Narkunas; and Wu. For the latter, see Corley; Engles; Huang; J. Kim; R. Lee; and Song. Parikh and D. Kim do not explicitly discuss form, but their comparative approach works against Asian America as the default frame of reference.

3. Arac invokes the human; Narkunas invokes capital. Klinkenborg and Flusfeder, both reviewers of *Native Speaker*, employ America as the general category. Song argues for referential reading as a strategy to counteract deracination.

4. The phrase is from Avital Ronell, who discusses Barbara Johnson, Derrida, and Lacan on Poe's "The Purloined Letter."

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5. For the new formalism, see Levinson's mapping of the movement; Wolfson. On strategic formalism, see Levine, "Strategic Formalism." For responses to Levine, see Dever; Tucker. Levine's reply is "Scaled Up."

6. A special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* theorizes Asian American fiction (Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht). For anthologies on aesthetics and form, see Davis and Lee; Zhou and Najmi. For an example of historical formalism in practice, Lye's *America's Asia* remaps national and disciplinary archives by tracking "Asiatic racial form" across nineteenth-century American literary naturalism (5).

7. The antimony between allegory and symbol can be traced to the Romantics, who devalued the former for its mechanical nature and limited range of meaning and promoted the latter for its unity and organic form. According to Coleridge, a central figure here, the symbol is characterized by the "translucence" of the universal in the particular (qtd. in Fletcher 16n29). An echo of this debate finds its way into Lee's novel when the terms "transparency" and "opacity" are used to describe the spy (133).

8. Michael Chang analyzes how easily this American orientalism was activated during "Donorgate," the Democratic campaign finance scandal of the 1990s, when Asian Americans engaged in illegal fund-raising were accused of espionage. He shows how Donorgate led in turn to the federal case of espionage against Wen Ho Lee, a physicist.

9. From 1882 to 1943, with exclusion acts restricting their immigration in effect, Chinese entering the United States had to prove their right to do so with extensive documentation. During World War II, over 110,000 Japanese Americans were interned in concentration camps. In 1943 internees over seventeen were issued questionnaires so that their loyalty to the United States could be ascertained. Under the 1956 Chinese Confession Program, Chinese who had entered illegally as "paper sons" could naturalize if they informed on others. Special Registration, created by the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 and revoked in April 2011, expanded the National Security Entry-Exit Registry System to track and deport Muslim men in the United States. It required noncitizen males from Muslim nations in Asia and Africa over sixteen to report to INS offices, where many were deported for minor infractions.

10. Puttenham's "Englishings" of these figures of speech, as his editors put it (Whigham and Rebhorn 59), may offer an additional point of entry into the relation between rhetorical figures and the nation.

11. On enigma, see Obbink. Frye makes the well-known argument that all criticism, insofar as it seeks to interpret meaning, is essentially allegorical (89).

12. Chow extends Foucault to argue that the self-referential gesture in ethnic representation is "tantamount to performing a confession in the criminal as well as noncriminal sense . . . it is to admit and submit to the allegations (of otherness) that society at large has made against one" (115).

13. The *OED* gives several definitions for *evidence*: "quality or condition of being evident," (def. 1), "that which manifests or makes evident" (def. 2), and "ground for belief; testimony."

14. Quilligan's principal quarrel is with the confusion of allegory with allegoresis, which imposes meanings not originally intended by manufacturing a disjuncture between what a text says and what it means.

15. Chen offers the most sophisticated example; she considers this scene as representing Asian American subjectivity, but she also complicates this reading with her theory of performance.

16. The *OED*'s conclusion that *loop* is "[o]f obscure etymology" indicates a suggestive connection to allegory.

17. An ethnic studies historicizing subjectivity as "figur[ing] a process which cannot be detached from or understood apart from that very figuration" would powerfully extend and supplement Butler's insights (69). Hayden White derives *trope* in early English from *tropos* ("turn" in classical Greek) and *tropus* ("metaphor" or "figure of speech" in Latin) and suggests that *style* is its modern counterpart (2).

18. I thank Scott Combs for this important insight. Questions 27 and 28 of the loyalty questionnaire were yes-or-no and thus particularly controversial. The first demanded an oath of allegiance disavowing Japan, the second demanded military service as proof of loyalty. Leave processing from camp was keyed to interpreting "yes, yes" as loyal and "no, no" as disloyal. Ngai considers the unintentional rhetorical consequences of the questionnaire (173–201). Voluntary declaration of one's ethnicity was another version of this subjection. To distinguish themselves from "enemy" Japanese, Chinese distributed buttons declaring, "I am Chinese," while Koreans wore badges stating, "I am Korean."

19. Consider Earl Warren, then California's attorney general, who justified Japanese internment with this language: "We believe that when we are dealing with the Caucasian race we have methods that will test [their] loyalty. . . . But when we deal with the Japanese we are in an entirely different field and cannot form any opinion that we believe to be sound" (qtd. in Ngai 176).

20. In the rhetorical tradition, irony is considered a type of allegory. In "Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man compares their temporal structures (*Blindness* 187–228).

21. Song observes that the difference of the Asian American figure from the norm is registered even in fantasy: Henry plays the role of Speech Monster.

22. The phrase is a playful echo of Derrida's essay on "white mythology," his critique of philosophical pretensions to truth that rest on a disavowed foundation of metaphor.

23. The novel suggests another reading of *queer* by positioning Lelia and Henry as symbolic parents for an alternative American family. See Eng on queer liberalism.

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24. Corley offers a beautiful reading of each of these possibilities.

25. Jasbir Puar's reading of the terrorist body offers a compelling argument for the "profound yearning" on the part of the United States "for the transparency of these bodies" (132). She cites, for example, Camp X-Ray (the Guantánamo detention site) and the practice of shaving the prisoners there.

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