Native Sons and Native Speakers: On the Eth(n)ics of Comparison

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[Comparison] brings with it new problems: descriptivism, summary, anthologism—a certain analogical logic. [O]ne compares A to B according to a model.
—Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*

CHANG-RAE LEE'S *NATIVE SPEAKER* WAS PUBLISHED IN 1995 TO almost immediate acclaim—the novel, Lee's first, garnered glowing reviews, several awards, and prestige for its author. The tale of a Korean American "ethnic consultant" impressed critics with its witty, sly evocation of an American identity politics that transforms the model minority employee into the model corporate spy. Reviewers saw in the novel's protagonist, Henry Park, a postmodern figure for the trials constitutive of ethnic identity. An expert in profiling "foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans" and a specialist in Asian immigrants, Park provides his firm's clientele—"multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, [and] individuals of resource and connection"—that most crucial of services, the acquisition of usable information (17). Ethnicity marks Park's difference and is his greatest occupational asset. In offering this view, *Native Speaker* was said to register the complex identifications attending ethnicity in the United States.

Such approbation dissipated seven years later, when a selection committee nominated *Native Speaker* as a finalist for a New York City reading campaign. The committee commended the novel for its deft urban characterization, praising Lee's exploration of the relations among the city's diverse populations.[1] Dissent emerged, however, when members of the Korean American community insisted that the selection committee retract its nomination, claiming the novel shed stereotypical light on Korean American culture.[2] These

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readers targeted Lee's choice of profession for his protagonist, arguing that the novel reinforced the cliché of Asian inscrutability by casting Park as a spy. Far from correcting or commenting on that typical identity, Park's position as an "ethnic consultant" had fallen prey to it. Park had failed, in other words, his task as a representative of ethnicity.

For those involved in the reading-campaign controversy, the logic of stereotyping marks ethnic representation at its most reductive and therefore, its worst. Meanwhile, in the criticism of *Native Speaker*, the stereotype leads some to the different conclusion that the conflation of Park's occupation with his ethnicity is all but inevitable. For June Dwyer, the matter is as simple as a good match: Park's job is "a strikingly unusual, but altogether *appropriate* job for an immigrant" (74; my emphasis). Or, as James Kyung-Jin Lee puts it, "[T]he assimilated Henry is crucial to his capacity to work as a spy, and thus *serves perfectly* as Lee's emblem of a self-conscious, self-aware model minority" (247; my emphasis). Tim Engles argues that Park's profession, while taking advantage of his heritage, offers a mirror image of his biography. "Henry's vocation acquires nuanced significance," Engels remarks, "when read as a more precise representation of Korean American experience" (43). The connection is even more direct for Tina Chen, who focuses in large part on Lee's racialized revision of the spy thriller genre. While Chen claims that invoking the spy thriller allows Lee to "redress the popular stereotypes of Asian secret agents created by Anglo-American writers," she nonetheless describes Park's occupation as "a *logical* extension of his personal history as a Korean American" (656, 638; my emphasis). Figuring Park through a type makes in these accounts a kind of interesting sense. What is more, such figuration enables the novel's work as cultural analysis. Espionage "metaphorically adds a new level to our understanding of what immigrants do for their adopted country" (Dwyer 74), depicts "a representative Korean American's cultural self-evisceration" (Engles 46), and even provides "a provocative thematization of racial in/visibility" that "alludes to the structural role Asian Americans have served" (Chen 656; J. Lee 247). *Native Speaker* speaks, in other words, to its protagonist's signification.

The trouble (or fascination) with typing lies, then, in its effect on the singularity ethnicity is said to embody. A typecast Park means that his ethnicity is not only scripted but indeed the script by which his narrative proceeds. Perhaps less obviously, the logic of the type renders Park's ethnicity recognizable in another sense—that is, recognizable in relation to another ethnic type. For reviewers and critics alike, Park's significance as an ethnic character registers him as an "invisible man" whose resemblance to "the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" lies in "the refusal of others to see him" (Chen 638) as well as in the "racial identity search" on which he embarks (Engles 32). As one reviewer puts it, "With echoes of Ralph Ellison, Chang-rae Lee's extraordinary debut speaks for another kind of invisible man: the Asian immigrant in America."[3] These comparisons attribute invisibility specifically to Asian Americans, the model minority that does not require tracking.[4] Yet they also conflate ethnicity with invisibility and in so doing name invisibility as a shared trope, a shared difference. Linking *Native Speaker* with *Invisible Man*, not despite, but through ethnic difference, they suggest an intertextual association that emerges out of the relation between the novels' protagonists. The interethnic makes it possible to imagine an ethnic intertextuality.

Long deployed in efforts to claim the legitimacy of individual ethnic literary traditions, intertextuality here provides the basis for reading affinities between specific ethnic literatures. When Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey* names Signifyin(g) as "a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality," he defines a specific African American literary practice that in turn defines the

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literature through that practice (xix–xxi). Indeed, the textual persona for this dynamic, Esu-Elegbara, has become a figure for intertextuality, and his critical counterparts—including, for instance, the Monkey King and the Chippewa trickster Nanabozho—have followed him in performing similar feats of legitimation for their literatures.[5] Intertextuality thus shores up what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls "a sense of an *internally meaningful* literary tradition" (11; my emphasis).[6] At the same time, the political urgency of such thinking cannot contain the impulse of intertextuality to seek out new relations. Despite the priority she places on establishing an Asian American literary tradition, Wong in *Reading Asian American Literature* finds herself drawn to the prospect of reading across ethnic literatures. In one striking instance, Wong ends a discussion of the "racial shadow" in Asian American literature—one in which she establishes carefully this shadow's relation to the classic psychoanalytic figure of the double—by remarking that African, Native American, and Chicano and Chicana literary histories yield a similar troping.[7] "The possibilities for comparative study," she writes, "appear numerous and promising" (117).

This essay cultivates the promise scholars like Wong have identified but not pursued.[8] Following a series of contexts that spans disciplinary, metatextual, and critical discourse, I argue for an intertextuality made possible by the ethical limit posed by ethnic difference. More specifically, this intertextuality faces the obligation to foreground ethnicity as a specific textual presence. Thus an attentiveness to the representation of ethnicity—its embodiment through characterization, its formal or generic manifestations—comprises the effort to honor its difference. At the same time, the limiting force of such obligation sustains ethnic intertextuality. Far from prohibiting, for instance, a comparison of distinct ethnic literatures, the injunction to pay heed to ethnicity produces a specific reading motion, a perpetual rotation of the intertextual engine for which another comparison is just a turn away. The prospect always exists for having missed the ethnic mark. That missed encounter, however, yields the imperative to continue reading without knowing how difference will emerge. Heeding this imperative not only results in an altered sense of *Native Speaker* and its rendering of Henry Park. It also alters what it means to read ethnic literature.

Disciplining Comparison

Gayatri Spivak's recent *Death of a Discipline* opens with a tale of rebuilding: "Since 1992," she writes, "three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the discipline of comparative literature has been looking to renovate itself." The fate of the Berlin Wall enjoins comparative literature to rethink its mapping of literary borders. For Spivak, Charles Bernheimer's *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* indexes this impulse as a preoccupation with ethnic difference, or what she calls "the rising tide of multiculturalism and cultural studies" (1). Awash in this tide, comparative literature calls for its own reformation even as it faces internal critique—it faces, in other words, the difficult conditions of its possibility. Difference, embodied in this historical moment by ethnicity, constitutes an edge to comparative literature that is simultaneously the discipline's raison d'être.

In the essays collected in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ethnic difference is singular not only for its aesthetic, political, or ethical relevance but also—and perhaps even more forcefully—for its disciplinary significance, as is evident in Bernheimer's history of reports made to the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) since 1975. The Bernheimer Report, presented to the ACLA in the spring of 1993, as well as its two predecessors—known familiarly as the Levin Report (1965) and the Greene Report (1975)—seeks to hold a mirror to the discipline: its vision of lit-

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erature (as distinct from the one endorsed in national literature departments), its account of current standards and methodologies, its sense of pressing questions straining and potentially redefining comparative practice.[9] Not unlike a State of the Union address, each ACLA report describes and assesses disciplinary conditions and by extension, the state of literature itself. In Bernheimer's genealogy, however, this function is interrupted when the report written to follow the Greene Report goes unsubmitted because "the chair of that committee was so dissatisfied with the document that he exercised a pocket veto" (Bernheimer, Preface ix). The aberration testifies to the reports' institutional weight: in noting the gap, Bernheimer underscores the existence of the tradition, and in inheriting this gap from its forebears, his report is in turn defined by it. Yet Bernheimer's reference calls attention to the ghostly 1985 report and the conditions that surrounded its demise. What disciplinary vision warranted the executive veto? A clue lies in the belligerent conservatism the Bernheimer Report attributes to its immediate predecessor. Of the 1975 Greene Report, Bernheimer and the members of his committee say that it "does not so much articulate new goals and possibilities for comparative literature as it *defends* the standards proposed by Levin against perceived challenges" (Bernheimer et al. 39; my emphasis). Specifically, the Bernheimer committee recalls three such "perceived challenges" named as threats to the discipline's high standards of excellence—the use of translations in research and teaching, the growth of interdisciplinary programs, and the presence of literary theory, whose synchronic view of interpretation receives from the Greene Report an "implicit rebuke" (41). Retrospection yields introspection: the review of the Greene Report reveals that contention has driven the discipline's self-portraits.

The Bernheimer Report's attentiveness to this history of divisive concerns provides a context for the ellipsis that follows ten years after the Greene Report. Indeed, the Bernheimer Report makes it possible to imagine how ethnic difference might have been at stake in the 1985 report's demise. By the time of that report's drafting, the academy had witnessed the explosive entry of "minority literatures" into departments of English, comparative literature, and a host of national language and area studies programs. Postcolonial studies hit American shores in the early 1980s, bringing a gaze that criticized the production and maintenance of cultural epistemologies forged in the name of the West and that exposed literature as a privileged and therefore unquestioned site of such historical constructions. Similarly, the presence of the ethnic in American literary studies compelled a reconfiguration of canons and literary histories such that the field could no longer easily assume "canon" and "literary history" as precepts. Finally, as a synonym for singularity, specificity, and particularity, ethnic difference in this moment began to acquire the kind of exemplarity previously attributed to gender, race, and sexuality. This moment rendered ethnicity the redeeming difference. Its force occurred through its identity as difference.

For comparative literature, historically a discipline invested in crossing the borders of literary and disciplinary nationalisms, these developments have cast ethnic difference as an object of interest, preoccupation, and even anxiety. My speculations about the missing ACLA report have less to do, therefore, with exposing shady institutional dealings than with positing a connection between the literary political significance of ethnicity and current discussions in comparative literature about the health of the discipline and what its defining activity, comparison, signifies. Reading *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* makes clear that ethnic difference stands simultaneously at opposite ends of this discussion. It embodies for some contributors a predicament facing contemporary comparative practice: the spectral other, the index of Eurocentric privilege and guilt, the limit case

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of a discipline already on the edge. For others, however, ethnic difference characterizes and explains the discipline at its most visionary—its approach to historicist thinking, its insistence that nationalism affords an insufficient picture of the cultures of literature. Ethnic difference would appear crucial to the disciplinary silhouette comparative literature projects for its present as well as its future.

In the first view, ethnic difference marks what Mary Louise Pratt calls "crises of accountability and expertise" for the discipline (62–63). The emphasis on cultural specificity enjoins comparatists not only to include ethnicity but also to address how it alters their critical practice—and even whether their practice adequately attends to its handling. Pratt welcomes this doubled crisis, arguing that it exposes the discipline's conservative bent. She laments the resistance to dislodging Europe from the center of comparative study, remarking that "one continues to be haunted by a specter that surged forth at the height of the so-called Western culture debates," and urges her colleagues to continue exorcising the demon of Eurocentrism (62). Yet such purification rites trouble other scholars, who see in the privileging of ethnic difference the source of a restrictive disciplinary identity politics. Bernheimer imagines how the reification of ethnicity consigns any comparatist endeavor to inadequacy; any critic "who ventures beyond the European area or gets involved with ethnic cultures at home . . . will always . . . be found lacking in some quality of authenticity" ("Anxieties" 9). In the meantime, David Damrosch claims that the distinctiveness of comparative literature is at risk. For him, ironically, "the new emphasis on cultural context" has not broadened but constrained the sphere of comparative activity by "increas[ing] the nationalism of much study" (123). In the guise of "cultural context," ethnic difference intensifies a disquieting separatism—an isolationist view that may preclude the connections on which comparative literature thrives.

These arguments cite ethnic difference for the trouble it has caused comparative literature. Yet a discourse also exists that articulates how ethnicity resides productively in the field. Thus the Bernheimer Report describes comparative literature "as a privileged locus for cross-cultural reflection" (45), emphasizing that the discipline values encounters with difference and declaring its "inherently pluralist" nature, as Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein put it (78). "Cross-cultural reflection" also inflects Emily Apter's sense that an "exilic consciousness" has enabled "comparative literature's very disciplinarity" (94). The flight of scholars from World War II–torn Europe to American universities; the postcolonial version of that intellectual diaspora—here experiences of displacement ground the discipline's theoretical predispositions. In rejecting literary nationalism, in foregrounding ambiguity as a cultural dynamic and melancholy as a psychic manifestation of social upheavals, this comparative literature attends to the wrenching disidentifications of history. Or, as Ahearn and Weinstein write, this comparative literature proceeds "aware of but not defined by Difference in all its powerful forms" (78).

In short, ethnic difference is for comparative literature both limit and inherent principle. Here Rey Chow's ascription of a "fundamental ambivalence" to the discipline offers a useful perspective on the institutional construction of ethnic difference (108). Chow suggests that comparative practice can draw no certain path from this ambivalence. But it can, I suggest, draw *on* ambivalence to sustain a perspective Damrosch calls "inherently elliptical" (128). To do so is, first, to follow Damrosch's lead, refuse the comparative act a fixed point on which to center its operations, and posit instead "a new literary geometry" in which the ellipse—"that geometric form generated from two foci"—propels comparison into action. Generated in this way, comparison clears ground for difference by redefin-

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ing the discipline and its object and adapting disciplinary practices to previously "marginal subjects" (122). Modeled on the ellipse, comparison yields more attentiveness to difference. Yet second, and more significant for the purposes of this argument, Damrosch's sense of the elliptical makes room for reconstructing the place of difference in comparison. In the elliptical dispersion of terms, the potential exists for difference to be always variable, instead of a point of permanence. Difference remains perpetually on the verge of its own displacement. Or, to put it another way: in the ellipse of comparison, difference slips into *différance*.

Bigger Thomases Everywhere

If Damrosch's ellipse plots comparison around difference—or what Damrosch might call unforeseeable pivot points—his view of comparison discovers a pivot in Bigger Thomas, whose biography Richard Wright reconstructs in "How 'Bigger' Was Born." The novel's critical history offers at least two contexts for this comparative thinking. *Native Son* has been taken up as a naturalist work, a precursor to the more explicitly existentialist *The Outsider*, and a protest novel. Often biographically based in Wright's involvements with Communism, French existentialism, as well as the negritude movement, these readings turn on a comparative gesture situating Wright's work in a dynamic of influence. The early reception of *Native Son* thus repeats the filiation described by the novel's title. By contrast, when, thirty-odd years later, a newly emerging African American literary studies turned to *Native Son*, it did so also by playing a comparative hand. Thus Houston A. Baker concedes the validity of prior interpretations of the novel but insists on defining *Native Son* as "the first black novel that captured [the] full scope and dimension of African American 'folk heritage'" (13). Against the intertextual comparisons in which *Native Son* travels between European and American literary traditions, Baker urges readers to consider the novel in its indigenous context. In so doing, he places Wright in a literary tradition that includes James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter*, and Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*. He secures the novel's textuality through its expression of nativity.

Baker's insistence on a native textuality emphasizes that comparative arguments proceed too often blind to their own logic. His challenge to such blinkered thinking echoes Frantz Fanon's scathing assessment of the function the black performance of alterity serves: "the Negro," Fanon writes, "is comparison."[10] For Fanon, this comparison elevates whiteness because "the world always expects something of the Negro" (139)—that is, because the world consigns blackness to failure. Yet Fanon's syntax also identifies blackness with comparison in a way that exposes the operations of the latter. This is the double rhetoric driving "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in which Wright both follows Fanon in critiquing the comparative act and refuses the rigidity of Fanon's despair. Wright's essay conjures a peculiar existence for Thomas—one in which he shuttles between being a specific classification and a global type—that renders comparison the ceaseless process of management, negotiation, and evaluation. In so doing, the essay suggests that comparison accommodates (ethnic) difference by repeatedly suspending it.

Comparison underlies "How 'Bigger' Was Born" from the outset. If the essay does not begin with Bigger Thomas, its discussion of genre—in which perpetual exclusions establish and maintain a literary taxonomy—catapults the essay into comparative action.[11] Of the genre, Wright observes:

> In a fundamental sense, an imaginative novel represents the merging of two extremes; it is an intensely intimate expression on the part of a consciousness couched in terms of the most objective and commonly known events. It is at once something private and public by

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> its very nature and texture. Confounding the author who is trying to lay his cards on the table is the dogging knowledge that his imagination is a kind of community medium of exchange: what he has read, felt, thought, seen, and remembered is translated into extensions as impersonal as a worn dollar bill. (vii)

Claiming *Native Son*'s generic uniqueness, Wright also acknowledges that the novel's singularity puts his authorship at risk. Thus while he describes the imaginative novel as the "merging of two extremes," he speaks of the toll the blending takes on his status as the novel's originating voice. The ability of the imaginative novel to straddle intimacy and objectivity, to strike the private and the public in one blow, produces the author's imagination as common coin, "a kind of community medium of exchange." The distinctiveness of the genre lies in its repudiation of authorial centrality. Or, to follow Wright's logic to its end, *Native Son* accomplishes its uniqueness by making its author fit a type—comparable to others.

That the passage registers Wright's unease through a trope of currency underscores the significance of conceding authorial comparability. Wright admits his distaste for viewing his work as "a kind of community medium of exchange," going so far as to suggest that having an audience, because it involves exchange as readerly consumption, means chancing the imagination that has enabled the exchange in the first place. To be read is to have had that imagination "translated" and thereby to have entered into relations "as impersonal as a *worn* dollar bill" (my emphasis). Significantly, the passage critiques authorial originality through a mixed metaphor compounding the linguistic with the economic. Mingling translation with the image of a dollar bill faded by countless hands effects a view of usage not so much as an index of value but as a lessening by dilution. This is a fate to which Wright seems both resigned and resistant. His description of writing as a gamble only heightens the sense that fate is on the line. An effort "to lay his cards on the table," writing necessarily risks exposure. Or, more pointedly, writing is sustained by the exposure by which it can also be undone.

Yet Wright's discomfort regarding his authorship does not extend to the portrait of his character. If the challenges inherent in preserving ethnic difference against absorption or assimilation worry today's comparatists, they pose no such qualms for Wright. He veers, instead, in the opposite direction, insisting on Bigger's typicality as well as the political necessity of such characterization. One might even go so far as to say that Wright's comparative thinking in his analysis of "the imaginative novel" anticipates his discussion of his protagonist's functional typicality. Thus, when Wright concludes his discussion of genre and authorship, he proceeds with an account of the Bigger type that then propels his vision of a global politics. From a description of the five-Bigger spectrum to the contention that Bigger embodies a metaphoric alliance between oppressed populations: in Wright's hands, typology marks a comparative rhetoric structuring "How 'Bigger' Was Born." Comparison moves the essay, simultaneously shoring up and complicating Bigger's status as a representative African American.

The idea of a Bigger type first appears with an autobiographical claim—"the birth of Bigger goes back to my childhood"—which soon gives way to the complications of a multiple "birth." "There was not just one Bigger," Wright insists, "but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect" (viii). Multiply conceived, the construction of the type progresses through a sequence of five portraits. An escalation of social defiance marks how Biggers number 1 and 3, in bullying and taking advantage of fellow African Americans, anticipate the behavior of later Biggers, including that of Bigger number 5, who reserves his far more open rebellion for white authority—sitting, for instance, in the white section of streetcars and challenging

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conductors to move him to his "proper" place (ix–x).[12] The lives of African Americans writ large through this serialized type drop out, however, within pages of the classification scheme. Bigger's typicality undergoes a radical shift when Wright makes the provocative claim that "Bigger Thomas was not black all the time"—that he numbers in the "millions" and appears "everywhere" (xiv). Indeed, describing how his new understanding of Bigger has rendered him more sensitive to the machinery of oppression worldwide, Wright declares that he "began to feel far-flung kinships, and sense, with fright and abashment, the possibilities of alliances between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness" (xv). A vision for unity, the passage nominates Bigger as a representative "American Negro," placing him as an equal alongside potential comrades in the larger, global realm of political transformation. Yet so does it imply that Bigger is not simply a comrade but also the unlikely touchstone for an oppressed subjectivity around which "alliances," based in a sense of "far-flung kinships," can be built. In this moment of revolutionary imagination, the extended family models politics.

What to make of this transformation? How can Bigger live doubly in the essay, as both a type based in particularity and a figure of general proportions, without having his ethnic specificity compromised?[13] I suggest that the tension between the two turns "How 'Bigger' Was Born" into a restaging of the act of comparison. Early in the essay, the comparative act both yokes and specifies, producing the representative African American man and the inevitable narrative that scripts his American fate. The Bigger type proceeds serially, each of the five Biggers reinforcing it through an implied comparison with his counterparts. Each of the five Biggers, in other words, is himself Bigger by virtue of his difference: "If I had known *only one* Bigger," Wright observes, "I would not have written *Native Son*" (ix; my emphasis). Meanwhile, when the vision of revolution takes center stage, a comparative turn redraws Bigger's silhouette as that of Everyman. Here Bigger exceeds the ethnic type he has earlier defined: Wright's account of an "*extension* of my sense of the personality of Bigger" means the character has grown "Bigger" than the initial portrait that gave him life (xiv; my emphasis). At the same time, the force of this generalization depends on Bigger-the-specific-type as the ground from which it derives. Without Bigger—the representative of the African American experience—as a point of comparison, the Bigger Everyman could not exist.

"How 'Bigger' Was Born" thus locates an understanding of Bigger Thomas with the comparative complexities I have been describing. In Wright's hands, Bigger shifts from position to position, serving as a representative of ethnic difference and a generalized human condition. Readers uncomfortable with the universalizing gesture have sought to explain it through Wright's political affiliations; the alliance he envisions, as more than one critic has argued, manifests a Communist ideology of unified revolution in which the novelist imagines African Americans playing a part.[14] In this familiar account, Bigger's difference is assumed into (and that assimilation justified by) the putatively larger, transcendent view of humanity in the throes of an emergent political consciousness. Thus Wright's essay, ostensibly concerned with the character's evolution, rhetorically produces Bigger through multiple comparisons—in particular, through the implicit comparison that emerges when Wright moves Bigger from one typology to another. In that instance, in the shift from racialized specificity to an extended familial type, the essay leaves Bigger suspended. In that instance, Bigger enacts that sense of hovering any act of comparison must at some point face, becoming, in effect, a figure for comparison.

"How 'Bigger' Was Born" defines comparison by insisting on and deferring (Bigger's) difference. This double action allows Wright

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to sustain contradictory analyses: thus an account of the ways in which American racism creates, only to repudiate, African American subjectivity can coexist with a universalist vision that foregoes ethnic and national differences in the name of political alliances. The essay's production of Bigger points out and troubles that political reduction of ethnicity that would make comparison prohibitive. And more: it describes a comparative practice that, by performing the dilemma of accommodating difference, also retains difference as a necessary and invigorating limit. As premise and subject, difference provides the basis for an intertextuality in which the terms of comparison are neither fixed nor left untouched. Difference ensures that another comparison is always on the horizon.

Restless Nativity

> I approached all of these new revelations in the light of Bigger Thomas, his hopes, fears, and despairs; and I began to feel far-flung kinships, and sense, with fright and abashment, the possibilities of *alliances* between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness.
>
> (Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born" xv)

> But can you really make a family of thousands? One that will last? I know he never sought to be an ethnic politician. He didn't want them to vote for him solely because he was colored or Asian. He knew he'd never win anything that way. There aren't enough of our own. So you make them into a part of you . . . all this because you are such a natural American, first thing and last, if something other in between. (C. Lee 326).

Fifty years after Wright "sense[s]" in Bigger Thomas the viability of global "alliances," Chang-rae Lee imagines John Kwang, a Korean American borough councilman who speaks across ethnic populations and creates a constituency despite—or out of—interethnic tensions. At press conferences and rallies, in formal speeches as well as informal dinners with volunteers, Kwang calls for what Wright might have viewed as an example of kindred consciousness. In one such instance, Kwang addresses a crowd after hostilities between African Americans and Korean Americans have left two people dead and several stores firebombed. Drawing on a rhetoric of psychic interiority, Kwang implores his audience to understand the incidents not as "a black problem or a brown and yellow problem" but as the product of "self-hate." He urges those in the crowd to "think of yourself, think of your close ones, whom no one else loves, and then you will be thinking of them, whom you believe to be other, the enemy and the cause of the problems in your life" (151–52). He proposes using self-reflection to engage empathy and affiliation. If Wright turns Bigger into a figure for a politics based in alliances, Lee figures Kwang as the voice for such a politics.

Yet both Wright and the protagonist Henry Park know that realizing this vision is no easy feat. Despite characterizing politics as a family affair, Wright acknowledges the "fright and abashment" that accompany his sense of "far-flung kinships"; meanwhile, Park suspects that the unity of "a family of thousands" can only be fleeting. Further, both address how unlikely a springboard ethnic difference is for movements broader in scope. Thus Wright anticipates in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" that turning his character into a global rallying call will incur skepticism and anger from certain readers. And when Park observes that Kwang "didn't want them to vote for him solely because he was colored or Asian," he articulates the dynamic that will inevitably cast the councilman—however thoughtful his platforms—as a token, the ethnic politician. A global type for the countless oppressed, Bigger jeopardizes his specificity. A politician who endorses the strategic value of coalition building for ethnic groups, Kwang faces being reduced to a type. The risk boils down to the status accorded to their acts of ethnic representation.

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Bigger Thomas and John Kwang embody, in other words, the difficulty of interethnic politics. And their fates—when Kwang suffers a political scandal the public turns against this upstart immigrant, and Bigger's actions only confirm what the public believes it knows about African Americans—demonstrate that accomplishing this politics is far from certain. Yet I want to take both characters seriously and argue for a textual version of the interethnic relations they propose. What happens, then, to the difference of ethnicity when it is read across texts, when an act of reading places *Native Son* and *Native Speaker* alongside each other? Even a quick consideration of the chiasmus of the novels' titles makes the intertextual relation seem inevitable. If *Native Son* foregrounds the filiation structuring Bigger Thomas's relations to family, culture, nation, and the world, it also insists that speaking these relations contributes to their significance. Meanwhile, *Native Speaker* places language at the heart of Henry Park's narrative but asserts that the character cannot avoid filiation in what he will have to say. In this crossing, ethnic difference is not simply a construction but indeed constructed by the imbrication of filiation with speech.

Indeed, further unraveling the titular thread reveals how nativity functions as a decisive and troubled factor in the intertextual construction of ethnic difference. Nativity links filiation and speech as conditions of the protagonists' subjectivity: native sons by virtue of their birth, Bigger Thomas and Henry Park are also native speakers. Both speak to the effects of nativity, indicting the pretense with which it confers legitimacy on their ethnic differences only to find them wanting. Nativity is also, however, the site at which the intertextual relation encounters its own ethical complicity in the ethnic femininity both novels exploit. To the extent that the erasure of women of color enables the novels' analysis of nativity, a comfortable resolution to this problem may not exist. Rather, this discomfort marks a necessary condition for an intertextuality invested in the honoring of difference.

The novels' critique of nativity is most pointed when the texts take two all-American institutions—the legal system and private sector capitalism—as targets. Thus *Native Son* articulates how the law can preserve the maxim "innocent until proven guilty" and simultaneously find Bigger Thomas guilty by calling him a native son. Bigger's attorney, Max, makes this point clear in his closing speech, asserting that Thomas represents "a mode of life in our midst . . . plowed and sown by our own hands" (359). The figure of "life" in native soil describes African American history as an organic process, one in which "life new and strange" arises from surrounding conditions. "So old" is this cultivation that it precedes Thomas as "an order of nature" (368); the result, Max observes, is that Thomas's way of life could only be "a way of guilt," his "crime exist[ing] long before the murder of Mary Dalton" (361). Racism enables the proleptic cultivation of African American nativity. These are terms that earlier, during the inquest, Thomas himself anticipates—as he has known them all his life. When the coroner exhibits Bessie Mears's body to prove Mary Dalton's rape, Thomas recognizes the ploy and its possession of him as the native ethnic subject: "even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored his life and dictated the terms of his death" (307). Power ("they still ruled him") and possession ("he was their property") converge in a lifelong association in which his nativity is inescapable.

Native Son demonstrates that Thomas's value stems not from what his body can do but from the fact that his difference—bodily inscribed in his crime—can be claimed and thereby judged. Thomas is claimed for his difference and then abandoned because of it. This dynamic acquires even more force when

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its inverse illustrates the eager embrace with which a multiculturalist capitalism commodifies Henry Park's nativity. The thinking that makes Bigger Thomas both native and a default criminal finds a telling counterpart in the strategies of Glimmer and Company, a private sector firm for which Park works as an ethnic consultant. Founded by Dennis Hoagland—who realizes that the mid-seventies influx of immigrants will create a "growth industry"—Glimmer and Company provides "ethnic coverage" in the guise of information. The firm proceeds from no national agenda, pledging "allegiance to no government" but "dealing" in people instead and valuing Park because of his ability to facilitate such dealing. As an ethnic consultant, Park profiles Asians and Asian Americans who have drawn the attention of businesses and government units anxious to protect their own interests. His ethnicity marks his first qualification: in a telling slippage, the firm deems Park a *fellow* native by presuming that he shares with his assignments common heritage—enough to win their confidence and elicit the information they reputedly possess (17–18).

This is not to say that American nativism does not value its subjects but to emphasize the uses to which such value is put. In his fantasy of "running a big house like the CIA," Hoagland describes a plan by which he would "breed agents by raising white kids in your standard Asian household" (173). This thinking regards Asian discipline in much the same way that it damns Thomas's "Negro" criminality—by casting Asian discipline as a supplement to an American nativity that then absorbs the ethnic native for its own convenience and profit. Park's hybrid identity makes him the exemplary spy, distinct and heads above "white" Americans who, "even with methodical training were inclined to run off at the mouth" (172). *Native Speaker* affords Park the status of a subject—he does the profiling, while *Native Son* addresses how Thomas is the object of profiling—but that status is overdetermined. Perhaps more important, the brazenness with which the firm treasures Park reveals not only how it serves this nativist American ideology but also the ideological zeal with which district attorney Buckley relies on profiling to prosecute Bigger Thomas.

Driven by fantasy, neither Hoagland's nor Buckley's nativism can move forward without women: Hoagland's house of hybrid agents presumes the existence of mothers, while Buckley cannot do without Bessie Mears in arguing the case against Thomas. The novels (whose narratives otherwise center on male protagonists) cannot do without femininity: the murder and supposed rape of Mary Dalton propels Thomas into public consciousness, and Park's narrative begins when his wife Lelia leaves him. Yet the textual gesture locating femininity as a narrative crux, as the linchpin of the protagonists' troubles, raises questions about the analysis of nativity the novels advance. Femininity leaves both novels vulnerable to the critique that their analysis of nativity is not innocent. What does it mean that the novels proceed at the cost of their depictions of women? How does paying heed to femininity contribute to, complicate, or even impede the argument that an intertextual dynamic constitutes ethnic difference?

One feminist response to these questions might begin with the placement of women of color as guarantors of (male) ethnic subjectivity. You-me Park and Gayle Wald thus explain that Ahjuhma, the sole Korean woman in *Native Speaker*, shoulders weight crucial to the novel's narration of Park's past. Brought to the United States after the death of Park's mother, Ahjuhma confirms the Parks' accomplishment of the American dream (their domesticity is sustained by the labor of an other) even as she embodies Korean authenticity (in cuisine, for instance). As such she sustains the adolescent Park's self-loathing—his revulsion at her appearance displaces hatred "towards the part of [his] Koreanness that refuses to yield to 'real' Americanness" (621). Trudier

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Harris discovers much the same situation in *Native Son*, where the narrative pits Bigger Thomas against the black women (his mother and Bessie Mears). *Native Son* views black women's subservience as complicity and in so doing turns black women's work into collaboration or "being in league with the oppressors of black men." Calling this representation a kind of double-standard nativism, Harris remarks that black women function as "native" to "what whites want for blacks" and "foreign . . . to individual black development" while the novel casts Thomas's desires as "native" to "the best of American traditions" and "foreign" to such "Afro-American subservience" (63). Thomas emerges the exemplary American hero, his disenfranchisement the source of his heroism. Had Harris known of Henry Park, she might have put him on Thomas's case.

For these readers, *Native Son* and *Native Speaker* regress through the representation of women of color: the textual violence wrought on ethnic femininity diminishes any analysis of nativity the novels might pose. Yet I want to suggest that the novels' construction of ethnic femininity emerges out of a view of ethics distinct from that which such criticisms assume. To make this argument is to shift away from the ethical positions that have come to dominate ethnic literary study: that reading literature entails holding representation responsible, that reading literature means holding out for more or more responsible representations, and that reading ethnic literature means attributing ethical force to ethnicity. Rather than proceed only with these formulations in mind, I suggest that an intertextuality produces ethnic femininity across *Native Son* and *Native Speaker* by enacting the risk of diluting ethnic difference. Moving between the bodies of Ahjuhma, Mrs. Thomas, and Bessie Mears, this intertextuality foregrounds the ethical difficulty of writing women of color even as it insists on the necessity of doing so.

I begin this case for an intertextual construction of ethnic femininity by observing that *Native Speaker* and *Native Son* depict the charges leveled at them by feminist readers. In *Native Speaker*, this is to recall, as the novel does in flashback, a family visit during which Lelia accuses Henry and his father of exploiting Ahjuhma. When she learns that "Ahjuhma" is a formal title and not a name, Lelia refuses to imagine that the woman's life could remain so unacknowledged. "This woman has given twenty years of her life to you and your father," she says to Henry, "and it still seems like she could be anyone to you" (69–70). In this way, Lelia critiques the coincidence of anonymity with femininity and anticipates the unease Park and Wald articulate (623–24). Meanwhile, Harris's claim that *Native Son* relegates black women to complicit subservience finds articulation in Bigger's identification with Bessie at the inquest. There Bigger not only understands the coroner's spectacular and strategic use of Bessie's body but through that understanding can voice her anger at the subservience trapping her: "Anger quickened in him: an old feeling that Bessie had often described to him . . . a feeling of being forever commanded by others so much that thinking and feeling for one's self was impossible" (307). Bessie's consciousness dictates the terms of Bigger's response. The anger quickening in Bigger has its source in "an old feeling" of Bessie's; his experience of anger, while a product of his frustrations, nonetheless derives from hers.[15] Lelia's accusation and Bigger's identification: both acts make acknowledging ethnic femininity a textual imperative.

My point is not to defend either novel for its representation of women of color. Readings that pinpoint Bessie's depiction or Ahjuhma's relative absence turn to the two as representatives of ethnic difference, indexing what *Native Son* and *Native Speaker* have to say about African and Korean American women.[16] Their terms—the realistic, the ideal, or even the authentic—presume that representation can be judged on some success-or-failure rate. I argue instead that ethnicity demands

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and profits from intertextual reading. The juxtaposition of Bessie and Ahjuhma, because it must keep in mind the "other" woman of color, can begin to account for the turns by which femininity figures ethnicity. Thus Ahjuhma's silent preservation of Korean cultural traditions in the Parks' Korean American home acquires critical force through Bessie's articulation of her place in white domesticity; thus the futility of Bessie's speech is confirmed by Ahjuhma's insistent refusal of speech. Invested in their protagonists, the novels may speak only indirectly, if at all, to the textual deployment of femininity as the material ground for ethnicity. But that ground cannot be avoided in their juxtaposition.

The novels in fact enact this juxtaposition in their negotiation of interethnic relations between women. When, for instance, Lelia solicits Ahjuhma's speech, Park's narration implies that she does so hoping that conversation will induce cross-cultural understanding (70). And yet these good intentions only meet hostility: Ahjuhma tells Henry that there exists "nothing for your American wife and me to talk about" (71). While Lelia's advances seek to bridge difference, Ahjuhma's response reinforces it. Ahjuhma speaks through Henry what Bessie Mears might have said to Mary Dalton: that womanly bonds of identification are difficult to make, or, more pointedly, that the American (or white feminist) presumption that no difference will remain a difference is ill conceived. Only ever mediated by Park, Lelia and Ahjuhma's conversations emphasize that the relations between Bessie and Mary are little more than a missed encounter. On the night of her death, Mary says to Bigger that she would like to meet his "girl," never knowing that the two have already not met at Ernie's Kitchen Shack and that Bessie was the one to foil that encounter (73–75). When Ahjuhma insists that she and Lelia share no common ground, she puts into words what Bessie performs. To call these incidents "missed encounters" is to underscore their necessary elusiveness. If *Native Son* does not imagine any affiliation between Bessie Mears and Mary Dalton, *Native Speaker* confirms the impossibility of such affiliation by imagining it only to refute it.

Through their juxtaposition Bessie and Ahjuhma argue against their placement in relation to one another. That juxtaposition asserts, ironically, the implausibility of interethnic relations as well as that intertextuality that brings them together. What does it mean that ethnic intertextuality should post warnings against the crossing its presence implies? I have argued that this irony does not signal the futility of ethnic intertextuality but rather that its limits will always be felt and must be made manifest. At times such limitation must be spoken through that intertextual association it critiques. Unlike a model of multiculturalist reading that turns to the promise of otherness shared by ethnic literatures (a transcendent ethnic commonality), ethnic intertextuality promises only that textual affinities are as viable as they are provisional. The balance lies between a double insistence on possibility and responsibility: a balance struck, for instance, by Bigger Thomas's comparative figure. If the problem is one of ethics—of not skirting the obligation to account for ethnic difference—then I am suggesting that intertextuality renews this obligation by defining ethnicity as difference never fixed but always suspended. In intertextuality, ethnic literature renews itself as a project capable of exceeding—indeed, risking—its own bounds in its willingness to view difference not separately but crosswise.

Notes

1. The One Book, One New York campaign featured a sponsorship of businesses and organizations, including *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the New York Public Library ("NYC").

2. The New York Women's Agenda expressed similar concerns (Kirkpatrick). Of this dispute Rachel Lee notes

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the assumption "that positive portraiture of Korean Americans equals further representational progress for Korean Americans" (343).

3. Catherine Hong's review of the novel is among four of the twenty-three reviews excerpted on the book jacket that read the novel alongside an African American tradition of cultural expression. Hong makes explicit reference to Ellison. Meanwhile, the back cover jacket quotes Frederick Busch's remark that the novel composes "the wounded love of Asian Americans for their nation" as a "moving, edgy new *blues*" (my emphasis).

4. At the same time, this invisibility becomes a reason to keep a watchful eye on Asian Americans. Consider here the FBI's pursuit of the Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee in November 1999 (Persico).

5. For a sustained account of the trickster figure, see Jeanne Rosier Smith.

6. Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993) was one of the first full-length studies of Asian American literature.

7. Wong describes "counterparts to the Asian American racial shadow": the "tragic mulatto/mulatta" in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the "mixed-blood Pauline / Sister Leopolda" of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (115–16).

8. See also King-Kok Cheung. This status quo remains, even when cross-cultural work begins to emerge. Thus Smith in *Writing Tricksters* calls for "models of successful cross-cultural negotiation, which allow for points of exchange and intersection across racial, cultural, and ethnic divides, without obliterating or oversimplifying differences" (xii–xiii). Her book, however, repeats these divides, with individual chapters on Asian American, Native American, and African American literatures.

9. The Levin, Greene, and Bernheimer Reports appear in full in Bernheimer's volume.

10. See Fanon 211, 139. As Diana Fuss argues in *Identification Papers*, for Fanon the Negro is not even afforded the realization of alterity, since that would imply access to subjectivity. Fanon's reference to Bigger Thomas is well known.

11. Consider how Derrida's argument in "The Law of Genre" presumes a comparative logic.

12. I number these Biggers for clarity of reading, not in any attempt to describe a progression in Bigger's characterization.

13. One of this essay's readers suggests that Wright's yoking of the global and the political is fraught with broader complications. Postcolonial and transnational thinking have interrogated appeals to the global as some exemplary site of politics for their unquestioning universalism. Yet appeals to particularity as political ground are no less untroubled. My reading emphasizes that Wright's rhetoric places Bigger in both positions: potentially guilty of universalist politics or of identity politics or both. But so is his figure suspended between the two.

14. Wright's tangled relationship to Communism is outside the scope of this argument. It is worth noting, however, that the Communist Party took *Native Son* to task for what it deemed its excessive turn to individualism.

15. For Barbara Johnson, this intimacy of consciousness means that Bessie, "the silent presence in the scene in which Bigger Thomas writes," is Bigger's best reader (69).

16. Calling Ahjuhma a Korean American woman raises a number of questions that I have not the space to address here. What, if anything, makes Ahjuhma American? Her arrival at the Park home? The period of her residence?

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