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Towards Interracial Understanding and Identification: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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African Americans and Korean Americans have addressed Black–Korean encounters and responded to each other predominantly in their favorite genres: in films and rap music for African Americans and in novels and poems for Korean Americans. A case in point is the intertextuality between Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. A comparative study of the two demonstrates that they are seminal texts of African American–Korean American dialogue and discourse for mutual understanding and harmonious relationships between the two races in the USA. This paper reads the African American film and the Korean American fiction as dialogic responses to the well-publicized strife between Korean American merchants and their African American customers in the late 1980s and early 1990s and as windows into a larger question of African American–Korean American relations and racialization in US culture. This study ultimately argues that the dialogue between Spike Lee's film and Chang-rae Lee's novel moves towards a possibility of cross-racial identification and interethnic coalition building.

New York City of the late 1980s and early 1990s was mired in boycotts, firebombings, riots, lootings, and murders. During the period, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Flatbush, Howard Beach, Bensonhurst, Canarsie, and Crown Heights were almost synonymous with interracial tensions and violence. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, portraying New York City of the same period, are naturally shot through with African American–Korean American encounters in the outer boroughs of the metropolitan city. Significantly enough, the Korean American novelist's fictional representation of African American–Korean American conflicts

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echoes and reworks the African American director's cinematic portrayal of the interracial tensions.

Yet Chang-rae Lee scholars have not noted the intertextuality between the Korean American novel and the African American film. This is a curious neglect in the criticism of *Native Speaker*. After all, *Do the Right Thing* was the first African American film and *Native Speaker* was the first Korean American novel to deal with African American–Korean American encounters which, especially after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, have been imprinted "in the popular imagination as locked in a deadly embrace."[1] *Native Speaker* and *Do the Right Thing* invite a critical comparison also because critics have compared *Native Speaker* with African American literary texts.[2] In order to fill the lacuna in the criticism of *Native Speaker*, this essay will demonstrate that Chang-rae Lee delves deep into the African American–Korean American interracial politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s partly by rewriting Spike Lee's representation of African American–Korean American encounters

[1] James Kyung-Jin Lee, "Where the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority: The Price of Privilege in Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* and Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 35, 2–3 (2002), 231–57, 232.

[2] *Native Speaker* has been compared with W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright's "How 'Bigger' Was Born" and *Native Son*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*, and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. See Sarah Midori Zimmerman, "A Conspiracy of Chance," *A. Magazine*, 31 March 1995, 50–51; Catherine Hong, "In Brief – *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee," *Vogue*, April 1995, 236; Tim Engles, "'Visions of Me in the Whitest Raw Light': Assimilation and Doxic Whiteness in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Hitting Critical Mass*, 4, 2 (1997), 27–48, 32; Mary Jane Hurst, "Presidential Address: Language, Gender, and Community in American Fiction at the End of the Century," *Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, 17, 1 (1998), 1–13, 12; You-me Park and Gayle Wald, "Native Daughters in the Promised Land: Gender, Race, and the Question of Separate Spheres," *American Literature*, 70, 3 (1998), 616–23; Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, "Experiments in Action: Style and Authorial Agency in T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, and Chang-rae Lee," University of California at Berkeley Ph.D. dissertation (2001), 150–221; J. K. Lee, "Where the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority," 231–57; Tina Chen, "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts in *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 48, 3 (2002), 637–67, 638, 648, 654–55, 663 n. 9; Eun Kyung Min, "Lee changrae-eui 'boiji ahnneun sarahm'" (Chang-rae Lee's "Invisible Man"), *21-seki moonhak* (21st-Century Literature), 6 (Summer 2002), 4–20; Daniel Y. Kim, "Do I, too, Sing America? Vernacular Representations and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 6, 3 (2003), 231–60, 232–33, 249–52, 255–56; A. Noelle Brada-Williams, "Interethnic Relationships in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Gish Jen's 'Birthmates,'" in Roy Goldblatt, Jopi Nyman, and John Stotesbury, eds., *Close Encounters of an Other Kind: New Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity & American Studies* (Joensuu, Finland: Faculty of Humanities, University of Joensuu, 2005), 23; and Yung-Hsing Wu, "Native Sons and Native Speakers: On the Eth(n)ics of Comparison," *PMLA*, 121, 5 (2006), 1465–72.

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in *Do the Right Thing*. This intertextual study will ultimately argue that the representations of interracial encounters from the respective African American and Korean American positionalities in the two texts are dialogic and complementary in their common search for the possibility of cross-racial understanding and identification.

In the third entry of his journal for *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee imagined that "MAN #1" and "MAN #2" would engage in "a dialogue about how the Black man in America owns very little."[3] Lee's idea of the scene was fleshed out with the creation of the three Corner Men in the script. In the course of their rhetorical games, the Corner Men touch on the absence of African American businesses in their own community. Pointing to the Korean American-run Fruit and Vegetable Delight, ML thinks it "a god-damn shame" that the fresh-off-the-boat Korean immigrants have been running a successful business in a building of the neighborhood. He wants to know why African Americans were unable to open a business in the same building that had been boarded up for a long time. Unable to figure out the Korean American success and African American failure in business, he states rather dejectedly, "Either them Korean motherfuckers are geniuses or you black asses are just plain dumb." Coconut Sid tries to explain the African American entrepreneurial failure with a conspiracy theory: "It's gotta becuz we're Black. Ain't no other explanation. They're always keeping the Black man to about shit." Flatly disregarding Coconut Sid's explanation, ML swears that he will be the first customer if "our own business" is open "right here in our own neighborhood." But Sweet Dick Willie breaks up his friends' discussion almost irreverently, by rejecting both Coconut Sid's "old excuse" of race and ML's "old Keith Sweat shit, 'I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that.'"[4]

The vignette enacts a thorny issue that has plagued African Americans: their economic dependence on non-African American merchants in their own community. ML understands that the absence of African American businesses in his neighborhood is mainly due to the lack of African American patronage of African American businesses. Since he problematizes the African Americans' dependence on non-African American merchants and argues for their economic autonomy in their own neighborhoods, ML is in the tradition of the diverse forms of black nationalism such as the Double Dollar Duty doctrine of the 1930s, the Buy Black campaign of the 1940s, and

[3] Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing: A Spike Lee Joint* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 36.

[4] *Do the Right Thing*, 1989, Disc One: The Movie, *Do the Right Thing*, prod. and dir. Spike Lee, DVD, double-disc set, Criterion Collection, Universal Home Video, 2001.

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the Black Power movement of the 1960s. For the proponents of these black nationalisms, the economic independence of the African American community is crucial since it is a prerequisite for and a barometer of the overall community control of educational, social, and political institutions.[5] Coconut Sid rationalizes the lack of African American business in the African American community with a race card: African Americans are unable to open businesses in their own neighborhoods simply because the US government, financial institutions, and big corporations want to control and destabilize the economy of the African American community. Thus he rehashes a fallacious rumor that non-African American immigrants have easy access to institutional and financial resources unavailable to African Americans when they start businesses and that they are ultimately agents of the mainstream to do blacks in or to maintain white domination in US society.

Lee states that the Corner Men's dialogue was not intended to blame the Korean American grocers for the absence of African American business and to expel the immigrant merchants from African American neighborhoods.[6] True, the Corner Men do not launch a bitter diatribe against the Korean American merchants in the scene. But the Korean Americans' entrepreneurial success takes on serious implications in the Corner Men's discourse: it is not only a sore reminder of African Americans' lost opportunities but also a painful emblem of the closed door of race. The Korean American grocers even become unwitting agents of the white mainstream trying to reinforce and perpetuate a racist system in the USA. To say the least, then, the Korean American grocers are clearly unwelcome intruders on the African American turf. One can find a nativist position in the speech of the two Corner Men who presume that native-born African Americans have been shoved aside in their own neighborhood in the interests of the foreign-born Korean Americans. ML's further question about the Korean Americans' legitimacy of doing business in the African American neighborhood is stifled in this vignette but will resurface with a vengeance in the riot scene, where his frustrations will develop into hostility and be unleashed against the Korean American grocers.

Do the Right Thing shows the increasing tensions between the Korean American grocers – Sonny and Kim – and African American residents inside Fruit and Vegetable Delight which presage the volatile interracial confrontation at the end of the film. The first interracial encounter takes place

[5] Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 23.

[6] See "Cannes, 1989," *Do the Right Thing*, Disc Two: The Supplement.

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between the Korean American couple and Da Mayor. When Da Mayor asks why he cannot find Miller High Life in the store, Sonny replies bluntly, "No mo' High Life. You look what we have and buy." Da Mayor gets angry and exclaims stridently, "How come no mo' High Life? Look, doctor, this ain't Korea, or China, or wherever you came from. You get some Miller High Life in this fuckin' joint." Without heeding her customer's request, Kim gruffly tells Da Mayor to "buy another beer." Da Mayor reluctantly settles for a Miller Lite but complains that the grocers are "askin' a lot to make a man change his beer." By pointing out the merchants' insensitivity to Da Mayor's brand loyalty, the scene criticizes the fact that the Korean American grocers do not cater to the needs of their African American customers and ultimately raises the issue of who has the power to make decisions about what to sell in the grocery store. The vignette also enacts one of the African Americans' complaints against the inappropriate behaviors of Korean American merchants: African American customers are sometimes "being pushed to purchase unwanted items."[7] At the same time, the episode highlights the Korean Americans' rudeness to their patron: partly due to their limited English proficiency, the Korean American couple cannot explain why they have decided not to carry Da Mayor's favorite brand of beer any more. Da Mayor interprets their unpolished speech and manner as signs of impoliteness and disrespect. No less significant, the purely commercial dispute in a Korean American market is nuanced exclusively by ethnicity and transformed into a flashpoint for native–immigrant confrontation when Da Mayor points out the merchants' national origin and immigrant status.

The next African American–Korean American encounter is between the Korean American merchants and Radio Raheem, who enters the Korean American-run grocery to buy batteries for his ghetto blaster. Strangely enough, Sonny, who has had no difficulty in communicating with Sweet Dick Willie and Da Mayor, cannot understand what type of batteries Raheem wants. When Raheem asks for "Twenty 'D' Energizers," Sonny wonders whether his customer wants "C" Energizers. Raheem cries out in anger, "D, mother fucker, D. Learn to speak English first, all right? D." Now Kim asks Raheem how many batteries he wants. Mad again, Raheem shouts, "Twenty, motherfucker, twenty." The tension escalates again when Raheem wants to check the expiration date of the batteries which Kim has already started to put in a plastic bag. After ascertaining the expiration date, Raheem orders

[7] Ella Stewart, "Communication between African Americans and Korean Americans: Before and after the Los Angeles Riots," in Edward T. Chang and Russell C. Leong, eds., *Los Angeles – Struggles toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, & Latino Perspectives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 33.

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Kim to take the batteries out of the bag and count them again. The fact that the Korean American couple cannot differentiate even the sounds of "C" and "D" reinforces the stereotypical image of "no-speakee-English" Korean Americans and, by implication, intrinsically inassimilable aliens. It is ironic and even humorous that the usually inarticulate Raheem harangues the Korean Americans about their English. Raheem's exasperated command to learn to speak English prior to running a business reminds one of the Corner Men's discourse, since it discloses his subconscious displeasure at the Korean Americans' entrepreneurial success despite their language problems. The brawl between Raheem and the Korean Americans also suggests that some altercations between African American customers and Korean American merchants are caused by Korean American merchants' unfamiliarity with American business practices and African American customers' suspicion of Korean American merchants' dishonesty in business.

The two African American–Korean American encounters are part of the escalating tensions of the multiracial neighborhood supremely represented in the racial slur montage, where different ethnic groups face the camera and spit out a barrage of ethnic and racial slurs at one another. Although Mookie and Sonny do not exchange racial slurs against each other in the jump-cut sequence, the racial slurs against and by the Korean American(s) deserve careful consideration. Stevie, a Puerto Rican street teen, slams Korean Americans: "You, little slanty-eyed, me-no-speakee American, own every fruit and vegetable stand in New York, bullshit, Reverend Sun Young [*sic*] Moon, Summer Olympics '88, Korean kick-boxing son-of-a-bitch." In his turn, Sonny disparages Jewish Americans: "It's cheap, I got a good price for you, Mayor Koch, 'How I'm doing?' chocolate-egg-cream-drinking, bagel and lox, B'nai B'rith, Jew asshole." The two racial slurs draw our attention especially with their celebrity icons: Sun Myung Moon and Edward L. Koch.

Sun Myung Moon is the controversial founder of the Unification Church. Korean American produce merchants have been stereotypically called "Moonies," blind followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, ever since the *New York Daily News* carried a state senator's allegation in 1982 that Korean American merchants were followers of the reverend and received secret financing from the Unification Church to open their businesses.[8] A new variation on the stereotype of Asian Americans as foreign, inscrutable,

[8] See P. G. Min, 102; Kyeyoung Park, *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 57; Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 88; and Patrick D. Joyce, *No Fire Next Time: Black–Korean Conflicts and the Future of America's Cities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 69.

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subversive, and clannish agents of the Yellow Peril, the portrayal of Korean produce retailers as Moonies spread quickly partly because it seemed to explain the source of Korean Americans' sudden and spectacular success in the produce retail markets. Korean American merchants smarted over the false accusation and felt the need to dissociate themselves publicly from the Unification Church, for most of them not only belonged to mainstream Christian churches but also scrimped and saved to open their businesses. Little wonder, then, the Korean American merchants of Bedford-Stuyvesant asked the African American negotiators to acknowledge, in the final agreement to end the 1988 Tropic Market boycott, that Korean American merchants had not been bankrolled by the Unification Church.[9]

Edward Koch was a Jewish American mayor of New York City. Many Korean American retail merchants had leased buildings from Jewish American landlords since the 1970s. As Korean American businesses became successful, some landlords doubled or tripled rents in a short period. Korean American merchants resented that the money earned by their hard work ended up going more to the Jewish American landlords than to themselves. Hence Korean American business associations started a campaign for enacting a law regulating commercial rents from 1983, created a multiethnic small-business coalition to lobby for the regulation of commercial rents in 1985, and helped in the submission of a proposal for commercial rent control to the New York City Council in 1988. When the proposal was narrowly defeated, many Korean Americans believed that Mayor Koch defended Jewish landlords' interests and made Korean American merchants suffer from uncontrolled commercial rent increases. From this perspective, Sonny's anti-Semitic utterance can be properly understood as a cry for reasonably controlled commercial rents to Jewish American landlords and to Koch. In the 1989 mayoral election, Korean Americans rejected Koch and endorsed David Dinkins, an African American politician, who promised to take some measures to regulate commercial rents.[10]

Koch is a crucial figure in *Do the Right Thing*, for part of Spike Lee's agenda was to depose the incumbent mayor in the 1989 New York mayoral election,[11] as can be seen in some graffiti on a wall: "Dump Koch." Lee attributed the deteriorating racial problems in New York to Mayor Koch's

[9] Zia, 88.

[10] P. G. Min, 177–78.

[11] See Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 55, 282; Spike Lee, "Spike Lee Replies: 'Say It Ain't So, Joe,'" letter to the editor, *New York*, 17 July 1989, 6; "Spike Lee," in David Breskin, ed., *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), 188; and S. Lee and Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Final Cut: Spike Lee and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Rap on Race, Politics, and Black Cinema," *Transition*, 52 (1991), 176–90, 180, 182.

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twelve years in office and believed that inner-city lower-class African Americans took the brunt of Koch's political maneuvering most severely during his three terms from 1978 to 1989. In fact, Koch's policy for the interests of the white corporate elite and middle- and upper-class white suburbanites was against the interests of the inner-city African Americans and retail merchants such as Sonny. Not surprisingly, then, Korean Americans' rejection of Koch and support of Dinkins was the very position of Lee and many African Americans in the 1989 mayoral election, although Koch did his best to divide and conquer the diverse ethnic groups by pitting Korean American immigrants against low-income African Americans in the inner city.[12] It is this commonality of African Americans and Korean Americans in urban ghettos that Sonny desperately pleads in the riot scene.

After destroying and burning down Sal's Famous Pizzeria, the angry mob moves across the street to the front of Fruit and Vegetable Delight. Sonny is scared to death when the mob is poised to tear up his store and ML threatens him, "It's your turn, sucker." Sonny wildly swings a broom to hold them off and cries desperately, "I no white! I no white! I no white! I'm black!" The mob starts to laugh at the Korean American's claim to blackness. ML shouts at Sonny, "Me black," and Sweet Dick Willie asks, "Where you black at?" Sonny is undaunted by their monopoly of blackness and exclaims, "You, me, same! We same." Exasperated at the preposterous claim, ML retorts, "Same? Me black. Open your eyes, motherfucker." At this juncture, Coconut Sid intercedes, "Leave the Korean alone, man. He's all right." Amused at Sonny's claim to blackness, other African Americans repeat "Yeah, he's all right. He's black. Shit." They finally head back across the street, leaving the Korean Americans untouched. Spike Lee seems to have obtained the idea of the episode from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which he was reading while visualizing *Do the Right Thing*.[13] Malcolm X remembers that African American rioters "convulsed laughing" and spared a Chinese restaurant when they saw the sign reading "Me Colored Too."[14] Lee's journal entry of 28 December 1987 reads, "During the riot scene, the entire family is outside the store pleading ME BLACK, ME BLACK, ME NO WHITE, ME BLACK TOO. The folks are more amused than anything else. They leave the store untouched."[15] Lee's script and storyboards also read that African Americans start to laugh at the Korean American's claim to

[12] Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black–Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 25–26.

[13] Lee and Jones, 38.

[14] Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989; first published 1964), 114.

[15] Lee and Jones, 35.

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blackness and "feel for him."[16] African Americans might have been intrigued by Sonny's claim to blackness and have burst out laughing in sarcasm at the incongruity of the claim. But his claim to blackness is far from funny since it was a matter of life and death to him. It is his last clutch at straws in the face of African Americans' violence against his store.

Sonny knows that he is the next target of African American violence simply because his store is now the only symbol of external exploitation in the predominantly African American neighborhood. Hence he needs to proclaim publicly where he stands in a world divided by black and white only. When he identifies himself with the African Americans with his claim to blackness, his desperate utterance is immediately questioned by ML and Sweet Dick Willie, who regard him as none other than a surrogate for the mainstream whites. There is a fundamental difference in the notion of blackness between Sonny and the Corner Men. Although conscious of the political and economic factors constituting black identity, ML and Sweet Dick Willie rely fundamentally on skin color and race when they refute Sonny's claim to black identity. When he claims black identity, however, Sonny means that he is also a person of color who is struggling for survival at the bottom of US society. For him, then, "black" signifies less a specific racial category than a set of ideas, constructions, disadvantages, oppressions, and disenfranchisements commonly associated with African Americans in the USA.[17] Despite the difference in their skin color and economic status, Sonny implies, African Americans and Korean Americans are victims of the ideology of white supremacy and share the same subordinate position to the whites in US society, as is best demonstrated by their coexistence in the urban ghettoes. In fact, Sonny was on the side of the African American neighbors who protested the killing of Raheem: he followed the police car carrying Raheem's body and hit the trunk with his palm in a gesture of protesting police brutality. Thus he felt "black" vis-à-vis the mainstream establishment represented by the cops even prior to his claim to blackness. As Philip Hanson argues, the African American–Korean American debate on the definition of black demonstrates Spike Lee's redefinition of "black" from "colored" to "oppressed."[18] Hence Sonny's claim to blackness

[16] Ibid., 251; and frame number 99B of the "Storyboard Gallery," in *Do the Right Thing*, "The Riot Sequence," Disc Two.

[17] Janine Young Kim, "Are Asians Blacks? The Asian-American Civil Rights Agenda and the Contemporary Significance of the Black/White Paradigm," *Yale Law Journal*, 108, 8 (1999), 2385–412, 2392.

[18] Philip Hanson, "The Politics of Inner City Identity in *Do the Right Thing*," *South Central Review*, 20, 2–4 (2003), 47–66, 60, 61.

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represents Lee's argument for a close affinity between African Americans and Korean Americans and attempt for interracial solidarity and coalition building against racism and social injustice in the USA.

In *Do the Right Thing*, Coconut Sid presumes that Korean Americans receive preferential treatment from the federal government or commerical banks and Stevie repeats the rumor that Korean Americans are financially supported by the Unification Church. As if to refute these false rumors on the source of Korean American grocers' seed money, Henry, the protagonist of *Native Speaker*, discloses that his father "got his first infusion of capital from a *ggeh*."[19] The start-up capital from a *ggeh* – a Korean American rotating credit association – was a crucial part of Park's social capital of a dense ethnic network circulating information and resources within the Korean American community. Henry also answers ML's question of whether Korean Americans are geniuses in business when he states that the greengrocer "had no real cleverness or secrets for good business; he simply refused to fail, leaving absolutely nothing to luck or chance or someone else."[20] Indeed, no less important for his entrepreneurial success than the social capital was his creed of self-reliance, hard work, perseverance, rugged individualism, and iron discipline. Park pulled himself up by his own bootstraps and ran his business as if he had been a warrior with a belief in "a determined set of procedures, certain rules of engagement": "you worked from before sunrise to the dead of night. You were never unkind in your dealings, but then you were not generous … You were steadily cornering the market in self-pride."[21] He worked hard with a ruthless determination to succeed and, after working twenty-five years as a greengrocer, became a successful entrepreneur making millions of dollars from five well-situated grocery stores in the Bronx and Manhattan.

Despite his entrepreneurial success, however, Park's immigrant life has a profound sadness. In the first place, he did not immigrate to the USA to sell fruits and vegetables. He lost his wife to cancer on his way to success and was not properly understood by his son. Far from his friends, he spent his last days only with Ahjuhma, the most isolated figure in the fiction. But he took care not to show any emotions of frustration, sadness, or pain, since he knew nobody cared about his feelings. Hence he liked to offer only the classic immigrant narrative, in which he cast himself as "the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient [and] resourceful," who had started with "only $200 in his pocket … and just a few words of English."[22] And it is this image of the

[19] Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996; first published 1995), 50. [20] Ibid., 49. [21] Ibid., 47. [22] Ibid., 50, 49.

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self-made American hero that Stew, Henry's father-in-law, saw in the Korean American businessman. According to Stew, Park worked hard since the immigrant knew that "[n]o one was going to help him if he failed." Park reminds Stew of "the problem" of US society. As an illustration of the "spoiled culture," Stew recalls a newspaper article about a young African American couple with two kids: "You know the story. Hot-dog gumbo for dinner. Of course, neither of them is working. They're on welfare and food stamps but they still somehow have enough money for cable and long distance."[23] Thus Stew lauds Park's self-reliance, rugged individualism, hard work, and grit, and in the same breath makes disparaging charges against the African Americans' unwillingness to work, dependence on welfare and food stamps, moral irresponsibility, and behavioral weakness. Stew's praise of the self-reliant Korean American entrepreneur and aspersions of the dependent African American family is a quintessential example of the mainstream conservatives' management of minority races by pitting the Asian American model minority against the African American urban underclass.

The matching of the self-reliant Asian Americans against the welfare-reliant African Americans began with the first essay on the model-minority myth.[24] Korean Americans, first included in the Asian American model minority in 1975, began to be contrasted against African Americans from the early 1980s.[25] Stew admires "the Oriental culture and mind," which make Asian Americans "ambitious," "serious," "circumspect," and "careful";[26] and denounces African American culture which signifies for him lack of work ethic, behavioral deficiencies, social deviance, and moral failure. Chang-rae Lee shows the workings of the model-minority myth against African Americans in Henry's reminiscences of his father. In Ardsley, Park tried to give the conservative WASPs and Jews of his "immaculate" neighborhood the impression that his family "believed in anything American … in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices

[23] Ibid., 121.

[24] See "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.," *U.S. News & World Report*, 26 Dec. 1966, 73 ff.

[25] For the stereotypes of the Korean American model minority, see John L. Dotson Jr., "The Pioneers," *Newsweek*, 26 May 1975, 10; John Grimond, "Los Angeles Comes of Age," *Economist*, 3 Apr. 1982, 3 ff.; Michael Daly, "Making It: The Saga of Min Chul Shin and His Family Fruit Store," *New York*, 20 Dec. 1982, 32–38; Pauline Yoshihashi and Sarah Lubman, "American Dreams: How the Kims of L.A. and Other Koreans Made It in the U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 June 1992, eastern edn, A1 ff.; Edward Norden, "South-Central Korea: Post-riot L.A.," *American Spectator*, Sept. 1992, 33–40; and Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Overachievers," *New York*, 10 April 1995, 43–51.

[26] C. Lee, 121.

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burn down to the ground."[27] Park tried to be the "perfect" American by accepting, internalizing, and performing the model-minority myth: he not only trusted the American system, worked hard, and had a clean credit record; he also helped consolidate the US racial order by sharing the built-in racism of the model-minority myth, which made the interstitial Korean Americans shoot the African Americans and suffer their retaliation in the ghettoes. Thus Lee "draws a connection between the American ideal of the self-made man, the stereotype of the model minority, and the management of race."[28]

Of course, Park's prejudice against African Americans cannot be ascribed solely to his internalization of the model-minority myth. His anti-African American racism brought from Korea was reinforced as a result of his daily experience with African American customers – "[s]hoplifting, accusations of shoplifting, complaints and arguments"[29] – at his stores. He regarded most young African Americans as potential shoplifters: while pretending to sweep the floor with a broom at the store entrance, he made it clear to his African American customers that he would not tolerate "any *funny business*" in his store.[30] True, he once "tried not to hate them" and even employed a few African Americans for hauling and cleaning the produce in his store. But he replaced them with new immigrants after finding that they were unpunctual, irresponsible, and undependable. After all his experience with African Americans, he came to feel "nothing," "[n]ot even pity," for them. To him, "a black face" signified "inconvenience," "trouble," or, more seriously, "the threat of death." Park himself narrowly escaped death by African American armed robbers in the basement of his store. He also knew several Korean American merchants "who had been killed in their stores, all by blacks."[31] Lee thus discloses both Park's disrespectful attitude towards African Americans and the factors which helped reinforce his racist prejudice against them: the constant occupational threats of shoplifting, mugging, armed robbery, break-in, and murder that confront Korean American storeowners operating businesses in low-income, high-risk, African American neighborhoods. The novelist's enumeration of the occupational threats plaguing Korean American merchants is in stark contrast to Spike Lee's rather innocuous dramatization of the encounters between African Americans and Korean Americans.

[27] Ibid., 52–53.

[28] King-kok Cheung, "Three Korean American Dreams: Performing the Model Minority in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Inmoon nonchong* (Journal of the Humanities), 55 (June 2000), 1–31, 11. [29] C. Lee, 186. [30] Ibid., 185, original emphasis. [31] Ibid., 186.

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In Spike Lee's film, Da Mayor and Raheem point out the Korean Americans' immigrant status during their altercations with the merchants. In particular, Raheem expresses his xenophobic nativism against the immigrants while repeatedly taunting them about their lack of English proficiency. In the scene, a Korean American girl watches in terror the squabble between her parents and Raheem. She looks up with scared eyes at the tall, imposing Raheem who tells her parents to learn to speak English first. In an interesting rewriting of the scene, Henry envisions his father's argument with an African American customer: "They lean in and let each other have it, though the giving is almost in turns. It's like the most awful and sad opera, the strong music of his English, then her black English; her colorful, almost elevated, mocking of him, and his grim explosions."[32] Like the Korean American girl, little Henry might have witnessed native speakers' accent discrimination against his father. As befitted "Marble Mouth," who imitated the punctilious pronunciation of a white girl in kindergarten,[33] little Henry not only grew embarrassed and angry at "those funny tones of [his] father … all that Konglish," but also wanted to yell at him to "just talk right for once." But the grown-up Henry now misses his father's talk, "the crash and bang and stop of his language."[34] For the second-generation Korean American, the immigrants' accented English is now far from a faulty language to be embarassed at or ashamed of. He hears in the immigrants' "Konglish" nothing other than "the ancient untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope."[35] It is the very medium of the immigrants who cry that "[they] belong here, or [they] make [themselves] belong."[36] Since the immigrants' halting English represents "their vitality and their ardent desire to live and work and make something of themselves in America," it is "the emblem of their struggle" in the face of great difficulties and symbolizes their desire, commitment, and will to claim the USA as their own.[37] Consequently, unlike *Do the Right Thing*, *Native Speaker* ultimately valorizes and celebrates the immigrants' stilted English, "all that Konglish, Spanglish, [and] Jive."[38]

The altercations between African American customers and Korean American merchants do not develop into interracial conflicts on the collective level in *Do the Right Thing*. Neither do the African American rioters

[32] Ibid. [33] Ibid., 234. [34] Ibid., 337.
[35] Ibid., 304. [36] Ibid., 344.
[37] June Dwyer, "Speaking and Listening: The Immigrant as Spy Who Comes in from the Cold," in Katherine B. Payant and Toby Rose, eds., *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving out a Niche* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 79, 82.
[38] C. Lee, 337.

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demolish and burn the Korean American grocery in the movie. But John Kwang, a Korean American councilperson, knows that customer–merchant quarrels on the individual level augur badly for the interracial relations between African Americans and Korean Americans. He observes the inevitability of volatile interracial relations rather pessimistically: "Blacks and Koreans somehow seem meant for trouble in America. It was long coming."[39] He foresees the ultimate confrontation between the two groups in the recurring black boycotts of Korean American stores. Indeed, *Native Speaker* is shot through with references to black-led boycotts of Korean American groceries throughout New York City. It mentions six boycotts which broke out in four out of the five boroughs of New York City in one year. Chang-rae Lee seems to compress the fifteen-year history of black-led boycotts of Korean American stores in the metropolitan city from 1981 to 1995 into one year.[40] In particular, Lee alludes to the 1990 black boycott of the R&N Fruit and Vegetable Market when he mentions "the first riot in Brownsville, where a mostly black crowd, watched over by a handful of police, looted and arsoned a Korean-owned grocery."[41] When Kwang states that one Korean American convenience store near Crown Heights was burned down,[42] Lee also recalls the 1991 Crown Heights race riot against Hasidic Jews, in which one Korean American business suffered severe damage simply because the innocent victim was in the wrong place at the wrong time.[43]

More significantly, Chang-rae Lee alludes to the 1992 Los Angeles riots in his depiction of multiple boycotts. Lee criticizes the mass media's sensationalist and incendiary reports of the Los Angeles riots when Henry notes, "The press was having a field day. They had multiple boycotts to cover. Vandalism. Street-filling crowds of chanting blacks. Heavily armed Koreans. Fires in the night."[44] Kwang recalls the Los Angeles upheavals more clearly when he makes a short eulogy for two victims of African American–Korean American conflicts, Saranda Harlans and Charles Kim.[45] Lee's allusion to the African American–Korean American confrontation is also clear when African American activists argue that "the obvious violence and destruction" against Korean Americans are nothing more than "'demonstrations' against the callousness of Korean merchants and the unjust acquittal of the Korean storeowner who … shot and killed Saranda Harlans."[46]

[39] Ibid., 181.
[40] For the fourteen boycotts during the period see Joyce, *No Fire Next Time*, 10–21, 65–118.
[41] C. Lee, 180. See Joyce, 111, for a brief description of the boycott.
[42] C. Lee, 271. [43] Joyce, 54. [44] C. Lee, 192.
[45] Ibid., 151. [46] Ibid., 193.

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As scholars have pointed out, Kwang refers in his eulogy to the two deaths before and during the 1992 riots: the killing of Latasha Harlins by Soon Ja Du and the death of Edward Lee by friendly fire. More significant, Chang-rae Lee adapts details of the two deaths in crucial ways. He transforms the fifteen-year-old Harlins into a "young black mother" of two kids, and obfuscates Du's gender by just calling her "a Korean shopkeeper." Lee portrays Harlans sympathetically by providing her with two kids and, by implication, a stable family with strong bonds. In contrast, he presents the ungendered Korean American merchant in a harsh light: the cold-blooded merchant, who shot a caring African American mother in the back, is given neither any humanizing information nor extenuating circumstances of the shooting. With these changes, Lee indirectly criticizes the stereotypical association of the African American youth with criminality and the Korean American family with the model minority, implicit in the sentencing colloquy of Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Joyce A. Karlin.[47] Chang-rae Lee revises the details of Edward Lee's death as well. During the Los Angeles riots, Edward responded to the call of Radio Korea and volunteered to protect Korean American businesses from attacks by rioters. But he was mistaken for a looter and shot to death by friendly fire. Unlike Edward, Chang-rae Lee's Charles died in a hospital having been suffocated by fumes in his family store firebombed apparently by African Americans. Charles was not a member of the Korean American vigilantes armed to protect Korean American stores and property from the approaching African Americans. In other words, he was not shot to death at the front line of interracial violence on the collective level, but was suffocated while trying to salvage merchandise from his family store. Thus Chang-rae Lee shows a sanitized version of the Los Angeles riots in Kwang's description of Charles's death.

In his speech to the multiethnic audience, Kwang argues that the African American–Korean American conflict is a problem not of race, color, mistrust, or ignorance, but of "self-hate," "our acceptance of what we loathe and fear in ourselves."[48] He illustrates with two examples: a Korean American merchant shadows an old African American man through the aisle of his grocery store; and a group of African American girls spit in the face and hair of a Korean American girl newly arrived from Korea. The two cases are a simplified reenactment of Spike Lee's jump-cut sequence of racial slurs in which different ethnic groups spit out a barrage of ethnic slurs at one

[47] For an excellent study of the colloquy, see Neil Gotanda, "Multiculturalism and Racial Stratification," in Jean Yu-wen Wu and Min Song, eds., *Asian American Studies: A Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 379–90.

[48] C. Lee, 151, 152.

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another. Like the ethnic minority characters slamming and being slammed by each other, Kwang's Korean American merchant and African American girls accept and perform the mainstream culture's stereotypical prejudice against ethnic minorities. The Korean American merchant and the African American girls have internalized the racist stereotypes of the African American as potential shoplifter and the Korean American as exotic alien respectively and perform what they are subconsciously indoctrinated by the stereotypes to act against each other. No less significant, Kwang argues, they ultimately hate none other than themselves when they repeat what the mainstream whites loathe in other ethnic minorities, since they at the same time fear to recognize what the whites loathe in themselves. In other words, the Korean American merchant's and African American girls' racist behaviors are a displacement of the ridicule, rejection, and hatred heaped on themselves by the mainstream culture onto the other people of color similarly ridiculed, rejected, and hated by the racist culture. Hence the Korean American merchant and African American girls are victims of self-hate as well as victimizers of the other.

Kwang goes on to urge his African American and Korean American audience to recognize their commonality: the unloved, struggling, and oppressed people of color who have known "no justice, no fairness."[49] As if to answer the questions raised by ML in *Do the Right Thing*, Kwang reminds the Korean Americans that the African American community suffers from a lack of African American-owned businesses in their own neighborhoods mainly because of the "brutal legacy of enslavement, disfranchisement, and disentitlement":[50] discriminatory lending practices of financial and banking institutions, the redlining policy of insurance companies, and the lack of ethnic networks and financial capitals. He then recalls Korea's colonial period when Koreans "were made servants and slaves in their own country" and "were cast as the dogs of Asia." He lists Koreans' historical traumas under Japanese colonialism, comparable to African American enslavement, lynching, segregation, oppression, marginalization, and discrimination. He concludes that what African Americans and Korean Americans "have in common, the sadness and injustice, will always be stronger than [their] differences."[51] In an extended variation on Sonny's desperate claim to blackness in *Do the Right Thing*, Kwang thus equates Korean and African Americans' historical tribulations and traumas under Japanese colonialism and US internal colonialism respectively, and ultimately seeks for an interracial

[49] Ibid., 151.
[50] K. Cheung, "Three Korean American Dreams," 23.
[51] C. Lee, 153.

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empathy and cross-identification between African Americans and Korean Americans.

Spike Lee acknowledges that *Do the Right Thing* is "one side of the story" of race relations in New York City "from the perspective of black New Yorkers."[52] Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* is an interesting response to the call of Spike Lee's one-sided story of African American–Korean American encounters from the Korean American perspective. While representing the African American–Korean American encounters in black and yellow, Spike Lee and Chang-rae Lee find that African Americans and Korean Americans are imbricated in complex ways and have symbiotic relations in the USA. Both Lees take a hard look at their own communities; disclose the problems, prejudices, and misunderstandings of their own groups; and ultimately move towards the possibility of cross-racial identification and interethnic coalition building between African Americans and Korean Americans.

[52] S. Lee, "Spike Lee Replies," 6.

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