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Social Latitude, Awareness and Personal Capability: The Problem of Agency in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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> Then I reflected that a more poetic case than these would be a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him.
> – Jorge Luis Borges, "Averroes' Search"

Ⅰ. Introduction

One of the ironies of humanity's growing technological capabilities is that the more our collective power grows, the more individuals feel helpless to influence their own destinies. Across the globe, protest movements sputter fitfully against distant leaders, globalization, corporate elites, climate change, the technological disruption of traditional industries, all united by the vague sense that so much of our lives is controlled by forces outside our individual control. Yet in many ways our lives are freer than those of previous generations, who knew well the horror of war, pestilence and famine. The chief irony of the current age is that our lives contain more possibilities than ever before and yet this freedom is often accompanied by a sense of powerlessness. This paradox of entrapped liberty, of impotent potentiality, is a defining element of modern life and has become a central feature of contemporary narratives, particularly those dealing with tragic themes, for it is in tragedy that the limitations of human agency in an indifferent world are most closely examined.

This paper examines the question of agency in a condition of entrapped liberty in relation to Chang-rae Lee's acclaimed novel *A Gesture Life* and argues that understanding what we mean by 'agency' involves three distinct elements: social latitude, awareness and personal capability. Through the first-person narrative of Franklin 'Doc' Hata, Chang-rae Lee shows us how both social

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and psychological forces enmesh the modern individual in a fine web that keeps self-determining choices tantalizingly out of reach. As the strands of this web are both social and personal, Lee creates a modern form of tragedy along the lines Borges sketched in "Averroes' Search," in which a goal that is easily attainable by others is yet denied to the protagonist because the Self he has made to cope with the world he must live in does not allow him to reach out and take the thing he wants. Through such a tragic vision, Lee demonstrates the gaps in contemporary theories of social power and agency and suggests new ways of thinking about the contradictions that bedevil the present.

Ⅱ. Agency and Theory

Since Karl Marx famously declared that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (11), the humanities have struggled to define a space for human agency independent of social determinism. While Marxists view modes of production as determining consciousness, post-humanists stress Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, a pervasive hegemonic representation of particular aspects of the world that dominates individual perceptions of one's own reality. As Edward Said argued in *Orientalism*, "no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism" (4). Yet, in asserting that individual works are manifestations of a deeper structure rather than the products of individual consciousness, discourse theory disturbingly suggests an absence of agency. Instead of the free, rational individual of Enlightenment theory, post-humanism views the subject as determined by cultural patterns of identity. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue:

> We like to think of human beings as agents of, or actors, in their own lives, rather than passive pawns in social games or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity … But we must recognize that the issue of how subjects claim, exercise and narrate agency is far more complicated. We have noted that discursive systems emergent in social structures shape the operations of memory, experience, identity and embodiment. People tell stories of their lives through the cultural scripts available to them, and they are governed by cultural strictures about self-

> presentation in public. If individuals are constituted through discursive practices, how, then, can they be said to control the stories they tell about themselves? (42)

Yet if individuals cannot even control their own life-stories, what control can they have over their own lives? Here we may see how well postmodern outlooks reflect the age of entrapped liberty, yet it runs contrary to lived experience to suggest we are powerless over our own destinies. Each of us can claim moments when we freely made decisions with divergent consequences. We must have some kind of agency, but how can we square this with our understanding of cultural discourses construct subjectivities?

In order to address this issue, it is necessary to define clearly the constituent elements of agency. Gayatri Spivak has said:

> It seems to me that agency relates to accountable reason. The idea of agency comes from the principle of accountable reason, that one acts with responsibility, that one has to assume the possibility of intention, one has to assume even the freedom of subjectivity in order to be responsible. That's where agency is located. (294)

Discourse theorists like Foucault view the 'individual' as a discursive construct of the Enlightenment that has begun to disappear: "It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that can be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think" (Foucault 341). Yet this perspective threatens to eliminate the principle of accountable reason along with individual psychology and, as the philosopher William James persuasively pointed out, our mental experiences are the most basic stuff of what we call life (92) and any theory of agency that excludes how individuals psychologically engage with the world is seriously incomplete. Judith Butler has grappled with this problem by differentiating between the subject and the psyche, arguing that the psyche should be seen as the remainder of what cannot be reconciled in the process of subjectivation, that which exists outside of the discursive processes that shape our identity (86), yet it remains unclear how this is to be integrated into our understanding of how individuals in practice negotiate the demands of self and society.

It is here that literature is our truest guide because it combines character and circumstance, a fusion of psychology and sociology that shows us the interplay of mind and world in a way that statistics cannot. Moreover, it is in tragic literature that the question of agency comes most sharply into focus. Is Oedipus' fall determined by the gods or by his own character? Does Hamlet hesitate too long or is he trapped in an impossible situation? What is the role of *hamartia* in the tragic hero's failure? However, in discussing the modern age we need a contemporary tragedy, one that can embrace ideas on psychology, discourses of nationalism and power, the role of ethnicity and hybridity. Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) offers an ideal text to illustrate the problem of agency and through a close reading of the novel this paper argues that agency needs to be divided into three distinctive components: social latitude (the freedom of action afforded by society), awareness (a person's understanding of themselves and his/her situation) and personal capability (the will and ability to act even if one has both social latitude and knowledge). In order to take meaningful, positive action, a person needs the freedom to act, an understanding of what can and needs to be done, and the personal will and ability to actually do it. In *A Gesture Life*, however, one of these three components is always missing, making it impossible for the tragic hero to take the actions necessary to avoid his fate.

Ⅲ. Society, Psychology and Agency in *A Gesture Life*

The novel begins with Franklin 'Doc' Hata, a retired Japanese American in a quiet town, carrying out "a retrospective evaluation of his life that has been materially successful but emotionally bankrupt and impotent" (Chua 65). Hata's first-person narrative unfolds in non-linear fashion, with events in the present punctuated by his reminiscences such that past and present become inextricably interwoven, remaking our perceptions of both as we experience Hata's evasive, unreliable attempts to make sense of his life. We gradually learn that Hata is an ethnic Korean, adopted by a middle-class Japanese family, who served as a Japanese soldier during World War II. In Burma, he is charged with looking after some Korean comfort women and falls in love with one of them, Kkutaeh, who is brutally murdered by Hata's unit. Hata leaves Japan and moves to the USA, where he establishes a successful small business and adopts a Korean daughter, Sunny. Their relationship becomes increasingly troubled,

with Sunny rejecting Hata's scrupulous politeness and deference with her wild, promiscuous behavior until she leaves and breaks off all contact. Hata also begins a relationship with a local woman, Mary Burns, which breaks down in a slower, less tempestuous fashion due to Hata's hidden insecurities and unacknowledged passions and memories. His life now moves towards a final moment of crisis when Sunny returns. The novel thus embraces not simply contemporary life in the USA but life in Imperial Japan and Hata's continual failure to solve problems thrown up for him by history, environment, his upbringing and himself.

Hata's early development is intimately connected to the social latitude not available to a Korean adoptee in Imperial Japan. Koreans were widely discriminated against as second-class citizens in Japanese society: "No one of my family's circumstance could expect to change his station, at least without a lifetime of struggle" (Lee, *Gesture* 72). His birth family are tanners who live in the slums: "We slept all together in a one-room house. My mother and father would be heaped in the corner like a mound of sackcloths, the noise of their exhausted slumber keeping me awake" (259). Hata never directly states but he does strongly hint that he lived with his Korean family until he was twelve, long enough to retain distinct memories and speak the language fluently, which suggests he spent a larger portion of his childhood with them than he wishes to remember. Hata repeatedly represses these memories, however, and contradicts himself on the rare occasions he recalls them. When Kkutaeh asks about his Korean name, he says "it was never used by anyone, including my real parents, who, it must be said, wished as much as I that I become wholly and thoroughly Japanese" (235) and then says "the day the administrator came for me was the last time I heard their tanners' raspy voices, and their birth-name for me" (236). It is not hard to picture an alternative scene, in which the family is forced to give up their son because "[he] was fortunate to score exceptionally high on several achievement tests, and was one of a few boys of [his] kind to be identified and enrolled in a special school in the nearby large city" (72). The imperial power thus removes the most promising ethnic Koreans from their families and gives them a thoroughly Japanese education to make them of service to the state. Of course, his parents call his Korean name as he is taken away, but this is exactly the type of memory that Hata learns to repress.

It would seem, on the surface, that Hata's tale furnishes an excellent example of how marginal, hybrid subject positions undermine nationalist narratives, as

proposed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Bhabha has emphasized how hybridity in the colonial sphere destabilizes imperial narratives: "Resistance … is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power" (158). Resistance is not an act of conscious agency but emerges from the intersection of incompatible discourses and so Hata's position as ethnic Korean and adopted Japanese inevitably brings together incompatible narratives about the Japanese empire that create tensions throughout the story. Hata does not consciously choose to reject Japanese nationalism, but ambivalences and contradictions emerge in his life because as an ethnic Korean passing for a Japanese patriot, paradoxes and conflict emerge around him as he exists at the point of intersection between narratives of glorious nationhood and ethnic subjugation.

The novel could thus be read as an example of how imperialist narratives of domination undermine themselves, but that is not what Lee shows us. Instead, we are shown a man who desires nothing more than to simply be part of a community, without question, wholly accepted by everyone, yet the manner in which he attempts to accomplish this alienates those closest to him. The novel's intersection with theoretical ideas has divided scholarly opinion. Young-Oak Lee argues that as Hata sheds the national ideologies of both Imperial Japan and the USA, "he is forced upward, to a higher plane of existence" (74). The novel thus charts Hata's "transformational journey from a man of prejudices regarding nation, gender, and race, to a man of deeper understanding, embracing difference and diversity" (Y. O. Lee 79). Megan Laverty similarly views the ending positively and says the novel "culminates with Hata's joyful reconciliation to living in that he at last determines how to go on in a meaningful way" (199). In contrast, Anne Anlin Cheng comments on the frustrating ambiguity of Hata's final lines and sees in them not a triumphant resolution but "an *active refusal to act any further* in bad faith. Since the site of contact and love *is* the site of compromise and colonization, it is therefore crucial that this final passage bespeaks mobility and approximation rather than resolution and affirmation" (571). Keith Ames Russell paints a bleaker picture and remarks that Hata's decision to leave the USA "marks a final failure to find a home or somewhere to belong" (205). Such diverse interpretations indicate the difficulties the novel poses and demonstrate the need for closer study.

The lacuna in much cultural theory—particularly that related to ethnic subjects—is that it connects agency purely with social latitude and is concerned solely with removing institutional obstacles, such as entrenched discrimination. However, an increase in social latitude does not in itself lead to empowerment. What Lee shows in *A Gesture Life* is the importance of individual psychology when confronted by restricted social latitude. There are those who may rebel against their situation, but this is not the case with Doc Hata. In analyzing Lee's construction of character, I have found the theories of psychologist George Vaillant to be particularly useful. Like Lee, Vaillant takes a longitudinal view of personality development and stresses the importance of unconscious adaptive mechanisms in shaping personality over time. Human beings, "when confronted with conflict, engage in unconscious but often creative behavior. These intrapsychic styles of adaptation have been given individual names by psychiatrists (projection, repression, and sublimation are some well-known examples). The generic term for such adaptive styles as a class is *ego mechanisms of defense*" (Vaillant 9). How particular people develop particular defense mechanisms is almost impossible to determine, but Vaillant argues they are strongly influenced by our close personal relationships and are adaptive rather than permanent:

> First, it is not the isolated traumas of childhood that shape our future, but the quality of sustained relationships with important people. Second, lives change, and the course of life is filled with discontinuities. What at one point in time appears to be mental illness at another point in time may appear quite adaptive … one defensive style can evolve into another, allowing all personalities to appear dynamic and no life to follow an entirely predictable trajectory. (29)

Of course, the larger social system plays its role in helping to determine which adaptations are useful, but it is this interplay between adaptation and society that Lee brings out in his novels. His characters have evolved defense mechanisms that in previous circumstances worked quite well but in their present circumstances are going to bring about disaster, yet they cannot change their own patterns of behavior.

Hata's ego mechanisms of defense are repression, projection and hypochondriasis, all mechanisms that allow him to deny the existence of unsettling emotions. This allows him to function in Imperial Japan but denies

him the knowledge he needs to understand what troubles him. He represses all memory of his Korean family and background:

> For me, it was the heady time of adolescence that unmasked and clarified my sense of obligations, so much so that I now view that period as the true beginning of "my life." This was when I first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relation between a self and his society. There is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating. For me, it was readily leaving the narrow existence of my family and our ghetto of hide tanners and renderers. (72)

Hata thus erases his childhood with his Korean family and dates his "real life" from the time he began living with the Kurohata family, although he places his greater allegiance to the state: "I knew even then as a boy of twelve how I should always give myself over to its vigilance, entrusting to its care everything I could know or ever hope for" (73). Hata internalizes the state's ideologies and strives to be an obedient servant of the empire, but whereas cultural theory believes ideological interpellation to be an unconscious process, Hata makes himself a loyal Japanese subject through a sustained act of will. His avoidance of conflict, his refusal to express anger and his strict repression of his Korean past all serve him well in advancing through Japanese society. By not drawing attention to himself, he can blend quietly into the background, just one among many, a Japanese like everyone else.

However, the war disrupts the cozy union of social ideology and Hata's psychology. At first, Hata hopes "my truest mettle would show itself in the crucible of the battlefield, and so prove to anyone who might suspect otherwise the worthiness of raising me away from the lowly quarters of my kin and reveal the essential, inner spirit that is within us all" (120). However, war also forces him out of his comfort zone. He moves further out to the imperial periphery, from Singapore in 1942 to Burma in 1944, and the further from the center he gets the more the brilliant glow of those heady national ideals fades and he is left with the sordid reality of power. In Singapore, Hata waits with his unit for the imminent arrival of comfort women. However, the first he sees is one who jumped to her death, a teenage girl he identifies as Korean. The incident unsettles Hata and he goes to see the others. "Why I was going to the new girls, then, I couldn't exactly say. I was naturally disturbed by the earlier events,

but the fact that I would be concerned in particular about them, even think an iota about their circumstance, confused and irked me" (111). Hata avoids self-reflection, but the unwanted emotions he refuses to examine drive him into troubling situations. For the first time, Hata has come face-to-face with the naked realities of Japanese power and what it means for Koreans and, by extension, himself. One of the comfort women frantically begs him for help and Hata unthinkingly replies in Korean—in fact, Hata seems unaware that he has done so. We only discover he has switched languages from the reactions of other characters. "She looked surprised at my words, staring at me as if I were someone she knew" (112). His commanding officer asks him directly:

> "Say, what was that you were saying to her?"
> "Nothing, sir."
> "I thought I heard you say something, in her tongue."
> "No sir, I didn't."
> He looked confused for a moment, but then shrugged. (112)

Hata could simply be lying to hide his Korean identity, but the untypically blunt denial suggests Hata is consciously unaware he has spoken in Korean. He has repressed all knowledge of his past so effectively that he is perplexed by the strange reactions of both the girl and the officer, who in turn are confused by Hata's complete denial of the Korean he obviously speaks. Yet the arrival of the comfort women awakens an uncomfortable question for Hata: Is he, a Korean torn from his family to be used in service to the Empire, as much of a slave as they are?

Previously, Hata had been content to behave according to social norms but now that he has awakened to the unconscious knowledge within him he is pushed increasingly to the point where he must make a moral decision regarding the comfort women. That he has certain latitude to do so is shown by the example of a junior officer, Corporal Endo, who engages in a suicide pact with one of the comfort women. Yet this is a point at which awareness and personal capability conspire to prevent Hata from taking action. He continues to repress knowledge we suspect he is increasingly aware of but because he cannot change his habitual ego mechanisms of defense he responds in the crisis by falling back on the modes of behavior he knows best, rather than engaging in a moral choice between alternatives.

In *Adaptation to Life*, Vaillant argues that happiness largely depends on the

joyful expression of anger and lust (53), yet these are precisely the two emotions that Hata represses most frequently and that emerge powerfully when he falls in love with the comfort woman, Kkutaeh. Hata's most serious repression is his abusive sexual relationship with Kkutaeh, which is narrated in a way that suggests Hata cannot admit the truth of what occurred:

> She was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, or somehow forcing herself to, and she did not move or speak as I was casting myself upon her. I kissed as much of her body as was bared … then it was all quite swift and natural, as chaste as it could ever be. And when I was done I felt the enveloping warmth of a fever, its languorous cocoon, though when I gazed at her shoulder and back there was nothing but stillness, her posture unchanged, her skin cool and colorless, and she lay as if she were the sculpture of a recumbent girl and not a real girl at all. (260)

Hata's description of their sexual encounter as "chaste" signals that he is repressing the true nature of his actions, which becomes apparent when he pauses outside the door to hear Kkutaeh "fitfully crying, though in quelled gasps, as if she were trying to hush herself" (261). However, Hata continues to act as if they enjoy a romantic relationship. He fails to acknowledge the truth to himself and readers must piece together their own understanding from Hata's evasions and the descriptions of Kkutaeh's response. Likewise, Hata's anger often manifests as hypochondriasis and, throughout the novel, Hata experiences physical pain or illness whenever he is involved in traumatic situations. In particular, when Captain Ono tells Hata that Kkutaeh is already pregnant by an unknown man, thus hitting a cluster of nerves regarding parentage, nationality, love, sex and power, Hata snaps and assaults him. "I wanted to get up to strike him but my right shoulder seemed to shear like wet paper when I put weight on my hand, and I knew it had completely separated. The pain was severe enough that it didn't feel like much of anything when the captain punched me in the belly" (270). Strangely, Hata's completely separated shoulder is never mentioned again, except when Hata says calmly upon waking, "they had already put my arm back in its joint" (291). Such a serious injury surely cannot be fixed so quickly. More likely is that Hata's hypochondriasis transmutes the emotional pain of discovering Kkutaeh has been lying to him into a physical pain that prevents him from expressing his rage.

The crucial moment comes when Kkutaeh asks Hata to kill Captain

Ono, then kills him herself and begs Hata to kill her. There is no longer any possibility of escape for her, merely a choice of deaths. However, for Hata the moment is a nexus of conflicts—his loyalty to Japan, his Korean heritage, his love for an imaginary Kkutaeh and his abuse of her, the repression of his own desires—all of which are beyond Hata's ability to cope with. He cannot kill Kkutaeh; he does not even respond to her request to do so. Instead he retreats from the moment and tries to claim the captain committed suicide, as if the issue were Kkutaeh's guilt or innocence and not that she is a comfort woman whose "duty" it is to have sex with Japanese soldiers. With Ono dead, the obstacle between them and her is removed and she is brutally gang-raped and murdered by the entire unit. As Anne Anlin Cheng suggests, we could simply blame Hata for his failure here, but:

> What seems troubling about Hata's choice not to act is not that he could not kill the woman he loved but rather that he never seemed to acknowledge the implications of what his choice meant. In a way, he never made a choice. That is, when K. made her final request, Hata did not answer; he simply did not act, nor did he ever explicitly acknowledge his role in what happened to K. (562)

Faced with Kkutaeh's demand that he kill Ono and then her, Hata refuses to do anything because any decision would force Hata to cross a psychological boundary that is, for him, impassable: he could kill Ono, but this would make a mockery of his own self-identifications and acknowledge the anger towards Ono (and by extension the Japanese empire) he has always desperately repressed; he could kill Kkutaeh, but this would force into the open not just his complicity in the Japanese Empire's atrocities but his own earlier abuse of her; or he could acknowledge that what he truly desires is not a better life for Kkutaeh but to have sex with her, returning her to her comfort woman status, but this would require admitting the sexual desire he has always hidden from himself. Whichever way Hata turns, he must break the delicately woven web that holds his worldview in place.

Ultimately, he refuses to do anything; he does not help to kill Ono, nor does he kill Kkutaeh, nor does he stand up to the soldiers when they come for her. As Cheng says, what is disturbing about Hata is that he does not seem to grasp what is happening, but this is precisely what renders the event traumatic—if Hata really grasped the event his whole self-image and worldview would

shatter. In the moment of crisis, he therefore responds according to habit—he avoids uncomfortable decisions, attempts to minimize his own conflicts and dismiss his feelings, and hopes the world will return to a state of harmony. This response is successful in Hata's general life, but fails him in the crisis, but then how can one become someone else in a moment of crisis? Hata's crises reveal who he is, even if this is knowledge he cannot face. Significantly, his repressions begin the moment he discovers Kkutaeh's dismembered corpse and the remains of the baby she was carrying:

> I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitations of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow … and I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (305)

Lee's intricately observed example of how personality and environment intertwine indicates some of the problems with traditional theories of discourse and agency. Hata is not unwittingly interpellated into narratives of Japanese imperialism; he makes a conscious effort to adopt them and is instead undone by unwanted subconscious knowledge that disrupts his desired identification. One might propose here that his hybrid position as a Korean adoptee in Imperial Japan disrupts the smooth functioning of nationalist narratives, but rather than a tale of empowerment, Hata's dual position as loyal soldier and enslaved ethnic subject causes him only anguish without interfering with the workings of empire. Marxist theorists like Louis Althusser[1] or postcolonial theorists like

1. In his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser defines ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of their existence" (162). In particular, State ideology is "a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working classes" (137). In defining the ideological state apparatuses that naturalize the unjust exploitation of the working classes in the name of the State, Althusser hopes to expose how capitalism reproduced itself as the 'natural' order of society. This would further the traditional Marxist goal of awakening the proletariat to the realities of their exploitation in order to foment revolution. For a full description, see Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

Homi Bhabha[2] may view nationalist discourses as unconscious narratives that can be deconstructed through conscious critical action that leads to agency for the oppressed, but Hata's tale is the story of imperial narratives consciously adopted but unraveled by subconscious knowledge that paralyses his ability to take action. The reasons for the disjunction are twofold: 1) critical theory assumes that all oppressed individuals desire to resist domination and those who do not are unconsciously interpellated into hegemonic narratives, but this ignores someone like Hata who has chosen the nation over his ethnic group because of a deep-seated desire to fit into a community; 2) theorists of race and ethnicity, such as Lisa Lowe,[3] tend to equate agency primarily with social latitude and elide the importance of individual psychological factors. Hata does not have the agency to act when Kkutaeh begs him to kill her quickly and humanely because he refuses to admit that he has tasted the bitter knowledge of his true identity and because in the moment of crisis he lacks the capability

2. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha emphasizes the importance of cultural hybridity in the colonial sphere and how hybridization continually disturbs attempts to define the nation-state in terms of fixed, essentialist identities. As a postcolonial theorist, Bhabha equates national ideologies with both the rhetoric of colonialism and the reactionary nationalism that often occurs in postcolonial societies, whereas Bhabha espouses a more cosmopolitan, pluralistic social vision. Nationalist narratives can therefore be disturbed by examining them from the perspective of marginal social groups or peripheral locations, where "counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (213).
3. In her seminal book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lowe constructs a framework that connects the influx of post-1965 Asian immigrants with those whose families had been in the USA for generations by emphasising, from a Marxist postcolonial framework, how both were victims of American racial and capitalist ideologies: "Asian Americans emigrating from previously colonised sites are not exclusively formed as racialized minorities within the United States but are simultaneously determined by colonialism and capital investment in Asia" (8). Crucially, "these Asian Americans are determined by the history of U.S. involvements in Asia and the historical racialization of Asians in the United States" (16). Like Althusser and Bhabha, Lowe sees the ideologies of the nation-state as oppressing both the working classes and ethnic minorities (two groups that often overlap). However, this framework emphasizes the restrictions society places on a particular group's freedom of action and, as Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, tends to equate agency purely with resistance to these restrictions while ignoring alternative psychological methods of adaptation. For further information, see: Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American cultural politics*.

to break his habitual mechanisms of defense. If this final component remains unclear in the case of Hata's treatment of Kkutaeh, Lee makes it a central feature of Hata's final crisis, when his daughter Sunny returns after many years apart.

Ⅳ. Tragedy and Agency

What makes *A Gesture Life* particularly interesting for thinking about agency is that Hata's problems repeat themselves when he moves to the USA. What differs in the second instance is that Hata *creates* the problem for himself by adopting the girl who will be the new locus of his tangle of pathologies. Whereas in Imperial Japan his choices were constrained by the situations the empire placed him in, in the USA he has greater social latitude to decide the course of his life; while he still faces discrimination, the USA will not force him to look after Korean comfort women in Burma. Hata, therefore, has greater freedom to choose—and he heads straight for the same rocks on which he foundered the first time, with his adopted Korean daughter Sunny now playing the role of Kkutaeh, a girl around whom questions of home, belonging, nation and sex cluster in claustrophobic anxiety.

Theorists of trauma have long puzzled over the return of the traumatic event, the way in which it erupts into the present despite the wishes of those who experienced it. According to Cathy Caruth, "in its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (*Unclaimed* 91). The crucial point for Caruth is that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). One may view Hata's experience with Kkutaeh in this light—his refusal to act occurs because he cannot dare to grasp the reality of the moment, yet this refusal to know is precisely what makes the moment traumatic. However, whereas Caruth erroneously sees the traumatic experience as "absolutely *true* to the event" (Introduction 5), Jeffrey Alexander describes this as the "naturalistic fallacy" and reminds us that "[e]vents are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event

unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction" (8). The traumatic event is only traumatic from the perspective of a particular observer, who experiences it as a profound shock to his/her own understanding of the world. Thus, Hata's experiences with Kkutaeh are traumatic not because they are inherently so but because *he* cannot assimilate them and his problems repeat themselves because he has not changed and thus is still vulnerable to the same nexus of conflicts surrounding national identity, sexual desire and repressed rage that found a locus in Kkutaeh. This repetition of the event creates a powerful tragic effect; for a traumatic event to happen once would seem unfortunate, but for it to happen twice would seem like fate. Yet, *hamartia* is a central element of tragedy—without the agency of the protagonist, there is no tragic effect, merely victimhood—so Hata's fall needs to be understood in terms of his own personality as well as his social situation.

When Hata moves to the USA, his social latitude expands; instead of being conscripted into the army, he is free to choose his own profession and location. However, he is not wholly free. Hata rapidly comes to understand the kind of position he can occupy in the small town of Bedley Run: he is the token Asian gentleman, a spot of color in a largely white community but one who is always a polite, conscientious neighbor, ever grateful to his host country. This suits Hata because he has already developed these attitudes in Imperial Japan. He is an expert at maintaining appearances; local real estate agents prize his fine house and his display window draws regular compliments. He is a fixture in the town, but one nobody is particularly close to. "On the whole an unwritten covenant of conduct governs us, a signet of cordiality and decorum, in whose ethic, if it can be called such a thing, the worst thing is to be drawn forth and disturbed" (44). This situation suits Hata's own modes of adaptation, but his adopted Korean daughter, Sunny, is repulsed by both the world she grows up in and Hata's mode of dealing with it. "All I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You're always having to be the ideal partner and colleague" (95). She resents the way Hata plays the role of the "good Charlie" (95) for the people of Bedley Run, although in the context of Hata's life acting the role of the perfect citizen of an adopted land is the mode he knows best.

Secure in his new country Hata adopts Sunny, onto whom he has already

projected many of his residual feelings for Kkutaeh, and hopes she can offer him redemption. "I thought only of the moment of her arrival, which I had hoped would serve to mark the recommencement of my days" (74). In this hope Hata lays the seeds for his failed relationship with Sunny because she is already marked by his own projections before he even meets her. Hata's projected desires for Sunny gradually alienate the two, encapsulated by their fights over her piano playing. Although Sunny practices daily, nothing she does can ever satisfy the internal image Hata wishes her to become. At one point, she asks him to get rid of the piano because "You like having it around for what it says. About me. How I've failed" (31). The piano incident is another example of how repression and projection spoil Hata's close relationships because he seems completely unaware he can play the piano. When Liv Crawford reminds him of a time when he had too much to drink and suddenly started playing the piano, Hata denies it outright. "I don't remember playing. I haven't played at all … I don't remember … it's hard to believe" (141). His blunt responses, so different from his usual elliptical speech, suggest more than that he is simply lying: Hata refuses to acknowledge the truth to himself. However, just because such knowledge is repressed does not mean it cannot influence him subconsciously. Hata makes Sunny learn how to play the piano, but is continually appalled by her playing, even though his own narrative makes clear how subjective his response is:

> Mary would comment again on how talented and skilled Sunny was, how dexterous and precocious, and I never thought to correct her appraisals, even though the performances were in fact maudlin and probably insulting to her, as they certainly were to me. I found them quite shaming. And as much as I tried, I couldn't inculcate the same sense in Sunny, as she pretended not to know what I was talking about. (71)

Thus, not one but two other characters reject Hata's assessment, suggesting his response is purely subjective, the force of an emotion disconnected from its real object and attached to piano-playing. Again, Hata's lack of awareness of his own motives is a crucial element in denying him the agency to do what is necessary for those closest to him because he cannot really see them, nor can he understand what he wants himself, and thus, he cannot comprehend the problems he finds himself in.

What is most disturbing is how Hata projects his own repressed sexual

desires onto Sunny. His descriptions of her late teenage years carry unmistakable erotic overtones.

> The dress came just up to her darkly suntanned shoulders, the delicate material clinging to her torso but not so tightly as to be indecent, the handsome drape conveying only the suggestion of the young woman beneath. But the young woman was certainly there, too, the near adultness of her, and the sigh of that shape made me realize why she had asked me to remain at home. (61)

Hata's first moment of crisis with Sunny comes when he discovers she is having sex, something "it disgusts me to think of" (96) although that does not prevent Hata from sneaking down to the house in question one night to see for himself. Hata wants to believe that "I saw her as I believe any good father would, with pride and wonder and the most innocent (if impossible) measure of longing, an aching hope that she stay forever pristine, unsoiled" (114), but then spies on her through the window, watching her dance for two men until "*finally* she was touching herself in places no decent woman would wish men to think about, much less see" (115; italics mine). Hata wishes to imagine her as pristine so that he can banish his own unwanted sexual desires, but those repressed desires inevitably bubble up to the surface and she becomes for him a symbol of sexual desire, impotent rage and visceral disgust. Rather than offering redemption, she offers him a return to the same dark place, the Burma of the heart, which he has always wished to escape.

However, by the end of his tale, Hata finally accepts the knowledge of what he has done to Sunny, when his rescue of her son, Thomas, triggers the memory of how she returned a year after leaving home, heavily pregnant and unsure of what to do. "I might have realized how frightening all this was to her, how overwhelming and awful, but I sensed instead only the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house like banners of our mutual failure" (340). It is a sign of Hata's growing awareness that he can now see what Sunny was feeling, even if he couldn't at the time. Hata pressurizes her into having an abortion as past and present overlap for him; his daughter, Sunny, onto whom he has long projected his buried memories of Kkutaeh, returns with the baby Kkutaeh had hidden from him. In pressing for the abortion, Hata acts in what he considers good faith, saving his teenage daughter from the burdens of single motherhood; in fact, much deeper emotions come into play

and rather than thinking of Sunny he sees in the baby a chance to erase forever the memory of Kkutaeh's lies to him, his own sexual desire for her, and the opportunity to regain an illusory purity of motives. Hata's treatment of Sunny is not a re-enactment but a continuation of his lifelong struggles, and yet again he fails in the moment of crisis because he cannot change who he is. At the end, Hata conflates the abortion with his wartime atrocities as he recognizes the damage that lies hidden beneath his gesture life: "I do not live in broad infamy, nor hide from righteous pursuers or seekers of the truth. I do not mask my face or screen my doings of each day. I have not yet been banished from this earth" (346). His repeated crimes remain hidden in this quiet suburb, but no longer from himself.

In a different kind of story, this knowledge would lay the foundation for a new, honest relationship between Hata and Sunny, after a tearful apology and the hesitant building of trust. But instead, Hata recognizes the failure of his American life. He may have gained greater social latitude in the U.S. compared to life in Imperial Japan, and he may finally have attained awareness of who he is and what he has done, but this merely underlines how powerless he is to change his own unconscious behavior or the effects of his past decisions. Recognizing that he does not have the capacity to change, he sells his beloved home and uses the funds to set up Sunny and her young son in a shop. It seems this is at last the gesture of reconciliation and redemption Hata has yearned for, but it is more accurately an admission of failure rather than an expression of agency. The key difference is that agency assumes the ability to make conscious decisions in pursuit of personal goals, but Hata's decision is a recognition that his personal goals will always be denied him by the effects of his unconscious behavior. At the last, he is denied happiness not by society or a lack of self-awareness, but by a personal inability to control his own behavior in the key relationships in his life. Therefore, he effaces himself from the lives of those he has harmed and leaves the United States just as he once left Japan, a refugee from the failures of his own internalized code. His last act is one of abnegation—he abandons any hope of redemption and simply disappears with no hope of the secure home he has always sought. "Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home" (356). The word "almost" in the final poignant line shows how close Hata has come, twice in his life, to creating a place for himself in this world and how impossibly far away it

is, just tantalizingly and forever out of reach of the contagion he carries in his hands.

V. Conclusion

In *A Gesture Life*, Chang-rae Lee illuminates how difficult it is to claim agency within the intricate tangle of social and personal strands that ensnare us and also shows some of the lacunae of cultural theory. Those critics like Young-Oak Lee and Laverty who read a positive ending into *A Gesture Life* are making theoretically based assumptions that are not supported by the text. Young-Oak Lee assumes that breaking free of national identifications automatically gifts one a superior consciousness (74) because critical cultural theory equates agency with breaking free from hegemonic discourses. However, this falsely conflates critical desires with the protagonist's goal; Hata does not want to break free of national communities but find a community he can genuinely feel a part of. He tries desperately to assimilate into both Japanese and American society and his life ends in failure by his own terms because he cannot do so. Thus, Hata is not solely denied agency by the nation-state's constriction of social latitude, although this plays a key role in shaping his personality, and his realization that he cannot be an accepted member of these communities comes, not because he has transcended national identifications, but because he has recognized the flaws in his own personality that cause repeated harm to those closest to him.

If an increase in social latitude is insufficient, then is greater awareness the key? Laverty assumes that greater self-knowledge also leads to greater agency, in that one can now make superior ethical choices, and thus, in her reading the novel ends with Hata's "joyful reconciliation to living … in a meaningful way" (199), but Hata's case shows that greater self-awareness and personal capability are not necessarily related. He knows what he has done wrong in the past but also knows that he cannot prevent himself behaving in the manner he has come to regret. Hata's story is thus a profound modern tragedy because there is a real development over time that simply underlines the inevitability of failure; Hata gains in social latitude when the novel shifts from Imperial Japan to the USA and he gains in awareness as time passes, but these gains towards agency simply confirm that he cannot change the patterns of behavior that have damaged those closest to him throughout his life.

What tragedy teaches us about agency is that neither social latitude nor

awareness is sufficient. There is also a third component, perhaps the hardest to pin down, an element that has to do with personal capability. Oedipus suspects the truth long before the moment of revelation, but he cannot become someone who skulks from the truth in the shadows—it is not who he is: "I ask to be no other man / Than that I am, and *will know who I am*" (Sophocles 55). Similarly, Hata cannot become someone else just because he has realised the truth of what he has done. It is this final element of agency that makes it so elusive for theory, because a situation that may be easily resolved by one person might be insoluble for another. Whereas the other two elements can to some extent be calculated, personal capability is an individual trait that resists generalization. It is the joker in the deck, such that even those with the freedom to act and awareness of what they need to do to reach their goal may still be incapable of doing it. Hata can see what would be needed to repair his relationship with Sunny, but he also knows that his various repressions and projections will still dominate his encounters with her. Therefore, he leaves to wander self-blinded at Colonus, a reminder of the limits of what is possible, beyond the regions that theory feigns to chart.

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Abstract

This paper examines the problems of agency in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and argues that agency needs to be understood in terms of three distinct but inter-related concepts: social latitude (the freedom afforded by society), awareness (one's understanding of oneself and one's situation) and personal capability (the will and ability to act even when one has both social latitude and awareness). In contrast to Marxist and critical theories that stress the power of hegemonic metanarratives to mold subjectivities, this formulation of agency stresses the interplay of cultural forces and individual psychological factors. In Lee's tragic tale, Franklin 'Doc' Hata is shaped not only by the social pressures of growing up an ethnic Korean in Imperial Japan or living as an Asian American in a largely white town in the USA, but also by the psychological mechanisms of defense he employs to navigate his difficulties. Although Hata's modest aims seem perfectly attainable by most, he is repeatedly unable to take the actions necessary to achieve his goals because he lacks either the social latitude to do so, a true awareness of his own motivations or the world he lives in, or the personal capacity to act even when he finally sees the truth. In constructing a modern form of tragedy that stresses the interplay of social and psychological forces, Lee outlines some of the complexities of modern life and reveals some of the lacunae of contemporary theoretical formulations of agency.

Keywords: agency, tragedy, theory, Asian American literature, subjectivity, posthumanism

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