LIVING DEATH:

LOSS, MOURNING, AND ETHNIC RENEWAL

IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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Abstract

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Director: Professor Nancy K. Miller

Living Death argues that the death of a beloved family member, a prevalent narrative feature in contemporary ethnic novels about immigrant families, comes to represent the accumulated traumas associated with ethnicity and assimilation in American society: losses of inherited culture, connection to ancestors, knowledge of the past, dreams, identity, "home," language, and belief in America's promises. As a result, the processes of grief demanded by this death necessarily involve the mourning of more than one body, more than one life. Loss and marginalization result in "living death," spiritual and social deaths, which must be mourned to revitalize ethnic identities and heritages previously suppressed, denigrated, or rejected in the process of Americanization. The dissertation also illuminates a distinction between ethnicity and race suggested in the fiction in relation to loss and marginalization; while spiritual and psychological aspects of living death arise from crises of cultural transmission, the compounded trauma of social death is integrally related to race. Drawing on studies of mourning and melancholia, trauma, racialization, and nation, *Living Death* explores the creative and culturally specific processes of mourning instigated by the sudden death of a loved one in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, and Carole Maso's *Ghost Dance*. It shows that second- and third-generation

narrators, confronting the losses and hardships of their parents' lives, work through haunting traumas in order to reconstitute a relationship with the aspects of ancestral heritage that can guide one in American life. The narrator in each of these four novels enacts a literary commemoration of familial loss and marginalization that enables recovery (or recreation) and reevaluation of disregarded and/or discarded histories and cultural identities. Rather than insisting on a severance of ties to lost objects, the mourning undertaken in this fiction tends toward reestablishing ties to the past in such a way that the past is put to service in the present. Knowledge of the past is used to give meaning to the present and to provide a ground from which to create new possibilities for the future.

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Loss, Mourning, and Ethnic Renewal in Contemporary American Fiction

Introduction

In literature as in life, death is a traditional end. In the last four decades, however, it has become a beginning, strikingly familiar to readers of various ethnic American literatures. In fact, some of the most celebrated works of the ethnic canon begin with an ended life. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) famously starts with the spirit of Sethe's murdered child haunting 124 Bluestone Road; her *Song of Solomon* (1977), with insurance agent Robert Smith's failed flight from the roof of Mercy Hospital and *Jazz* (1992), with the city's whispered reports of Joe Trace shooting his young lover. The first lines of Maxine Hong Kingston's groundbreaking *The Woman Warrior* (1976) reveal the secret of an unknown aunt, the "No Name Woman," who jumped into the family well. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), perhaps the second-best-known Chinese-American book after Kingston's, begins with Jing-Mei Woo taking her recently deceased mother's place at the mah jong table. The interlocking stories of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) emerge in response to June Kapshaw's death as she attempts to walk home to the reservation during a snow storm on Easter Sunday. *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina Garcia begins when Jorge del Pino's spirit, recently released from his body in New York, visits his wife Celia in Cuba to inform her of his death. The now classic *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Homebase* (1979) by Shawn Wong, and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) by Paule Marshall, as well as the more recent and popularly successful *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer, are all journey novels set in motion by the loss of a loved one. Death, in this literature, initiates a confrontation with suppressed and often painful histories that must be recovered.

This dissertation focuses specifically on novels of the late-1980s and 1990s that use familial deaths to embody the experiences of loss and trauma resulting from immigration and assimilation, as well as from the pain of marginalization and discrimination, and accumulating over generations in immigrant families. In the novels discussed here, including Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1994), Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Song of Love* (1989), Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), and Carole Maso's *Ghost Dance* (1995), individual deaths set in motion the project of mourning the past that ethnic memory requires.

Mourning demands working through unacknowledged losses, unresolved traumas, and gaps in collective memory. Rather than insisting on a severance of ties to lost objects, the mourning undertaken in ethnic fiction reestablishes ties to the past but in such a way that the past is put to service in the present. By mining memory, the narrator in each of these four novels moves toward a future that integrates the past into the present, ethnic heritage into American worlds. Knowledge of the past is used to give meaning to the present and to provide a ground from which to create new possibilities for the future. Working through the past takes the form of literary commemoration of familial loss and recovery (or recreation) and reevaluation of disregarded and/or discarded histories.

The literary processes of grief in contemporary ethnic fiction necessarily involve the mourning of more than one body, more than one life, and more than one death. In addition to the corporeal death of family members, surviving characters must mourn the less tangible but equally devastating death-in-life experiences, living deaths, suffered in the past and the present. Living death, which culminates in and is represented by the physical deaths from which the narratives emerge, involves two separate but related

deaths –spiritual death and social death. Spiritual death involves a diminishment of inner self, a psychological and emotional lifelessness that results from social and cultural losses but is largely personal and internal. Social death, a disavowal of one's existence in the external world, is interpersonal, related to a degraded position in cultural and national worlds. Different in nature, these deaths are nonetheless related. While spiritual death may be experienced singly, it always accompanies social death, which has discernable psychic repercussions on individuals.

Immigration inevitably involves the traumas of dislocation and loss. Losses amass as immigrants and marginalized ethnic groups attempt to integrate into mainstream American culture: losses of inherited culture, connection to ancestors, knowledge of the past, dreams, identity, "home," language, and belief in America's promises. Literary representations of these losses take the form of a spiritual death afflicting immigrant families. Spiritual death is a death of the inner self that interferes with personal relationships, attacks one's sense of identity, and hinders engagement with life. The fictional families discussed in this dissertation all suffer from emotional disconnectedness and gaps in memory between generations, while individual family members contend with confusion over identity and a sense of isolation within the family, community, and nation. Subdued by unspoken sorrows and disappointment, characters ail from their inability to make meaningful and/or lasting connections with one another and with the world. Without a sense of that which has been lost, second and third generation protagonists are haunted by inescapable resonances of a past they don't know.

Haunting, as a common characteristic of novels that contend with the losses accruing from immigration and assimilation, has been studied by Kathleen Brogan in

Cultural Haunting (1998). Identifying a "pan-ethnic phenomenon, registering a widespread concern with questions of ethnic identity and cultural transmission" (4), Brogan posits a new genre of ethnic ghost stories. Ghosts in contemporary ethnic American fiction, she argues, bring to light the lost or troubled transmission of cultural history and "potentially lead[] to a valuable awareness of how a group's past continues to inhabit and inform the living" (8). In other words, the dead return in spectral form, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, to bring that which is past, lost, and/or forgotten into the present and force a confrontation with this endangered history.

I posit that the ghost stories Brogan addresses are part of a larger genre of ethnic hauntings and cultural mourning in contemporary literature that does not necessarily rely on supernatural manifestations of the past. The novels studied in this dissertation represent a counterpart to Brogan's proposed genre. They are also concerned with the failures of transmission and lingering aftermath of immigration that plague the Leong, Castillo, Park, and Turin families, but the haunting is psychological and emotional, not spectral. The persistent and disturbing traces of lost pasts are rendered, aesthetically and thematically, through melancholia rather than through ghosts. The past lingers in the emotional, spiritual and social malaise that reaches crisis with the sudden, intensely traumatic death of a loved one. Pathologized by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" as an unhealthy attachment to lost objects, melancholia is often portrayed in psychoanalytic studies as a form of death in life. Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun* has created some of the more memorable and evocative language to characterize this condition. She describes melancholy as an "abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on

a long-term basis, lays claim upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions and even life itself" (3). Melancholia, she writes, results in a "devitalized existence…ready at any moment for a plunge into death" (4). This death-like existence plays out in the novels as melancholic attachments grip characters in a spiritual death. Haunting shadows of loss overwhelm characters' inner worlds and, manifested in their actions and relationships, impede the possibility of living in the present.

The losses accruing from immigration and assimilation that result in spiritual death are compounded by the traumatic experiences of social marginalization and discrimination, particularly for racially-marked immigrants, that produce a second kind of living death – social death. America's history of immigration and naturalization legislation attests to racist attitudes and concepts of American identity that preclude easy integration of those who threaten the fictive unity of the "imagined community" of the nation, as Benedict Anderson has termed it. National identity, in other words, is founded upon an imagined homogeneity of culture, which includes race, ethnicity, religion, language, and origin. Our national identity is ideologically constituted by a core set of traits that supposedly provide the basis for our unity and character as a people. American-ness is predicated on whiteness, northern European (if not Anglo-Saxon) origin, English language fluency, Christianity, and middle-class status. The farther a person exists from these accepted norms, the less he will be able to integrate into dominant society. Those who cannot or will not be assimilated are not necessarily ejected but rather are uneasily incorporated into the national body, relegated ideologically and often physically to the margins of society. The marginalized are bodily alive but, as Sharon Patricia Holland

argues in *Raising the Dead* (2000), denied a viable identity within the national imaginary, they are socially non-existent – socially dead.

The families in *Bone*, *The Mambo Kings,* and *Native Speaker*, excluded from the prevailing vision of America, or included in ways that perpetually mark them as foreign and subordinate, suffer socially as well as spiritually. They endure discrimination, exploitation, humiliation, and disrespect due to their perceived foreignness. They encounter great challenges in securing material success and advancement. Even with upward economic movement achieved by the Parks and the Turins, these novels refuse to celebrate progressivist discourses of assimilation; rather they emphasize that movement is not always progress. The American Dream, reduced to material signs of economic achievement, does not fulfill the other aspects of the dream - national belonging, a sense of wholeness and identity, safety, and equality. Movement "up" is not necessarily movement into the core of mainstream American society, especially for racialized groups.

Popularly and culturally, ethnicity is an important factor in social identity and experience in America, but socially and politically, race has a greater impact on the lived realities of Americans. In the U.S., race has historically been a salient element in determining social experiences and opportunities for various ethnic groups in specific historical periods and in exposing racially-marked ethnic groups to continual and sometimes virulent prejudice. This distinction is ultimately reflected in the literature under consideration in this dissertation. My reading of *Ghost Dance* alongside *Bone, The Mambo Kings,* and *Native Speaker* suggests that while spiritual death is a common experience of immigrant families, race, not ethnicity, is the ground upon which social

death is wrought in the U.S. And it is in the literature of racialized ethnic groups that social and spiritual deaths become inseparable forms of living death with political as well as personal consequences.

Holland proposes that the marginalized in national culture, including racial and ethnic minorities, women and homosexuals, constitute "nations within" whose devastating experience of being obscured and unacknowledged in the larger national culture can be equated to the silencing erasure of physical death. All minorities, she suggests, feel an intimate bond with death because their very presence in America correlates with that of death itself as the "almost unspeakable" within the discourses of nationhood and belonging. Authors' recourse to physical death to broach the subject of living death has its basis in a preexisting, ideological connection between the disturbing realities of both actual death and social death.

Holland's work is an important point of departure for my readings of ethnic haunting in literature. For it is not only lost pasts and departed loved ones that haunt immigrant families psychologically and emotionally but also, I argue, the haunting nature of being the socially dead that constitutes living death in much contemporary ethnic American fiction. Characters are not only plagued by the lingering torment of loss and traumatic memory, but are themselves rendered insubstantial, present absences like ghosts who haunt the larger cultural memory. Cultural haunting, then, can take multiple literary forms in addition to the supernatural mode Brogan studies. In the novels I consider here, haunting, like death, is psychological, emotional, and social.

As my debt to Holland suggests, this study of living death in contemporary ethnic American novels is influenced by significant work being done in African American

literary and cultural studies by Karla Holloway, Anissa Janine Wardi, and Abdul JanMohammed, who like Holland, investigate the role of death in black culture.[1] Karla Holloway states that "African Americans' particular vulnerability to untimely death in the U.S. intimately affects how black culture both represents itself and is represented" (2). Death and the threat of death as a ubiquitous reality is reflected and explored in literature. The pervasive presence of death, its purpose and function in African American literature differs greatly in kind and degree from death in the literature of other ethnic groups in the U.S. where death remains more metaphorical; however, recent African American scholarship provides important and useful insights for understanding death and living death in other ethnic literatures.

Studies of social death in literature, like Holland's and JanMohammed's, draw largely upon Orlando Patterson's important study of social death and slavery. Patterson's work makes it possible to understand not only what social death is but also its effects in the personal as well as social spheres. Historically specific, his findings are not widely applicable to other theories and configurations of living death; however, with respect for the different historic and social circumstances, specific insights gleaned from studies of African American culture, including Patterson's study of slavery, can facilitate broader understandings of social death and its representations. For example, Patterson's conclusions about the dehumanizing effect of severance from the past on slaves establishes a connection between social and spiritual death essential to the study of living death in contemporary ethnic fiction. Patterson writes, "Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors

[1] Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial* (2002); Wardi, *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature* (2003); Jan Mohammed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death* (2005).

into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forbears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory" (5). The slave's trauma of disrupted transmission and social/cultural isolation is shared, in a less violent form, by immigrants under assimilative pressures to break fully with the past. The degree of powerlessness between slave and immigrant is different, but the need for ancestors and a connection to the past in order to create meaning in the "living present" is revealed to be an essential element of humanity that can and has been denied in different ways in our national history.

In *The Alchemy of Race* (1991) critical race scholar Patricia Williams proposes another way that the humanity of those excluded from the national imaginary is attacked. Williams's formulation of "spirit murder" emphasizes society's disavowal of Others as not simply a form of death in life, but an act of violence committed by society against its own members. Drawing upon her own alternating experiences of invisibility and heightened scrutiny as a black women in the predominantly white, male halls of prestigious law schools, Williams argues that those made to feel like non-entities in the eyes of society, as though not "part of the larger cultural picture… concocted from a perceptual consensus to which [they are] not a party" (56), are traumatized on a regular basis by everyday interpersonal events that deny their inherent worth as human beings. As Williams explains, "a fundamental part of ourselves and our dignity depends on the uncontrollable, powerful, external observers who make up a society;" thus, "disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard" is a violent act against their humanity, their spiritual selves (73). And though Williams is speaking specifically about racial discrimination, assaults on ethnic identity are equally damaging to spiritual life.

Feminist therapist Maria Root theorizes such widespread and constant "violence to the soul and spirit" committed based on group membership as "insidious trauma" (qtd. in Brown 107). Social death and spiritual death are once again yoked. Ethnicity, integrally related to family, community, and memory, is an emotional component of identity; the degradation of, injury to, or erasure of a person's ethnicity is a painful psychological and spiritual experience.

Novels like *Bone* and *The Mambo Kings* in which characters, Ona and Cesar respectively, choose to die rather than continue to exist in a state of living death, emphasize the abusive nature of society's disregard for ethnic Americans who fail or refuse to surrender their ethnic pasts to American futures. The death of Henry Park's mixed-race son under an accidentally murderous pile of white boys' bodies in *Native Speaker*, on the other hand, symbolically demonstrates the nation's equally fierce resistance to integration of ethnic Others whose difference, due to race, cannot be washed away, even if desired. Ultimately, what each novel strives toward is not a wholesale integration into mainstream American society but rather a new relation to both America and ethnicity.

Living death may begin with the act of immigration but, in the novels I discuss, the traumas of loss and marginalization continue to affect subsequent generations both directly and indirectly. It is this resonance of loss and trauma in the present that concerns contemporary American ethnic writers at the end of the twentieth century. Their writing bears witness to the spreading of spiritual death throughout families and over time when troubled pasts remain buried and unacknowledged. Novel after novel presents second or third generation protagonists trying to come to terms with the palpable traces of pasts not

their own that persist in their lives. Immigrant parents' suppressed and unresolved grief bubbles over into their lives, in their demeanor, their actions, their treatment of their children, and indelibly marks the lives of their children.

Various theories of generations contribute to understanding the immigrant experience and its representation in literature. Marcus Lee Hansen's 1938 model of second generation rejection and third generation recovery of ethnic culture, commonly referred to as Hansen's Law, continues to be influential in the conceptualization of immigrant generations, but, derived from and addressing the situation of European immigrants of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, it has limited usefulness for reading living death in contemporary ethnic fiction. While characters in the novels I discuss here do turn away from ethnic heritages in hopes of integrating more fully into mainstream American society and ultimately seek a return to ethnic roots, these movements do not correspond to Hansen's generational model. Instead, characters negotiate their own relationships to ethnic and American cultures, regardless of immigrant generation, more in line with Werner Sollor's theorization of consent and descent, and in response to variables of assimilation, most significantly race, that didn't figure into Hansen's theory.

Ethnicity, though popularly associated with descent, is considered a matter of culture (enacted via traditions, food, music, etc.) and arguably a matter or choice, especially for white ethnics, as Mary Waters contends in *Ethnic Options* (1990). Race, on the other hand, despite scientific discrediting, is still commonly held to be biological and inescapable. Race depends, more than ethnicity, on a visual epistemology that assumes knowledge of a person's identity can be ascertained through visible signs. For racialized

ethnic groups, ethnic choice is usurped by externally imposed identities. Consent becomes of matter not of choosing to claim an ethnic identity but of negotiating a positive relationship to it.

Because this study of living death in ethnic fiction is concerned with literary explorations of the aftermath of immigration, the theory of generations developed in trauma and Holocaust studies is especially useful here. As Eva Hoffman suggests in *After Such Knowledge* (2004), "the testimony and study of post-Holocaust 'second generation' may be useful to second generations elsewhere, and emerging from other difficult histories" (xiv). The concepts of transgenerational transmission, latency, postmemory and absent memory in post-Holocaust studies help explain how the experiences of an earlier generation can continue to affect those who follow.[2] Trauma studies in general has established that the unassimilated nature of trauma results in unconscious repetition of the trauma in one's behavior and memories. Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth explains 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 that it is was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*UE* 3). Survivors of trauma, able neither to forget nor speak of their experience, unwillingly act out their painful pasts again and again, and in doing so bequest the absent or fragmented memory of their suffering to those who surround them. Children of trauma survivors, such as

[2] Yael Danieli provides a review of literature on the intergenerational transmission of psychological effects of trauma on offspring of Holocaust survivors in "Families of Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust" (1981). The essays in *The Intergenerational Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies to Trauma* (1998) edited by Danieli address intergenerational transmission of trauma among various groups including but expanding beyond the post-Holocaust generations. Hoffman offers an informative discussion of generation issues in Holocaust studies in *After Such Knowledge* (2004). Latency, or temporal delay, as a characteristic of trauma is explained by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). Postmemory is theorized by Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames* (1997), "Projecting Memory" (1999), and "Surviving Images" (2001). Ellen S. Fine develops the idea of absent memory in relation to French Post-Holocaust literature in her article in *Writing and the Holocaust* (1988).

Holocaust survivors, are thus marked by their parents' pasts through the non-conscious transferal of psychic and emotional wounds.

Because the knowledge of direct experience of trauma is too painful to be acknowledged, revisiting and integrating the memory of trauma into the present is only possible with enough distance to recognize the past-ness of the traumatic event. The necessary distance, in time and space, is inherent in the difference between generations. The task of witnessing falls to subsequent generations who can and must, in order to understand their inheritance and end the haunting repetitions of trauma, confront the past. This model of generations in relation to trauma intersects with the literary representations of immigrant families in the novels discussed in this dissertation. The direct experience of trauma associated with the immigrant experience affects the next generation belatedly and through absence in the silence, emotional states, and behaviors of parents. Members of the second or third generation suffer from memories they lack and must recover (or imaginatively recreate) in order to understand how their familial and cultural history has shaped their present lives.

An individual's internal sense of his or her ethnic identity depends upon the continuity of memory. With the gaps of transmission that result from the disjunction of immigration and the traumas of loss and marginalization, ethnicity, like memory, becomes a fraught, tenuous legacy. Cultural anthropologist Michael Fischer contends that "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often

unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" (195-6). Ethnicity and memory are inescapably ours and yet something we must create for ourselves. Neither are purely matters of descent nor consent. As Fischer continues in his explanation of ethnicity, "Whereas the search for coherence is grounded in a connection to the past, the meaning abstracted from that past, an important criterion of coherence, is an ethic workable for the future" (196). Ethnicity and memory are rooted in the past but, when fluid and dynamic, become future-oriented. Ethnicity, in an individual's personal sense of and relationship to it, is very much like memory itself.

In the literature of ethnic haunting, ethnicity is more specifically, as Brogan asserts, "a function of mourning, the form of memory that most directly confronts loss" (171). The mourning that occurs, initiated by individual deaths, necessarily expands to become a project of mourning multiple losses and traumas of a collective familial and communal past. Brogan calls this cultural mourning. Cultural mourning in ethnic fiction is not mourning in a psychoanalytic sense of detaching from lost objects. It is a process of restoring ties to the dead and the ancestral memory and culture they represent. Reburied in living memory and narrative, they become available as part of what Robert Pogue Harrison calls a humic foundation that "holds in its conserving element the unfinished story of what has come to pass" so that it can be retrieved in the future (xi). The dead are rendered accessible beyond the boundaries between life and death, past and present, and valuable elements of the past are integrated into the present. In *Bone*, Leila transforms her lost sister into a goddess who guides and inspires the living. Hijuelos's Eugenio Castillo finds a way, through music and memory, to restore a relationship with his dead father and uncle. *Native Speaker*'s Henry Park learns to listen to the voices of his deceased father

and son in the speech of the immigrant community around him, and Vanessa in *Ghost Dance* mines spiritual and imaginative traditions to create from absent memory an empowering familial history as a foundation for living.

Each of these resolutions, in their refusal to surrender the past, may be considered melancholic, but as David Eng and Shinhee Han argue in their study on racial melancholia, in relation to ethnicity, race, and assimilative pressures, melancholy constitutes resistance to ceding ethnic heritage under pressures of dominant society that disregards or erases difference. Racial melancholia insists upon the preservation of ethnic origins and identities in the face of dominant culture that disparages these vestiges of the past. The melancholic nature of cultural mourning serves to resist the dehumanizing forces of living death that ensue when people are severed from their ancestors by a drastic rupture in memory that closes the past off from the present.

Current reevaluations of melancholy in general suggest that it can be a valuable response to loss provided the subject can move from paralyzing melancholia to meaning production. Engaging the creative potential of melancholy keeps the past and the psychic experiences of loss available as sources of possibility in the present and future rather than moving into the future vis-à-vis closure and forgetting. With the necessary realization that the present is not the past, a subject can keep vestiges of the past active in the present as sources of understanding and creativity. In their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003), David L. Eng and David Kazanjian describe the creative process as generated by loss when mourning engages not only what is lost but also what remains, the devalued vestiges of the past that persist. They assert that "the work of mourning remains becomes possible through melancholia's engagement with the various and

ongoing forms of loss" and can produce new perspectives of and meanings in the world (5). It is this engagement with loss that leads to new forms of and relationships to ethnic heritages in the novels of immigrant families confronting death, actual, spiritual, and social, discussed in this dissertation.

Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* begins with the news of Ona Leong's suicide and moves back in time as her older step-sister and our narrator Leila Fu excavates familial and communal history in an attempt to understand her sister's devastating act. Leila cannot discover *the* reason for her sister's death, but sifting through and reevaluating layers of memory move Leila beyond grief to a richer sense of her own identity and mode of living. Chapter one, "'Look how the heart keeps beating!': Mourning Life and Death in *Bone,"* examines how, in response to the loss of Ona, Leila constructs a narrative to commemorate the numerous losses of the Chinese-American community associated with immigration, marginalization, and the traumatic history of the racially discriminatory exclusionary immigration and naturalization acts specifically targeted at the Chinese. This history affects the Leong-Fu family materially and psychologically, creating a condition of living death that includes both spiritual and social death and contributes to Ona's physical death.

Ona, the sister who had been most emotionally and spiritually attached to the immigrant generation and least able to negotiate the conflicts between Chinese and American cultures, brings trauma and loss to the fore by choosing to die, and Leila, through confronting with language Ona's death along with all the prior losses it embodies, resists outsider status and struggles to bring herself and her community back from the deadening abstraction of living death. Leila constructs a narrative memory that

reclaims buried history and puts it to the service of creating a dynamic relationship between past and present, Chinese and American. She reinvents Chinese-American identities, which honor and integrate the spirits of her parents and ancestors into the service of the present and future.

The literary project of *The Mambo Kings* is also to recover a forgotten history of immigrants in America, in this case the generation of pre-Castro Cuban immigrants including Hijuelos's own parents, whose memory had been overshadowed by the large waves of immigrants pouring into America after Castro's rise to power. Hijuelos, like Ng, enacts a literary recovery of memory undertaken upon the death of characters, the immigrant brothers Nestor and Cesar Castillo, most intimately connected to endangered ethnic heritages and histories. Chapter two of this dissertation, "Picking Up the Mambo Line: Melancholy, Masculinity, and New Beginnings in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love,*" examines the melancholia for a lost homeland that determines the lives and deaths of the Castillo brothers and can only be escaped through an engagement with uniquely Cuban cultural forms.

The melancholia of Cesar and Nestor Castillo, rendered by Hijuelos through vivid imagery and narrative repetition, is highly sexualized, with women representing the unattainable lost objects of Cuba, national belonging, and acceptance and with success entangled with exaggerated notions of masculinity. Nestor's son Eugenio attempts to break the repetitive cycle of melancholic longing in the second generation before, longing for his lost father-figures, he too becomes trapped in its grip. Hijuelos's approach to narrativizing through Eugenio draws upon the layered, culturally-specific history of the mambo as a structural device for accessing the stories of lost fathers. By arranging

repetition into a rhythmic creation, like the mambo, Eugenio is able to free himself from the chains of sadness over lost objects through reestablishing a relationship with the past in the form of the novel itself, a literary mambo.

The death of a father who represents a connection to the past and ethnic heritage is also central to Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*; however, in Lee's novel grief is intensified by the death of a son, Mitt, who takes with him narrator Henry Park's dreams for the future. Henry's strained relationships with his loved ones, living and dead, and his (in)abilities to grieve are enmeshed in conflicted attitudes toward American-ness and its implicit whiteness and toward Korean-ness with its implicit Otherness. Assimilation for Henry is limited by racial exclusions and racism, and he persists in feeling himself to be a "foreigner within," not belonging to American mainstream culture nor to ethnic communities or homelands. Henry is unsure of where he belongs and who he is or wants to be, a condition reflected in and exasperated by his career as a spy. The issues of racial exclusion and melancholia, betrayal of ethnic community, perhaps also of family and self, and confused sense of identity are projected onto these two central deaths in the novel.

My third chapter, "'The Strangest Chorale': Listening for the Unlost Voices in *Native Speaker,*" considers Henry Park's indirect working through of the deaths of his beloved family members and all the losses these deaths embody. His interactions with John Kwang, the Korean-American politician on whom he is employed to spy and who embodies traces of both Henry's father and son, provides Henry with the means to reclaim his immigrant history and rebury his lost loved ones in such a way that they remain a part of his life. Through Kwang's rise and fall, Henry relives his intensely

painful personal losses in a different context and acquires a new perspective on his Korean past and American future as well as on his own ethnic identity. And by restoring a relationship with his father and son, Henry also restores his own relationship with the world and ability to rebuild his life and envision a future, nourished by the presence rather than haunted by the suppression of the past.

Though the other novels in my dissertation make the story of immigration and ethnic marginalization central, in *Ghost Dance* Maso's protagonist Vanessa Turin, third-generation in her immigrant family, is further removed from the immigration experience and, as a white ethnic, does not suffer marginalization in society as a result of her ethnic or racial identity. So whereas in *Native Speaker*, Henry struggles with the process of assimilation and in *Bone* and *Mambo Kings*, assimilation of children resisted by immigrant parents creates conflict between generations, in *Ghost Dance*, the process of assimilation was completed long before Vanessa was born, and the family integrated into mainstream American society. Nonetheless, the novel registers multiple losses of cultural memory and connections, identity, knowledge of self and past, feeling, and "rational" relation to the world shared by other the fictional immigrant families I discuss. The almost absolute lack of cultural inheritance and identity, erased through assimilatory forgetting, is the source of the debilitating emotional health of the Turin family. The result is an ongoing and accumulating experience of absent presence that constitutes a spiritually and psychologically powerful living death. And similar to the other fiction considered, the trauma of living death is inseparable, in Vanessa's narration, from the tragic death of her mother.

"Choosing to Live: Rising from the ashes of familial and ethnic loss in *Ghost Dance,"* delves into Vanessa's tortured narrative movement toward an embrace of life despite suffering in order to learn to love her deceased mother Christine "from here" by working through traumatic loss and creating cultural memories to renew a connection not only to Christine but also to an ethnic ancestry of which she'd been deprived. The inclusion of *Ghost Dance* in this dissertation also allows me to explore the complicated relationship between race and ethnicity in the literature of ethnic haunting and cultural mourning.

This dissertation takes as its overriding focus the revision of meaning achieved in these novels through an engagement with the haunting traces of loss: the literary transformation of living death. In each novel, living death begins as a disempowering and spiritually oppressive experience of death in life but, through literary memorialization and a renewed, dynamic relationship with the past, surviving characters emerge from this devastating condition of social and spiritual death to create new possibilities for ethnic and American identities and communities in the United States. And living death becomes the achieved, desirable state of the dead who live on in the stories and memories of subsequent generations.

Chapter One

"Look how the heart keeps beating!": Mourning Life and Death in *Bone*

In Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, the suicide of Ona Leong is announced on the first page of the book with sublime understatement by the narrator and Ona's older half-sister Leila Fu: "Mah and Leon are still married, but after Ona jumped off the Nam, Leon moved out. It was a bad time" (3). Ona jumps to her death from the thirteenth floor window of the Nam Ping Yuen, the last of four housing projects built in San Francisco's Chinatown, where the Leong family lives. *Bone,* Ng's first and only novel to date, is a story about a family suffering and falling apart seemingly as a result of this shocking death.[3] Beginning her novel with the story of a female relative's suicide, Ng hearkens back to *The Woman Warrior,* Maxine Hong Kingston's foundational text of Asian-American women's writing. At the start of *The Woman Warrior,* a young Maxine's mother tells her the story of an anonymous aunt who jumped into the family well after being disgraced for sexual impropriety during her husband's extended absence. Spoken of only in whispers as a warning against transgressive female sexuality, Kingston's no name woman was denied, in shame, by her family, but Kingston takes up her story and attempts to forge a connection with this long-lost aunt. "Unless I see her life branching into mine," Kingston writes, "she gives me no ancestral help" (8). Both *Bone* and *The Woman Warrior* give voice to a silenced past and reclaim the memory of these lost women who can offer ancestral help. Ng's Leila and Kingston employ storytelling to

[3] *Bone,* though an only book, has garnered Ng notable attention. Beginning with a flurry of essays in the now defunct *Hitting Critical Mass*, scholarly interest in *Bone* continues to generate criticism particularly concerned with the negotiation of Chinese-American identity and subjectivity (see Thomas W. Kim; Allen Gee; Vivian Fumiko Chin) and Ng's literary construction and use of Chinatown (see A. Robert Lee; Rocio G. Davis; Frederick Luis Aldama; and Lisa Lowe).

come to terms with haunted family history and reconstruct a past usable to them in the present and future. Each must find a way to transform ghosts into guiding spirits.

As in Kingston's memoir in which she presents multiple versions of her aunt's story, conclusive truth is neither possible nor necessary in understanding Ona's suicide in *Bone.* Characters and readers alike struggle over the question, *why?* What is the reason for Ona's devastating act? Critics Frederick Luis Aldama and Rocio G. Davis view Ona's suicide as a failure to imagine a way out (93; 96); and David Goellnicht interprets it as "a sign of failure to claim 'America'" (317). Many theories are posited; no answer is given. Explaining Ona's suicide is not Ng's intent. The suicide, instead, serves as the instigating crisis of the novel, compelling Leila to engage in the painful but necessary process of mourning. This ritual of mourning, not Ona's death, is the central concern of Ng's novel.

With Ona's death, Ng presents her characters with a loss so great and tangible that it cannot be ignored or denied. The loss of the beloved Ona, then, compels the difficult processes of bearing witness and grieving avoided for so long, in which not only Ona but also the other losses that her death contains, losses related to life, must be mourned. Ona haunts the text as a present absence who brings her family, most significantly Leila, into contact with the past. She lingers disturbingly in the hearts and minds of her family and, though never taking spectral form, functions in the text like the ghosts discussed by Brogan in *Cultural Haunting* (1998). She shadows her family's life with that which has been lost, and forces, through the enormity of her act and its effect on her loved ones, a delving into the past. Ona's death instigates the cultural mourning necessary to make sense of the present and to make possible a future. Cultural mourning, enacted through Leila's literary memorializing, reconstitutes continuity with the past while simultaneously

enabling, through dialogue between present/living and past/dead, a renewal of ethnic identity and community for narrator and protagonist, Leila.

Moreover, the speaking of this painful story of family history surrounding her sister's suicide breaks the silence of death-like existence to which the Leongs have been relegated. It is not only Ona's death that must be mourned but all the losses and hardships that Ona's demise embodies – the effects of living death on the personal lives and subjectivities of those relegated to the margins of American society. The Leongs are consigned, geographically and psychologically, to the position of living death, physically living but sequestered and socially non-existent. The inhabitants of Ng's Chinatown, both physically and ideologically excluded from the prevailing vision of America, could be understood as inhabiting this realm of living death. And though living death occurs at the level of national formation and preservation, narratives like Ng's expose how these constructs materially and psychologically affect the private and spiritual lives of individuals who are misperceived and disregarded by mainstream American society. Ng presents a literary illustration of the tangible effects, most prominently Ona's suicide, of Patricia Williams's spirit murder. My reading draws on these theories to explore how Ng uses death, physically and metaphorically, to address the traumatic histories of immigration and marginalization in the lives of her characters. Living death and spirit murder translate into a lived experience of degradation, discrimination, loss, and financial hardship that constitutes a form of insidious trauma. The trauma of racial and ethnic oppression affecting Ng's Leongs culminates in the more easily recognizable trauma of Ona's death. Her death is both counted among the accumulated traumatic losses resulting from living death and used to represent these losses.

Living death, not Ona's suicide alone, accounts for the estrangement of Mah, the girls' mother, and Leon, Mah's second husband and father to Ona and Nina. The emotional disconnection among family members, and the anger, frustration, and sadness of their lives predate this tragedy. Ona's death, instead, embodies the many hardships associated with immigration and marginalization experienced by the Chinese in America and affecting the Leongs. While Mah and Leon have their share of love, hope and spirit, life for them is largely characterized by the habitually unexamined experiences of rejection, exclusion, labor, and disappointment.

And though the more directly traumatic experiences of immigration, legal exclusion, and exploitative, physically exhausting labor are not theirs, the lives of Leila and her sisters are indelibly marked by their parents' pasts. They inherit a shadow of experience, which Eva Hoffman, discussing the post-Holocaust generation in *After Such Knowledge* (2003), argues haunts the second generation who cannot properly mourn "a multitude of lost 'objects' that they never had a chance to know" (73). Similarly, as second generation daughters of immigrants the Fu-Leong sisters are connected to the cultural trauma of their immigrant parents by what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," memory that is vicarious, displaced, and belated, transmitted, in Hoffman's explanation, via emotional *sequalae,* the "splintered signs of acute suffering, of grief and loss" manifested non-consciously in one's behaviors and disposition (34). Hoffman's and Hirsch's model of the second generation in terms of trauma plays out in the novel but also intersects with the immigrant model of generations. The direct experience of trauma is attributed to the immigrant experience and affects the next generation belatedly and through absence. Mah and Leon's daughters do not fully know or appreciate their

parents' past experiences in America, but this past is their legacy and demands a response. As Hirsch posits, "Perhaps it is *only* in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation" (Surviving 120). Leila and her sisters inherit not only the sorrow of their parents but also the task of mourning their traumatic losses that continue to haunt the family.

Because Ona's suicide is inseparable from and representative of cultural losses, the attempt to understand it necessitates also a reckoning with the family and community history of silently traumatic lives. Only by revisiting and actively engaging with the past can Leila uncover and begin to value the layers of history that continue to inform her life. This process takes the form of ritual commemoration through Leila's remembering and narrativizing her family history. Through her act of storytelling, she is able to translate traumatic memory, which is timeless, invariable, and without closure, into narrative memory, which finds an order for traumatic memories so that they can be known, integrated into personal or, in this case, familial history, and transmitted to others. Because narrative memory, as expressed in storytelling, involves both processing of what one knows or has observed and imagination to create one's own order and understanding from this knowledge as well as what is missing, it is usable in redefining and affirming ethnic identity and values.

Moreover, Leila's story offers a counter-narrative to the American discourses of equality and progress that deny the existence and experiences of the Chinese in America and of Chinese Americans. As Holland states, "In the face of such daunting state power

and in the presence of an overwhelming national imaginary, creative writers are discovering ways to circumvent the boundary of absolutes – to bring the subject of death and our national imaginings to the forefront" (40). Ng is one of these writers; she, through Leila, refuses the proclaimed boundaries between living and dead, center and margin, American and Asian in which the imagined community of America, unified by race, language and culture, rests and finds comfort. Leila's narrative claims a voice and the status of the living for those relegated to the silence and erasure of living death.

Ona's suicide and its aftermath poignantly illustrate how life informs death and how, via Leila's remembering and storytelling, death informs life. By choosing death, Ona brings this taboo subject, with all its mystery, terror, and threat, to the forefront; and by confronting with language Ona's death along with its metaphorical corollaries, Leila resists outsider status and struggles to bring herself and her community back from the deadening abstraction of living death. Her retrospective work of mourning, through storytelling, makes permeable the boundary between living and death and between immigrant/ethnic and American by speaking across and rejecting absolute divisions. Through this process, she is able to reinvent Chinese-American, rather than immigrant, identities that honor and integrate the spirit of her parents and ancestors into the service of the present and future.

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It wasn't just death that upset Mah; it was life too.

Loss is not simply a part of life, but rather a way of life, for the Leongs. The accumulation of losses and hardship becomes damaging to the family as a whole and as individuals. Sources of optimism and hopefulness wither away, and the need to mourn becomes increasingly urgent. Dulcie Leong, whom we get to know as Mah through her

daughter's narration, first encounters the consciousness-shaping experience of loss and disillusionment when abandoned by Lyman Fu, her first husband and Leila's father, shortly after immigrating to the U.S. with him. She married Lyman because he promised to take her away from the war-torn village where she lived; he promised her a better life. Though keeping his first promise, he falls short on the second. Lyman, quickly realizing that the promise of an easy life in America is as undependable as his promises to Mah had been, takes off once again to chase the deferred dream of Gold Mountain to Australia, this time traveling alone.[4] He leaves a pregnant Mah behind in an unfamiliar world to find her own means of survival. Ultimately Mah is stripped of financial support, propriety, and the only person to whom she is connected in this strange land.

Her sense of self and plans for the future perish. With no skills, experience, or English, she is forced to remake herself into a worker in order to support herself and Leila. Taught to sew by her landlord Tommie Hom, Mah begins her long, laborious career in his sweatshop alongside other Chinese immigrant women, restricted by race, gender and language from more lucrative and less physically punishing employment. Sewing consumes Mah's life:

> Mah sat down at her Singer with the dinner rice still in her mouth. When we pulled down the Murphy bed, she was still in there, sewing. The hot lamp made all the stitches blur together; the street noises stopped long before she did. And in the morning, long before any of us awoke, she was already there, at work. (Ng 34)

[4] The belief in America as Gold Mountain was rooted in the prosperity to be found in the mid-nineteenth century Gold Rush and the building of the railroads, opportunities that offered Chinese immigrants easily available, albeit laborious and dangerous, work. However, by the mid-twentieth century, when the Fus and Leon immigrate, most Chinese in America are already working in laundries or restaurant service and relegated to Chinatown ghettos.

Work expands from the sweatshop into her home and fills all of her time. Stitches, rather than the rising and setting of the sun, regulate the passing of the day for Mah; and the division between domestic and work space is erased. Frederick Luis Aldama calls this collapse of boundaries an "implosion of space" whereby the private place is increasingly intruded upon by public space (86). Mah does not have the ability to preserve the private space of the home as such; she is not entitled to the distinction between private and public that middle class America takes for granted. In addition to her time and space, her body and beauty are also sacrificed to work. Leila describes how she "watched the years of working in the sweatshops change [Mah's] body. Her neck softened. Her shoulders grew heavy" (163). These changes mark the physical loss of her prior self.

After being abandoned by Lyman, Mah must also attempt to remake herself as a legitimate female subject. Juliana Chang insightfully argues that, "Mah's status as a husbandless fallen woman makes her an improper national subject, and she must restore her propriety through remarriage" (122). Mah must remarry because the national discourse of gender and domesticity requires an adult woman, particularly a mother, to be located within an officially recognizable family structure. Additional pressure is placed on her within Chinatown where the community continues to be haunted by an early history of Chinese women in America visible only as prostitutes.[5] Mah's concern for propriety resulting from the loss of her husband acknowledges this gendered social history of the Chinese in America.

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[5] To prevent permanent settlement, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 specifically barred immigrant Chinese laborers from bringing their wives to the U.S., and the 1924 Immigration Act prohibited entrance of all Asian women. The result was the bachelor society of early Chinese immigrants. The relatively small percentage of women present in nineteenth and early twentieth Chinese America were either petty bourgeois wives, largely secluded in their homes, or prostitutes, often tricked, lured or bought into prostitution and smuggled into America. For a fuller discussion of the history of Chinese prostitution in America see Lucie Cheng Hirata's article "Free, Indentured, Enslaved."

Required to remarry, Mah chooses Leon as her second husband partly for his green card, which itself, due to exclusionary immigration acts, also came at the price of his original identity. Unwelcome in an atmosphere of anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S., Leon could not enter as himself in 1942, so had to reinvent himself as a legal citizen, this his first in a long string of inventions in America. Leon bought an identity and family history to enter the U.S. as Grandpa Leong's son – "a paper son." Many Chinese immigrants in the twentieth century circumvented exclusion acts by buying papers – what Leila compares to "a black market passport" – that presented them as the sons of old-timers, who were (or were able to convince the U.S. government that they were) citizens and, therefore, their children born abroad were also citizens.[6] Leon was a tender fifteen-year old when he bought and memorized a new identity and history as Lai-on Leong in order to come to America. However, this gain is also a profound loss; the act of becoming a paper son is a symbolic suicide of one's prior self in order to take on the histories dictated by the U.S.'s restrictive immigration laws (Goellnicht 303). Leon's original name and past before arriving in America must be cast off. The person he was before immigration is lost without a legible trace. His only remnants are perhaps to be found in Leon's suitcase full of papers too varied and out of context to decipher. It is a death never mourned but indelibly marked in Leon's mind. "One hundred and nine times" Leila has heard him tell the tale of becoming a Leong, but not once does she report hearing stories of Leon's life before his journey to America.

[6] In the Great Fire of 1906 in San Francisco, municipal files, including birth certificates and citizenship records, were destroyed, and, many immigrants were able to establish US citizenship by claiming they were born in San Francisco rather than China. This resulted in a new rise in Chinese immigration, which would have included Ng's Leon.

Leon must invent Leon Leong from the scraps of his identity that he is permitted to hold on to as well as his acquired Leong history and his dream of America. Fortunately Leon is in the habit of fixing up and finding new uses for that which others consider junk; he finds value where others don't, including in himself (Chin 370). Though the death of his former self is never mourned, Leon's invention of himself as a paper son testifies to a belief in his inherent value as a person despite America's rejection of him and other Chinese immigrants. And yet, like many of his other inventions, fashioned from the discarded and broken remnants of clocks, tin, lamps, etc, this task of self-invention will never be complete. Leon is never secure in his place in the U.S.. When others, including You Thin, with whom he traveled from China, agree to a government deal to confess to illegal entry in exchange for naturalization papers, Leon, perpetually suspicious of the government, angles to confuse the authorities with aliases and false birthdates. He refuses the offer only to find himself "caught in his own lie" when he first attempts to collect social security. As Leila reports, "the laws that excluded him now held him captive" (57). The exclusionary acts and racist U.S. policies that had compelled Leon to relinquish his former identity and adopt a distrustful attitude toward the government have now been repressed in national memory, and, Leon is, once more, like at Angel Island, suspect and challenged to prove that he belongs in the U.S.. Leon's predicament and response illustrate David Eng's crucial observation in *Racial Castration* (2001) that: "As the state legally transforms the Asian alien into the Asian American citizen, it institutionalizes the disavowal of its history of racialized exploitation and exclusion through the promise of freedom, abstract equality, and inclusion in the nation-state" (32). The de jure granting of citizenship and the promises it holds for the Asian American, however, do not materially

alter the "contradictions of institutionalized racism that claim his inclusion even as he is systemically excluded" (Eng, *RC* 22). In *Bone,* Leon is painfully reminded at the social security office that his identity as an American is always vulnerable to being rendered illegitimate despite his time, labor, and family in the country.

In addition to the profound loss of his prior self upon immigration, Leon loses opportunity after opportunity, gamble after gamble, and business endeavor after business endeavor in America. The most financially devastating loss is undoubtedly that of his and Mah's life savings, which they had invested with high hopes in the Leong and Ong Laundry only to be swindled by his partner, Luciano Ong. The most persistent of his losses is that of his time and sweat as his life, like Mah's, is drained by labor: "Leon worked hard, too. Out at sea, on the ships, Leon worked every room: Engine, Deck and Navigation. He ran the L.L. Grocery while holding down a night job as a welder at the Bethlehem Steel yard. He talked about a Chinese takeout, a noodle factory, many ideas. …" (34). Though Mah seems resigned, finally, to mere survival, working to live, Leon works also to continue to dream, even when his dreams repeatedly come to naught. He works shift after shift, voyage after voyage, doing jobs others would not deign to accept because he refuses to lose his belief in a better future and the possibility of creating that future for his children. Yet the family is unable to achieve financial security let alone success, and his business failures, compounded by the sweat of his labor and the time sacrificed away from home, ultimately result in the withering away of Leon's dream, the American dream of equal opportunity and the "up-by-your-bootstraps" mobility that had motivated and become part of his immigrant subjectivity. Consequently, Leon resists

acknowledging the demise of this ideal of America, battered by years of strenuous labor, failed businesses, and discrimination.

His difficulty at the social security office is not the first indication of continued exclusion, or rather uneasy inclusion as a subordinate and segregated minority, in the U.S. Leila, while looking for proof of Leon's citizenship to present at the social security office, goes through Leon's suitcase and finds an archive of disappointment and rejection.

> The letters were stacked by year and rubber banded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: "We don't want you."
>
> A rejection from the army: *un*fit.
>
> A job rejection: *un*skilled.
>
> An apartment: *un*available. (57) (emphasis mine)

Leon is negated –*un*made – as if he doesn't exist. The suitcase, full of letters contradicting the heroic stories Leon has told his daughters, testifies to the continued attacks on Leon's selfhood despite his official identity as a citizen. Indeed, in the mainstream cultural imaginary, Leon, as American, doesn't exist; Americans don't look like Leon or speak like Leon. His existence must be repressed ideologically to preserve the ideal of America in the national imaginary, but, simultaneously, his material existence is required to provide the capitalist market with cheap, physical labor. He is allowed only a shadowy presence in the U.S. and occupies a place of liminality – between absence and presence, life and (social) death.

Leon's vulnerable American identity and liminal racial status result in an insubstantiality that extends into his family life, where he is also an absent presence. At sea or at the San Fran, the rooming house he had lived in as a bachelor, he is often

missing from the family. The narrative begins with Leila looking for Leon; this task is a familiar one for her. "Leon lost. Leon found" is a regular pattern for the Leongs (62). When the girls are young, Leon does not choose to be away; he must ship out more often and for longer stretches than he'd like in order to make ends meet. His continual absences, though *for* his family, have consequences *on* his family. Mah is lonely and depressed while Leon is away. Her intensified discontent during Leon's absences, which effectively reduce her once more to husbandless mother for extended periods of time, leads her to an affair with her boss Tommie Hom, which in turn, renews feelings of shame and impropriety.

The necessary jobs taking Leon away from his family lead, ultimately, to voluntary departures from his family that begin when he hears of Mah's affair and moves back to the San Fran. This becomes his on-again, off-again home away from home, to which he returns continually, including after Ona's death. This repeated behavior on Leon's part, though conscious attempts at escape from the troubling reality of his life, can also be understood as what trauma theorist Dominic La Capra calls "acting-out," in which "the past is performatively regenerated" without recognition of its difference from the present (716). After Mah's affair, and then again, after Ona's death, Leon returns to his traumatic beginnings of a lonely, restricted bachelorhood in America.

The most significant effect of Leon's absences in terms of his family is on his daughter Ona, who would cry when he left and count the days until his return. His repeated departures constitute traumatic lapses in paternal presence for Ona. As a child, she attempts to find ways to master this disturbing experience, like the young boy Freud describes in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" who devised the *fort-da* game to deal with

his mother's disappearances.[7] When Leon is away at sea, Ona plays a counting game to maintain a sense of control over his absences and returns: "She counted off the days till Leon was coming home, and then she stood at the mouth of the alley, counting the cabs that went by. Every night that Leon was gone, she'd count out ninety-nine kisses to keep him safe, to bring him back" (Ng 88). When Leon is gone of his own accord, Ona takes a more aggressive role in recovering her almost lost parent. During his tenure at the San Fran after Mah's affair, a ten-year-old Ona dedicates herself daily to bringing Leon back to the family apartment on Salmon Alley. She walked with him from the San Fran to the union hall, waited with him as the jobs filled, and spent afternoons with him walking on Market Street or at the movie theaters until he returned home. Ona was unwilling to lose Leon as Leila had lost her father, whose only trace in his daughter's life is a collection of stamps from letters sent when she was quite young.

In addition to the partial loss of Leon, Ona and her sisters also struggle with the loss of ancestral culture. Though they desire, to a degree, escape from Chinese culture, they also suffer from a growing distance from this culture that, regardless of their assimilation, determines how they are viewed by others. The diminishing of Chinese culture in the family life is evident in many instances. The girls speak English more fluently than Chinese. Religion becomes diluted: Jesus Christ and Confucius join the ranks of Chinese Gods celebrated on New Year's Eve. Nina dates white men and has an abortion. Leila moves in with Mason Louie, her boyfriend, outside of Chinatown and then marries him without a traditional wedding feast. The most significant examples of

[7] Freud's story describes a child's game of throwing small objects and proclaiming *fort* (gone), only to later retrieve them with a joyful *da* (there). Freud analyzed this game of disappearance and return to be the boy's attempt to master his unpleasant feelings about his mother's disappearances and to assure himself of her return.

the inability to preserve Chinese culture in America are not to be found in the actions of the daughters, however, but in the father. Leon's family is founded not on blood relations but on paper, and the obligation he owes to his paper father, Grandpa Leong, goes unmet: Leon never sends Grandpa Leong's bones back to China. The practice of repatriating bones represents the desire to return to one's homeland as a final resting place. Disregarding the traditional respect for ancestors and homeland, Leon fails to carry out his promise and filial responsibility and suffers such guilt for this neglect that he believes Ona's death to be his punishment.

Juliana Chang suggests that Leon's non-fulfillment of his promise to Grandpa Leong is a "mimicking of the broken promise of America itself" (120); however, I find Vivian Fumiko Chin's argument that "Leon's neglect can be redeemed if his 'forgetting' about Grandpa Leong's bones is read as an act of resistance against the idea that the United States cannot be the true home of Chinese immigrants" (369) more satisfying. I agree with Chin that Leon's oversight can effectively be read as an attempt to displace the origins of China to San Francisco and assert a sense of belonging in America – to claim America as home and to protect his stake in his constructed identity. Robert Pogue Harrison's argument in *Dominion of the Dead* that humans bury their dead "above all to humanize the ground upon which they build their worlds and found their histories" (xi) also supports this reading. Grandpa Leong's bones consecrate the American soil in which they lie as the foundation for Leon's belonging in America and the start of a new life and history here. Regardless of the individual motivation behind Leon's failure to repatriate Grandpa Leong's bones, this nonobservance plainly demonstrates a lapse of recognition

for the immigrant spirit of the old-timers that Ng aims to remedy with her novel.[8] This spirit returns to haunt not only Leon but the entire family in the form of bones – forgotten bones, weary bones, savored bones, and shattered bones.

***

Too much happened on Salmon Alley. We don't talk about it.

Before Ona's death, the Leongs had been reluctant or unable to confront the insidious trauma of living death from which they suffer. To protect themselves from the vulnerable position they maintain as a marginalized ethnic group within the U.S. and from the judgmental gossip mill of Chinatown as well as from their own recognition of psychic wounds endured, silence, secrecy, and lies are the family rules. "We don't talk about it," which Leila tells us after Ona's death, could be their credo (3). Theirs is a strategy of denial and suppression. Leon's identity before becoming a Leong remains unknown, to the government and his family. Leon makes up stories for the girls, when young, to explain his rejections rather than reveal the truth about the discrimination and insults he faces on a regular basis outside of Chinatown. When Leon returns home after confronting Luciano Ong about bankrupting their laundry, they "didn't talk about Leon's bruised and swollen face or his limp" (171). Mah and Leon whisper in bed about their tenuous financial situation after Leon has displayed, dollar by dollar, the money he earned from a job at sea for the girls to count and exclaim "We're rich!" (181). The pretense of success is used in an effort to keep the secret of their financial instability from the girls who cannot help but be aware that there is never enough money.

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[8] In an interview with Jennifer Brostrom, Ng stated: "I wanted to remember the old-timers buried here against their wishes. As I wrote *Bone*, I was conscious of their regret so I wanted to create in the language of the book an English that could serve as the fertile and final resting place for my memories of the old-timers" (Ng, Interview 88).

The Leong-Fu sisters learn well the code of silence and deception from their parents: “We graduated from keeping their secrets to keeping our own” (112). As children when Leila finds Ona crying in the bathroom, she does not ask Ona why she is crying or try to comfort her; instead she displaces concern onto how Mah will react to Ona’s dirty dress. Leila is not only uninterested in learning about Ona’s troubles but also initiates a collusion to keep secrets from Mah. Similarly, aware of the conflict Ona is having with her parents over her boyfriend and of her drug use, Leila chooses not to speak to her sister; she claims to be “trying to break away from always being the “Big Sister” and “couldn’t blame her for doing all that stuff and keeping quiet. Those days, Mah and Leon were giving her a hard time for going out with Osvaldo” (15), the son of Luciano Ong who had betrayed Leon in their business partnership. Indeed, Leila and Nina had advised Ona to keep her continued relationship a secret – just as Leila had advised Nina not to tell her parents about her white boyfriend in New York and, most significantly, her abortion. Leila, too elopes with Mason, and must work up the courage to tell Mah.

While Juliana Chang posits that the family silence is a result of having too much to say, the silence being a “symptom of excess” (117), I propose that this excess is ultimately released in misdirected anger. Leon and Mah are plagued by a discontent that, unspoken, bubbles over in explosive, physically violent ire directed most often at one another. Leon was to provide Mah with respectability, financial support, and a domestic partner; Mah was to provide Leon with the pleasures and respectability of domestic life and family. However, due to external pressures that impinge upon their personal lives, neither is able to meet the expectations of the other. The one who, for the other, was to

restore the possibility of success and happiness in this new world becomes the most frequent scapegoat for the other's unexamined emotions when these possibilities go unfulfilled.

> How many times have Nina, Ona and I held them apart? The flat *ting!* sound as the blade slapped onto the linoleum floor, the wooden handle of the knife slamming into the corner. Which one of us screamed, repeating all their ugliest words? Who shook them? Who made them stop?
>
> It was obvious. The stories themselves meant little. It was how hot and furious they could become. Is there no end to it? What makes their ugliness so alive, so thick and impossible to let go of? (35)

Anger creates a palpable "ugliness" in their lives. It eats away at their hopefulness and ability to "get long." It puts pressure on familial bonds and recreates within the home the environment of fear and threat of the outside world. The girls are not only witnesses to this rage but are also dragged into it, forced to negotiate between their parents or between their parents and outsiders who are not Chinese, as they do between the cultures of America and China(town), and find themselves repeating it in their very attempts to stop the fighting.[9]

And though Mah's life is largely confined to the apartment on Salmon Alley and the sweatshops, later replaced by the Baby Store, Leon has more interactions outside of the home and outside of Chinatown, which allows him also to act upon his anger more freely outside of these limited spaces. For example, his anger explodes "like a string of firecrackers popping" (55) in his tirade against the young worker at the Social Security

[9] Leila works as a liaison between immigrant Chinese parents and the faculty and administration at the Edith Eaton School in Chinatown; Nina is a tour guide for Americans in China. Both have taken jobs that involve bridging the divide between American and Chinese cultures.

office and in his foolhardy rush to confront Luciano Ong about the laundry. Though Leon speaks openly of the negative aspects of life, his manner of doing so is problematic. His irate, ranting reiterations of gripes, ultimately, fix him more firmly as a melancholic subject. He does not work through his grief but rather claims grievance, which Anne Anlin Cheng notes is easier to deal with and more acceptable than grief because "we [as a nation] hardly know how to confront the psychical imprints of grief except through either neglect or sentimentalization" (6). The tendency toward grievance instead of grief distracts from "the more immaterial, unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making of the so-called minority subject and that sustains the notion of 'one nation'" (Cheng 6). Leon's ranting, then, deters a painful confrontation with losses and exclusions that would lead to mourning and poses no threat to the status quo of living death.

Nonetheless, grievance can be a positive force in the public realm and provides an outlet for Leon's overwhelming emotions. He expresses his discontent outward rather than internalizing it and in doing so asserts his injuries to be wounds, his living death a murder. Yet when directed either at the wrong audience or in an irrational manner, as is the case with Leon, the voicing of grievance is ineffective. Considered a crazy old man and a clown, or sounding his cries within the walls of their Salmon Alley apartment, he remains unheard and voiceless in the larger society that has inflicted his wounds.

In many ways, Ona is the second-generation extension of Leon. Their bond is concretized in their names. Mah names Ona, Leon's first child, from his Chinese name, Lai-on. Ona becomes Leon's hope for the future, but she has also psychologically

internalized his grief and insubstantiality as a national subject. Leila describes her sister as:

> too close to Leon. When she was little she'd be weepy for days after Leon left on a voyage, and she'd wait for him, shadowy and pensive, counting off the days till he came home. Every time he lost a job, she went into a depression with him. When he got high on some scheme, she was drunk on it, too. Mah said she was like Leon that way: Ona had no skin. (172)

Their very spirits seem to be linked. Both are shadowy presences with a ghostly lack of skin. Even before Ona physically dies, she occupies a liminal position between life and death. Her "shadowy presence" is associated with her silence and Leon's grief, as well as with the dead, as is exemplified in the single successful photograph of an entire roll of film from the Ghost Festival featuring Ona "standing alone in front of a wooden gravemarker, holding a big orange in her hand" at Grandpa Leong's grave (86).

Unlike her parents and sisters who release their discontent in anger, even if only within the limits of family, Ona recedes more fully into silence than others in her family. Leila says, "All I know is Ona got used to keeping everything inside, to holding the seeds of herself secret from us, and we got used to her shadowy presence" (112). Leila describes her sister as ghost-like even in life – there but not there, an absent presence in the time before she jumped. The family code of silence and denial contributes to Ona's suicide by intensifying her position as living dead.[10] Ona is silenced both as marginalized, raced ethnic whose voice, particularly when sounding discontent, would

[10] Donald C. Goellnicht's comment about silence in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* can help us to better understand this dynamic also in relation to the Leong family in *Bone.* Goellnicht asserts, "the Chinese Canadian community plays into the hands of the dominant culture through self-imposed silence that amounts to an erasure of themselves, a denial of their history" (318).

threaten the dominant national discourses of unity and equality, and by her family, who have seemingly internalized this code of silence and do the work of the nation by self-silencing.

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Escape. What Leon searched for, what Ona needed.

Escape is more appealing in its apparent ease and potentially immediate relief than the slow, painful process of mourning. Each family member is attempting to escape – not merely Salmon Alley, but the conditions of living death that they associate with Chinatown. Leon ships out on voyage after voyage and seeks refuge in his past seclusion at the San Fran. Mah sleeps with Tommie to divert her mind from the monotonous concerns and toils of her days. Leila moves in with Mason in the Mission, and Nina runs off to be a flight attendant based in New York and then a tour guide in China. None can truly escape or forget, though each tries. The desire to escape their past and present marginalization in the U.S. is common to all but most dire for Ona. Ona is trapped in a silent, lonely, isolated world, and she escapes in the only way she can.

As Leila suggests, Ona always seemed to be more stuck than she herself or Nina. As a middle child, Ona is caught in the middle –between her two sisters, between her parents, between Leon and Osvaldo, and between the desire to break out of Chinatown and her inability to leave. Outside of Chinatown she unavoidably feels as if she does not belong, even with other Chinese Americans. Whereas her sisters can leave Chinatown, even if only to go as far as the Mission, and can forget about or turn away from the old-timers, Ona is closest to this generation, its traditions and beliefs. As Chinatown and the Chinese-American community begin to change and discard the old-timers as "time wasters" (7) and "Chinatown drift-abouts. Spitters. Sitters. Flea men in the Square" (13),

Ona is at an impasse. Unwilling to discount the old-timers and unable either to leave Chinatown or preserve it, she doesn't know how to move into the future. So she escapes through death.

Ona does not simply die; she chooses to die. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, there is resistance to reading suicide as courageous and generative;[11] however, by refusing to designate a cause for Ona's death and presenting it as a suicide, Ng attributes a sense of agency and power to the symbolic act.[12] In a 1994 interview, Ng states, "Suicide was another metaphor to speak about departure. My point was not why Ona […] committed suicide. The point was that there was a way to honor her decision. I wanted to look at the courage it takes not only to leave, but to remake another world" (Interview 88). Ona's course of action, in light of Ng's statement, can perhaps be read as bolder than the escape attempts of her parents' and sisters'. Hers is drastic enough to reject the unlivable status of living death to which marginalized groups are relegated and drastic enough to refuse to close herself off from the past.

According to Ng, *Bone* describes "the personal and spiritual cost of leaving one life in order to make another" (Interview 87). Reading Ona's suicide as such a journey can be supported with attention to the symbolic resonances of the details of the act. Ona chooses to die in order to live, to find a peaceful life, or to help her family do so. She

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[11] In his article "Sisters," Benjamin Perez reads Ona's suicide as triumphant. In an archetypal reading of the Leong-Fu sisters in relation to the Fates of ancient Greek mythology, he interprets Ona's suicide as a revolutionary departure from the imposed roles and power structure of patriarchy. However, this is the only criticism I encountered that attempts a positive analysis of the suicide.

[12] A correlative example, offered by Abdul JanMohammed in *The Death-Bound-Subject*, that may clarify how suicide on the part of the socially dead can be understood as more than simply destructive is the suicide of the rebellious slave. In choosing his actual-death, the socially dead (slaves but also, for JanMohammed in his study of Richard Wright's fiction, blacks under Jim Crow) is able, however fleetingly, to assert his subjectivity and negate the master's absolute control over him. JanMohammed writes of the suicidal slave, "his 'voluntary' death affirms his freedom of choice, whereas his involuntary death or his acceptance of his social death only confirms his bondage" (18).

jumps from a window on the M floor of the Nam Ping Yuen. *Ping yuen* means "something like 'peaceful gardens'" (14), and the M floor is the thirteenth floor. In America, thirteen is considered an ill-favored number; however, as Leila informs us, the number thirteen is good luck in their Chinese dialect because it "sounds like to live" (123). By jumping from this exact place, Ona is at the intersection of two cultural worlds and their contradiction, the place of impossibility which menaces her. Furthermore, she is at the interface between life and death, metaphorically looking for a peaceful life, something she has not had in the ethnic enclave of Chinatown (whose real world is inaccessible and willfully misunderstood by a mainstream America that sees only stereotypes and tourist attractions).

Ona's name, too, means peace in Chinese. In English, the root of her name can also be seen in the word "bone," a connection highlighted by the inversion of the "e" in the tumbling letters of the title on the book cover and reading almost like an "a" (Chuang 57, Goellnicht fn 21). Ona, as a character, symbolically embodies all that bone represents in the text. She also embodies hope for peace. She is, especially for Leon, the child who will redeem the hardships and sacrifices of the older generation. Consequently, the burden of reconciling the bones of the past with the perpetually deferred desire for a peaceful fate falls upon Ona.

Ona's journey, I argue, in its expectations and limitations, is most analogous to that of immigration undertaken by her parents and ancestors who also left one life "in order to make another." Chinese immigrants came to America to create a better future for themselves and their progeny, and they sacrificed for this goal. The Chinese in America contributed greatly to the building of America, perhaps most significantly through the

building of the transcontinental railroads and Chinatowns. The Chinese were attempting, though inevitably limited in success, to maintain unabated their cherished cultural values and habits on foreign soil, and, in the course, alter the cultural and racial landscape of this new land. Chinese immigrants, like all other large immigrant groups in our history, were changing America and challenging the defining concepts of what it meant to be American. Through her death, Ona similarly challenges commonly held concepts of American-ness through her embrace of death, that which the modern western world fears and denies, as preferable to living death.[13]

Ona's suicide is the ultimate realization of self-silencing; her act is literally self-destructive. However, symbolically, it is a powerful statement of agency. Ona makes visible, if not articulate, the necessity of a counter-narrative to national discourses that deny the reality of Chinese Americans' existence and traumatically overwhelming experiences of poverty, exclusion, and continual loss. Her suicide testifies to that which she in life could not – the unspoken loss and sorrow of marginalized, ethnic immigrants.

Yet the success of Ona's act, on the symbolic level, is dependent upon Leila's subsequent acts of cultural memory and narration that would provide healing for those who survive. Ona begins the work of confronting the painful past by illuminating its disturbing presence in the present that Leila must take up and carry into the future. Ona's sudden and shocking death moves Leila from the place of silence and erasure, and Leila's subsequent narrative is imperative in putting Ona's suicide to use in the recuperation of cultural memory that bears witness to the traumas of the past and in the reaffirmation, as

[13] Philippe Aries in *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974) claims that in the 20th Century the dichotomy of life and death was solidified with death marked as shameful and contaminating so that, particularly in the US, there is an "interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness" (94).

well as re-creation, of ethnic identity and community. This project, originated by the old-timers, is now taken on by the second generation. Like the transmission of grief and memory, the task of remaking a world for themselves is necessarily collaborative and continuous, though not necessarily orderly and predictable, as the passing of the baton from one generation to the next, and then one sister to the other, illustrates.

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Remembering the past gives power to the present.

Ona's demise does not immediately initiate mourning. On the contrary, the family, refusing to accept this loss, experiences a deep melancholia. They respond to her death as they responded to most previous losses. Leon rants at the world; Mah and Leon fight with one another and lash out at their daughters; Leila and Nina retreat internally and busy themselves with myriad distractions. Despite Leon's "noisy loneliness" and Mah's "endless lament" (24), Ona becomes another silence that persistently haunts their every thought, action, and emotion: "Everything went back to Ona" (50). The family doesn't talk about Ona or their own feelings; "Silence was safer" (146). Feelings of guilt and blame proliferate throughout the family.

The family simultaneously comes together and pulls apart in acts of traumatic repetition this loss engenders. Leila returns home to Salmon Alley after having moved to the Mission with Mason. Nina, too, flies home from New York and is dressed inappropriately in red, which is the color her mother dressed her in as a girl (while Ona's dresses were white). Mah, no longer working in the sweatshops, returns to her Singer in a doleful scene in which Leila hears the tinny, hollow sound of Mah running the machine without fabric. Leon rants to anyone and no one against bosses, co-workers and America, "this lie of a country!"(103), and leaves the family to return to the life of a lonely

bachelor at the San Fran, remnant of a vanishing Chinatown past, which simultaneously also returns Mah to his abandoned wife.

Ona's death is also in a sense a reenactment of parental trauma, not only in literalizing Leon's metaphoric suicide upon becoming a paper son but also perhaps Mah's specifically gendered trauma. Leon sacrifices his prior identity upon entering the U.S. because he is objectionable to the nation-state. Ona, too, feels that she has no secure place in the U.S. She sacrifices her body and her life, both "un-American" from the dominant perspective, in repetition of Leon's erasure of his former self. When Mah is abandoned by Lyman Fu and rendered an improper female national subject, her former identity also undergoes a figurative death, and she threatens to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge in physical realization. She does not jump but Ona does when she becomes a single woman without attachments to a man. Leon threatens to disown his beloved Ona if she continues her relationship with Osvaldo ("You will no longer be my daughter, I will no longer be your father" (173)), and though she does not yield to Leon's wishes, her relationship with Osvaldo ends soon after she leaves Salmon Alley with him.

Ona's fatal leap, by repeating in bodily form the abstract deaths of her parents, serves as an awakening to the traumas of life and living death endured by the Leongs and the other Chinese-American immigrants. "Since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (Caruth, *Trauma* 8). Leon's and Mah's traumas are implicated in Ona's but displaced in time, space, and materiality. They are forced by Ona's physical death to revisit their own spiritual deaths, which they had been unable to process when first experienced. Still, they

are initially as reluctant to mourn Ona's death as they had been to acknowledge these profound losses of self.

Leila is frightened by this failure to mourn: "We lived with the ghost, the guilt. But then it got too dark" (Ng 15). She fears that, getting stuck in her sorrow and blame, she will have no future; she fears she will lose Mason, who is already pressuring her to return to the Mission. So she follows Grandpa Leong's advice: "the best way to conquer fear is to act. *Open the mouth and tell*" (21). Grandpa Leong's advice, in Leila's case, corresponds to what psychologist Dori Laub calls the imperative to tell. He states that survival of trauma involves "the imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Laub 78). Leila must open her mouth and tell not only about Ona's death but also the other unwitnessed hardships of her parents' and community's lives to claim a life and future for herself and her family.

In order to know and tell the buried truth, Leila must dig through the archives of family and community history. She is a searcher physically (looking for Leon, for citizenship papers) and metaphorically. Her responsibility as part of the second-generation is to retrieve the spirit and history of old-timers while simultaneously continuing their mission of remaking another world for the future. Memory, her mode of searching, structures the novel. The performance of memory engenders the backward chronology of the novel, which has attracted much note among reviewers and critics. The book does not move in a straight trajectory backward in time. It includes multiple flashbacks within chapters and one entire chapter (Chapter 13) that predates the chapter

that follows it. As in memory, time is fluid, with the remote past weaving in and out of the recent past. Lisa Lowe and Juliana Change have both discussed the structure of the novel as layered, sedimented, and/or palimpsestic. Both critics position Leila as one digging through, or peeling up, the layers to uncover what lies beneath. Building on the ideas of these critics, I would like to emphasize that what is being mined is memory – Leila's and her community's.

Ng employs a concept of time integral not only to memory but more specifically mourning. The temporal structure of the book is best described by Leon: "sorrow moves though the heart the way a ship moves through the ocean. Ships are massive, but the ocean has simple superiority…. One mile forward and eight miles back. Forward and forward and then back, back" (145). The language of this quotation recalls narrator Nick Carraway's closing words in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther… So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (187). Fitzgerald's novel about the American Dream has become a touchstone for ethnic American writers like Ng. *Gatsby*'s engagement with the elusive American dream, migration, self-invention, and disillusionment resonate throughout *Bone*, allowing Ng to inscribe her novel within the traditional canon while simultaneously insisting on specificity of Chinese-American experience.

More germane to my concerns here, both *Gatsby* and *Bone* attest also to the imperatives of the past and of mourning. Ng's allusion to the final lines *Gatsby* suggests recognition that the experience of hope and frustrated yearning is not a specifically ethnic

need to reclaim cultural heritages but is essential to American culture as whole. Interestingly, Ng is more optimistic than Fitzgerald. Ng's metaphor suggests the past exerts a powerful force over us but movement forward does indeed occur, little by little, while in *Gatsby* the past persistently holds us back, our dreams of the future always out of reach. Fitzgerald's novel ends on the same note of futile human desire that had characterized Jay Gatsby's life and story. Ng holds out more hope for Leila, who learns the importance of creating something new and usable from loss and the unfulfilled promises of America. Perhaps a reevaluation of the value of the past in the present, related to the current reassessments of melancholia as creative and generative, account for Ng's perspective. Her recasting of Fitzgerald's sentiment registers the beneficial potential of integrating, rather than banishing, memories of lost objects of the past (even painful ones – lost loved ones, unfulfilled dreams, betrayed promises) in service of building a new future. The movement of *Bone* is the movement of Leila's slow journey forward – a journey of mourning, sorrow moving through the heart, and of remaking the world for herself through this mourning. The very structure of the book attests to the necessity of moving back into the past in order to move into the future. With each chapter, Leila jumps back in time and then moves ahead from her starting point only to regress further with the following chapter. Every onward stride requires several reverse steps, but, rather than being "borne back ceaselessly into the past," advancement in time is achieved.

Leila will be able to claim a future for herself but must first claim her cultural history, or she will continue to be haunted by ghosts of past who refuse to be forgotten. The healing of cultural mourning requires more than bearing witness to the traumas of the

past. The construction and telling of a narrative is also required. Leila needs to order and make sense of the memories for herself, without relying on existing versions of American or Chinese-American history. In revisiting her familial and cultural memory, Leila reevaluates findings to yield her own truth about their lives and Ona's death. Narrating the story of her family and community as she uncovers it, Leila integrates intangible traumas into her subjectivity and transforms ghosts of the past into timeless spirits. Moreover, she develops a counter-narrative to American discourses of unity, equality, and progress that relegate racialized ethnic Americans to living death and thereby deny the subjectivity of Chinese immigrants. She accomplishes this largely by reading, from a retrospective vantage point, the traces of the past that remain. The most significant remnants for Leila seem to be Leon's suitcase of papers and the various forms of bones present in the novel.

When Leila searches through Leon's suitcase to find the required papers for the social security office and instead finds, among apparently random newspaper clippings and photographs, a store of rejection letters, she cannot fathom why Leon would save this collection of lost hopes. She asks, "What use was knowing the jobs he didn't get, the opportunities he lost?" (58). At the time, uncovering this unacknowledged history is frustrating and even angering for Leila, who thinks within the prevailing understanding of history as a record of progress. However, in her retelling of the episode, a new perspective is enabled by the safe distance she occupies from the initial experiences of these losses and from the extreme loss of Ona. She no longer believes that history is only the history of progress, and she is able better to appreciate the importance of honoring the past: "I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son and I've inherited this whole suitcase of lies.

All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all" (61). Rather than discount and discard the letters as she'd first wanted, Leila comes to value them. She recognizes the way these letters serve to affirm Leon's existence. [14]

She reverses the trajectory of negation documented in the suitcase and beholds, instead, how Leon has been *made* in America via these rejections. Like the briefcase carried by Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Leon's suitcase contains a material history of racial exclusion and degradation in America that is largely responsible for the man he has become. Leon's identity has been shaped not by the process of assimilation into the national mainstream but by exclusion, and so this exclusion cannot be cast off and forgotten without also repudiating Leon. In addition, Leila, in bearing witness to the continual rejections endured by Leon, also attests to the strength and tenacity of his spirit, his refusal to give up. This legacy, as well as the legacy of exclusion, can now be owned by Leila. The lies she claims are not only Leon's lies about his identity but also the lies of America documented in his suitcase – the lies of acceptance, equality, and progress. This, too, is a truth that Leila, as an American, perceives and voices.

Bones, possessing several layers of signification in the novel, are perhaps the most important form of remains through which Leila must sift. The bone of the title most obviously refers to Grandpa Leong's bones and metonymically to the old-timers and their forgotten spirit. The fact that the old-timers, as a whole, have been largely forsaken is

[14] Leila stands at a distance from Leon's painful past of extreme exclusion in various ways: in relation to time; not having experienced it herself, in relation to perspective; having moved to the Mission with Mason, in relation to place; as Leon's step-daughter, in terms of blood; and, as Aldama points out, as a college educated professional, in relation to class. Though the Leongs have not achieved full integration into American-ness by the second-generation, there is a sufficient degree of progress measurable in terms of class movement to allow the girls to be educated and pursue professional careers.

evinced in the abandonment of their bones in American cemeteries. Leon is not the only son who has reneged on his promise to repatriate bones of the elders; so many bones had been forgotten that, out of necessity for burial grounds, the remaining bones have been disinterred and reburied in group graves. However, as the man at the Hoy Sun Ning Benevolent Association tells Leila, "Sometimes it takes a generation, like you, but eventually somebody comes. Tomorrow, or another generation's tomorrow, it's all the same" (77).

Ona's death instigates a return to these bones and to the old-timers by inflaming Leon's guilt over his broken promise to Grandpa Leong. This guilt leads him and Leila to the group plot at the cemetery, where Leila learns the applicable art of reinvention from Leon, who "finds the right gesture" to respect his paper father and the others of his generation whose bones lie with his. Leila understands that Leon leaves a pack of Lucky Strikes to call back breath in place of the traditional oranges and candy to call back sweetness. This is his personal ritual to bring his dearly departed – Grandpa Leong but also, entwined with him, Ona – back into his world. Leila realizes that she too needs a ritual. The telling of her family's story, the novel itself, becomes her right gesture (Chin 373).

Bone appears repeatedly in the narrative in association with the many losses and sacrifices of the immigrants. The very first reference to bone in the book is in the way Leila envisions her elopement as a "bone for the gossipmongers" (3). The incessant gossip-mill of Chinatown has repeatedly chewed upon the fodder provided by the Leong-Fus, starting with Mah's abandonment by Lyman. Gossip ensues over their being a family of girls, Mah's affair, Leon's returns to Salmon Alley, their numerous business

failures, and Ona's suicide. The Leongs generally perceive the gossipy sewing women and old men as figures to guard themselves against. However, despite the negative aspects of gossip, it also testifies to the existence of an intimate community and functions as the cohesive material of that community, linking people together. For it is gossip that often keeps the family informed about Leon's whereabouts when he is not living on Salmon Alley, and the sewing women are the only ones who are able to comfort Mah after Ona's death (Sze 62-4). Leila, recounting this scene wherein the sewing ladies "draw out Mah's sadness and then take it away" (105), acknowledges the less obvious positive aspects of the gossipy community.

Bones are also associated with the life of toil and exploitation lived by Mah and Leon. In Mah's work as a seamstress she refers to the connecting seams of her garments as "the big bones," which, Leila tells us, she knows as well as a doctor knows those of the human body. These are the "bones" that hold the pattern together as Mah's and Leon's labor give shape to and secures the life of their family.[15] Much of the story Leila tells involves revisiting this history of exploited and exhausting immigrant labor in the U.S. By telling this story, Leila gives voice to the disturbing presence of those whose lives disprove the discourses of democratic openness and cultural pluralism upon which The American Dream, pursued by so many immigrants, is built and which serves to cover and silence the truth of racially structured labor exploitation (Chang 113). Leila, through narrating her parents' (and community's) lives in America, reveals the oppressive nature of these national discourses when reality contradicts them for racialized immigrants. And, like her reevaluation of the contents of Leon's suitcase, Leila's attention to the work-

[15] For a more detailed analysis of bones as connective mediums of family and community see Jay Chuang's "Bone in *Bone*."

weary histories of Mah and Leon reverses their negation in the national imaginary by illuminating their unrelenting determination and unending hard work.

Another layer of communal history addressed via the motif of bones is illustrated in Leila's striking memory of eating pigeon while watching *I Love Lucy* episodes with her sisters: Mah, according to a strict economy of "No waste," sucks the meat off their discarded bones, claiming, "Bones are sweeter than you know" (31). This memory attests to the quality of life available to most immigrant families, including the Leongs, in Ng's Chinatown. Leila continues to witness it among the families she must visit for work: "Cluttered Rooms. Bare lives" (17). Despite the long hours of work, rewards are minimal, and poverty persists. The Leongs, and others, live lives of necessity and make do with what they have. Pigeon, at forty cents a piece, is a treat, but even at that price, Mah must content herself with the bones.[16] Yet, though depicting their poverty, this is a happy memory for Leila. For this memory also speaks to the family's ability to "get long." Mah, like Leon, demonstrates the ability to find value and sustenance in that which others would deem trash. This ability is a survival skill, valuable and admirable, particularly when coupled with the dogged hope, despite hardship, that the Leongs also possess in the early years. Unfortunately, as the conditions of life for the Leong girls surpass that of their parents, their ability to maintain a spirit of hope and determination to "get long" diminishes. The less they are forced to make do, the less able they are to appreciate how and how much their parents had sacrificed. The recovery of memory and spirit associated with this memory of bones is part of Leila's narrative project.

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[16] In *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), Sau-Ling Wong discusses this scene in Ng's earlier short story version "The Red Sweater" as being about necessity and "quasi-cannibalistic sacrifice" (31). In other words, voluntary parental sacrifice meant to make choice, as opposed to necessity, possible for their daughters, instead generates guilt and the imperative of filial sacrifice in turn. The result is, according to Wong, an "endless cycle of pain" (31-35)

Finally, Ona's bones, so shattered from her jump that her body is unrecognizable, are the bones that call forth the presence of these other bones, previously suppressed in the family's memory. But Ona herself must be reburied so no longer a ghost who torments her loved ones with sorrow and regret. Her memory must be exorcised so that her continuing presence in their lives can be embraced. Brogan's use of the model of secondary burial, borrowed from anthropology, is useful to conceptualize what Leila achieves. According to Brogan's explanation, secondary burial occurs when the dead, after a period of extended mourning, are exhumed to be reburied properly. During the period between the first and secondary burial, the deceased occupies a position between life and death from which she interferes with the living and so must be put to rest by a ritual that "transforms the dead from the menacing ghosts to (at least potentially) beneficent ancestral spirits and renders them accessible rather than inaccessible." These spirits are integrated into the present rather than banished (Brogan 22).

Bone follows this model of secondary burial almost perfectly. The path of mourning Leila takes, her ritual of memory and narrative, reburies Ona, Grandpa Leong, the old-timers, and the traumas of the first generation, by incorporating them into her story. For it is our stories, Leila comes to believe, that tell us who we are and connect us to history (Ng 36). As Leila learns, "Our memories can't bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers" (89). Leila can keep her lost loved ones alive in spirit in her memories and her story.

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I knew what I held in my heart would guide me.

Through telling her story and imposing some sense of order (though not the order dictated by mainstream notions of progressive time or aesthetics) on the insidious trauma

of living death, Leila is able to "make whom and what [she mourns her] own" (Brogan 138). She reinvents Ona as a goddess in her personal cosmology. Ona is metamorphosed from a troubling ghost who shadows the lives of the Leongs into an ancestral spirit, a goddess who guides in with her practice of counting. Leila, too, becomes a counter, for counting does not simply mean tallying numbers. To count also means to take account of and to include. Leila, through her acts of memory and bearing witness, recounts her communal history, including all the pain often left out. Leila is the one who counts the living and the dead and records them in her living memory. With Ona as her goddess, Leila will not forget that all count and must be counted.

Moreover, memories of Ona propel Leila forward into the future, for "Ona had always been the forward-looking one" (Ng 88). Leila, and the others left behind by Ona, cannot fix themselves in their grief, in the past. They must take the past with them, within their hearts, as they move into the future, for "*The heart never travels.* … the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and the dead. And all our promises, like our hopes, move us through life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea" (193). Forward and forward and then back, back. Like the force of the ocean, the power of community and of familial history is strong and anchors Leila but it does not halt the motion of her journey through life. Instead, it will keep her from getting lost.

The form of Chinese-American identity must also move forward without getting lost. She cannot be Chinese like Mah and Leon but neither would she want to be like Mason's cousin Dale, who doesn't even comprehend the workings of family. All assimilation is not progress in *Bone* (Chin 367). Without losing touch with the aspects of

Chinatown that comfort her and give her strength, Leila needed to find a way to leave Chinatown and the old-timer ways that are no longer wholly applicable to her life. She does so by rediscovering the old-timers' and Ona's goal of remaking the world. She claims as her own their spirit of hope and survival and develops a personal sense of ethnic identity in the continuity she restores between past, present, and future, living and dead. Leila rejects these absolute divisions and in doing so also contests the binary between Chinese and American that calls the authenticity (as Chinese and as American) of second generation Chinese Americans like her and Ona into question. By bearing witness to and voicing the culpability of such rigid thinking about national and ethnic identities in Ona's suicide, Leila is able to forge a connection with her ethnic heritage and, in doing so, revise her ideas about who she is in relation to ethnicity and the demands of present-day America without destroying herself, as Ona had. There does not seem to be a sense that Leila has overcome the difficulties of being Asian in America but simply that she has begun the ongoing process of creating a viable way to be Chinese-American.

Bone challenges the fixed definitions of Chinese and American. Social and political constructions deny the legitimacy of the Leongs in America, yet as Ng's novel illustrates, the experiences of the Leongs are very much American; their lives would not have developed in quite this way anywhere else. And yet the color of their skin and their ancestral values and traditions have rendered their experiences in American particularly Chinese. Chinese and American, like life and death, are, in fact must be, fluid.

By end of the novel, Leila has come full circle; the book starts and ends with Leila leaving Salmon Alley. However, she has learned from mourning Ona and the

experiences of living death that “backdaire” is and need not ever be simply left behind. Nor must Ona: “Inside all of us, Ona’s heart still moves forward. Ona’s heart is still counting, true and truer to every tomorrow” (145). To be true to Ona’s heart, Leila herself must also count – the living and the dead, the hardship and the toil, the love and community, the exclusion and the silencing, the unyielding spirit of hope and possibility. And she must count aloud to sound the voice of the Chinese Americans within and part of America. Ng, through Leila, demands recognition of the status of the living for Chinese in America and Chinese Americans by unsparingly telling their lives, replete with beauty and sorrow.

Chapter Two
Picking Up the Mambo Line: Melancholy, Masculinity and New Beginnings in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*

Oscar Hijuelos is generally reputed to be among the leading Latino writers in the United States. The majority of his novels portray pre-Castro Cuban immigrants striving for the never fully realized American Dream of economic and social success.[17] His second novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), recounts the lives and relationships of two Cuban musicians, brothers Cesar and Nestor Castillo, who immigrate to America in 1949 in search of fame and fortune. The Castillos are the most successful of Hijuelos's Cuban immigrants in his early novels, but even their success is transitory.[18]

America beckons to the Castillos over radio waves with promises of success and fame but is not the hospitable landscape they've envisioned from Hollywood movies and well-known success stories. The brothers leave Cuba because the music scene in Havana is overcrowded and offers limited opportunities for native musicians. As literary scholar Gilbert Muller explains, Cuba, at this time, was under "artistic colonialism" of the U.S.; Cuban musicians were relegated to lesser clubs as big American jazz bands dominated the scene (103). So, lured by the celebrity enjoyed abroad by countrymen like Desi Arnaz, Jr. and Tito Puente, Cesar and Nestor make their way north to New York, where they move in with their cousin Pablo's family in a small two- bedroom apartment. They

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[17] Only two novels, *Mr. Ives's Christmas*, the story of a man of unknown background whose life and faith are shaken by the murder of his son, and *A Simple Habana Melody*, about the unrequited love of a Cuban composer for the songstress who made his song world famous, depart from Hijuelos's usual focus on Cuban Americans.

[18] The life of the Santinio family in *Our House in the Last World* devolves into little more than disappointment, poverty, illness and domestic abuse in America. In *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, Mariela Montez, who marries an Irish immigrant, leads a lonely life even among her fifteen children. *Empress of the Splendid Season*'s formerly aristocratic Lydia España, after nearly losing her overworked husband to a serious heart attack, spends the better part of her life as a cleaning lady for wealthy clients in New York City penthouses as her children move, physically and emotionally, farther and farther away from her.

occupy a neighborhood of mostly white immigrants and students between Harlem to the north and Columbia University to the south. Over the course of Cesar's life, many of his Irish and German neighbors and even his cousin Pablo will move out of the area, but Cesar, never fully assimilated into white America nor unequivocally barred, lives in this same apartment building, where he becomes superintendent, until he dies.

Often lauded for its powerful characterizations and recreation of New York City dance hall culture of the 1950s, *The Mambo Kings* brought Hijuelos widespread critical and popular acclaim culminating in national bestseller status and a Pulitzer prize, the first awarded to a Latino novelist.[19] Much scholarship on the novel focuses on the Cuban-American experience, Latino identity, and literary or cultural contexts for reading the novel. In this chapter, I contribute to these lines of inquiry by focusing on important aspects of the book that have received less sustained attention – melancholy and cross-generational transmission of memory and cultural heritage from father(s) to son.[20] For though the novel is centered on Cesar and Nestor, Nestor's son Eugenio is integral to *The Mambo Kings*. Nestor and Cesar's stories revive memories of a lost Cuba and disappearing Cuban America that, as a member of the second generation like Hijuelos himself, Eugenio has the responsibility of recovering if it is to be preserved at all.

Largely absent for the majority of the book, Eugenio frames the narrative with a first-person prologue and epilogue. In between, his voice seems to disappear as Cesar's and Nestor's stories are presented, perhaps deceptively, as the remembrances of Cesar

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[19] The popularity of the novel also led to a film adaptation by Warner Brothers in 1992 and an ill-fated musical stage adaptation that, despite high expectations, failed to open as planned on Broadway in the summer of 2005 after negative reviews for its "out-of-town-try-out" in San Francisco.

[20] Though Cesar is Eugenio's uncle, he becomes a second father to the boy; in my discussion, I will repeatedly refer to both Cesar and Nestor as fathers to Eugenio despite different biological relationships.

while awaiting his death in the Hotel Splendour in 1980. Yet these stories, presented from a third-person point of view – not Cesar's – are being told *for* Eugenio as second-generation heir and *through* Eugenio as mediator/medium. His voice has not disappeared; it has been submerged in a collective voice and memory. I argue that Hijuelos enables Eugenio's access to a past not his own through drawing upon the layered, culturally-specific history of the mambo as a structural device for the novel.

The mambo's origins are found in the Congo religion, which, among the large numbers of Africans from the Congo brought to Cuba as slaves, evolved into Afro-Cuban palo monte. According to Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, *mambo* referred to the liturgical songs at the end section of a ceremony of possession of a *santero*, or priest figure, by a powerful spirit;[21] it was a "*cantico*," or repetitive song or chant, of "strong magic" used to fortify the spell enabling the dead to speak to and through the living (317). Ortiz emphasizes the power of communication that mambo evokes by listing a series of meanings that include "matter," "words," "conversation," "speech," "discourse," and "messages" and allude to "the spoken dealings that one has with the invisible beings by means of the song" (306-7).[22] Ethnographic musicologist Ned Sublette gives a different version of the mambo's Congo origin, claiming that the mambos were the repetitive, rhythmic songs sung at the end of a ceremony at which a charm-making cloth was made. However, both agree that "basically, *mambo* means a complex of things

[21] It is important to recognize that possession here is not identical to Christian notions of demon possession in which an evil spirit inhabits a human body causing various physical and emotional maladies; possession in Afro-Cuban religions is ceremonial and sought as a means of communication with ancestors or divinities. It is temporary and does not usually endanger the medium.

[22] Translations mine.

involving communication" (Sublette 53) and that mambo involves potent magic embedded in music.

Only in the early twentieth century did the secular musical form of the mambo appear, popular for its blending of European musical elements with the African syncopation of the drum beat pattern. The mambo is a song with spontaneous polyrhythms that offer musicians and dancers freedom to create variations within certain boundaries of the composition/performance, allowing new melodies to be heard. Gustavo Perez-Firmat, premier scholar of Cuban-American culture, in his influential book *Life on the Hyphen,* explains that "just as the sacred mambo established contact between the visible and invisible, the profane mambo establishes a dialogue between the heard and unheard…The mambo is a musical séance" (84).

The mambo, with its origins in Afro-Cuban culture and religiosity and with its later incarnation as a Cuban-American musical form, provides Hijuelos with the means for Eugenio to initiate an ongoing and dynamic relationship with the past by rearranging the repetitive strains of familial loss and longing into the rhythms of a liberating literary mambo. *The Mambo Kings* can be understood as a literary séance, to play on Perez-Firmat's description of the mambo itself. Eugenio functions as both *santero*, through whom the dead (his uncle and perhaps father, too) can speak, and as a bandleader, a *mambero* like Cesar, who orchestrates the tales of his fathers to invoke the presence of the invisible world and give voice to unheard stories. Drawing upon music and its magic, Hijuelos returns the popular musical form to its sacred function of communication with the spiritual world, through which Eugenio breaks the cycle of deadening melancholy that destroyed his forerunners.

Repetitions of music, of memories, of experiences, and of an *I Love Lucy* episode on which the brothers appeared at the pinnacle of their career and a mere year before Nestor dies in an accident behind the wheel of Cesar's DeSoto in 1957, as well as thematic repetition of the first half of the book in the second, represent the difficulty of breaking out of the cycle of deadening melancholy that haunts the Castillo brothers and, with their deaths, threatens to engulf Eugenio. Loss has haunted the lives of the Castillo brothers since leaving their hometown of Las Piñas in the Oriente Province of Cuba. The accumulated losses of home, Cuba, and family left behind, especially their mother, all combine for Nestor in the form of María, the lover who left him and whose memory consumes his waking thoughts, his dreams, and his musical creativity. He writes twenty-two versions of the song "Beautiful María of my Soul," one of which he was sure would somehow, someday return María, and all that he had lost, to him. Till the evening of his death, he "dreamed about undoing things, not his children, or his wife's happiness, but of somehow going to Cuba again and into the arms of María" *(*Hijuelo*s, MK* 182). Exalted reverence and unrelenting yearning for the past make it impossible for Nestor to overcome his sadness and live in the present.

Nestor, upon his death, ultimately becomes Cesar's María, torturing him with memories of a happier, irrecoverable past "when he believed that a benevolent angel walked beside him" (382). Without this suffering "angel" to balance his carefree joie de vivre by absorbing both their sorrows, Cesar, too, gets trapped in an obsessive melancholy and nostalgia. He fails ever to recover from his brother's death, which, in its lasting effect, contributes to his own demise as he drinks himself to death in the Hotel Splendour. As a result, though loving and attentive, Cesar is of little help to Eugenio in

mourning his father and ultimately compounds Eugenio's paternal loss and vulnerability to nostalgia and melancholia.

Cesar's death, twenty-three years after his brother's, creates a crisis of transmission in memory and history. Without Cesar, Eugenio feels bereft of any connection to Nestor, Cuba, and the Cuban-American community from which he has distanced himself. This second death impels Eugenio toward a task of mourning that invites the possibility of reinterpreting his melancholic patrimony of obsessive desire for that which has been lost, the imagined key to happiness and selfhood (be it a homeland, a mother, a woman, a brother, a father or a virile youth). Eugenio must move beyond a destructive investment in fixed images of an idealized past to recover an obscured familial/cultural memory and to generate from it a new legacy of survival, community, and artistic creation. By narrativizing and integrating their memories into his own rhythmic form, his own mambo, Eugenio not only respectfully commemorates the lives and losses of the Castillo brothers, but also acquires for himself the (positive and negative) models of identity and masculinity that he must negotiate in order to find his own way of being a Cuban-American "man in the world." He frees himself from the chains of sadness over lost objects and develops an active and energetic relationship with the continued presence of his fathers in his life.

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He was the man plagued with memory. . .

For much of his short life, Hijuelos's Nestor Castillo is trapped in "melancholy paralysis." The "past shapes [his] present into a rigid and lifeless structure," as scholar Mari Ruti explains occurs in the psychic condition of melancholia (654). In other words, due to his inability to accept loss, Nestor's desire and interest in new objects is blocked,

and he is relegated, emotionally and psychologically, to living death. Nestor never really joins the ranks of the living because he refuses to abandon his lost loves – Cuba, his mother, and María, which all fuse in his mind. Life is so painful without these perceived sources of wholeness and contentment that he disengages, remaining distant from life around him. For Nestor only the past in Cuba is real; only there does he believe he has a life, but it is a life to which he can neither return nor move beyond.

Hijuelos emphasizes the lifelessness of Nestor's existence through pervasively linking this character with death and rendering him dead in the text in many ways before his life ends. Nestor's intimacy with death begins in childhood and haunts him throughout his curtailed existence. As a boy suffering from acute asthma, Nestor awakens several times from troubled sleep to find a priest performing last rites over his small, pained body. These first encounters with death in life are unequivocally associated with separation from his mother. He recalls his mother weeping over him as if he were gone and thinks back to other nights when, "I couldn't breathe, *Mamá*, remember how I used to call you?" (Hijuelos*, MK* 43). An implicit lack of maternal response, or at least fear of maternal abandonment, resides in Nestor's words. He seems to have felt that his mother had given him up for dead, his beautiful mother powerless to help him against the "thick cotton" filling his lungs, just as she was powerless to protect him and Cesar from their violent father.

Without his mother, Nestor feels vulnerable and incomplete. He perpetually seeks to return to an impossible oneness with her as a means of restoring himself:

> The peaceful sleep in his mother's arms was the sleep he missed, and so he would walk these streets, agonized by the night and wishing that he had never

> left Las Piñas or the loving grip of his mother. But he was a man, *coñó*! Destined to live in the world and to take his place among the other men who were everywhere, running things and giving orders and facing life in every moment. Why should he be any different? (95).

He experiences a sense of failure as a man, for which he blames separation from his mother but may instead be a result of his denial of this separation. Separation from the mother is necessary for autonomous development of the self; however, when the matricidal drive, which according to Julia Kristeva is "the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation," is stymied, the maternal object is incorporated and the matricidal drive is transformed into a "melancholic putting to death of the self" (28). So it is not the loss of his mother but rather his insistence on holding on to her that induces melancholic living death for Nestor.

Hijuelos associates this initial separation from mother with the separation from motherland. Mother and Cuba are entwined in Nestor's mind, and the primal wound of mother-child separation is repeated with immigration for Nestor. Nestor migrates incrementally away from the locus of mother/home: from Las Piñas to Santiago de Cuba, from Santiago to Havana, and from Havana to New York. With each move farther from the family home, Nestor's sense of melancholy and longing for his mother's arms increase. His grief reaches its zenith of paralyzing depression just prior to his departure from Havana, and thus from Cuba itself. At this point, unattainable desire takes the eroticized form of the beautiful, sensual María Rivera.

Their short affair, which constitutes the epitome of love for Nestor, is characterized by all-consuming sex that makes him feel sated, complete, and manly.

Unable to relinquish the sense of self with which María imbues him, he becomes cruel in his attempts to force her into pledging an eternity with him through persistent marriage proposals and a sadistic desire for virile strength: "he wished for a *pinga* so huge that it would burst her open, and let fly, like a broken *piñata*, all her doubts about him" (Hijuelos*, MK* 104). However, the power of the penis is not sufficient to maintain a hold on María, who leaves him to return to a former lover. Her abandonment repeats and solidifies his separation from mother and Las Piñas and will itself be repeated in the loss of Cuba, when, within a year, the brothers journey to New York.

María becomes the idealized female figure onto whom Nestor fixates his unwavering desire. "The more he thought of her the more mythic she became. Every ounce of love he'd received in his short life was captured and swallowed up by the image of María" (43). She represents the lost mother, also named María, through whose body Nestor can return to the womb; "María is the womb, the lost origin, the paradise… from which man was ejected and searches for but can never return" (Luis 204). Maria, therefore, is conflated with mother and Cuba. Richard F. Patteson convincingly argues that "for Hijuelos the syncretism of the mother icon – possibly his version of the Virgen de la Caridad – always seems to lead back to Cuba. In both a closely personal and a broader cultural sense, she is the ultimate point of origin and the very embodiment of that primal island toward which Nestor's music and memory hearken." The path back to Cuba through María is not a difficult one to follow. Hijuelos's choice of name for Nestor's lover leads directly back not only to his own mother, but also to the Virgin Mother, who is of great importance in Cuban Catholicism. La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, mentioned by Patteson, is not only the holy mother but also the patron saint of

Cuba and symbol of hope for return to the island for Cuban Americans, an important parallel in reference to Nestor's perpetual longing for María.[23] "María" evokes religious associations of maternal comfort in the face of Cuban-American, Cuban, and Afro-Cuban histories of exile, displacement and loss.

Thoughts, daydreams, and nightmares of María persistently plague Nestor, and Hijuelos presents these in language that blurs the boundary between life and death. A striking example is Hijuelos's description of Nestor's sleepless nights during his early years in New York City: "His insides twisted into shit, the weight of his skull crushing the pillow, sheets entangled around him, a thick blue wormy vein boring across the brow of his melancholic head" (Hijuelos*, MK* 40). Nestor's relentless thoughts of "the past from which there was no escape" work upon him as time and nature upon a corpse; life is being crushed out of him by his refusal to give up María, to accept her loss and the separation she represents from mother and Cuba. "He relived their life over again so often that he sometimes had the sensation of being buried by the past, as if the detail of this shattered love (and the other sadnesses of his life) had been turned into stone, weeds and dirt thrown over him" (42). He is interred in the grave of his tortured mind by the "sadnesses of his life" to which he ceaselessly returns.

Even after marrying and having children, he cannot elude the feeling that he is "not long for this world"; as he tells his wife Delores, "I sometimes feel like a ghost, *tú sabes*, as if I'm not really part of this world" (88). And though Delores attempts to refute the veracity of these statements and to alleviate his pain with her body, she does not have the power to exhume him. Even as he makes love to Delores and experiences moments of

[23] Caridad has become such an important religious figure for Cubans in exile partly due to her Santería counterpart Oshun, who, as Yoruba mythology contends, left Africa to accompany and provide comfort for her people who were sold into slavery.

"ecstatic relief," when he closes his eyes, he pictures María, imagines María's breast, not Delores's, in his mouth, relives the pain of his losses: "when he saw María, he pictured her in a room, and in that room a doorway through which could be seen the sickbed of his youth and himself, unable to move, calling out, "*Mamá!"* and waiting, waiting. And he'd open his eyes again and begin to pump Delores harder, but he could not forget about the other" (90-1). As Patteson notes, "the reality of Delores is submerged by the memory of María, and that in turn is submerged by the deeper memory of his mother." Nestor loves Delores but never with the intensity he feels for the women of his past, and, as long as he pines for these women, he is not free to love another. Delores cannot hold Nestor in their present life; he continuously slips back into the past and wallows in the sadness engendered by its loss.

Only Cesar has the ability to call Nestor back to the present, albeit temporarily. On those tortured nights before Delores, when Nestor, tangled in his winding sheet, is being crushed by the weight of the past, Cesar never fails to call the apartment and lure his solitary brother off to the distractions of a party. And when driving cross-country on the momentous Mambo U.S.A. tour, Nestor's fascination with death and cemeteries manifests itself in his dreams, this unconscious courting of death is countered by Cesar's crude, insistent embodiment of life. "There goes the future," Nestor says to himself upon passing a cemetery as he falls asleep.

> "There goes the future." He found himself stumbling through a cemetery, exulting in the obelisks, Celtic crosses, and monuments with their carved angels and bursting suns. Christ risen (Forgive me, Lord), Christ on the Cross (Please place me in your Heart). Then he'd wander through the cemetery

> feeling very much at home, until some sound, Cesar snoring, Cesar saying, "Oh, baby," Cesar belching, would stir him from his uneasy sleep and he rejoined the world. (Hijuelos, *MK* 162)

Cesar serves as Nestor's life-line. Cesar and Nestor, drawn as opposites by Hijuelos in the first half of the book, balance one another. Nestor bears the melancholy and nostalgia of both while Cesar lives in the moment and insists his brother take part. Cesar is the manic counterpart to Nestor's depressive state. He repeatedly tells Nestor to forget about María, to stop rewriting the already perfect song, to get on with his life. The brothers together attain some degree of equilibrium and harmony that each, in his extremity, is unable to achieve alone.

As Nestor's demise approaches in the time of the book, the sensation of death not only foreshadows the fatal accident but also emphasizes that this impending death is only physical for Nestor. Nestor's bodily death, though tragic and sudden, is merely the inevitable culmination of his spiritual and emotional death. Some, like critic William Luis, argue that Nestor's death is suicide, citing that "he feels isolated and has contemplated suicide on more than one occasion" as the basis for the argument (Luis 206). However, Nestor's melancholia and desperate thoughts are not evidence enough to read this death as a suicide when the text of the scene, described unequivocally by Hijuelos as an accident, does not support such an interpretation. What is certain is that Nestor is in tune with death, seems to know that his is near: "He had felt himself lifting off the ground while leaning back during his trumpet solo, he felt himself passing though a wall" (Hijuelos, *MK* 181).

Minutes before the car slides on a patch of ice and crashes into a massive oak tree, slamming the steering wheel into Nestor's long-broken heart, Nestor is already entertaining vague thoughts about death freeing him from the "pains swirl[ing] around inside" of him, from the sorrows of his past: "He had wondered what it would be like to go walking off into an eternal distance. He had thought of the past as going on forever. He had wondered if there were angels, as his mother used to say there were" (181). He imagines death can offer a peaceful reunion with all he has lost. In death, he might return to an eternal past surrounded by gentle, beautiful souls.

When death finally does befall him, he looks up to see "the sky as it had looked from the porch of his family's house in Cuba" with "stars blinking like a child's happy eyes" (183), an image that twenty-three years later his brother will remember as indistinguishable from their mother's face. Though he struggles to stay away and speak final words of love for his family, he is carried by dreams across this sky back to Cuba where "someone" (María? his mother?) was "stroking his thick, wavy hair, and [he] did not wake" (184). His body and mind give in to the pull of an idealized past to which he'd longed to return and only could through dying.

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Why did he feel at times that he walked around with a corpse slung over his shoulders, as if the days after his brother died were somehow repeating themselves?

Death haunted Nestor's life, and his death haunts the remainder of his brother's life. Cesar had been the vibrant, bacchanalian brother, always living in the present and looking toward the future. Though occasionally saddened by thoughts of his mother, failed marriage, and daughter in Cuba, he is easily restored by "rum, rump and rumba," his holy trinity. He does not give in to nostalgia – until Nestor dies. Then "[t]he sad

business of memory came over Cesar in waves like the initial symptoms of a bad winter influenza, and this led to a plague of melancholia that was blood-red and spread quickly through his psyche" (193). In the second half of the book, Cesar, in effect, repeats Nestor's melancholically-induced death in life. He becomes paralyzed by sadness and longing for his brother as Nestor had been for María. This also marks a shift in the narrative in the use of women by the characters as a conduit to the lost objects of the past. For Nestor, women are a conduit to Cuba; for Cesar, they become a conduit to Nestor.

Nestor's sudden death shakes Cesar's world with such a force that he cannot recover. Old sorrows that had been repressed in his psyche and borne by Nestor are awakened. Without Nestor, Cesar is incapable of reconciling his previous forward-looking attitude toward life with new feelings of grief. In the days following Nestor's death, so great is Cesar's denial that he sees Nestor everywhere; he chases this apparition from borough to borough, on the streets and on the subways. However, if Cesar can't let Nestor go and can't capture his elusive ghost, he can keep his brother alive by becoming him. He takes on Nestor's familial role, becoming a father-figure to Eugenio and his sister Leticia. He dreams of making love to Delores and attempts to seduce her. However, as was the case for Nestor, Delores merely serves as substitute: "He would walk through a dense wood of his desires, thinking 'Delores' and then 'Nestor'" (197). Cesar incorporates Nestor to keep alive internally what he has been deprived of in the external world. Nestor becomes part of Cesar's ego, but, without check, this incorporation entails a loss of self. His investment in keeping Nestor alive by becoming him increasingly threatens Cesar's own well-being.

Cesar becomes overwhelmed with pain and obsessed with the past as Nestor had been. He begins longing for their mother and even returns to Cuba, where he reenacts, as an adult, his most persistent memory of maternal love – his mother washing his hair. During this reunion, Cesar experiences "an insight into love: pure unity" that releases him momentarily from the sadness oppressing him (209). With Cesar's eventual return to the U.S., this reunion repeats the original separation from mother as well as Nestor's sense of maternal abandonment. Cesar's visit ends when he overhears his mother call him a "poor drunkard"; despite its veracity, Cesar feels betrayed by his mother's identification of him as an object of pity. He attempts, upon goodbye, to rectify his mother's degraded view of him by denying his alcoholism, but:

> the lingering doubt in her eyes, and his sense that many other things were wrong, too, and that he was at their center, disturbed him. This disturbance followed him …through many things, through many years, and to the very moment when he sipped yet another glass of whiskey that steamy night in the Hotel Splendour, years later, an indelible and thorny line, memory, forever present. (218)

This disturbance is the vestige of primal loss of the mother and, with her, his narcissistic view of himself through her eyes. After his second and final departure from his mother and Cuba, Cesar is haunted by the enduring knowledge of a separation that he associates with a failure on his part. Like Nestor, he begins to feel unsure about himself (his worth, his accomplishments, his purpose in life, even his manliness) and about the future.

The nearer his death, the more Cesar's thoughts return to his mother and his perception of the wonders of the womb, which is presented as closely related to Cesar's

hyper-sexuality. “Years later, as a man, kissing a woman’s privates, he’d tremble with the recollection of how he’d imagined the whole world inside his mother’s womb” (388). Through this positive correlation developed between the approach of death and recollections of encounters with the female body, Hijuelos suggests that sex for Cesar has always partly been an attempt to return to the womb and seize its awe-inspiring power as his own through sexual conquest. Literary critic Juan Bruce-Novoa identifies Cesar as conquistador in tradition of Castillian imperial expedition epics, a sexual conquistador (17-18). Women, for Cesar, provide a way for him to assert his manhood – a manhood challenged as a boy by his abusive father. The numerous and mostly interchangeable women who comprise the long chain of Cesar’s lovers provide him with the stature of greatness (at least in his own estimation; less simply positive perhaps from Eugenio’s perspective). However, in the second half of the book, deprived of sexual prowess by aging and of seductive charms by melancholia, Cesar feels emasculated. And emasculation is a form of death for Cesar.

In repetition of Nestor’s longing for Cuba through women of their Cuban past Hijuelos also grants Cesar a María of his own, his daughter Mariela. Cesar has never really known Mariela, and having been adopted by her step-father, she is not technically his daughter anymore. None of this deters him from seeking, through her, rebirth into happier phase of life:

> In a way, thinking about Mariela helped him to understand why Nestor used to sit on the couch and torment himself for hours singing about his ‘Beautiful Maria,’ even if it was all a pipe dream. Something about love and the eternal spring, time suspended – so that the Mambo King daydreamed about himself

> sitting by the sunny window, head set back while his daughter, Mariela, cut his hair, the way his mother used to, Mariela's lovely voice (he imagined) humming into his huge ears, her face radiant with happy love for him. (Hijuelos, *MK* 265)

Like Nestor's María, Mariela becomes an imagined replacement for an idealized mother, promising wholeness and pure love. Also like María, Mariela's presence is based entirely in nostalgic memories that disregard the reality of the past and the impossibility of fulfillment of fantasy reunions. Mariela has no intentions or desire to join her father in America. Raised in a communist household and proud member of the Cuban ballet company, Mariela does not need to be saved from Castro's Cuba. And having only seen her father once since he immigrated to the U.S., on his return to Cuba after Nestor's death and before Castro consolidated his power, Mariela's occasional, polite yet somewhat formal letters demonstrate no sign of the unconditional love, reminiscent of his mother, that Cesar imagines.

Unlike Nestor's María, however, Mariela is not eroticized. Instead Cesar has a second woman, Lydia, a Puerto Rican mother of two and Cesar's final girlfriend thirty years younger than he, who becomes for him a representative of the less exalted aspects of María/mother. He turns to Lydia as both a lover and a mother figure and treats her alternatively with extreme kindness and extreme cruelty. He "suckled her breasts like a baby" (358), but he also fucks her violently while, in his sleep, thinking she is María and he is punishing her on behalf of Nestor. Also, like Nestor with María, Cesar, now old and no longer confident in his masculinity, rages jealously and possessively at Lydia. He tells her "the thought of not possessing you is an agony I cannot bear" (358), but when she can

no longer bring herself to have sex with him because "touching [him] is like touching death" (271), Cesar experiences the ultimate betrayal. Not only does Lydia's rejection of him repeat the perceived rejections of mother and daughter, but it also shatters Cesar's delusion that he could conquer death through sex. Lydia verbalizes what Cesar had been desperate to deny – his zombie-like existence, spiritually and physically.

Cesar's melancholia does not repeat Nestor's exactly, however, because Cesar's lost past includes not only the losses of mother and Cuba through immigration, but also the losses of Nestor and the Cuban-American world they occupied in the 1950s, as well as a second loss of Cuba with the rise of Castro. The Castro regime and closed relations between the U.S. and Cuba invite daydreaming about Cuba, now lost in a more permanent way: "It made a big difference that he just couldn't get on an airplane and fly down to Havana to see his daughter or to visit the family in Las Piñas… It was all a new kind of sadness" (258-9). When able, Cesar never did hop a plane to visit family, though he did visit Cuba and other Caribbean islands to party; now that the possibility of visiting has been foreclosed, he is forced to recognize Cuba as lost to him. Even if he could physically return, return is impossible because time has brought change to the island. Based on reports he hears on the news, letters from his older brothers, and newer Cuban arrivals, he comes to the conclusion that Cuba doesn't exist anymore, not the Cuba he knew. Simultaneously, the new world where he had built his life is also changing in a way that is distressing to him. Nestor's death not only threatens Cesar's identity as brother but also, coinciding roughly with the end of the mambo era, signals the beginning of the end of his reign as mambo king. The music scene for bands like the Mambo Kings slows down; tastes in music change; jobs get harder to come by and go mostly to younger

musicians. His voice gets scratchy from age, alcohol, and disuse. A comeback becomes virtually impossible. In addition, the whole city, from his perspective, changes, becomes less cohesive and more dangerous.

New waves of Cubans enter the United States in the years prior to Cesar's death, dramatically changing the national perception of Cubans in America. It is no coincidence that 1980, the year Cesar decides to die, is also the year of the infamous Mariel boatlift. The Mariel boatlift, lasting almost five months from April till September, transported to the United States 124,799 Cubans seeking refuge from communist Cuba (Boswell 51). The Marielitos were reported to include a disproportionate number of prisoners, homosexuals, and mental patients sent by Castro. Though greatly exaggerated, this account was influential in American national responses.[24] Americans in general were predisposed to scorn the new arrivals because the country was unprepared to deal with such a large influx of new immigrants who were feared would take jobs in a period of recession and who were predominately Afro-Cuban. And because close to 75% of Mariel refugees settled in southern Florida, Cubans, as a concentrated group of ethnic immigrants struggling to adjust, became more visible and newsworthy than earlier waves of Cuban immigrants. Reports of greater social undesirability were readily believed.

Unlike earlier Cuban immigrants who tended to be white, and especially in the beginning of the century educated and upper-class, the Marielitos were mostly working class or poor, lacking in education, and black.[25] The constitution of Cubans in America

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[24] Though approximately 26,000 Mariel refugees had prison records only about 4% were hard-core criminals; most were political dissidents or arrested for minor crimes like stealing food or selling blue jeans on the black market (Boswell 53).

[25] According to Boswell and Curtis, in the 1960's only 7% Cubans in America were Afro-Cubans and in 1970's less than 3%. In contrast, 20% of Marielitos were Afro-Cuban (56) and as noted above, the Marielitos constituted the largest influx of Cubans to America recorded in history.

was dramatically altered by Castro's boatlifts and negatively affected popular perceptions of and attitudes toward Cuban Americans that, until then, were associated most closely with Desi Arnaz, or perhaps Ricky Ricardo, white, entertaining, more or less assimilable, but with an exotic flair. Cesar's identification with Arnaz and the social currency that came with such an identification was deteriorating with changing views of Cuban Americans.

In the grasp of an irrecoverable past that will not pass, lost with the changing times, Cesar becomes someone he cannot recognize and will not accept as himself – a fat, old, washed-up musician-turned-superintendent. His passion for music dissolves in his pain: "He lost his feeling for music and his soul withered…his brother's absence just took Cesar's spirit out of everything" (Hijuelos*, MK* 203). Initially wanting to shed all painful connections to the life he could no longer have beside Nestor on stage, Cesar first flees from his life by joining the merchant marines and then returns to begin a new career as a building superintendent. Though he returns intermittently to music, largely to earn extra money to send to his brothers in Castro's Cuba or to revitalize a futile attempt to emulate Arnaz as a nightclub owner after the time has passed, his career as a mambo king is over. He moves into the basement, which he finds appealing: "he was so elated by the perfect realization of a purgatorial existence that better spirits came to him" (233). He recedes into an underworld, a womb-like, coffin-life refuge, and occupies a liminal position between life and death that reflects his psychic location. He buries himself underground, like the dead, and takes comfort in the appropriateness of this environment.

He becomes a more desperate and violent lover; he date-rapes one woman he is seeing and is tied up by another. Over the years, his no-longer highly functioning penis

fails him repeatedly, and he cannot recover his virile, "king cock" past. And as his body grows old and sags, the failure of his internal organs due to a lifetime of over-hearty eating and alcohol abuse literally turns his insides to mush. The fabulous Cesar Castillo, young, charming, sexually potent mambero and older, caring and protective brother slips away, but the aging, melancholy Cesar who remains has no sense of self without these definitions. "Was that a life for the fabulous Cesar Castillo?" (266). Not one he could endure. He clings to the memories of the past with a nostalgic longing doomed to be unfulfilled and prodding him toward the imagined recovery promised through suicide.

Cesar deliberately and actively courts his death. He doesn't play with the attractions of death, as his brother had, but decides to bring his life to an end and follows through. After several stays in the hospital, his doctor tells him that alcohol is poison to his system. Cesar goes to the Hotel Splendour with a ready supply of poison because he would "rather go out like a man, rather than slowly rotting away like an piece of old fruit, like those *viejitos* I see in the drugstores" (245). He will die "in style," drinking whiskey and listening to *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* repeatedly on the phonograph. His deathwatch in 1980 at the Hotel Splendour is the focal point to which the narrative repeatedly returns from forays into memory. One could say that Hijuelos grounds the novel geographically in Cesar's dying. And the Mambo Kings' music serves as soundtrack for both his life and his dying, blurring the boundary between the two. Recurring strains of sorrow and ecstasy evoke idealized images of the past with Nestor, legendary musician friends, and bevies of beautiful women at the site of his former sexual conquests and now his death.

In his final act before his body gives out, Cesar enacts his desired reunion with Nestor by writing out the lyrics, in his own hand, to Nestor's song "Beautiful Maria of my Soul." He revives his lost object, Nestor, by embodying his repetitive compulsion. María, through Nestor's song, continues to represent all the losses of an idealized past for both Nestor and Cesar. She represents mother and Cuba; her song signifies a desire for Nestor and the era of the Mambo Kings. This song, which Nestor labored over incessantly and which Cesar listens to repeatedly in the Hotel Splendour, symbolizes the brothers' entrapment in their own sorrow. They cannot break away from the sadness of their lives; therefore, they cannot live. Though the song is a creative endeavor growing out of melancholia, it does not work through but rather, especially in the brothers' numerous returns to it, reanimates grief.

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But this life is always so much work, though. . . .You fellows know what I mean?

On the surface, Hijuelos presents melancholy alternatively as individual pathologies of the Castillo brothers, particularly of Nestor, or as a Cuban ethnic trait, which is how Eugenio initially reads it: "'Cuban': melancholic, longing. Arnaz had it, his Uncle Cesar had it, Frankie, Manny and most of the Cubans who walked into the household, jitterbugs and all, had it" (Hijuelos*, MK* 366). On another level, it is not a Cuban characteristic so much as Cuban-American, and not Cuban-American, perhaps, so much as American, rooted in the experiences of immigration, exile, and marginalization and to the struggle to preserve an ethnic heritage in this new country. The living death of melancholia in Hijuelos's book that I've discussed above is also then related to Holland's theorization of living death as the experience of silencing or erasure of the marginalized in mainstream culture.

Cuban Americans like the Castillo brothers are part of a generation of Cuban immigrants being deleted from national memory, especially after changes in Cuban-American relations and post Castro-exodus. By fictionalizing and giving voice to this largely unrecorded history, Hijuelos's text testifies to and counteracts this erasure. As Bruce-Novoa argues, the deaths of the Castillo brothers that jeopardize the continuity of Eugenio's family memory "symbolize[] on a communal level the erasure from the historical memory of a period of Cuban-American experience incarnated in those same characters" (14). Through Cesar and Nestor, Hijuelos gives voice to this generation's story, restoring it to the cultural memory of the Cuban presence in the U.S. along with the memory of the grand years of the 1950's when Cuban music and musicians played a formative role in American culture and when travel between the U.S. and Cuba was easier, enabling the preservation of idealistic visions of Cuba and return. The commemoration of what is cast as the glory days of Cuban America simultaneously bears witness to the experience of exclusion from mainstream America as immigrants and as Latinos. Despite being in some ways favored, the Castillos, and the mid-century Cuban immigrants whom they represent, were outsiders marked by language, appearance, and cultural values.

When the brothers arrive in New York City, their cousin Pablo welcomes them into a supportive Cuban community, but the city itself is not so welcoming. Upon their first arrival in the snowy city, the brothers' thin-soled shoes are soaked through and their cheap Sears, Roebuck coats are ineffective against the windy cold that "chilled to the bone," foreshadowing the struggle they will encounter to thrive in this new environment. Cesar recalls "a bit of malevolent prejudice in the air… being shushed on the street for

speaking to Nestor in Spanish, having eggs thrown at him from a rooftop as he marched up the hill… in a flaming pink suit" (36). He and Nestor spend their days working at a meat-packing plant, and evenings, to the distress of their many Irish and German neighbors, practicing with their musical *conjunto* in Pablo's apartment. Eventually their dedication to their dream begins to pay off, yielding local success within the Latino community. However, these musical jobs are low-paying and last late into morning hours.

The labor elicited from the Castillos is not equivalent to the exploitative labor required of other immigrants like those depicted in Ng's *Bone,* but Hijuelos presents other characters, such as Delores's father, who are indeed ravaged by the damaging effects of physical labor. Like Leila's parents in *Bone,* Delores's father has limited job opportunities because of his immigrant status and inability to speak English, so he takes a delivery job "carrying heavy wooden boxes of metal-topped seltzer bottles up and down the stairs of one building after the next" for twelve and a half hours a day (Hijuelos*, MK* 65). This work eventually kills him. The jobs of the women in *The Mambo Kings* also exemplify the menial work available to immigrants; Delores, until marriage, is a housecleaner; her sister is a hair dresser in a neighborhood shop; Lydia works in a factory gluing rhinestones on eyeglasses. Their work is time-consuming, low-paying, lacking in upward mobility, and in Lydia's case, physically debilitating as it ironically affects her vision.

So though the work and schedules are physically demanding and low-paying, the Castillos have certain advantages as musicians – the demand for the exotic and privileges of whiteness – that seem able to help them escape the plant and other menial work both

mentally and, for a time, literally. As musicians, the Castillos' meaning of work is different because work at the plant supports their music, which allows them to reconnect with the lost homeland and reenact their cultural heritage. Unfortunately, these benefits are unreliable. The brothers capitalize upon the Mambo-mania raging in New York City in the 50's and, for a time, become local celebrities. However, when mainstream American culture moves on from this musical craze, there is no place for Cesar Castillo and the fabulous Mambo Kings. Their records end up in the discount bin at record stores or alongside religious knick-knacks at the botanicas. Even their premier hit "Beautiful Maria of my Soul," which reached number 8 on the easy-listening chart, sold ten-thousand records, and spawned numerous recordings by other artists including Arnaz and Nat King Cole, is reduced to a Muzak track playing in banks and supermarkets. The irony of labeling this song of tortured emotion easy listening attests to the appropriation of the Mambo King's music. The Castillos and their music are valuable to American culture only while American culture is interested, no longer. Their Cuban-American culture has been commodified, diffused, and divorced from its origins. And though they contribute to American culture, the Castillos never achieve the status of American themselves.

Race plays a crucial role in the ambiguous position of the Castillos, more specifically Cesar, in American popular culture. Cesar knows that his appearance will aid him in getting jobs for his band because he is "like Desi Arnaz, what they called in those days a Latin-lover type, dark-haired and dark-featured, his skin being, what was then called 'swarthy.' Swarthy to Americans but light-skinned when compared to many of his friends" (27). Indeed this seems to be the case. "That Cesar was white like Arnaz (though to some Americans he would be 'a Spic') and had a good quivering baritone and blunt

pretty-boy looks all seemed destined to work to his advantage" (33). However, these quotes reveal that Cesar is not actually white but "off-white." Race is relative; he is white but white like Arnaz, white with qualification – a "Latin-lover type," "swarthy." He, like Arnaz, is marked as other by his accented English, his flamboyant style of dress, and his musical and dance genre. Though he is not an absolute Other by race (i.e. he is not forced to enter clubs by the back door as some of his black band-mates must), he is not accepted as American either. In fact, his appeal, like the mambo's, is dependent upon his foreignness; so long as the difference he embodies is fashionable and unthreatening, he can reap benefits and opportunities.[26] This advantage only exists while Latin culture is popular.

From his arrival, Cesar recognizes his outsider position in U.S. and takes measures to change it. Language is his first barrier to America. He and Nestor studiously teach themselves English from an English grammar book, newspapers, comic books, and the school books of Pablo's children. Speaking English elevated one's status among Cubans in the city, and Cesar liked to show off by throwing hip English sayings into his Spanish conversations at Cuban parties all over the city; "he was famous for impressing even the driest Cuban professor with the exuberant variety of his speech" (38). This fame is not necessarily the kind of admiration Cesar seeks. He believes his facility in English garners him status in the Cuban-American community and acceptance in American society; however, ironically, his English may actually contribute to his outsider status.

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[26] According to Perez-Firmat, there are two kinds of mambo in America, the "smooth" and the "hectic." The smooth ameliorates the threat of the sexual, frenetic, improvised mambo via ballroom dancing lessons that teach a fixed version of the dance. The hectic mambo is "a darker, ruder sibling." Perhaps Cesar is acceptable, like Arnaz, because closer to the smooth mambo, white and (at least before Nestor dies) eager to assimilate. He can embody the temptation of the exotic, exciting dance and culture without embodying its threat.

Cesar also acquires language from his friends and acquaintances; he learns words and expressions at parties, hanging out in Greenwich Village, and from Bernard Mandelbaum, whom he'd met while picking up extra work at a lithography plant downtown. The English Cesar is learning ("hep cats at a jam session," "jive," "Crazy, man, give me some skin!" "schlep," "schmuck," and "schlemiel") is not standard English. In fact, the English he is learning is the language of outsider groups, African Americans, bohemians, and Jews.[27]

Additional evidence of Cesar's awareness of his outsider status, and desire to move from margin to center, can be seen in his choice of female companions. Unlike Nestor who constantly seeks reconnection to Cuba and whose longing is reflected in his undying love for María and choice of a Cubana for his wife, Cesar, in his youth, is eager to achieve American success, and this longing, too, is reflected in his choice of women. Women like Vanna Vane – fair, blonde, and beautiful – are most appealing to him because social status comes with them; "to be seen with a woman like Vanna was prestigious as a passport, a high-school diploma, a full time job, a record contract, a 1951 DeSoto" (19). Unambiguously white, unquestionably American, women like Vanna, who is Cesar's longest lasting relationship and features most centrally in his recollections, offer access to expedited assimilation and American-ness, as it had for Desi Arnaz, whose mainstream success is largely to be found not in his music but in his relationship, personal and professional, with Lucille Ball.

On the other hand, literary critic Christine Tourino argues that Cesar's sexual prowess "allows him to be successful in America without ever having to give up his

[27] Of course, the words he learns from Bernardito are not English at all. They are words that have become part of a Jewish-American vocabulary in English. Hijuelos refers to them as Yiddishisms.

Cuban-ness – in fact, it is precisely his charisma as a Cuban male that facilitates his sex-capades. Cesar compares the veins in his erect penis to the Mississippi River and its tributaries and its head to a Cortland apple, mapping his member directly onto the U.S. landscape in a loving gesture of cultural conquest" (par. 12). His obsessive and sometimes offensive machismo, in this regard then, can perhaps best be seen as an attempt to negotiate cultures, masculinity, and immigrant status. Cesar tries to claim America through his triumphs with American women like Vanna Vane but refuses, simultaneously, to cede his Cuban identity and notions of masculinity. This hyper-masculinity, enacted upon America through the bodies of its women, continues to mark Cesar as foreign, his machismo stereotypically Latino.

Nestor's D.D. Vanderbilt book *Forward America!* also demonstrates the difficulty of negotiating American-ness. Nestor looks to this book as an authoritative guide to the success and happiness that elude him. The book promises results for all men, "rich or poor, Chinaman, Indian, or from the planet Mars" (Hijuelos*, MK* 119) but "addresses only the concerns of the immigrant who is willing to divorce himself from the past – not those who must mediate between his native and adopted cultures" (Luis 204). Do many such immigrants exist? The aggressively assimilationist argument in the Vanderbilt book suggests that one's original home, culture, and history must be forsaken in order to be a successful man in America. An earmarked page of Nestor's book asserts, "The confident, self-assured man looks to the future and never backwards to the past" (Hijuelos*, MK* 148). The declaration that there is no value in the past, that it must be abandoned, is counterintuitive to Nestor. The book's effect on Nestor, then, is the opposite of its

intended purpose. As William Luis astutely points out, the Vanderbilt book makes Nestor feel more like an outsider and failure.

After Nestor's death, Cesar inherits this book along with Nestor's melancholy. While earlier in his life this book may have been more appropriate to Cesar's mind-set, it has nothing to offer Cesar after his brother's death places the responsibility of maintaining a connection to Cuba on him alone. He, now, like Nestor before, will not give up the past so easily. For example, in his short stint as a nightclub owner, his adherence to Cuban cultural values obstructs his success because he refuses to adopt cut-throat business ethics or be controlled by others. Instead, he hires other Cubans, pays them well even when there isn't enough money, gives his friends free food and drinks, and provides a space for musicians to jam. He operates his business according to values of community and hospitality rather than driven by the bottom dollar, which dictates much of American business.

The paralyzing melancholia that results from an unwillingness to give up the past can be debilitating, as I've discussed above, but with the alternative attitude to the past suggested by the Vanderbilt book, Hijuelos also suggests that the Castillos' melancholia has value as a form of resistance. David Eng and Shinhee Hann argue that minority subjects' refusal to "get over" their losses can be an attempt to preserve what is most valuable about the past and denounce the dominant culture's demand to disparage it. The Castillo melancholia counters pressure to cast off their Cuban-ness. The Vanderbilt book, then, of little help to Nestor or Cesar, not only serves as a reminder of their exclusion but also signifies their commitment to memory. The challenge, then, is to preserve a memory of that which has been lost while still moving forward with one's life. This task, as in

Bone, falls to the second generation. Eugenio, like Leila, must discover a way to keep the past available, not to let it go as easily as dominant society would like, but also not to let sadness over loss impede living.

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…it's like a rumba, but with much more movement of the feet, as if the chains had been removed.

The daily lives of Nestor and Cesar are marked by bouts of depression, self-isolation, and, in Cesar's case, alcoholism, all manifestations of the overwhelming longing and grief that act upon Eugenio as their heir. The Castillo legacy, at first glance, is one of sorrow and regret. Until the deaths of the central male figures in his life, Eugenio has not directly experienced the losses of his immigrant forerunners. He receives the traces of their experiences through what, in discussing the Holocaust inheritance for the post-Holocaust second-generation, Eva Hoffman and Marianne Hirsch characterize as indirect transmission of knowledge across generations. Eugenio, not yet seven at the time of Nestor's death, becomes a quiet, sad boy and then an isolated, angry teen who recedes from everyone in his family and community, eventually including his beloved uncle. Stunted in growth as a man near thirty but unhappy and unsure of who he is or where he belongs, he is in danger of getting sucked into the potentially unending repetitions of his father's and uncle's melancholic paralysis.

The challenge of breaking this cycle is registered by Hijuelos's use of the *I Love Lucy* episode first introduced in Eugenio's prologue. Eugenio describes a vivid childhood memory of rushing excitedly to wake his uncle Cesar from a drunken slumber so they could behold together "an item of eternity" – a rerun of the appearance of Cesar and Nestor on the *I Love Lucy Show*. Eugenio has watched this episode, repeatedly aired in

syndication, numerous times. He can predict the number of minutes he has to get Cesar to the couch between the brothers' arrival in the Ricardo living room and their performance at the Tropicana, Ricky's nightclub. He knows every line uttered. This show, which recurs throughout the book, is a miraculous turning back of time that etches itself on Eugenio's mind and represents the nostalgia for the past that marked Nestor's and Cesar's lives and, with their deaths, seeps into his own.

As a child, Eugenio finds succor in the resurrection of sorts he witnesses in the *I Love Lucy* episode. He describes viewing this show as the wondrous, sacred experience of his youth:

> The first time I saw a rerun of this, I could remember other things about him …it was like watching something momentous, say the Resurrection, as if Christ had stepped out of his sepulcher, flooding the world with light – what we were taught in the local church with the big red doors – because my father was now newly alive and could take off his hat and sit down on the couch in Ricky's living room, resting his black instrument case on his lap. He could play the trumpet, move his head, blink his eyes, nod, walk across the room, and say 'Thank you' when offered a cup of coffee. For me, the room was suddenly bursting with a silvery radiance. (4)

The boy experiences the appearance of his father on a small, black and white screen as a miraculous homecoming. Initially, it triggers happy memories that block the unwanted knowledge of his father's death and brighten his dimmed world. His desire for this resurrection is problematic.

Though Nestor can be seen on the stage of the Tropicana with Cesar, the two brothers "side by side, living, breathing beings, for all the world to see, harmonizing in duet of that *cancion*" (6), his return is an illusion. The quiet, handsome man with the horsey grin and big ears is not Nestor Castillo, but Alfonso Reyes, a fictional character he briefly portrayed on a stage set in Los Angeles. And he is not restored to Eugenio. He remains inaccessible in the world of television, encapsulated in a small box, behind glass and outside of time and place. Eugenio can exalt in his father's reanimation, but this, too, is an illusion, and one that dissipates within minutes when Ricky Ricardo's flamboyant "*Olé!*" signals the end of the brothers' song and appearance on the show. Ultimately, Nestor is lost again, every time the episode ends.

In addition, the Desilu-produced miracle, confusing celluloid images with "living breathing beings," encourages, especially in its repetition, a concept of the past as fixed and unchanging. The *Lucy* episode supplies Eugenio with a preset iconography for remembering his father's and uncle's lives that threatens to replace and distort the reality of their experiences in Eugenio's memory. As literary critic Paula W. Shirley asserts in her analysis of the multiple functions of Desi Arnaz in the novel, "Television in *The Mambo Kings* not only reflects, but creates the tension between memory/not memory, experience/not experience" (76). The scene of the singing brothers appearing on their cousin's doorstep represents but simultaneously misrepresents the brothers' actual arrival to their cousin Pablo's apartment on LaSalle Street. *I Love Lucy* is American kitsch that, in the stereotyped character of Lucy's heavily-accented, passionate, musical husband, presents a humorous cliché of Cuban Americans. Perez-Firmat avers that generations of Americans formed their "notions of how Cubans behave, talk, lose their temper, and treat

or mistreat their wives by watching Ricky love Lucy" (1). The show is entertainment, what Perez-Firmat calls "the great Cuban-American love story" (44). The Ricardos live happily ever after, but the Arnazes do not, nor do Hijuelos's Castillo brothers. The *Lucy* episode young Eugenio turns to in order to remedy the absence of his father does not hold the answer to Cesar's and Nestor's lives any more than the series in general did Arnaz's or Lucille Ball's. It is all simulation, all fantasy.

Without really knowing his father or the worlds which he and Cesar occupied, thus not aware of precisely what has been lost, Eugenio's investment in the *Lucy* rerun, and its delusive experience of recovery and loss similar to traumatic repetition compulsion, primes him to receive his melancholic inheritance. The quiet and sad Alfonso Reyes lodges in the boy's mind, replacing a living memory of Nestor and threatens to supplant a more intimate and dynamic connection to the past. Nestor's life-like resurrection, though wonderful and yearned for, is also frightening and dangerous. Even as a boy, Eugenio is aware on some level of the dark side to this trickery of the moving image on the screen:

> For me, my father's gentle rapping on Ricky Ricardo's door has always been a call from the beyond as in Dracula films, or films of the walking dead, in which spirits ooze out from behind tombstones and through the cracked windows and rotted floors of gloomy antique halls. (Hijuelos, *MK* 3)

The Nestor who is resurrected via modern technology and whom Eugenio rushes to see on the television is rendered through the imagery of the prologue as both Christ-like and monstrous. As a complex man, loving but troubled, he is lost in his son's memory.

Consequently, though this prologue suggests that the project of the novel is "the resurrection of a man" or two, belief in resurrection can be misleading in its false promise that the lost object can be restored. By the time he is able to revisit the past, in the form of the central narrative, Eugenio has given up his need for such a belief. Cesar's death in 1980 instigates an urgent need to reconnect with a familial and cultural history that is slipping away with Nestor and Cesar's generation of Cuban immigrants. Mourning his fathers' losses may be the only means for Eugenio to claim a rich, invaluable trove of love, beauty, and community that the brothers also enjoyed and could have passed down were it not for the dark shadows of sorrow looming over them.

Eugenio seems to have realized that he must resurrect not his father or uncle but their stories and spirits. The recovery of these resources are necessary to forge a living connection to the past, which includes not only his forefathers' lives but also and significantly the interacting social and cultural histories of Cuba and the American "immigrant world – of lush romantic nights in New York's dance halls and days of harsher realities" (Muller 102) that shaped his family history, and indirectly, the man he becomes. In order to avoid his fathers' fates, he must revisit and reinterpret the past so it can inform rather than obstruct his future, as it had Nestor's and Cesar's. Similar to Ng's Leila in *Bone*, Eugenio must make meaning out of melancholy through constructing a narrative; in Eugenio's case, his narrative must convert traumatic repetitions into rhythm to invoke the magic of the mambo. Hijuelos provides the possibility of communicating across boundaries of past and present, life and death, through the structural and thematic device of the mambo. The mambo allows the living and the dead to speak to one another

so that Eugenio can collect and arrange the stories of his family into a living, life-affirming form.

The sacred roots of the mambo are found in Afro-Cuban religion. Afro-Cuban culture has great influence island-wide in Cuba; this influence is most noticeable in music like the mambo, largely derived from religious rituals, and especially through the introduction of drums. Though derived specifically from the Bantu descendents and their religion, palo monte, the mambo's sacred function signifies in connection more generally to Afro-Cuban culture and religion, including not only palo, which is secretive and little know to outsiders, but also Santería, more well known and pervasive among Cubans and Cuban Americans regardless of race or other religious affiliations. According to Cuban writer and musical scholar Alejo Carpentier, in 20th century Cuba "all the elements of the vast sonority of the Afro-Cuban realm are all mixed together" (256); an outsider like Hijuelos or his characters would reasonably read the mambo as Afro-Cuban rather than more narrowly associated with the Bantu or palo.[28]

All Afro-Cuban religions, including palo and Santería, believe in communication between the living and dead with the dead serving as guides who have great wisdom to impart to the living because they have knowledge of both life and death.[29] Santería and palo both involve rituals of possession and assert that anyone, not only a priest, can

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[28] Though the turn to Afro-Cuban culture may seem odd in a book that insists upon the whiteness of its characters as Hijuelos's does, in the early 20th century, distinctive elements and achievements of Afro-Cuban culture, most particularly the music, become emblematic of Cuban culture and were used in the service of Cuban-ness and national pride in the face of impending Americanization beginning in the 1930s. This does not mean that racial divisions were abandoned or that Blacks were more accepted in Cuba, however. For example, as Sublette points out, "The music was blacker than ever, and black people weren't permitted to perform it" (447). Similar to what has happened in the US, Black art forms were appropriated by whites without indicating a change in racial structures.

[29] There are four major Afro-Cuban religions: Regla de Ocha, better known as Santería,; palo monte; Espiritismo; and Vodu (or voodoo).

communicate with those on the spiritual plane, including ancestors. The purpose of Santería is to achieve balance with the universe by receiving guidance from ancestors or orishas, Santería divinities. Santería's following extends not only throughout Cuba but also to Cuban Americans, who like their island counterparts are often forced to practice furtively due to misunderstanding and discrimination. Nonetheless, many Cuban Americans, including Hijuelos, are occasional users of Santería with some knowledge of this religion as part of their Cuban culture.[30]

By the 1930's when Afro-Cuban cultural forms were being integrated more fully into Cuban national culture, the word *mambo* took on secular meaning used to refer to rhythmic sections or repeating instrumental figures in popular Cuban dance music. Arsenio Roderiguez, who claims to have invented the modern mambo, verbalized the connection between this musical form and its sacred origins and the continued emphasis on communication. He told Cuban musicologist Odilio Urfe, "The word mambo is African, of the Congo dialect. One singer says to the other: *abre cuto guiri mambo*; that is: 'open your ear and listen to what I'm going to tell you" (qtd in Sublette 54). However, the form we know today as the mambo came about in the 1940's and 1950's, flourishing more so in the United States than in Cuba. It is during this period of time, New York City's mambo era, that Hijuelos's Castillo brothers come riding the wave of mambo popularity to America. And this mambo, like Eugenio, is a particularly Cuban-American creation. As Perez-Firmat declares, the mambo was "born in Cuba but made in the USA"

[30] In a *New York Times* article, Hijuelos reports visiting a Santería place while working on *The Mambo Kings* in hopes of making the "music stuff in the book" work out by talking to the then recently deceased Machito, who with his band the Afro-Cubans was the first to fully integrate Afro-Cuban music and black North American jazz. He didn't speak to Machito about the music scene in the '40s and '50s but did speak to Machito's widow, who happened to enter the shop while he was there (Watrous). Hijuelos's visit testifies to the pervasiveness of Afro-Cuban religious practices in Cuban-American culture and suggests his belief in communication with the dead in relation to Santería and music.

(80); its roots are in Cuban musical forms but it grew out of a combination of Cuban and American music.

Eugenio takes the paralyzing repetitions of Nestor and Cesar and arranges them into rhythmic form akin to that in mambo music. Bruce-Novoa claims that the novel's repetitions and rewritings present infinite variations, in parody of mambo (20). I believe Hijuelos to be more sincere in his use of the mambo form; however, I agree that the frequent repetitions with variation emulate musical arrangement common to the mambo, particularly the mambo fused with African American jazz as became popular in the fifties. Tourino also compares the narrative form, in relation to its temporal circlings to and from 1980 in the Hotel Splendour, to the form of the musical mambo: "Hijuelos's relentless return to the Hotel Splendour (which occurs no less than 35 times) is like a horn line in mambo music that becomes familiar through repetition" (par. 15). This circling also contributes to the effect of rhythm through repetition. In this way, Nestor and Cesar's repetitive strains of sorrow are transformed into rhythmic patterns culminating in a literary mambo.

In addition, certain passages are strikingly rhythmic in their deliberate linguistic and syntactical repetition. For instance:

> That was Nestor the young man in the sleeveless T-shirt whose body was like a letter K in the window of the apartment… That was Nestor on the living-room couch, strumming a chord on the guitar… That was Nestor's voice heard on the street at night, on La Salle, on Tiemann Place… That was Nestor down on his knees playing with the children, pushing a toy truck into a city of alphabet blocks… while in his head there bloomed a thousand images of

> María: María naked, María in a sun hat, María's brown nipple filling his mouth, María with a cigarette, María commenting on the beauty of the moon….
>
> That was Nestor, eyebrows arched with the scholarly concentration of a physics student… That was Nestor up on the rooftop stretched out on a blanket and sipping whiskey, waking up screaming at night, decked out in a white suit… (43-44)

This passage in particular is a striking example of a verbal polyrhythm. A polyrhythm, the simultaneous occurrence of contrasting rhythms, is a defining characteristic of the mambo. Here, Hijuelos develops two contrasting rhythms intertwined: the complex, clause-accumulating That-was-Nestor sentences constituting one rhythm and the shorter, mostly gerund María phrases comprising the other, quicker rhythm. One presents slowly building images of Nestor, remembered by Cesar and Eugenio, and the other contrapuntally presents Nestor's exciting, sensual images of María from a more distant past. Even with in the descriptions of Nestor alone, there are contrasting emotional tones evoked in the pleasant, peaceful images of him strumming his guitar, smoking a cigarette or playing with the children, undermined by the anguish of his always-present longing for María and the vitality with which she is imbued. Passages such as this one are almost trance-inducing, like the chants that might be used in African or Afro-Cuban rituals of possession.[31] They create an atmosphere freed from the boundaries of time and death to allow Cesar and Nestor to tell their stories to/through Eugenio.

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[31] Others include a riff on drumming on one of the Mambo King records on pages 252-254; a description of Eugenio as a boy in his relationship with Cesar on page 285; and Cesar's proclamations of love to the Cuban girlfriends of his youth on pages 390-392.

The insights granted by considering the mambo's history make available a new opportunity for comprehending the allusive narrative voice(s) of the novel. Critics express uncertainty and hesitancy concerning the narration. As mentioned previously, the majority of the novel is comprised of Cesar Castillo's deathwatch recollections. Though spotted with Cesar's first person thoughts, the narrative is largely mediated through a third person voice that seems closest to Cesar's perspective and nostalgic tone but cannot be attributed to Cesar's consciousness alone. Nor can the consciousness be Eugenio's, though as Perez-Firmat points out Eugenio's voice can be detected in the main narrative through the verbatim repetition of some of his sentences, in the descriptions of the *Lucy* episode (147), evidence that indicates Eugenio's continued participation in the narrative but does not explain his participatory role.[32] The narrative contains memories and thoughts – specifically those of Eugenio's parents – to which neither Cesar nor Eugenio would have been privy. At points in the novel there is also an implied criticism and mediation of Cesar's actions and attitudes.

William Patteson states that Eugenio's frame places distressing family memories into perspective within his memory, but I am not alone in arguing that Eugenio does more than simply frame memories. Perez-Firmat suggests that Eugenio "underwrites" or "translates" Cesar's memories, occupying a "position halfway between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'he'" (147-8). The structure of possession/mediation that I suggest would place Eugenio in a similar position, both as and distinct from Cesar, and would also allow for the possibility of other voices, such as Nestor's and Delores's, to participate through Eugenio also. Juan Bruce-Novoa argues that "The brothers lives are

[32] These repetitions from the prologue can be found on pages 139-143. Cesar also returns to the filming of this episode in a dream on page 312.

being recreated by their heir" and an "interior narrator" whose memory transcends any single character's through imagination and fictionalizing" (13). I argue that the voice/consciousness of the novel as a whole, Bruce-Novoa's "interior narrator," transcends a single character's consciousness; this is accomplished through a collective telling in which, as in the musical mambo, various participants contribute individually to the composition by each member of the immigrant generation communicating through Eugenio. As "heir," his role is to receive, not recreate their lives. And from these recovered memories, he can create anew for himself a fusion of Cuban and America that, like the mambo itself, can thrive, freely changing and growing in America without abandoning a living memory of Cuba and early Cuban America. He becomes a bandleader, a mambero like his uncle, orchestrating the tales of his fathers to create his own mambo and take his place in the mambo family.

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…this music will make it all possible…

Joining the mambo family, Eugenio recovers a sense of belonging to a community; however, the mambo family is a gendered community, an all-male family. It seems important to HIjuelos's novel that this recovery becomes possible through male figures, through Nestor and Cesar and the great Cuban-American father Desi Arnaz. In the world of Hijuelos's novel, Cuban-ness needs to be restored paternally rather than maternally. This, of course, is paradoxical because Cuba is associated with women/mother, yet both Nestor and Cesar fear emasculation from women and blame their weaknesses on a failure of women to love them enough. Cesar warns Eugenio: "Women, boy, will ruin you if you're not careful. You offer them love, and what do you get in return? Emasculation. Orders. Heartbreak" (223). Women like their mother, María,

and Mariela are beautiful but monstrous in their power over Nestor and Cesar; these Marías all represent Cuba but an inaccessible and rejecting Cuba. So Eugenio must find a new, less potentially destructive access to Cuba through the all-male mambo family with Desi Arnaz, one of the few Cubans to truly become a lasting part of mainstream American culture, as his new spiritual father guiding him to a creative regeneration of Cuban America.

In Eugenio's epilogue, Eugenio travels to Los Angeles a year after Cesar's death to visit Desi Arnaz. At first hesitant to follow through and run the risk of being disappointed, Eugenio, lounging by the pool, falling desperately in love with a blonde beauty, and leafing through the old copy of *Forward America!*, is on the verge of repeating his fathers' downfalls, but the sadness emanating from the book motivates him to pick up the phone to call Arnaz and confront the mythic icon of his life.

Arriving at Arnaz's estate, Eugenio first enters a tranquil garden blooming with flowers and mistakes a white-haired, slightly stooped Arnaz dressed in blue coveralls for a gardener. The *I Love Lucy* theme is not playing, and Arnaz, no longer a model of mainstream success, is only a man, one who ages, and answers his own phone, and reads his own mail. Arnaz's real-life downfall without Lucille Ball, though elided in the novel, is evident, and yet "when he smiled, the young Arnaz's face revealed itself" (400). Unlike Cesar, Arnaz seems to have accepted the passage and vicissitudes of time and, in doing so, moved forward while still preserving essential elements of his past. Hijuelos's Arnaz has learned to make the best of the life he has instead of pursuing impossible fantasies of a lost past. He welcomes Eugenio and explains to the younger man that he chose southern California to build his home because it reminds him of Cuba. With a

similar climate in California, he can grow the same plants and flowers he remembers in Cuba and recreate for himself various elements of the lost island of origin in a new environment where they can flourish and evoke memories of the past but in a different context.

The items that hang on Arnaz's walls also testify to a simultaneous need to preserve the past culture and merge it with the present one. The walls are adorned with a 1952 map of pre-Castro Cuba, the Cuba both Arnaz and the Castillos remember, and photos of Arnaz with not only famous Latino musicians like Xavier Cugat but also all-American movie stars like John Wayne. These items allude to Desi's ability to change with the times and merge his musical career, rooted in Cuban culture, with a television career based in the emerging American cultural milieu of the sitcom. He has found a way to build a home for himself in America without Lucy and without sacrificing his love for and memories of Cuba.

Arnaz models a different concept of success for Eugenio than he had for Cesar and Nestor. His example suggests the importance not of fame and wealth but of finding contentment in what life brings. Eugenio's encounter with Arnaz is a turning point. A powerful desire for love and for life overwhelms Eugenio when Arnaz implicitly invokes the Castillo brothers by asking Eugenio if he believes in an afterlife and then referring to the same vision of pure love – being a baby in his mother's arms – that both Cesar and Nestor held. Eugenio wants to recover this pure love for himself, but his image of love is paternal.

In Arnaz's living room, Eugenio can finally reconnect with his lost fathers by breaking through the fixed notion of the past encapsulated in the *Lucy* episode that has

haunted his life. Sitting alone while his host has excused himself to take a phone call, Eugenio thinks back to this show, and Hijuelos blurs fact/fiction, past/present, memory/reality as the episode begins to play out once more, now life-size and outside the box. Nestor and Cesar are there on the couch, and Lucy appears serving coffee. And, this time, rather than a distanced observer, Eugenio is *in* the scene; when he thinks "Poppy" and Nestor turns to him, he is able to disrupt the all too familiar scene and reunite with his lost father to reaffirm the love they feel for one another. When Eugenio hugs Nestor and "hit[s] on solid flesh," the scene may hearken back to the resurrection fantasy of the epilogue, but Hijuelos quickly takes Eugenio, and us, beyond that:

> Embracing him, I started to feel myself falling through an endless space, my father's heart. Not the heart of flesh and blood that had stopped beating, but this other heart filled with light and music, and I felt myself being pulled back into a world of pure affection, before torment, before loss, before awareness. (404)

The solid, physical Nestor is gone, but Nestor's heart remains as an infinite source of "light and music" for Eugenio. Father replaces the idealized mother in this revision of pure love and unity that for Nestor and Cesar had been sought, unsuccessfully, in women. A father's love and the music of Cuba and Cuban America have the potential, in the world of Hijuelos's novel, to be more dependable and empowering for Eugenio.

As Eugenio's dream continues to progress through the *Lucy* episode with Desi's living room magically transformed into the Tropicana, Nestor and Cesar perform the melancholy "Beautiful María of my Soul." Eugenio cannot delete this scene from his reenactment of the episode because he must remember the loss and sorrow that this song

represents in order to respect his fathers' pain. This performance is followed by the lyrics of this emblematic song, appearing for the first time in the novel in English. Eugenio's presentation of these lyrics, undoubtedly filtered through him, is certainly a dangerous repetition of his father's obsessive and his uncle's final acts; however, the act of translation produces, deliberately or not, difference and distance from the original that may signify Eugenio's attempt to understand this song as part of his family history without claiming as his own the paralyzing sadness it embodies.

This dream, and the novel itself, ends with Hijuelos's appropriation of the characteristic *Lucy* iconography, the satin heart. Eugenio dreams of Cesar's heart "swelling to the size of the satin heart on the *I Love Lucy* show, and floating free from his chest over the rooftops of La Salle" (406). Cesar's heart brings Eugenio back to his own home, which he had left years ago, where he sees himself as a boy enter church and walk in on a funeral – his father's. Eugenio's attention turns to the music of the pipe-organ as it is replaced by "a full-blown mambo band straight out of 1952 playing a languid bolero" (406-7). Sadness descends upon the church as the coffin is carried out, but upon exiting the church, the sadness lifts when "another satin heart escapes, rising out of the wood, and goes higher and higher, expanding as it reaches toward the sky, floating away, behind the other" (407).

The floating hearts, Cesar's and Nestor's, rendered in *Lucy* imagery and accompanied by the mambo orchestra's bolero, represent a fusion of Cuban and American cultures that will allow Eugenio to keep the memory of his father's culture alive within the context of his American life (Luis 214). There are two hearts rather than one, as in the *I Love Lucy* show, attesting to a powerful mutual love and companionship,

a love between two men, brothers, more powerful than the love between man and woman – Nestor and Maria, Cesar and Vanna, even Desi and Lucy – in the book. The two hearts travel together, like the Castillo brothers, in enactment of the fraternal love that pervades and drives the book. Eugenio, as son to the brothers, can now partake of this love as a source of support, inspiration and guidance to forge a new beginning rooted in a sense of the past but moving toward the future. Eugenio will keep alive the stories of the past and maintain a relationship with Nestor and Cesar through the creative and sacred possibilities engendered by the mambo.

Chapter Three
"The Strangest Chorale": Listening for the Unlost Voices in *Native Speaker*

Death is a persistent and pivotal feature in Chang-Rae Lee's fiction. In only three novels, he has accumulated an impressive death count. In *A Gesture Life* (1999), death surrounds Doc Hata at war and is far from absent in his after-life in Bedley Run. Jerry Battle's metaphorical struggle to recover a purpose in life in Lee's most recent novel *Aloft* (2004) involves, by my count, four deaths, the attempted suicide of a friend, and his father's near-death heart attack and stroke. However, it is in his first, award-winning novel *Native Speaker* (1995) that Lee creates his most overpowering climate of death. *Native Speaker* is set in the violently-charged ethnic and racial milieu of the early 1990's in the United States.[33] Two defining events of the period, the Los Angeles riots and the Golden Venture shipwreck, as well as an alarming rise in the murders of cabdrivers in New York City, all fictionalized in the novel, characterize the severity of this environment.

The expansive context of anonymous, wide-scale death in *Native Speaker* provides the backdrop for the numerous individual deaths – by illness, accident, or obscure machinations – that amass in protagonist and narrator Henry Park's story. His mother dies from liver cancer when he is a boy. His son Mitt suffocates at the bottom of a dogpile of children during his seventh birthday party. A mere eighteen months after the accidental death of Mitt, Henry's father dies from a global massive stroke, his third. The Korean houselady, known to Henry only as Ahjuhma, who lived with him and his father in their Ardsley home, dies of pneumonia shortly before Mr. Park's fatal stroke. Dr.

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[33] Lee received the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the Barnes and Noble Discover Great Writers Award, the American Book Award for the Before Columbus Foundation, the Oregon Book Award, and the American Library Association Notable Book Award for *Native Speaker*.

Emile Luzan, a Filipino psychoanalyst and Marcos-supporter whom Henry, as a spy for the Glimmer and Co. espionage firm specializing in "ethnic coverage," is assigned to report on but to whom he nearly blows his cover, dies in a suspicious boating accident off St. Thomas. Finally, Eduardo Fermin, Dominican-American campaign worker for city councilman John Kwang, and Helda Brandeis, Kwang's Eastern-European cleaning woman, are killed from smoke inhalation during a fire at Kwang's headquarters.

The double loss of son and father are the central deaths and driving force in *Native Speaker*. These deaths, occurring in close temporal proximity, are integrally related to one another and to the other deaths in the novel. Similar to Hijuelos in *The Mambo Kings,* Lee stresses paternal inheritance as integral to the construction of identity and cultural legacy. The death of Mitt, Henry's mixed-race son, represents a lost future of seamless American integration to which Henry, a confessed assimilist, aspires. Mr. Park, his immigrant father, embodies a familial history of Korean culture and immigrant struggle.[34] With the paternal line disconnected in both directions, Henry is separated from his ancestral heritage and bereft of an heir to carry on the family line and memory. Ties to the past and the future seem to be obliterated. When the novel begins, Henry is fixed in time, trapped in a state of personal and professional suspension; he has lost his sense of self and his place in the world.

Henry cannot escape the climate of death because, in both his professional and personal lives, he is implicated in it. The accumulation of deaths, past and present, exerts

[34] The question of how to refer to Henry's father in this chapter is vexing, but is one, I believe, inherent to the novel. Though we know that Henry's father has an American name (George Washington Park), we never learn his Korean name. Henry speaks of him only as "my father," which is his most significant role in the novel. As Henry remarks at one point, individual names are less important in Korean culture than relationship within the family, and thus, relationships are used to identity and refer to individuals. Therefore, I will speak of him as Henry's father but also Mr. Park to avoid awkward repetition.

pressing claims upon him as the realms of personal and public death, ultimately, collapse. Like the mass of bodies bearing down on Mitt's small form when he dies or the fumes filling Kwang's headquarters, the general atmosphere of death grows increasingly thick and suffocating as prior deaths, those of both parents, Ahjuhma, and Mitt, emerge in Henry's thoughts, called forth by the present, less personal deaths, starting with Dr. Luzan's. Henry's experience with Luzan is a turning point; it signals a first recognition of the inability to keep his personal life with his family discrete from his professional life, in which he wins over the trust of other Asian Americans in order to betray their secrets to unknown clients with undisclosed motives.

Henry, distraught over the recent death of his son, responds to Luzan on a personal level, as a psychologist who understands and cares for him. This intimate connection compromises Henry's detached stance and cultural invisibility as a spy. As Crystal Parikh states in "Ethnic America Undercover," "Henry's likely betrayal of Luzan initiates his sense that his own encounters with traumatic loss and epistemic violence become symptomatic of his part in the 'selling-out' of those around him, his sense that he is responsible, because of something lacking in him, for the pain he finds in others. This sense of responsibility, and the accompanying guilt, deviates from the emotional neutrality and distance the spy must maintain" (273). Though Henry knows that his mysterious clients pose a threat to Luzan, he is unable to offer the kind doctor a warning, as, in contradiction to his professional duties, he would like. Ultimately Henry's reports play a role in Luzan's murder, which instigates a crisis of conscience and consciousness.

Afterwards, Henry comes to realize not only that he contributes to the violence plaguing the larger immigrant community of New York City through his work but also

that this community's suffering is related to his own personal traumatic losses. Until he can recover ties to the past and future, he cannot begin to reconstruct a sense of self. He is haunted by Dr. Luzan's difficult query: "Who, my young friend, have you been all your life?" (Lee, *NS* 205). Henry struggles with this question throughout the novel; answering it requires a reorientation of self to others and outside world that cannot take place until he mourns his losses.

He must mourn not only Mitt's and his father's deaths but also the many losses accruing from immigration and assimilation that they represent, such as the loss of tradition, language, a connection to his father and ancestors, and a belief in the immanent possibility of a pluralist America. The painful process of mourning occurs, for Henry, largely within the context of his interactions with John Kwang, Henry's current work assignment. In his resemblance (in different ways) to both Mitt and Henry's father, the Korean-American politician makes possible a reburial of Mitt and Mr. Park in Henry's memory that, in psychoanalytic terms, allows for them to be reinstated in his psychic life, as *Bone's* Ona was in Leila's and *The Mambo King's* Nestor and Cesar in Eugenio's, without trapping him in grief or haunting echoes of guilt and emptiness. Henry's mourning enables him to claim the living spirit of his lost loved ones simultaneously in himself and in the immigrant communities of New York City.

Through Kwang and the espionage plot, Lee forces Henry to engage in a peeling away of, along with his masks of fabricated selves, layers of guilt and ambivalence about his role in the Korean-American community and in American society at large. Feeling, for most of his life, as if he never truly belonged to either world, Henry needs to find a way to belong to both. Kwang is the figure through which he can negotiate the fraught

but inextricable relationships between assimilation and cultural memory and between loss and identity in which Henry and the wider population of ethnic immigrants he comes to identify with are entangled. Through his work with Kwang and his constituents, Henry is brought face to face with his family's immigrant past as it replays itself in the lives of other, newer immigrants. He witnesses their efforts to maintain their languages and cultural traditions at the same time as they struggle to fulfill hopes for a new, more prosperous life in America. He begins to see their struggles and their accruing losses as his father's and his own.

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There is a closing going on, Henry, slowly but steadily, a narrowing of who can rightfully live here and be counted.

Lee draws upon three episodes of contemporary American history to situate his novel and its depiction of the vulnerability of raced and immigrant groups to violence, deportation, and death in the very real context of intense tensions and anxiety over racial and national belonging that characterized the 1990s. The Los Angeles race riots erupted in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. Four white police officers accused of beating African American King in March of 1991 were acquitted despite incriminating video evidence broadcast on national television and drawing attention to the problem of police brutality. When the verdict was delivered on April 29, 1992, rioting swept through the city for three days and brought to the fore of national consciousness the palpable racial tensions that seethe in American cities with deteriorating economies and vast social inequalities. The L.A. riots also powerfully demonstrated the complexity of the American racial structure, too often cast, especially by the media and political engines, as simply black and white. The riots intensified conflict between African American and Korean-

American communities in Los Angeles as well as between black and white populations. For, in addition to the Rodney King case, the shooting of Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, by Korean-American store owner Soon Ja Du thirteen days after the King beating also contributed to igniting the violence and directing hostility specifically toward Korean-American merchants. Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to five years probation, community service, and $500 fine – a lenient penalty that outraged many in the African American community. In the wake of the riots, scores of people were dead, thousands injured; thousands of businesses were damaged and more than ten thousand arrests were made.

A year later, on the other side of the country, a second crucial event occurred that highlighted and intensified American xenophobia. On June 6, 1993, the Golden Venture freighter carrying a human cargo of approximately 300 Chinese immigrants being smuggled into the U.S. ran ashore on Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York.[35] Ten men died in the water; their bodies drifted ashore on the beach in the weeks following. The six minors aboard were released, and a few passengers purportedly escaped. All others were detained in an INS prison. Hundreds of Golden Venture survivors applied for political asylum, but the Clinton administration deported the majority. Fifty-three immigrants remained imprisoned until 1997, two years after Lee's book was published. In response to national anxiety over the presence of illegal aliens, President Clinton's National Security Council implemented strategies to combat illegal entry to the U.S. by employing

[35] In spring 2006, the Golden Venture incident has been revived in the news as part of a renewed moment of intense concern with and controversy over illegal immigration in the U.S. and government proposals for stricter enforcement policies similar to, if not more extreme than, those employed by the Clinton administration in response to the Golden Venture immigrants.

counter-smuggling tactics, such as wire taps, satellite surveillance, and strict penalties, previously employed for drug trafficking and gang control.

The early 1990s in New York City was also the scene of rampant violence against cabdrivers. Although this violence wasn't new to the city or the country, in March and April of 1990 a serial killer targeting livery cab drivers in the Bronx robbed and shot his victims in the back of the head after being driven, as a fare, to a given destination. This killing spree testified to the extreme occupational dangers faced by cabdrivers, many of whom are immigrants working long hours at all times of day in order eke out a living.[36] According to reports in the *New York Times*, 21 cab and livery drivers were killed by September 1990 ("Livery-Cab"). The violence escalated in the following years, reaching a record 46 homicides of cabdrivers in 1992. From 1990 to 1993, over 100 cabdrivers, most livery drivers, were killed in the city.

Lee employs fictionalized versions of these events in *Native Speaker* by displacing the escalating violence between African American and Korean-American communities of Los Angeles prior to the riots to New York, recounting the Golden Venture shipwreck on a smaller scale and without naming it, and including an ongoing murder spree in which "five or six" unnamed taxi drivers, implicitly all immigrant men, are killed in the city at the same time as the other events in Henry's life are taking place.[37] The compound effect suggests that the nation ultimately places little value on the lives of those who seek refuge, opportunity, and equality here. Those killed or robbed in

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[36] According to a *New York Times* article by James C. McKinley, a 1987 national study found that taxi drivers are the occupational group, after police officers, killed most frequently on the job; the same article reports that in 1989, 253 taxi drivers were killed nationwide.

[37] For detailed correlations between *Native Speaker* and these historical events, see Liam Corley's "Just another ethnic pol: literary citizenship in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*."

racial conflict, drowned, imprisoned or deported while trying to enter the country, or slain in the front seat of a taxi, fail to exist as significant individuals in the world of the novel. Their lot is a reminder of the potential end that threatens all who reside in the limbo of living death in Lee's New York City – the immigrants (legal and not) and racial minorities who are silenced and discounted in the national imaginary. They remain interchangeable and invisible entities, until Henry begins to interact with them and take notice.

Not all immigrants meet such drastic ends in *Native Speaker*; however, Lee presents the larger immigrant population as connected by the shared experiences of social and political marginalization and economic exploitation that create the realm of living death. The immigrant community "offer[s] to the marketplace their gross of kimchee, lichee, plantain, black bean, soy milk, coconut milk, ginger, ahi, yellow curry, cuchifrito, jalapeno, their everything, selling anything to each other and to themselves, every day of the year, and every minute"(Lee, *NS* 83). While their contributions add to the richness of the American marketplace and culture, the people themselves are excluded. They are the living dead, the "brown and yellow whatevers, whoevers, countless unheard nobodies" (83), whose trauma Lee expands the scope of his novel to include. These marginalized people, allowed only a shadowy presence, haunt Henry's story as they haunt the nation and national literature.

Drawing upon the landscape and imagery of Fitzgerald's quintessential American novel *The Great Gatsby*, Lee's Henry observes "ghostly forms" below on his way to Kwang's office in Queens:

> I watched as people struggled to shift themselves forward in the bare morning light, gearing up for the work ahead of them, their ghostly forms drifting in and out of the cluttered maws of the storefronts and garages and warehouses. The people were thin, even when they looked almost fat they were thin, drawn as they were about the necks and faces. Even this early they were smoking cigarettes and cigars. The steam of fumes, other fires. Breathing it in. (82)

Here, Lee gives us a closer look at Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes, the wasteland beneath the train tracks where "ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight" (Fitzgerald 27). Henry travels on the same elevated train track above Queens that Nick Carraway does on his way to Manhattan. Both narrators comment on the scene below but see different things. Nick sees the shapes of a dismal reality through an "impenetrable cloud," but Henry pierces the cloud to see the men behind it.

Lee's allusion to Fitzgerald's novel, like Ng's, similarly inscribes his novel into a tradition of canonical American literature.[38] More than Ng, however, Lee simultaneously criticizes that tradition; he writes to fill in the blind spots of this representative of the great American novel.[39] What Fitzgerald allows the ashes to hide from the white, Midwestern Nick's vision, so he can sense but need not witness, Lee obliges Henry to see clearly: the struggle of exploited human life – the labor that threatens to devour the masses in its gaping jaws, the noxious air that poisons them. Henry must look at these

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[38] Lee's engagement with canonical texts is not limited to *Gatsby.* Liam Corely provides an interesting examination of Lee's use of Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers," from which the epigraph is taken and which Corely argues Lee alludes to throughout the text.

[39] Daniel Y. Kim also identifies a "Gatsbyesque conceit" in the way that Kwang is presented to the reader solely through Henry's perspective "suffused by a Nick Carraway-like sense of 'romance'"(263). *Gatsby* has also been invoked in reviews of *Aloft,* for example Michiko Kakutani's and A.O. Scott's *New York Times* reviews, suggesting a sense of Lee's continued engagement in his writing with Fitzgerald's novel.

people, because, although he may not identify with them at first, they are his people and this is where he comes from.

The allusion to the impersonal realm of the living dead in Lee's very own Valley of Ashes is personalized by the use of ash imagery in connection to individuals who figure in Henry's narrative. Henry recalls, for example, when in earlier years his father would leave for work with confidence and cologne, but when he would return "the magic had all but abandoned his face and his step, the aura was gone, the lilt, and I could smell the animal of him as he walked past my bedroom door in the short hall, the stink of sweat and ruined vegetables and the ashen city penetrating me like an epochal sickness" (Lee, *NS* 136). The vibrancy that the young Henry could momentarily admire in his father is smothered by the residue of the "ashen city" that shrouds Mr. Park in the public sphere and clings to him when he comes home, contaminating his family. Then, when Eduardo and Helda's bodies are found in Kwang's offices after the explosion and fire, they "were covered in a film of ash, as if they'd slept through a gentle, black snow" (250), an ironically peaceful image that manifests the polluted environment of racial and ethnic politics in the novel. Even the heroic Kwang, after the fire, is associated with the deadening cover of ash: "He delicately brushed his hair with his hand, as if it were strands of ash" (272). His attempt to brush away his hair, as if ash, may also be read as an attempt to brush off the guilt he feels for these deaths. He tries to shake off the ashes, but they have become a part of his body. The literary depiction of Kwang's hair as ash foreshadows his imminent fate in America, reduced from public figure to shadowy form, to be remembered, if not for Henry, as merely another foreigner who returned to his country.

Unlike Kwang who fades into shadow, female figures like Henry's mother and the Korean houselady Ahjuhma never acquire a solid presence in the world outside the home at all. As You-Me Park and Gayle Wald argue in "Native Daughters in the Promised Land," Korean women are particularly shadowy figures in the novel because Lee's narrative "mostly concerns itself with the legitimation of a male immigrant subject in the public sphere" (609). Henry's last memories of his mother attest to her limited existence in comparison to her husband's. She never truly lives in America, even for her son, for whom her demise "was more like a disappearance than a death" (Lee*, NS* 77). He has no final image of his mother, despite being sent into the hospital room to bid her farewell. Instead he remembers clearly the sight of his father in the corridor outside her hospital room "trying hard to swallow the nothing balling in his throat" (59). Henry's need to negotiate a relationship to America must be accomplished through his father, who has a connection and presence, however tenuous, with the world of America outside the stronghold of family and culture for which women are responsible and to which restricted.

Park and Wald turn to Ahjuhma as the most extreme manifestation of the abject Korean woman whose very body has been appropriated by the domestic sphere so that she has "no access to cultural, political, or 'economic' encounters with American society" (622).[40] Ahjuhma's abjection is a condition of her living death. Henry describes her as "some kind of zombie," the very definition of the living dead. He goes on to state "[w]hen she wasn't cleaning or cooking or folding clothes she was barely present; she never whistled or hummed or made any noise, and it seemed to me as if she only partly

[40] Equally invisible to American society and more peripheral to Henry's story are Helda Brandeis and the young, illegal "hospitality girl" who is seriously injured in Kwang's car accident. These women are little more than collateral damage to Kwang, Henry, and Lee.

possessed her own body, and preferred it that way" (Lee*, NS* 65). She has no identity or life outside of the domestic role she filled for the Parks. Her body, functioning to fulfill her duties, does not belong to her and may indeed be a burden attaching her to a life unlived. This lack of autonomous existence explains why she had to die before Mr. Park, without whom she has no purpose or ties to the land where he has brought her. Without Mr. Park there is no justification for her continued existence.

Though male and American-born, Henry, too, has but a shadowy presence. He is a spook who hones his invisibility into a serviceable commodity. The word "spook," which Henry and his colleagues at Glimmer and Co. use to describe their occupation as secret agents, allows Lee to conflate the two meanings of the word, spy and specter, to emphasize how Henry's career both capitalizes upon and deepens his protagonist's invisibility. Lee's repetitive use of this word highlights the racial source of this invisibility engendered by exaggerated visibility. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) indelibly connected the concepts of haunting and racial in/visibility with its unforgettable first lines: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). Henry too is a spook because people refuse to see the person beyond his objectified broad, yellow face.[41]

Working as spies, Henry and his colleagues employ an "honourable seeming absence" that threatens to erase them. Lee's turn of phrase here enables a double reading.

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[41] Numerous reviewers have remarked on *Native Speaker's* similarities and indebtedness to *Invisible Man.* Daniel Y. Kim in "Do I, too, Sing America?" and Tina Chen in "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts" also begin their critical articles on Lee's novel with a consideration of its connections to and/divergence from Ellison's novel.

Does *seeming* modify *absence* or *honourable*? The word simultaneously casts doubt on both. The *absence* of these characters is one that exists only on a symbolic level by virtue of their exclusion from the national imaginary, the refusal of others to see them. The characters' belief that this absence can be put to honourable use is illusory and self-deceptive. They contribute to their own absence with their disappearing acts and cultivated invisibility. Henry tries to convince himself that invisibility is an asset he controls, but, in fact, it is not a choice; "the spy's empowering positionality is confounded when the invisibility of the spy coincides with the in/visibilities of race" (Chen 645). Embracing his ghost-like identity as a spy augments Henry's invisibility and lodges him more firmly in the trap of living death. He, too, is only half-alive, an absent presence barely living his life. His wife Lelia remarks on this when she tells him, "Sometimes I think you're not even here with the rest of us, you know, engaged, present" (Lee*, NS* 126). Invisibility may be an advantage in Henry's professional life but cannot be contained there. It bleeds into his personal life and adds to the complications in his marriage; he thinks he is being an "impeccable mate" by wearing masks of the ideal husband but is actually absenting himself from the relationship.

John Kwang is a public figure who at first not only seems to have evaded the insubstantiality of living death that plagues his community but also attempts to challenge the marginalization and stunted lives of his constituents. His large-scale, pan-ethnic ggeh, or money club, is an attempt to provide the immigrant community with financial and political support. The ggeh collected regular contributions of money from hundreds of participants who would then be given, as needed, funds for a home, business capital, or college tuition for a child. A spreadsheet, which becomes Henry's responsibility after

Eduardo's death, lists information about all members. The spreadsheet asserts the existence of the invisible and silent "foreigners-within" as part of the American population. In addition, the ggeh has the potential to serve not only as a political powerbase for Kwang but also as an economic and social springboard for the disempowered. Though some, like Mr. Park, must be allowed to achieve financial success in order to preserve the myth of the immigrant success story and to serve as functionaries in the exploitation of newer immigrants, the masses must be kept in their place. Their presence in America is predicated upon their disenfranchisement and exploitability as cheap labor that the ggeh can help them circumvent. This potential of the ggeh makes it objectionable to the state, prompting the government's hiring of Glimmer and Co. to spy on Kwang.

As a result, Kwang's compilation of the list, attempting to count the "countless unheard nobodies," ironically facilitates their ejection when Henry hands the spreadsheet over to Hoagland, who in turn delivers it to the INS. The list is used to round up and deport all the illegal aliens involved. The hundreds expelled, in combination with the illegal immigrants shipwrecked and doomed to death or deportation, and the cabbie murders, both reported at the same time in the novel as the explosion at Kwang's office, attests to the fact that, in the larger view of nation, these people are allowed only a tenuous existence in America. They are vulnerable to death metaphorically and physically. Henry and his family are not immune.

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Mitt, the clean and bright one—somehow, miraculously, ours…

The shocking death of his seven year-old son, Mitt, preceding the narrative present of the novel, is unquestionably the crucial trauma initiating Henry's identity

crisis. At the start of the book, Henry's life is falling apart. His Anglo-American, speech therapist wife Lelia is leaving to travel to Italy, where she seeks refuge from her own grief over Mitt's sudden death as well as from their marital problems, for which she blames Henry. She accuses him of being unfeeling because he has not spoken with her about their loss. Henry is also having trouble at work, nearly botching his undercover assignment as a patient of Dr. Luzan. While his task is merely to elicit information about the doctor, Henry also reveals too much about himself – his dead son, Korean parents, and troubled marriage – endangering his cover and needing to be pulled out. Henry, always careful in his speech and deliberate in the self he presents to others, becomes "inconsistently schizophrenic" after his son's death (Lee*, NS* 22). He can no longer masterfully negotiate when he should and shouldn't speak, who he should or shouldn't be for a given audience.

Overwhelmed with grief, Henry's psyche resists integration of the unfathomable loss of his son as a result of children's unintentionally murderous play at the boy's birthday party. The trauma for Henry is, as Cathy Caruth describes is characteristic of trauma, "not simply violence of an accident but its very incomprehensibility" (*UE* 6). Mitt's death unhinges Henry's experience of self and world, neither of which makes sense without the boy or the promise of the future he embodies for both Henry and America. Henry becomes trapped in a timeless cycle of melancholic repetition. He returns time and again to his traumatic memory of Mitt's death.

For nights after the accident, Henry relives his return to the scene "like a cinematic mantra, a mystical trailer of memory" (Lee*, NS* 104). He views and re-views in his mind's eye the image of mother and child on the lawn as he encountered them on that

fateful day. The soundtrack of Lelia's unintelligible wails and a single boy's reiterations of the declarative "It was just a stupid dog pile" accompany the moving image to emphasize the incomprehensibility of the tragedy, which crescendoes when Henry's father leaves the house, after calling an ambulance, to collapse awkwardly, diminished and devastated, on the grass. Additional unconscious meanings of the trauma are illustrated therein when Henry's entire family has collapsed. The two most powerful figures in his personal cosmology, his "low master" and "lengthy Anglican goddess," have been leveled, literally brought to their knees, presaging the events that would follow – the old man's steady decline toward death, the dissolution of Lelia and Henry's marriage, and Henry's identity crisis. Mitt was Henry's bridge to both Lelia and his father. Without him to bind them all together and carry them into the future, familial ties begin to fray.

Henry's nightly returns to this moment both resemble and diverge from traumatic memory. The cinematic nature of this memory reinforces its unreal quality and unassimilable nature, too overwhelming to be integrated into the psyche. Lee's choice of *mantra* to characterize the ritualistic quality of the repetition alludes to the recurring nature of traumatic memory; however, *mantra* simultaneously suggests how Henry seems to invite the memory. Traumatic memory recurs in the form of involuntary flashbacks and actions; Henry, instead, appears to will the memory's return, night after night, only after Leila has fallen asleep beside him. But what does Henry attempt to conjure through his mantra of memory? Perhaps he seeks to invoke the actual moment Mitt's life ended in hopes of undoing it. His mantra is after all a "trailer of memory," a memory limited to

that which came after this crucial moment and that drags on behind long after the event has passed.

We know that at other times, too, Henry consciously and deliberately attempts to call forth this irrecoverable moment and possibly make some sense of it. His days and nights are characterized by imaginative attempts to "[r]eside … in the last place of the dead," speculating about the boy's death,"Maybe this way":

> A crush. You pale little boys are crushing him, your adoring mob of hands and feet, your necks and heads, your nostrils and knees, your still-sweet-sweat and teeth and grunts. To think, anyway, to breathe. How pale his face, his chest. Blanket his eyes. Listen, now. You can hear the attempt of his breath, that unlost voice calling us from the bottom of the earth. (105-6)

Henry attempts to return to the "last place of the dead" in an effort to connect with his lost son in his final living moment. He seeks to reach a dimension outside of time and place where Mitt can continue to live and speak, the two intimately related for Henry. However, because he was not physically present when Mitt's life departed his body, Henry cannot remember his son's final breath. His attempts at recovery are fruitless and detrimental to his psychic health; he merely exposes himself to reliving feelings of failure, emptiness, and grief. Henry becomes more firmly trapped in a single moment. In this imagined place of absent memory, Henry believes he can hear Mitt's voice calling out to him but he does not know what the voice is trying to say. Henry's memory becomes, in Caruth's definition of trauma, "the story of a wound that cries out … in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (*UE* 4). Mitt has

been buried but remains to haunt Henry with a voice from the underworld that he must learn to listen to and understand.

Henry cannot yet understand the truth that Mitt, from the position of the dead, has to tell him. Instead, in hopes of hearing the voice of a living Mitt, he turns for comfort to a box of audio tapes, recorded over the course of the boy's short life, of the child reciting newly learned profanities, playing with friends, and, forgetting the recorder's presence, in daily conversations with his mother. The aurally-obsessed Henry listens to these tapes not simply to evoke memories of Mitt but to invoke his presence, as well as that of Lelia, who at the moment is also, Henry fears, lost to him. Henry relies on Mitt's voice to return the boy to him. The voice does not bring Mitt back but remains to haunt Henry with Mitt's absence. "He rings in your ears," Henry comments to Lelia (Lee*, NS* 116). Like Eugenio's viewings of the central *I Love Lucy* episode and Cesar's continuous playing of the titular record *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* in Hijuelos's novel, Henry's listening to his son's voice on the tapes enables a false resurrection of the dead through technology that encourages denial and melancholic attachment. The tapes revive an animated memory of Mitt resistant to closure because not stopped in time and, paradoxically, very much stopped in time. The voice on the tapes also reinforces a false memory of Mitt as Henry wanted him to be: "Mitt always spoke beautifully, if I remember anything at all" (239).[42] The playful voice of the child seems to fulfill Henry's concept of Mitt being accepted with ease as American, as a native speaker.

[42] This statement ignores what Henry admits elsewhere in the narrative (for example on page 107), that the boy, by the time he dies, had already become careful and guarded in his speech in imitation of his parents whose difficulties communicating manifest themselves in circumspect speech, especially around their young son. Such contradiction reminds us, as readers, that Henry is an unreliable narrator.

Melancholic attachment to the moment of death manifests itself also in Henry and Lelia's desperate lovemaking following the accident:

> During certain nights, I pulled a half-sleeping Lelia back onto my body, right onto my chest, and breathed as barely as I could without falling faint. …I was Mitt, and then she was Mitt, our balance of all those boys who had now grown up. We nearly pressed each other to death,… that great obese heft of melancholy … piling on at once so that sometimes whether we wanted to or not we made love so hard and gritty we had to say fuck to be telling the very first part of the truth. (106)

Their lovemaking is an attempt to deny Mitt's death, to hold on to him by becoming him and clinging to his last living moments. Perhaps Henry seeks some small modicum of comfort in taking upon himself the pain experienced beneath the weight of bodies crushing Mitt in Leila's white body bearing down on his. However, no comfort comes; their lovemaking, of which Mitt was once the product, becomes ugly and harsh. Violence and love merge in a suffocating combination that defiles the memory of Mitt, their clean, miraculous boy. Reenactments of the accident cast each not only as Mitt but also, alternately, as the boys crushing him. Henry relives, in his identification with the force bearing down, his feelings of guilt. He absorbs the responsibility of the white bodies as well as the pain inflicted on his son's, implying racially-inflected guilt related to his assimilist desire for whiteness and the act of miscegenation that created a child disallowed by the national imaginary.

Much of Henry's guilt stems also from a powerlessness to protect Mitt as a father should. He was not there at the moment of the accident. He returned to Mr. Park's yard,

where the birthday party was taking place, to find his son's lifeless body cradled in Lelia's arms. Though he attempted CPR, the violent resuscitative attempt was gratuitous; the boy was already dead. Henry was too late, too absent, to intercede. He was helpless and ineffective. Henry had fallen short as a father in a way that his father, "nothing if not a provider and a bulwark" (135), never would have. Henry, in this failure, has also failed his father. When Henry was a child, identifying with his mother and her physical ailments, Henry's father would berate them both to toughen up, "resounding his personal lore of how merciless and dangerous it was in this land and that he could only do so much to protect us" (135). Mr. Park is sharply aware of his limited power and the vulnerable status of his family in America, whereas it seems that Henry, though generally harsh in his criticism of his father as un-American, envisions him as unfailing in his traditional paternal role. Henry dismisses his father's warning of danger as a "small man's folly" of self-importance in viewing "nation as a personal test – and by extension, a test of family" but cannot deny the protection his father provided (135). Henry's father has succeeded, by dint of his hard work and determination, in providing for Henry to advance in this merciless and dangerous land; Henry, in his turn, has failed the test. He has failed in his familial obligations as father and as son to protect his family. He is not present when the young white bodies push down upon the next generation of Parks in America.

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Cast it all, if you will, in a broad yellow light.

Henry's melancholic response to Mitt's death expresses his racial melancholia. David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, in "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," describe racial melancholia as the "ongoing series of failed and unresolved integrations" resulting from the contradictory processes of assimilation and racialization. Assimilation requires

attainment of mainstream norms and ideals, including whiteness and the middle class family, while racialization simultaneously precludes certain groups from these goals. Henry's assimilation in *Native Speaker* is perpetually unresolved, or suspended as Eng and Han might say; his sacrifice or suppression of personal and cultural difference are met, not with inclusion, but continued exclusion from the larger group and nation. He is, in Anne Cheng's terms, relegated to the position of "foreigner-within" despite being born and living his entire life on American land. Henry aspires to the ideals of whiteness and middle-class culture that, as a Korean American, are just out of his reach. Despite significant gains in language acquisition, education, economic class, and family structure, Henry remains on the fringes of the national fabric.

The mixed-race child Mitt embodies the potential for complete integration into the American mainstream that Henry could never achieve for himself. Henry hopes to spare his son the aspects of his Korean legacy that impeded his own limited assimilation, "all of that too-ready devotion and honoring, and the chilly itch of my blood, and then all that burning language that I presumed useless, never uttered and never lived" (Lee*, NS* 285) along with that "difficult face" that Henry wished were not his or his son's. He wants Mitt to enjoy "a singular sense of himself, a life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not" (267). The dream is that Mitt, because half-white, would be more fully integrated into mainstream American society, and despite his "half-yellow face," spared the racial and cultural inheritance that relegates Asian Americans to an outsider position.

In light of this desire, *Mitt* stands out, as an odd, unrealistic name choice. As cited by Min Hyoung Song in "A Diasporic Future? *Native Speaker* and Historical

Trauma," literary critic Hyungji Park has noted that a possible cognate of Mitt's name, pronounced in Korean, means bottom. Thus, "the death of [Henry's] son seems to have been inevitable on a literal as well as a figurative level, the name of the son in one language inscribing in another his untimely demise" and demonstrating the impossibility of translating Korean ancestry into American identity (Song 88). This revealing insight may account partly for Lee's decision in the naming of his character, as it serves to emphasize the symbolic meaning of the child's death. The Korean cognate also reiterates Mitt's location at the "bottom of the earth." This "bottom" is the realm of the dead to which the boy, banished from the world of the living, has been quite literally pushed down into and from which he endeavors to communicate across the boundary of life and death with his father.

However, this linguistic association of Mitt with *bottom* would only be accessible to a distinct audience of cultural insiders, and because Lee is writing for a dual audience, we must also consider the implications of this name for the wider audience of cultural outsiders, the "you" Henry addresses and distinctly sets apart from himself as white, mainstream American readers. *Mitt* has many connotations in English that Lee, so sensitive to language, no doubt considered. A mitt in English refers to a protective glove. The word's most common usage in the vernacular is in reference to a baseball mitt, necessary to cushion the blow of the fast-moving baseball into a catcher's hand. Baseball is the all-American sport that generations of American men bond over. Mitt's name, therefore, may also be read as reflecting and reinforcing his son's American-ness, though doing so in a way that undermines its intent. The child is named for baseball equipment, reducing him to an object, an object with a purpose. Like a mitt, Mitt's purpose seems to

be to cushion the blow of American racial politics, which cannot easily be changed to provide a comfortable home for non-white, non-Anglo Americans. Yet as the protective covering, Mitt/the mitt absorbs the impact directly and cannot survive the force of the pitch.

Mitt also sounds and looks like *mutt*, reinforcing to the boy's mixed race ancestry and the negativity attached to it in a racially structured society. This connotation foreshadows the taunts of his peers and casts the boy, once more, as less than human, an animal whose pedigree is degraded by parents of different breeds. It reinforces the fact that, despite Henry's stated desire for his son to be "univocal" and pure, the boy is both Korean and American, or perhaps neither Korean nor American. For in both languages, the name is badly chosen and has negative repercussions. The issue of choice brings us back to Henry and Lelia, who in the fictional world of the novel ostensibly did the naming. By having them bestow upon their child such an ill-fitting and ill-fated name, Lee suggests a failure of Henry and Lelia to understand the nuances of the Korean *and* English languages, evincing a non-native speaker relation to both languages.

Henry admits his linguistic failure when he tells Dr. Luzan of the imaginary brother with no name that he, as a child, created and considered his hero. Henry fantasized about a brother who was "perfect," "better than anyone," to represent all that he ardently wished to be. This brother was handsome, athletic, smart, beloved of white girls, and admired by white boys. He "spoke a singing beautiful English" and "could beat up the big black kids if he wished, the tough Puerto Rican kids, and anyone else who called us names or made slanty eyes" (Lee*, NS* 205). Henry relied upon this imaginary brother, "this comely wall of him, talking his trash and his resplendence, talking me up,

too, talking my story" (206) to accomplish for him what he himself could not. Unsurprisingly, the focus here is on language and speech. Henry created a figure who could "talk" his story for him with confidence and splendor.

Henry explains that he was unable to select a name for his imaginary brother because his ignorance of the subtleties of meaning of Korean names and what he deems the ordinary boringness of American names precluded any suitable choice. Perhaps the same limitations came into play in naming his son, who is the only other person in his life that Henry considers in connection with the word "perfect." In fact, I suspect that the memory of Henry's imaginary brother recounted in his "skein" for Dr. Luzan may indeed be entangled with his desired vision of Mitt in the future. Henry is far from a reliable narrator and is skilled at constructing plausible lies from elements of truth, particularly when dealing with a target, which Luzan was. His story may be "a necessary fiction" from his childhood where "greater truths [pertaining to Mitt?] reside" (207). Henry's confession regarding his made-up brother may also attest to what he is not able to admit readily about his son: "In my imagination these blinding halos of terror and beauty ring him, or maybe they were the same, as though he were limited somehow by his own unbearable preeminence and in that way given over to a doom in his life" (205-6). Henry is aware that a perfect person cannot exist in an imperfect world. Still he persists in perceiving Mitt as the ideal realization of all his desires.

Henry wanted to believe that with the white, Anglo Lelia as mother, all outer traces of Mitt's Asian difference would disappear, or melt away if you will, and Mitt would be able to claim America as his own and be claimed in return.[43] From Henry and Lelia's first meeting, Henry's attraction to Lelia can be traced, in part, to her American-

[43] June Dwyer refers to Mitt as embodiment of the unviable concept of the melting pot (76).

ness, evinced in her whiteness and perfect English. Henry's first impressions of Lelia are: first, she is "very white," and second,"she could really speak" (9-10). These are the qualities that Henry, more than Lelia, aspires to for Mitt, the "the truest moment of their union."[44] For Henry and Lelia, though, their union refers to more than simply the love that brings two people together. "Alive, Mitt is the living fulfillment of their love and a symbol of the integration of their lives, cultures, and races" (Hurst 9). Mitt is the bridge. He brings his parents together across the distance of difference and miscommunication between them, the gaps created by the dichotomies of white/racialized, native/foreign, American/Other that polarize them in the public realm and seep into their personal lives. The first description of Mitt that Henry gives us depicts the child as such. He describes the young boy running around the couple's spacious and largely empty loft in Manhattan. Mitt playfully traversed the "obscene white expanse," literally filling the space between husband and wife, who "tended to dwell in the corners, along the periphery" (Lee*, NS* 24). Mitt was the figure who could bring his parents into the center, or so Henry hoped.

For neither Henry nor Lelia is comfortable or confident in the right to occupy the center. Though critic Tim Engles argues that "Lelia seems to consider her non-alien, 'native' perspective beyond question" (33), Lelia's clinging to the edges like Henry seems incongruent with her supposedly unassailable American-ness. I am more inclined to agree with Liam Corely that Lelia is "the most careful performer of American identity" in the novel. Lee is indicating to us, here and elsewhere, that which Henry may not be fully aware of or willing to recognize: American-ness is always constructed and

[44] Lelia, not Henry, insists that Mitt attend Korean school on weekends and points out to the boy that the people on the streets of Koreatown are "just like you" (283). How long the boy attends Korean school and what he learns there is never mentioned, but, based on Henry's accounts, the boy does not learn the Korean language.

performative. Such a recognition would complicate Henry's investment in his vision of Mitt's inborn American-ness.

Lelia presents herself as the typical white woman with no mystery, but, as Henry responds, whether or not he believes it himself, "There's always a mystery… You just have to know where to look" (Lee*, NS* 10). And, as Henry eventually learns, there are quite a few secrets in Lelia Boswell's family closet – her father's alcoholism and philandering, her mother's depression and fear of leaving the house, her uncle's death from AIDS. Her father Stew Boswell's improprieties, enacted with impunity, demonstrate an unquestionable right to exist in the world and do as he pleases, whereas her mother's and uncle's illnesses suggest axes of marginalization in addition to race and ethnicity, namely gender and sexuality, that also operate within national culture.[45] While Lelia's Anglo blood, then, carries the ambivalent inheritances of "openness and exuberance and all that hard focus" that render Stew incredibly successful and self-assured (though also overbearing, obnoxious, and racist) (119), this blood is no guarantor of the position of unassailable authority in mainstream culture in a different body (female like Lelia or her mother, homosexual like her uncle, or racially-marked like Mitt).

Moreover, Lelia's perfect English is neither natural nor inherent. It is as deliberate and careful as Henry's, only more congruent with her face. She explains (and he accepts) that her vigilant articulation of words is her responsibility as "standard-bearer" without either noting that this is a self-appointed position. Lelia assumes this title and task in relation to the immigrant populations for whom she provides impromptu English lessons

[45] Lee does not explicitly state that Steven was homosexual but presents numerous markers that the reader, drawing on a cultural context of the AIDS epidemic and its devastation of the gay community in New York City in the 1980s, would be able to interpret. As evinced by his use of the L.A. riots and the Golden Venture accident, Lee expects his readers to bring cultural knowledge to their reading.

while delivering food and performing other social services as a volunteer. Solidifying her authority as native speaker, Lelia then becomes a certified speech therapist working primarily with children who are learning English as a second language. Mastery of English is no less a means and emblem of American-ness for Lelia as for the immigrants and their children (like her students and Henry) for whom English is not a native-language.

Nor does English, beautifully spoken as taught by his mother, render Mitt safely American, except perhaps as the disembodied voice that Henry listens to on the audio tapes. For, even in combination with a maternal Anglo ancestry and American nativity, Mitt's American-ness, in a racially structured society where "[h]uman fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance" (Lopez 164), is contingent upon the view of others. When Henry and Lelia first begin spending summers with Mitt in Mr. Park's affluent suburban town, the boy is met with his peers' taunts of gook, chink, jap, and Charlie Chan, and later, after being seen with his parents, mutt, half-breed, banana, and twinkie. He is perceived as an outsider, an imposter, an impurity, not a subversive presage of the future as Henry sees him. The other boys, whom Lee subtly renders as representative of unthinking white superiority, focus instead on what Anne Cheng calls the "always-insisted-on-difference" of race that persistently marks Asian Americans as foreigners-within. Mitt's death, then, symbolically declares the unwillingness of America to accept racial mixing, the blurring of racial distinctions, that threatens the fictive ethnicity of "authentic" Americans as WASP.

Henry wants Mitt to be white in order to be American and believes that Lelia and the Boswell bloodline make this possible. Henry believes strongly in "blood,"

particularly paternal bloodlines. Blood and paternal family, *ilga* and *tonjok* respectively, are important values in traditional Korean culture that, though suppressed in response to assimilative pressure and desires, have a continued influence over Henry. He does not want Mitt to be like him or his father in terms of exclusion from or liminality in American society, but at the same time he depends upon Mitt to carry their family line into America. He refers to their blood "coursing through him [Mitt] like trickling old rivers" along with Leila's bloodline (138); he also fights against Lelia's suggestion that they consider adoption for a second child because "although your offerings of unconditional love and respect and devotion will make good of most any child, what you cannot give or else substitute is that tie unspoken and unseen, the belief in blood, that unbreakable connection telling your boy or girl that hers will never be a truly solitary life" (108). These statements suggest that Henry doesn't actually want to disown Asian ancestry. He wants, and insists that, his Korean blood to be passed on, but he knows that this desire conflicts with the only way he knows to be American – complete assimilation. Bloodlines are significant, in his view, not only as a means of ensuring a legacy but also for the child whom blood binds to a community and family. Despite Henry's attempts to distance himself from his father, he believes that blood relations can prevent one from being alone in the world.

What Henry envisions in Mitt's body, "his boy's form already so beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic" (103), is an invisible infiltration of Asian blood into the American corpus – like the invisible drop of black added to each can of optic white paint in *Invisible Man* that renders this government-issue paint made by Liberty Paint Co. the whitest white possible. However, the Park blood coursing through Mitt's body is not

invisible, and so his subversive body cannot be tolerated. Indeed, all traces of him and his challenge to the dominant concept of "American" must be eliminated or white-washed, such as when Mr. Park, in an explicit allusion to Ellison's novel, covers the blue walls of his dead grandson's room with "optic white" paint (217).

In an interview for the *New York Times Book Review*, Lee stated that Mitt's death represents an end of "'a way of thinking about the future,' the idea that maybe the time was not quite right for such a 'subversive, historic, unprecedented' blending of ethnicities" (Belluck B4). Lee reiterates the loss of the ideals of American identity in the actual loss of Mitt. The boy embodies both a desired vision for the future – "the possible fulfillment of the American Dream" (Dwyer 78) – and, upon his death, the foreclosure of that vision as nothing but a dream.

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I suppose they could build a bridge because they needed one.

Though Mitt more apparently embodies the potential for integration of the marginalized, raced ethnic into mainstream white America, he also undermines this model of incorporation which includes an eradication of difference and an implicit acceptance of the white ideal. For unlike Henry who is conflicted in his relationship to his father and his Korean ancestry, Mitt, as a young, innocent child, shares a close and mutually loving relationship with his grandfather without having to consider the attitudes and exclusions of the society at large. "He loved the old man, adored him. Whenever you looked Mitt was scaling the wide bow of that paternal back, or swinging from his shoulders, or standing on the tops of his feet so that they walked in tandem, with ponderous doubled soles" (Lee*, NS* 102).

The language of this telling description expresses an unspoken appreciation for the foundation Mr. Park has established for his grandson in America and an inextricable connection between past and future. The "bow of the paternal back" imagines the grandfather's back, curved from a life of labor and sacrifice, as the bow from which Mitt is launched into the future as a new American.[46] The boy swings from his grandfather's body like swinging from a tree, for Mr. Park has established the roots of the Park family in this new land and has grown into a sturdy bough from which the third generation can now move back and forth playfully. Finally, Henry's description of the two walking together on "doubled soles" is a significant play on words, sole/soul. Mitt is the soul of the future and Mr. Park that of the past. The two are bound and move – or halt – as one. Mitt was Mr. Park's, as well as Henry's, lifeline into the future, without whom there is seemingly no place or purpose to continue to exist in the world.

In fact, Mitt's death begins Mr. Park's dying, when he falls to his knees before Mitt's dead body on the lawn. The two are kindred spirits, and without Mitt alive in the world and with Henry's critical attitude toward his Korean legacy, Mr. Park's function as ancestor, source of familial history and ethnic heritage, has no value. Mitt's death, then, also involves a second death, the death of Henry's tenuous connection to the past that is solidified when Mr. Park's body expires after eighteen months of degeneration as, in a series of three strokes, he loses sensation in and control over his body. He, like Ahjuhma, is dispossessed of his body. Without Mitt, Henry needs to revive his own connection to the past and his Korean ancestry. And without his father, Henry must turn to the broader communal connections he had abused as a spy.

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[46] Pronounced differently, bow also alludes to the front section of a boat suggestive of the immigrant journey, though the Parks themselves arrived by airplane. The "wide bow" also signifies in contrast to the stifling conditions of the Golden Venture immigrants.

Henry deliberately does not pass on the traditions of his foreign ancestry to his son. He states that he, Lelia, and his father all allowed Mitt to "trample over all our custom and ceremony" (266). He did not teach Mitt Korean nor instill in him the tradition and discipline that his parents had insisted upon with him. Though he later regrets this when he reencounters "the need of the culture even for the smallest acts" with John Kwang (271), Henry believes these outward observances of Korean culture could hold Mitt back in American society. And yet, though Mitt did not participate in Korean culture himself, neither did he shun it. He was open to his grandfather's ways and appreciative as Henry was not.

Mitt did not judge his grandfather based on differences. Lee demonstrates this with Mitt's attitudes toward language. Mitt, who doesn't speak Korean and is a native English speaker, is able to communicate with his grandfather with little difficulty. The boy simply repeats, without mocking, his grandfather's statements until he grasps the old man's meaning. Mitt accepts his grandfather's language as just that, his grandfather's language, not a degraded form of another language. In fact, Mitt "could mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean, these notes of who we were, and perhaps he could imagine, if briefly, that this was our truest world, rich with disparate melodies" (240), something Henry is not able to imagine while his father is alive. Only after both Mitt and his father are dead does Henry begin to appreciate the beauty of his father's language and feel his loss of the Korean language.

Henry explains the closeness between his father and Mitt as enabled, paradoxically, by the distance between them. He says he and his father were too close to "build a bridge" as Mitt and his grandfather could: "we were always within striking

distance of each other" (239). Raised in an immigrant household, in a "foreign" culture, with a "foreign" face, Henry identifies strongly, and against his will, with his immigrant father. He fears that a distinction, to be found only in differentiation from his Korean father, must be wrought to establish himself as American.

Henry attempts to create a space between himself and his father, for example, with language. Mr. Park spoke a broken, heavily accented English, learned at his store, which was littered, like Leon Leong's in *Bone,* with angry racial slurs no doubt hurled at him by others. Henry, whose own English was "corrected" and formed with years of speech instruction at school, recalls as a boy making fun of his father's speech. Once, thinking he was coming to his mother's rescue when his father employed English in an argument with her, Henry assailed his father with his fine, school-educated English and undermined his father's position in the household by allowing the outside world's denigration of the immigrant non-native speaker into the private space of the family. And yet, while Henry was willing to use his English *against* his father, he refused to use it *for* his father. When Mr. Park brings Henry to the grocery store on weekends and requests he show off his English skills, Henry instead chooses to mumble in Korean and become invisible to the customers. He finds that by "speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me… I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them" (53).

Henry values English and yearns for American-ness as a means to separate himself from his father, not as a tribute to his father's success. Though Henry loves his father, his feelings for the old man are conflicted. He considers his father the one who holds him back from belonging in the U.S., not as the one who enables American-ness or

deserves any credit for it. Mitt, on the other hand, has enough of Lelia and her father in him to permit him to accept his Korean grandfather without endangering his American foothold. Henry's footing has never been secure. He worked diligently toward trying to establish American-ness though his careful speech, his education, his American friends and activities as a teen, and, especially after his mother's death, by turning against his father and diminishing his adherence to Korean culture. He loses his facility with the Korean language and his ties to the Korean-American community.

But Henry cannot be entirely held responsible for his weakening of cultural transmission. Dissociating himself from the Korean ggeh that helped him make his start and moving his family from Koreatown in Queens to an all-white neighborhood in Ardsley, Mr. Park himself admits that "In America…it's even hard to stay Korean"(51).

This challenge is impossible for Henry. How can Henry, born and raised in America, be expected to carry a memory of a place and time he never experienced and never was told about? In her influential work *Articulate Silences* (1993), King-Kok Cheung explains that "verbal restraint" is a trait of Asian cultures further induced for immigrants "as a survival strategy in the face of racism"(6). *Native Speaker* illustrates reticence on the part of Henry's parents deriving from the imperatives of both tradition and survival. Within the home, cultural etiquette and personal ambivalence hinder Henry from asking his parents about their pasts and his parents from sharing personal stories with him. In the public sphere, "survival" is thought to depend upon conformity to the model minority image. The isolating and silencing effect of this stereotype on the Parks reveals itself in the carefully composed lives shown to others and the great store of things unspoken. Henry remembers his parents' fear of disturbing this flattering but confining

image. "[W]e had to be careful of what people thought of us," he reveals, "as if we ought to mince delicately about in pained feet through our immaculate neighborhood, we silent partners of the bordering WASPs and Jews, never troubling them except with a smile" (52). Henry's parents sought protection in this stereotype and the silence that rendered them inobtrusive, invisible, and thus tolerable to those, the assuredly Americans and previous model minority, who seem to be in a position to allow (or not) the Parks to remain in the middle-class suburban neighborhood.

Regardless of its sources, the Parks' reticence contributes to a crisis of cultural memory. And upon Mr. Park's death, Henry loses his opportunity to know about his father's life. He never knows why his father came to America, what his father's experience in Korea during the war was, what his father's relationship with Ahjuhma was, if he'd prefer to have remained in Queens with less money but surrounded by fellow Koreans, whether or not he cried over his wife's death, who the people in the growing stack of photographs of unknown people are. Henry cannot recover this knowledge that must be added to the other cultural losses typical of the American immigrant model. Henry can only come to see what has been lost when he can shift his focus from the blinding goal of assimilation at any cost.

Henry sees Mitt as enabling a progression of the Parks toward American-ness; however, Lee has modeled Mitt more as a member of the metaphorical, as well as literal, third generation, who will turn back to his ethnic roots after the turning away of the second generation. The bridge that Mitt and Mr. Park were able to build between themselves was as much a bridge for Henry as for them. Mitt would be the one to recover ethnic roots after successfully integrating into American society, and thereby provide a

safe connection to a past Henry feels too close to embrace himself. When Mitt dies, Henry loses the possibility of this bridge to his father and Korean culture, which he himself had sacrificed or repressed within himself.

Mitt's death returns the responsibility of ethnic renewal to Henry. However, Henry is not yet able to acknowledge the significance of this loss, even when confronted with the additional loss of his father. It is only through the fall of John Kwang, in and through whom Mitt and Mr. Park are unearthed in Henry's thoughts, that Henry can begin to grasp the magnitude of what he has lost and turn back to his father and Korean culture with yearning and appreciation. Mitt and Mr. Park are physically dead and buried, but their memories and "unlost voices" return to haunt Henry with grief and guilt. They must be reburied in Henry's living memory and his narrative to become available to the future as what Robert Pogue Harrison, in *Dominion of the Dead,* calls a humic foundation. As Harrison explains, "through burial we consign the future of our legacies to this humic element, with its vast, diversely populated underworlds" (xi), so by his literary secondary burial of his father and Mitt, Henry is able to lay his loved ones to rest and also transform them into accessible and beneficent spirits in the service of cultural memory and renewal. The process of cultural mourning, constituting reburial of Henry's lost loved ones, occurs through John Kwang.

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What I saw in him I had not thought to seek…

Henry looks to Kwang, a successful Korean man on the American scene, for help in discovering his own identity but can only do so by also seeing in Kwang the immigrant roots of his father and the "effortlessly Korean, effortlessly American" possibilities he sought in Mitt. Kwang is the figure that brings both together in the present so Henry can

reimagine his relationship to each and re-experience their losses in Kwang's fall, which allows for a reburial and a new connection to both Henry's father and Mitt.

Kwang, as a character, is constructed in direct relation to Henry's father. His Korean-ness is defined in comparison to Mr. Park and his American-ness in contrast. Henry's first description of Kwang testifies to Henry's association of the politico with his father: "Korean, slightly younger than my father would have been, though, he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English" (23). Both men are Korean immigrants, born and educated in Korea, yet Kwang has achieved a linguistic feat of assimilation that Mr. Park, despite his many years in America, has not. This one sentence sets the tone for Henry's comparisons between Kwang and father, with Kwang, until near the end of the book, surpassing Mr. Park in Henry's esteem; Henry sees in Kwang an idealized father-figure who can help him to claim America as his own.

The most significant similarity between the men is their shared commitment to family, the paramount value of Korean culture. Everything Mr. Park does, everything he gives up, is for his family. As Henry's mother once told him as a young boy, Henry's father had earned a graduate degree in industrial engineering from the best college in Korea but worked long hours each day as a green grocer in a New York City ghetto for Henry's sake. Kwang, too, believes strongly in family and is a proud, strict father to his sons as Mr. Park was to his. However, once again, a meaningful divergence occurs: Kwang expands his vision of family to include the immigrant and ethnic masses of the city's diverse population, whereas Mr. Park contented himself with having provided a good life, materially, for Henry. Kwang dedicates himself and his money, though not entirely selflessly, to the service of his extended family in New York City. The daily

objectives in Kwang's office are voter registration of legal immigrants, assistance in the naturalization process for illegal immigrants, and financial support via the multicultural ggeh. As Daniel Y. Kim argues in "Do I, too, Sing America?", Kwang introduces his Korean beliefs into American life as a basis for maintaining his connection to the Korean immigrant community despite achievement of upper middle-class status (245). Mr. Park, on the other hand, is condemned by his son for achieving his economic status on the backs of other immigrants, exploiting those he'd employed in his stores for low wages, and for abandoning the community that helped him achieve his success with the small Korean ggeh he and his friends began.

These two men's contrasting attitudes regarding family are predicated upon a greater difference. Kwang "began to think of America as part of him, maybe even his, and this for [Henry] was the crucial leap of identity" (Lee*, NS* 211). This is the leap that Henry resents his father for never taking (though he himself could take it only through his investment in Mitt's identity). Kwang aspires to more than any other Korean American Henry has ever heard of: "he was going to be someone who counted, who would stand up like a first citizen of these lands in every quarter of the city" (303). And he has been successful not merely in financial terms but also socially. Kwang has become "a part of the vernacular" (139) in American society while simultaneously holding on to his essential Korean-ness.

Mr. Park has never been able to think of America as part of him or as his. Though Mr. Park is a strong, authoritative figure within the family, his standing in the outside world is tenuous. He is not "willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family" as Kwang is (139); on the contrary, he worked hard not to draw attention to

himself, an undertaking that in the next generation becomes his son's work. The Parks lived "as if everything with us were always all right, in our great sham of propriety, as if nothing could touch us or wreak anger or sadness upon us" (52). After moving to Ardsley, Mr. Park "mostly operated as if the town were just barely tolerating our presence" (52). He only left the house for Henry; he would quietly enter the gym like an intruder, sneaking in, and silently watch his son's basketball games without cheering like the other parents, as if afraid of being seen.

Henry blamed his father for not wanting to be American in a more profound way despite clues that Mr. Park did indeed once harbor such dreams. For instance, Mr. Park's self-baptized American name was George Washington Park. He selected not simply a popular American name, like John for example, but the name of the prototypical American, the nation's founding father. Mr. Park is choosing his ancestor, as Werner Sollors says Americans do in a culture of consent. Henry's father, by settling upon this grandiose name, attempts to create an American self, but this identity is not available to him in the eyes (and ears) of others. George Washington Park can mimic American English and middle-class life; indeed, by all outward signs, Mr. Park has achieved the American Dream. In comparison to Ng's Leong family and Hijuelos's Castillos, the Parks are an immigrant success story, yet Lee insists upon the fraught nature of the American Dream throughout *Native Speaker*. Wealth and the accumulation of possessions do not bring Mr. Park happiness or acceptance. His purchases are impersonal and go unused, the suburban house comes at the cost of a supportive community, and his son is unable to appreciate the elder's love and sacrifices while he is still alive. The material trappings of success merely obscure the fact that the American Dream is elusive

and out of reach. The claim of American-ness is denied Mr. Park by mainstream American culture that persists in perceiving him as a foreigner based upon his Asian face, heavily accented speech, and unfamiliar traditions and values. Only late in his life and story, through witnessing the fall of Kwang, is Henry able to see that his father's limitations are not of his own choosing, that he had to "retool his life to the ambitions his meager knowledge of the language and the culture would allow" (333).

Henry does not consciously see Mitt in Kwang until the end, but Lee provides numerous clues along the way that suggest a subconscious association. Upon first meeting the city councilman, Henry wonders if Kwang sees him as "someone we Koreans were becoming, the latest brand of American. That I was from the future" (139). As the younger of the two, it is logical to assume Henry would represent the future for Kwang, but it is Henry who sees Kwang as a new American, a Korean American of the future. He perceives Kwang in terms similar to his view of Mitt. He also describes Kwang's speaking skills, in contrast to Mr. Park's, as beautiful, echoing his memories of Mitt's English. Physically, too, Henry associates Kwang with Mitt, or rather with his imagined hopes for Mitt. Though both Kwang and Mr. Park have what Henry refers to as short, Korean legs, Mr. Park's legs are described as "gnarled trunks" and "bowlegs," while Kwang "exhibited a different grace: he didn't sport the brief choppy step of our number, but seemed instead to stride in luxurious borrowed lengths. He almost loped... A primed athlete among the unlimbered mass of men" (138). He is depicted as a man whose spirit transcends his body and the physical characteristics associated with his race to raise himself above the masses. Henry similarly imagined that Mitt, with the long limbs inherited from Lelia and Stew, would transcend his Korean-marked body to be a

"greyhound when he grew up, a wispy thing, gentler and more tender of step than we" (137-8).

Henry claims that he "had never even conceived of someone like [Kwang]" (139) but his perception of Kwang, bathed in light, echoes of his imaginary brother, resplendently encircled by halos, that in turn allude to Mitt, clean and bright. Similar to Mitt and the invented brother, Kwang is idealized. He appears taller and younger than he is to Henry, who declares "the kind of light that emanated from him, or the way his figure bent the light to a crucial incidence, but from any distance at all he appeared to me as though he were ascending an invisible ramp that magically preceded him" (134). The images Henry fosters of these three idealized figures mimic representations of white heroic figures in mainstream culture. Richard Dyer, in *White* (1997), analyzes how the photographic and cinematic practice of lighting white figures (especially men) from above to create a halo-like effect is used symbolically to associate whiteness with goodness, moral superiority, spirituality, and genius. Dyer says, "Light is a defining term and means of the culture and how different groups relate to it profoundly affects their place in society. Those who can let the light through, however dividedly, with however much struggle, those whose bodies are touched by the light from above, who yearn upward towards it, those are the people who should rule and inherit the earth" (Dyer 121). Appropriated by Lee, the light of the "white race-soul" and all the esteemed qualities that accompany it (Dyer 23) are subversively cast upon Asian-American bodies.[47]

[47] Henry, ambivalent about both his attraction to whiteness and his Korean ancestry, has a less positive relationship to light. Lelia's list casts him in the "whitest raw light" that doesn't illuminate in a celestial manner but rather sharpens focus on his faults and deviations from American-ness. His work also intensifies his absence of the light that shines upon those who ascend in society. In order to develop

The description of Kwang appearing as if "ascending an invisible ramp that magically preceded him" represents his "yearning upwards" as one who "would rule and inherit the earth." Kwang's ambition and light imbue him with the potential to rise in American society. This vision of upward movement recalls Mitt climbing his grandfather's body and swinging off his arms like launching pads. But Mitt's directional pull is ultimately reversed when he is pushed down into the ground until, rendered lifeless, he descends to the "bottom of the earth." Kwang's fall as a public figure, which begins as a metaphoric plunge in the public and political realm, at the end repeats Mitt's physical fall. In witnessing this moment Henry clearly sees Mitt in Kwang, when Mitt and Henry's father are explicitly unified and their deaths repeated in Kwang's fall.

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...calling all the difficult names of who we are.

Kwang's downward spiral begins with the fire in his office. Speculation circulates to intensify racial tensions. The media clamors for the city councilman, but he refuses to speak, knowing that, as a minority politician, whatever he says will be made into "a matter of race" (274). His decline accelerates as the pressure for him to speak increases in tandem with his guilt and adamant reticence until he reaches a breaking point on the night he insists on Henry's accompanying him to a Korean nightclub. Here he reveals his ugly truths to Henry – he is an unfaithful husband, he can be cruel and abusive, and he is responsible for the fire that killed Eduardo and Helda. Eduardo was revealed to be an informant, a spy like Henry, whom Kwang had to eliminate and punish. Later that night, after Henry has left him at the club, an intoxicated Kwang crashes his car into the

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efficiency as a spy, he develops "opacity" that "repels all manner of light and heat" (133). Henry himself blocks and is blocked from the enlightening glow and ascendancy that he associates with Kwang.

concrete divider of the bridge on-ramp. Protected by an air bag, he is only slightly injured, but his career is over. And the young, illegal "hospitality girl" from the club is slammed into the windshield and remains in a coma in the intensive care unit of Beth Israel Hospital when the novel ends. He knows that the end result of this debacle, beginning with the explosion and ending with the car crash and deportation of illegal immigrants in his ggeh, will be to fan the flames of xenophobia and racism.

Intentionally or not, Kwang too has betrayed his people. In arranging for Eduardo to be killed, he allows Helda also to die; with his reckless guilt and regret, he causes dire injury to the undocumented girl from the club; and due to the ggeh, he amplifies tensions and hostility for his constituents to grapple with. Henry's secret knowledge of Kwang's role in the fire illuminates a new perspective on his father's past and his own in relation to the immigrant community. "My ugly immigrant's truth, as was his, is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited… This is your own history… Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education" (319-20). Betrayal and exploitation are seen, not as personal faults and weaknesses, but as necessary acts of survival and simultaneously acts of self-destruction demanded by American history and society. Henry, Kwang, and Mr. Park are all implicated and united in this shared history (Parikh 277). And all are more, not less, American for it.

Nonetheless, because of conscious and unconscious associations, Henry, even after disillusioned, cannot abandon Kwang. Henry still turns to Kwang with hope: "I am here for the hope of his identity, which may also be mine, who he has been on a public scale when the rest of us wanted only security in the tiny dollar-shops and churches of our lives" (Lee*, NS* 328). He needs Kwang to return undiminished so he can believe in

the future again, so he can believe in an American future connected to a Korean past, a combination once embodied by Kwang. So Henry awaits Kwang outside the politician's Queens's house among the "America for Americans" protestors chanting "Hey, ho, Kwang must go!" and "Give us back our future"(331).

When Kwang arrives, the crowd closes in on him, Henry tries to intervene. He attempts to protect Kwang from the press of bodies that is "a magnified and ugly replay of the crush that caused Mitt's death" (Dwyer 77). Henry recounts:

> People are grabbing his shoulders, his hair…. Everyone is shouting… And when I reach him I strike at them. I strike at everything that shouts and calls … at the very moment I fall back for good he glimpses who I am, and I see him crouch down, like a broken child, shielding from me his wide immigrant face. (Lee*, NS* 343)

Though present, Henry is unable to hold back the rush of people. He sees Kwang, pushed downward toward the ground, crouching like a "broken child," Henry's broken son, with his father's "wide immigrant face." Kwang, too, despite his great strides in becoming American, is reduced to foreigner, outsider, intruder, and is expelled, like Mitt and the scores of illegal immigrants from his ggeh who are deported by the INS.

The dream of uncontestable American-ness in a poly-ethnic America has been destroyed, but Kwang has helped Henry to see, and hear, the American-ness of the immigrant and the immigrant experience. "Listening to Kwang's speeches, Henry finds those moments when the language of the Puritan and the Chinaman intermingle to be the 'most moving and beautiful' and they lead him to see the value and the American-ness of the language spoken by his father and other immigrants" (Kim, D. 246). As he sleeps on

Jane Street, with Lelia besides him again, rather than replaying the reel of Mitt's accident in his head, he listens to the Korean and Latino workers at the 24 hour deli down the street. He listens to their accented English with a new appreciation.

> I can hear the old laments of my mother and my father, and mine as a confused schoolboy, and then even the fitful mumblings of our Ahjuhma, the instant American inventions of her tongue. They speak to me as John Kwang could always, not simply in new accents or notes but in the untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope. (Lee*, NS* 304)

The accented Englishes he would have and indeed did ridicule and feel ashamed of before Kwang now sing to him like music of untold hopes and sorrows.

And his father's voice lives on in the voices of the immigrant community to whom he now turns. "I think I would give most anything to hear my father's talk again, that crash and bang and stop of his language, always hurtling by. I will listen for him forever in the streets of this city" (139). Though he cannot recover all that has been lost, if he listens, he can hear again his father's voice and the voices of those he's betrayed when he listens to the diverse voices of the city. By the end, the people on the streets and the people on the spreadsheet for whose deportation he is partly responsible have become part of Henry. "Whether I wish it or not," he acknowledges, "I possess them, their spouses and children, their jobs and money and life. And the more I see and remember, the more their story is the same. The more the story is mine" (279). He comes to identify with the multitudes of immigrants, their struggles and losses:

> When I get here I work. I work for the day I will finally work for myself. I work so hard that one day I end up forgetting the person I am. I forget my

> wife, my son. Now, too, I have lost my old mother tongue. And I forget the ancestral graves I have left on a hillside of a faraway land, the loneliest stones that each year go unblessed. (279)

He absorbs the shared experience of immigration and loss into himself and recognizes that his betrayal of this community has been a self-betrayal, for he is they and they are he. He can connect to his personal past by connecting with the life present around him.

This past includes the painful loss of Mitt, whose spirit and hope for the future, lives on in the immigrant children of the city. Henry leaves the spy business that pitted him against the immigrant community and joins Lelia at home to assist her during speech therapy sessions with these children. Though this complicates his relation to language and nation that he would like to consider resolved, but clearly Lee does not, what Henry does accomplish is a way to find solace in the living traces of Mitt, the children of immigrants who populate Lelia's sessions: "When I embrace them, half pick them up, they are just that size I will forever know, that very weight so wondrous to me, and awful" (349). Mitt and his promise for a future lives on in these children, not in the memory of a breathless body on the ground or in years-old audio tapes.

Henry revises the assimilist hopes he'd invested in Mitt and recognizes that what he seeks is not a univocal future for Korean Americans but one that allows for diversity and plurality of voices and stories, reflecting the experiences of "Kwang's people." He also recognizes that the state is not ready to allow a nationally-accepted redefinition of "American." Kwang and Mitt were ahead of their time, presages of a future yet to come but worth hoping for. This future, though, cannot rely on one man. Henry longs to keep alive his hopes through reviving a living connection to Kwang's people, who are his own

people, the legal and illegal immigrants of all creeds, colors, and origins. He begins to accept his place within this community by listening to their voices directly and cultivating an appreciation for their various Englishes as distinctly American, thereby redefining his concept of American to be more inclusive.

Chapter Four
Choosing to Live: Rising from the Ashes of Familial and Ethnic Loss in *Ghost Dance*

In Carole Maso's first novel *Ghost Dance* (1987), the death of Christine Wing, mother to narrator and protagonist Vanessa Turin, drastically threatens her daughter's desire to live. Christine's death, emotionally crippling on its own, also crystallizes for Vanessa generations of loss connected to immigration and assimilation. This familial past, in its effect on her parents, has haunted Vanessa since childhood and requires, with Christine's death, an engagement with the enduring losses that have hindered her ability to find meaning in the world and in life.

Maso is generally known as an experimental writer for her non-traditional forms and non-novelistic influences, and as a lesbian writer of erotic, woman-centered prose.[48] With the flourishing of Italian-American women's literature and criticism that began with the publication of Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book* (1985), Maso is also being read as an ethnic writer.[49] Maso and *Ghost Dance*, in particular, have been claimed by Italian-American literary critics as significant to the growing tradition of Italian-American women's writing. Leading scholars in Italian-American studies such as Fred Gardaphè and Mary Jo Bona have read *Ghost Dance* in exploration of how *italianità*, the traces of Italian culture that persist over time for immigrants and their progeny in a new land, is recovered by the third-generation narrator, Vanessa. Mary Frances Pipino examines

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[48] These influences, evident in the prose and form of Maso's writing, include music, arts, dance, film, and poetry and have been discussed by Maso in multiple interviews.

[49] *The Dream Book* is the first anthology of Italian-American women's writing; it made visible the existence of these writers and served as the basis for a community of writers and scholars to form. It is generally considered a seminal text in Italian-American literature and Barolini's introduction a seminal work of Italian-American literary studies. Following *The Dream Book*, there has been a renaissance in Italian-American literature and literary studies in general but especially among Italian-American women writers and critics, yielding full-length book studies such as Bona's *Claiming a Tradion* (1999), Mannino, *Revisionary Identities* (2000), Mannino and Vitiello, *Breaking Open (*2003*)*, Giunta, *Writing with an Accent* (2002), and Pipino, *"I Have Found My Voice"* (2000).

Maso's interweaving of the Italian immigrant experience and post-modernism in *Ghost Dance*. Maso is repeatedly referred to in Italian-American literary scholarship as an important figure.

Italian-American literary critics' embrace of Maso has generated a new branch of valuable scholarship on her work, illuminating an otherwise unexplored facet of her oeuvre. Though this criticism focuses on the examination of Italian-American ethnicity, it also moves us toward an appreciation of what I believe is Maso's larger project regarding ethnicity, a project that draws connections rather than divisions between various groups cast as Other and/or un-American.[50] Like Chang-Rae Lee, who expands his multicultural scope in *Native Speaker* to include the varied New York immigrant population and who uses a non-Korean but still ethnic protagonist, the Italian-American Jerry Battle, in his most recent novel *Aloft*, Maso continues to consider ethnicity and immigration with a more universal and theoretical exploration not limited to the particular ethnic group to which she belongs nor to the traditional American immigrant plot, used only once and in reverse in her fourth book *The American Woman in a Chinese Hat* (1994), in which protagonist Catherine emigrates from America to France.[51]

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[50] Such a movement in the criticism is necessary because a too exclusive focus on Italian-American ethnicity in Maso's work can lead to misreadings or limitations in scholarship. For example, Pipino argues that in *Ghost Dance* Maso's construction of Christine's character "both reinvents and challenges the traditional Italian mother/Madonna icon" (154); however, Christine is *not* an Italian mother. Christine is an American woman born of Armenian and German descent. Also, in her essay "A Usable Past," Josephine Gattuso Hendin briefly addresses Irish-American identity in *Defiance* as a "mask" for the "core Italian American theme of family identification and loyalty" (208). Though her interpretation of Maso's critique of family and patriarchy is convincing, Hendin does not entertain the possibility that the themes she associates singularly with Italian-American ethnic traits may be relevant for Maso to the more wide-ranging experience of working class, ethnic, Roman Catholic, female experience.

[51] Catherine, inescapably the "American woman" despite having settled in France indefinitely, contends with the themes of dislocation and homelessness typically central to experiences of immigrants in American literature.

Of all Maso's writing, *Ghost Dance* deals most directly with the issues of ethnicity and loss in connection with her own familial history. Like Vanessa Turin, Maso's paternal grandparents emigrated from southern Italy, and her maternal ancestry can be traced to Armenia, Germany, and England. However, even in this more autobiographically-based novel, Maso develops a sense of ethnicity and identity that is multiple and inclusive. In the wake of her idealized mother's traumatic death, Maso's Vanessa pieces together threads of memory and imagination to flesh out three generations of family history and the cultural heritages that have helped shape that history, including American, Italian, Armenian, and Native American (adopted later in life by her Italian grandfather). Through the excavation and creation of this complicated and often painful family history, Vanessa constructs a context and source of strength for the difficult task of mourning she can only accomplish by refashioning a self rooted in multiple origins and traditions rather than the one, maternal origin that has defined her till now.[52]

Persistent themes of Maso's oeuvre are loss, mourning, memory, and the interrogation of identity in connection with writing and creativity. Louise De Salvo and Robin Paula Silberglied, both Virginia Woolf scholars, read *Ghost Dance* through the prisms of loss, lyricism and healing, with respect to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in relation to these concerns.[53] Though their readings exclude a consideration of ethnic and

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[52] An acceptance of multiplicity is also developed in the novel regarding sexuality and sexual identity. Christine's life involves both a heterosexual marriage to Michael and a stable, long-lasting lesbian relationship with her college roommate, the French singer Sabine. Vanessa, too, defies a singular sexual identity.

[53] De Salvo focuses on the enabling and limiting possibilities of creativity that Vanessa must negotiate as she attempts to write her way out of her obsession with Christine and toward the ability to speak out about what and who (including Christine) has harmed her. Silberglied explores the relationship between loss and narrative technique, contending that for Maso, like Woolf, lyricism provides a form and language for "speaking through pain, if not about it" (60). She also argues that Maso presents a process of mourning that involves both lyricism and female bonds.

cultural loss, these themes are the same ones that I posit throughout this dissertation as integral to much ethnic fiction and have explored in relation to novels by Ng, Hijuelos, and Lee. I believe these two approaches to reading loss in the novel are complementary. In this chapter, I will integrate scholarship on loss and lyricism in *Ghost Dance* with the discussions of ethnic loss in the novel. Ethnicity (an absent presence longed for generations after immigration and assimilation have occurred) is connected to the traumatic losses, most especially but not only the sudden and devastating death of her mother, that affect Vanessa and determine the form of the book. By bringing these different perspectives together we see how the process of healing through imagination and lyricism necessarily involves a recovery of ethnic memory and identity. As in the other novels I've discussed, Vanessa's ability to move into the future requires mourning not only her mother's death but all the haunting absences of family and memory that, over time, have been emptied out of her life.

However, *Ghost Dance* illustrates a living death different from in the other novels. Living death in *Ghost Dance* is related to immigration and ethnicity but evolves under circumstances of assimilation that enabled, rather than obstructed, absorption into dominant culture. Vanessa and her brother Fletcher, the grand-children of European immigrants, must contend with the deadening effects of this absorption into and conformity to mainstream society. Entrance into the American mainstream, the established goal for immigrants, brings many rewards but, Maso's novel argues, comes at a great cost to immigrants and, more significantly, to their progeny. In *Ghost Dance*, immigrant fathers with great hopes for their lives in America encourage, even force, extreme assimilation on their families despite female resistance. This assimilation, so

drastic that it can be considered passing, requires a radical forfeit of one's cultural legacy and constitutes an extreme form of rootlessness and emotional disconnection within the Turin family.

As white ethnics whose ethnicity remains effectively buried for many years, the Turin family has achieved levels of social and economic status hindered by racial barriers for the families in Ng's and Lee's novels and by cultural persistence in Hijuelos's. In *Ghost Dance,* Michael Turin is a successful stockbroker and his wife, a famous American poet. They live in an affluent Connecticut town with their daughter Vanessa and son Fletcher. And yet their family is in danger of dissolution. Neither Michael nor Christine is happy or fully present in his/her own life or the lives of their children. Both are perpetual outsiders despite their achievements in the world – their successful careers, wealth, and picture-perfect family. Both suffer from unspoken loss with which their children, living in the realm of their palpable sadness, must grapple. Able to endow their children with material riches, they cannot provide spiritual and emotional nurturance. As a result, despite her wealth, Vanessa is left without a sense of identity or a place in the world.

Christine's death instigates and shapes the mourning of all these losses. Traumas of the distant and recent past, previously unknown or muted in Vanessa's psyche, are brought to crisis with Christine's fiery death in a car accident caused by the negligibly dangerous design of the Ford Pinto. This death and the scattering of family that follows initiates an urgent confrontation with what the author presents as three generations of continuing loss and sorrow in America. The narrrative begins a year after this devastating death with Vanessa still trapped in grief. Lost without her mother, Vanessa begins, through the writing of her story and lyrical engagement with painful memories, to make

the torturous journey toward accepting Christine's death and claiming her own life by mourning the traumas of the past that this death reawakens.

As in *Bone* and *Native Speaker*, the central death in *Ghost Dance* intensifies the disintegration of an already strained family. When Christine dies, Michael's parents Angelo and Maria, the only grandparents Vanessa had ever known and the only people who had attempted to ground Vanessa and her brother Fletcher in life, are already deceased. After the accident, which Michael and Fletcher survive, with burned bodies and severely wounded spirits, Michael boards an ocean liner headed toward cold northern European destinations. Fletcher abandons his activist work silently to tour national headquarters of corporations, like Ford and Dow Chemical, who knowingly spread harm for capital gain. Vanessa confides in her lost mother "I never thought this would happen to us, that we would end up like this: hundreds and thousands of miles apart, flung like fish across the water, scattered like ashes" (31). She is left alone and grasping for a way to rebuild a sense of self without Christine or family, which has also been incinerated in the flames of the Ford Pinto.

While the accident intensifies the impetus of mourning, Vanessa has been grieving the absence of her mother and father her entire life. Christine loved her children, but, afflicted with manic-depression, she was a distant, unreachable mother unable to give Vanessa and her brother Fletcher the attention and care they desperately needed. Christine not only abandoned her children emotionally but also repeatedly departed physically, seeking equilibrium in retreats to Paris or Maine with her lover of twenty-five years, Sabine. Michael is equally remote; his most salient quality, his silence. And, like his children, his life too revolved around Christine, relegating his children to secondary

importance and often allowing their needs to go unmet. According to family therapist Pauline Boss, uncertainty about the absence or presence of a loved one is a psychologically distressing experience that confuses and traumatizes (24). Vanessa and Fletcher contend with the traumatic experience that Boss terms "ambiguous loss" in their parents' nearly constant psychological and continual physical absences.

The more definite loss of her grandparents, both Grandpa Angelo and Grandma Maria, whom Vanessa knew and loved, and Grandpa Sarkis and Grandma Alice, whom Vanessa misses ever knowing, leaves Vanessa without a sense of origin before her parents. Michael's father Angelo dies before Vanessa is twelve years old. Though he taught her the rituals of his adopted Native American culture, after his death, Vanessa loses her tie to this heritage. It is not until she cultivates her own inner resources in the wake of her mother's death that she can reclaim this heritage and enact the titular ghost dance that will complete her healing.[54] Angelo's wife Maria dies several years after him, regretting her failure to share her Italian history and culture with her son and grandchildren. Christine's mother Alice died of a rheumatic heart when her eldest daughter was only twelve years old. Her father Sarkis Wingarian, disillusioned with America, returned to Armenia when Christine was nineteen and declined her invitation to visit upon the birth of his granddaughter. Cut off from these ancestral figures, Vanessa is

[54] The Ghost Dance was a spiritual movement among Native Americans in the late nineteenth century in response to extreme hunger and disease and to the assimilative pressure of the U.S. government. The movement, led by Paiute medicine man and prophet Wavoka in the 1890s, promised a return to the old ways of life and reunion with lost loved ones. The circular dance would induce trances wherein that which had been lost (pristine land, the buffalo, deceased loved ones) would return. Throughout the 1890s, the Ghost Dance spread to numerous tribes, most famously and tragically the Lakota. The Ghost Dance contributed to incitement of the massacre at Wounded Knee when the U.S. calvary attacked a Pine Ridge Reservation camp performing this dance that the U.S. government had banned. Maso's use of the Ghost Dance relies upon Lakota adaptation and history. For more information on the Ghost Dance, see Weston La Barre, *The Ghost Dance* and William A. Young, *Quest for Harmony: Native American Spiritual Traditions.*

deprived of the possibility of family memory and history as well as cultural legacies of Italy and Eastern Europe that, with her parents' silences, have never been passed on.

The effect of this dearth of cultural transmission is compounded by disenchantment with America, a failure of the new land to live up to its ideals and promises. Disillusionment with America is itself like a death for Angelo Turin and Sarkis Wingarian, as it was for Leon in *Bone.* The death of this belief in America, a belief on which their new identities are based and for which their old identities have been sacrificed, strikes a devastating blow at Angelo's and Sarkis's sense of self and place. The loss of a second land, their chosen land, invokes a perpetual homelessness when both Vanessa's grandfathers abandon America, physically or metaphorically, and seek a homeland that no longer exists. The encounter with loss and betrayal, as well as the departures it engenders, is a direct experience of the immigrant generation. Its imprint and consequences, however, have lasting effects on Michael and Christine and, in turn, Vanessa and Fletcher, as they too must build lives for themselves in and experience their own disillusionments with America.

The direction that Grandpa Angelo's search for a purer homeland takes reveals yet another loss connected to his assimilation into mainstream American society, that of an ethical foundation for one's identity. When, in a pivotal scene at the World's Fair, Angelo finds himself in the middle of a Civil Rights demonstration, he becomes aware of the weakened state of his ethical self and casts off the idealized belief in America he had held so dear since his arrival. A common assertion of whiteness studies insists that acceptance into whiteness, a crucial element of the national self-image, necessitates participation in the racist oppression of others as a group asserts its own whiteness by

defining itself against blackness rather than seeing their struggle as bound to other oppressed peoples.[55] The result is a "silencing of one's moral powers to protest injustice, degrading moral integrity into silent complicity with evil" (Richards 123). On an individual level, Angelo made just this compromise when he relinquished his racialized and denigrated Southern Italian identity to claim an American identity predicated (whether he was consciously aware or not) upon whiteness. Renouncing his silent "complicity with evil" after the World's Fair, he turns to Native American culture to find a new set of values and beliefs from which he can reconstruct a sense of identity, reassert a claim on America, and provide his grandchildren with ethical guidance for survival in an imperfect world.

Angelo's guidance ultimately proves invaluable to Vanessa but does not provide the fortitude to enact the Native American traditions she had learned until she has invented what she needs of the cultural heritages of her loved ones from which she feels disconnected. She must create her own family history within the chasms of absent memory rather than only turn to another history. Similar to Christine's ability to create a world in poetry and Angelo's need to recreate America and his relation to it through Native American culture, Vanessa too must create a new relation to the world, past and present, and the self. The novel suggests that the adopted culture does not replace but

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[55] Studies of Southern and Eastern European immigration to the United States in relation to race have found that, in the early and mid-twentieth century, these white ethnic groups occupied a racially in-between position, what David J. Roediger calls "not-yet-white" and David A.J. Richards "non-visibly black." For, though able to enter the country as free white persons, their racial stock was not considered equivalent to that of earlier Anglo-Saxon groups. Much of what today is considered ethnic difference was in fact perceived as racial difference until, as Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, in the post-World War II era, the country's racial structure became more dualistic and whiteness more inclusive for various political and economic reasons. For comprehensive studies of white racial formation among immigrant groups in the twentieth century, see Jacobson; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation;* and King, *Making Americans.* For studies of specific immigrant groups, see Richards, *Italian Americans;* Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* and Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* also on the Irish*;* and Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks.*

rather supplements the desire to reclaim what she feels she has lost – the Italian and Armenian cultures of her personal family history. By bringing the past productively into relation with the present, Vanessa draws from and builds on multiple legacies in order to construct an identity and find a way to live in world without her mother. Vanessa's mourning takes place through recovered legacies of invention and reclamation of lost and devalued cultural heritages that enable a new understanding of herself as well as of that which has been lost. The form of the book reflects the process and goal of creating something new from the previously discarded vestiges of the past.

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The whole world lay still. Nothing moved.

As was the case for Ng's Leila, Hijuelos's Eugenio, and Lee's Henry, creating the possibility of a future for oneself after the death of a loved one requires Vanessa to move backward into the past to integrate reawakened traumas into the present in order to make the future possible. Vanessa must come to terms with her silent, lonely childhood, the loss of grandparents unknown or departed, and family histories denied. Working through this history of loss helps her to move toward acceptance of the most devastating loss of her mother, which she resists acknowledging in order to delay the painful task of releasing her. Throughout the year after Christine's death, a nineteen-year old Vanessa continues to speak to her absent mother and ask others "Where did Mom go?" and "When do you think Mom is coming home?" (Maso*, GD* 65).

The novel constitutes Vanessa's first attempt at writing and illustrates, in form and content, her melancholic state of mind. The book is composed of non-chronological scenes and fragments of different lengths. These scenes and narrative fragments are not linked chronologically but, according to Maso, function as images so that "scene by

scene it makes the kinds of leaps that poetry makes line by line" (*Break* 39). Some, like the pivotal Grand Central Station scene of Vanessa's final meeting with and separation from Christine, recur throughout the book in altered or truncated forms. The different and sometimes contradictory versions of a single scene speak to the work of memory the novel undertakes. Vanessa must negotiate between memory and imagination attempting to arrive at a version she can accept while still bearing witness to the pain of her past.

For example, the opening scene of the book presents a romanticized version of Vanessa and Christine at Grand Central Station in which everything is lovely and pleasant. Christine looks especially beautiful and at ease, concerned only with taking care of Vanessa. She escorts Vanessa to a taxi and, only after seeing her daughter safely off, is able to complete a poem in her mind. This is how Vanessa would like to remember the afternoon; however, she then resists this revisionary impulse. Almost immediately she re-presents the scene, despite the hurt involved in doing so, with a determination to see it more honestly: "I will not look away. I will see her this time," Vanessa asserts (7). What she sees is her mother looking vulnerable beneath the layers of clothes, scarves, jewelry, and make-up, her armor against the world. What she sees is a mother so disoriented that she doesn't even recognize her child at first. And it is Vanessa who cares for Christine, wiping off the make-up and lifting off the heavy chains, not vice versa. Vanessa, falling into her familiar role of mothering her mother, doesn't want to go, but Christine, caring for Vanessa in the only way she can, insists that Vanessa leave and go back to her own life at college. Parting from Christine then becomes the great challenge Vanessa struggles with throughout the narrative. And this scene repeats several times in the novel as

Vanessa grapples with memory, trying to keep Christine alive and at same time find a way to let her go.

Often it is impossible to determine if Vanessa's stories emerge from memory or imagination. Many of the narrative scenes and stories are admittedly conceived by Vanessa. Like Henry Park and to a lesser degree Eugenio Castillo, Vanessa is an unreliable narrator but for different reasons. Henry is secretive and wily about what he reveals. Eugenio is dependent on the perspectives of an incurably nostalgic and melancholy father and a macho, bacchanalian uncle whose voices merge with his. Vanessa is unreliable because in her silent home so little memory has been passed on that she actively and deliberately creates what is missing, the stories and parts of stories that she claims "I learned in my sleep" (12). She unapologetically declares her role as inventor of family history because absolute truth is not her goal. Vanessa is looking for a history that she can learn from and be strengthened by and, without parents or grandparents present, she finds another way to achieve this. Exploring possibilities of the past, she accepts different versions of a story and unaccounted-for gaps.

The narrative scenes are interspersed with excerpts from disparate texts Vanessa has been reading since her mother's death. These include collections of her mother's favorite poets, biographies, and history – Native American history which helps Vanessa feel closer to her deceased grandfather, and American history, which she is reading "as if all the clues to these terrible disappearances [of her loved ones] are to be found in that complex heartbreaking story" (66). Also sprinkled throughout the book are lyrics from songs her father would sing and litanies of classical composers' names that Vanessa and Michael used to recite. These intertexts, often intersecting thematically with Vanessa's

family history, reveal the complex context for and multiple influences on Vanessa's post-modern identity.

The book is divided into five sections, but these are not traditional chapters charting chronological development. Rather, the sections, organized around image clusters and involving both compression and expansions of time, function aesthetically to establish tone, tempo, and "designs of imagery" that affect a sensual experience of a life and world(s), external and interior, with a sense of poetic unity (Maso, *Break 38*). This structure utterly rejects traditional novelistic form in an attempt to devise what Maso calls a useable form, a form that "might be opened up by our particular predicament" (*Break* 36). The predicament determining the shape of *Ghost Dance* is the condition of loss and the painful necessity to heal. Employing Julia Kristeva's theories on depression and melancholy in *Black Sun* (1989), Silbergleid argues that lyricism serves as a method of dealing aesthetically with loss because traditional language and narrative are insufficient to express grief. Melancholic speech, like lyric prose, is poetic, relying on rhythm and/or tone to express itself, rather than narrative discourse.

Vanessa, turning to writing to communicate her grief, creates a lyric style borne of her melancholic condition. She takes up Christine's art and language, an attempt, fueled by denial of loss, to understand and thereby recover this essential other by invoking her within the self. This is an endeavor begotten of melancholic desire to preserve the lost object; however, such incorporation, if unchecked, threatens to erase the self. Relinquishing herself to become her mother, Vanessa revives Christine at her own expense, as she does when she makes love with her mother's lover, Sabine. However, Vanessa, at the same time she is drawn, in her depression, toward self-destruction,

struggles against this erasure and writes not poetry, like Christine, but poetic prose, lyrical fiction, her mother's art but in her own form. This difference signifies the possibility of a move from melancholic paralysis to renewal and meaning that can result from an artistic engagement with sorrow and loss.

The lyric form of the novel illustrates Vanessa's melancholia in its existence outside time. Like the other novels discussed, most specifically *Bone*, *Ghost Dance* rejects the notions of causality and temporal progression. These narratives, concerned with loss and mourning, are founded upon the persistence of memory and trauma, which collapse the boundaries of time. In *Ghost Dance*, Vanessa exits the world of "normal" reality to enter a timeless, lyrical space where Christine lives on. Vanessa will not let time move on without her mother. Time becomes her enemy; it is brutal and violent, as evinced in her descriptions of the clock at Grand Central Station. In an early memory of this scene, Vanessa sees "The sharp arms of the great clock slice into the back of [Christine's] neck and she lets out a small sigh" (7); time menaces Christine because within hours she will meet her fate. Later in the book, when Vanessa returns to the scene at Grand Central Station, she claims, "I felt the giant clock's sharp arm cutting into my back like a blade" (42). Time has become ominous for Vanessa, who, after this moment passes, will not see her mother again and who is not sure she exists, or wants to, without Christine.

Existing in a stubborn state of denial, Vanessa cannot fully acknowledge her mother's death. She returns repeatedly not only to the memory of her final meeting with her mother but also physically to Grand Central Station itself, the site of the memory. "I go to Grand Central Station," she writes a year later, "looking for my mother who has

quite simply disappeared off the face of the earth" (65). Throughout the first four of five sections of the book, Vanessa resists conscious awareness of her mother's death. Instead, she refers to Christine as "gone" or "disappeared," putting off the finality of death. However, Vanessa must return to time and the external world in order to survive and have a future of her own.

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This is our fate: to love too much – even the dead, who may not need our love.

At the start of the novel, Vanessa is living what Kristeva calls the "devitalized existence" of the depressed (4). She has spent the year immersed in self-destructive behavior. Addicted to heroin and a sado-masochistic lover, she alternates between wanting not to feel anything and wanting to feel pain to kill the numbness. Louise De Salvo describes Vanessa's self-destructive impulses as an attempt to "eliminate herself" in fulfillment of her parents' treatment of her as non-existent. Although I agree that Vanessa is trying to negate herself, self-punishment and a lack of knowing who she is separate from her mother seem more convincing motives. Vanessa physically punishes herself for not being able to save her mother – a responsibility that should not be hers but which she had always felt was. And she has never known who she was outside of her relationship with her mother. Vanessa never achieved the necessary separation from her mother that would allow her to establish an independent identity. Feminist psychoanalysts like Nancy Chodorow have argued that failure of separation and individuation are a common problem for women who experience strong, primal maternal-identification, and results, for daughters, in a lack of distinction between one's mother and one's self (109). Such seems to be the case for Vanessa who often describes herself in conjunction with Christine. For example, she says "we were misfits" (Maso*, GD* 41),

and "[w]e were superstitious, my mother and me" (153). She never truly had a sense of identity without Christine at the very core. Upon Christine's death, then, Vanessa experiences a loss of being as well as the loss of her mother.

Christine has always been the center of Vanessa's world and of the Turin family. Vanessa, Fletcher, and their father all live to care for and please this beautiful woman, who is larger-than-life in their eyes. Christine is more like an idol of worship, an unpredictable goddess, than a member of the family. The beauty, genius, and ethereal qualities that render her unreachable make her all the more precious to them as they endeavor to get close, to keep her with them physically and emotionally while she is alive.

As a result, the environment of their home life is permeated with uncertainty, silence, and anxiety for Vanessa and Fletcher, who never know what the day will hold with their mother. They determine their words and actions based on her moods and the possibility of pleasing her. Even as young children, they are put in the position of having to help her through "bad days." Vanessa suffers from constant guilt for being unable to cure her mother, a guilt intensified when Vanessa leaves her mother at Grand Central on the day she will die. Thinks Vanessa, "Though I tried so hard at times, I would never be, as some children are capable of being, the grown-up my mother needed" (40). Christine's position as most important figure in Vanessa's world and the sense of responsibility in caring for this figure help explain why the loss of Christine is so devastating to Vanessa's selfhood.

Enduring Christine's absence, however, is not a new struggle for Vanessa. It is merely intensified by Christine's actual demise. Life in the Turin family is marked by

Christine's frequent departures. Vanessa's most constant memory of her mother is as "an extravagant, exotic figure, descending stairs or getting into the car, but always saying goodbye" (42). Christine was never comfortable for long in one place, even her home, so she was always leaving. So accustomed, in fact, was Vanessa to Christine's leave-taking that she could anticipate the event before any trip was planned. She describes the experience of world-blanching as one of her mother's departures approaches:

> In the days to come, the world would continue to empty itself slowly of color until finally, by the time my mother was handing her suitcase to my father at the top of the stairs, I would barely be able to see her at all, she would be lost in white. This happened many times through the years of my childhood. … With the first signs I would follow her more closely, sit nearer to her, watch her while she napped on the couch, etch her profile in my mind, hug her disappearing body as color drained from her lips and her blonde hair whitened. (39)

Vanessa was sensitive to her mother's comings and goings because the vitality of her world depended on Christine's presence, and the young girl needed to prepare herself for the frequent absences. Whiteness, a significant trope in the novel, signifies absence, emptiness, and nothingness. It is associated with snow, heroin, asbestos, and the disregarded flag of peace waved by the Native Americans at Wounded Knee. In light of the associations of absence and loss in the novel to assimilation, there are also non-explicit racial and ethnic connotations to this disappearing into whiteness. The homogenizing effect of assimilation into dominant American society (read: white,

middle-class) results in a loss of ethnic difference and cultural history and can create for characters like Christine and Michael a blanching of color and vitality.[56]

Christine was often a ghostly figure in her daughter's life. When the whiteness announcing Christine's departures spread, Vanessa needed to hold tightly to her mother as long as she could, as if in some way she could keep her from fading into a spectral cloud, but this dissipation could never be stopped. Even when Christine was home, she was not fully there. Vanessa writes, "I missed her terribly even before she had gone away. I missed her as I watched her writing. I could tell she was so far away that nothing could bring her back. Watching her some nights, stretched out on the couch reading or dozing off, I missed her even then" (179). Christine is psychologically absent, hauntingly so. Due to the combination of illness and genius, inseparable in Maso's depiction, Christine lived in a world of language and poetry, where "Psychic energy had to be preserved, carefully doled out, used for her work. Emotions had to be hoarded for the work. Attention to detail, mental acuity had to be saved, then focused" (38). Christine is, like the ghosts who she insists populate their house, an absent presence, not of this world but not departed. She is, as her Indian name proclaims, a Brave Ghost, fighting to survive in a world she is disconnected from and to live as she would like, as a poet, a mother, a bisexual. But these roles seem to conflict; to live fully in one role, she can only partly inhabit the others. Emotionally and spiritually, Christine is living a death-like life.

Her living death results from the unresolved losses of her parents, one who died and the other who abandoned her, and of a connection to her roots. Her poetry arises largely from these losses. Vanessa imagines that Christine first began telling stories in

[56] Maso also uses this trope of blanching in her essay "The Re-Introduction of Color" in *Break Every Rule.* In this essay, she discusses the pressure to conform, which suppresses individuality, imagination, and passion, as draining the color from the world and self.

hopes of curing her own mother, Alice, or, at the very least, creating a better world for her. "With words she makes curtains for the windows. Light weaves through the little girl's lacy tales. …With words she wraps her, with words she makes her mother smile. She would save her life; she would make her well – with words" (111). Unsurprisingly, this plan for rescue fails. And after her mother's death, Christine turns more fully toward words. Like Vanessa years later, Christine searches for "the words that bring back her mother if only momentarily or the words that might make some sense of things" (114). Christine dedicates herself to literature also in rebellion against her father's desire to capitalize on her beauty by turning her into a child model. Her refusal to fulfill his hopes contributes to his dashed dreams and eventual return to Eastern Europe that effectively orphans the teenaged Christine and her younger sister Lucy. The loss of her father compounds her loneliness and pain and intensifies her need to recreate the world through words and imagination. Through poetry, Christine can escape the hurt with altered and personal perception.

Christine is then able to live fully in her art but not in other areas of her life, where she is only partially present. Her accomplishments as an artist do not translate into success in her lived life. Emotionally and spiritually, she suffers a living death represented by her illness. The sickness of her mother Alice's heart, which left Christine motherless, becomes in the next generation a sickness of the daughter's mind that effectively renders Vanessa motherless even before Christine's death. In *Claiming a Tradition,* Mary Jo Bona asserts that illness is a common metaphor in Italian-American writing associated with the experience of America. She writes "To forget the cultural past… is to suffer a spiritual death that cannot be remedied by material prosperity or

higher education" (Bona 20). Even as Christine rises to heights of fame and material success as a poet, she continues to suffer a haunted and haunting existence as an abandoned daughter and troubled mother. Fred Gardaphè, in his interpretation of the scene when a frenzied Christine repeatedly rips out and moves the roots of her plants only to kill them inadvertently, points out that "For Christine, ethnicity serves no role in the creation of her art, 'the roots' only get in the way of new growth. But the price she pays for this disconnection from the past is a loss of the knowledge of how to live, the lack of which contributes to Christine's 'illness'" (148). Poetry drains her but is the only way for her to survive in a world of hurt. Abandoned by parents in a manner similar to that later experienced by her own children, she severs herself from the past to escape the pain of loss it invokes. The result is a spiritual death that impedes her ability to mother her children and perpetuates a cycle of emotionally-wounded children unable to engage in life.

Christine's spiritual death spreads to her family. Her art provides a space for her to live, but it is a distant place where her children cannot join her. Paradoxically, poetry and stories are also the only way Christine can connect with her children. Vanessa's one treasured childhood ritual is the nightly bedtime story about the Topaz Bird, invented by Christine to explain "her shifting moods, her inexplicable sadness or rage or joy" to her children (Maso, *GD* 8).[57] Vanessa looked forward to this intimate time spent with her mother and glimpse into her often inaccessible world. "I helped her, too, I think, in my

[57] The Topaz Bird, inseparable from Christine Wing not only through her stories but also metonymically in her last name, evokes a wealth of literary and cultural associations. Literary allusions include Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" hailing the songbird of poetry and creativity and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which uses birds as symbols of both entrapment and freedom and also compares the brave soul of artist to "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice." The readiest cultural association is to the hummingbird, which commonly carries connotations of beauty and intelligence. In several Native American tales, the hummingbird serves as a messenger between worlds and symbolizes the fragility of nature and living things.

half-sleep, dreaming the bird with her, inventing it over and over, reaching for it, reaching, my whole body strained to see it" (11). The Topaz Bird offers this possibility for Vanessa to "help" her mother, but it also contributes to Vanessa's sense of distance from her mother. Vanessa obsesses over the Topaz Bird and despairs because, throughout her youth, she can't see it herself. The Topaz Bird is a reflection of Christine's inner self, a wild, elusive creature with many meanings – the Bird of Genius, of Death, of Madness, of Creativity – whose "haunting melody" is ambiguously "a happy song or a sad song" (13). The indeterminate nature and mystery of the Topaz Bird, particularly in the stories Vanessa creates about it, are also qualities of Christine's. Vanessa's desire to see the Topaz Bird is actually a desire to see her mother, to understand the mother who brings such joy and pain into her life.

Christine insists repeatedly that "the Topaz Bird means us no harm" (10), but it does indeed cause much harm to the Turin children in its effect on their mother's tenuous state of mind. Despite Vanessa's hope that the bird would be her conduit to the even more magnificent and almost as unreal Christine Wing, its effect is often the opposite. Vanessa claims:

> I could not imagine a more exotic creature than my mother. I would have been happy to have lived in a world defined solely by the parameters of her arms, to have sunk into her large soothing voice, and stayed there safe, in her dark love, but even before I could get comfortable in her lap she had begun telling the story and pointing my head away from her, asking me to look upward, to grow wings, though I had just barely learned to walk. (11)

Vanessa cannot see the Topaz Bird; Christine cannot ignore it. For Christine, it offers an answer to the inexplicable and the possibility to be free of the constraints of the world that cannot accommodate the rare and extraordinary; she wants to offer this to her daughter. Yet Christine's love casts a shadow on that which she can offer Vanessa because it withholds as much as it gives. Vanessa wants only her mother; Christine, not the Topaz Bird, is the creature of Vanessa's dreams. Christine could teach her daughter to fly, but who will first teach the child to walk?

As Vanessa grows older she increasingly imagines the Topaz Bird viciously attacking her mother's brain. She sees "its terrible claws, its beak curved and sharp, its feathers brutal, sharpening into points. …It lands on my mother's head like a spiked crown, drawing blood from her scalp" (8). Christine is presented as a Christ figure, suffering for her unique perspective, madness or genius, and her refusal to surrender it to the demands of society, present in the novel in the forms of her father and mother-in-law, her psychiatrist, and the men with needles who come to medicate her. The Topaz Bird unites Christine's illness and talent. It becomes a figure of both awe and dread for Vanessa. The source of her mother's exquisite genius, it also threatens daily to take her mother away. Christine had always been partly of another world yet never truly gone, as, in fact, had been Michael.

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It was not a heroic effort; he never even tried to talk to us.

Despite his constant physical presence, Michael Turin, like Christine, is an absent parent. He is silent and sad for reasons his children do not know and can only imagine. Vanessa and Fletcher try repeatedly to break his silence about himself and their family, but he refuses to speak. "We were wildly, obsessively, interested in the things he would

not talk about, and while at times I enjoyed imagining what he might be thinking as he drew lines on graph paper or lay on the floor staring at the ceiling, some things we wanted – needed – real answers to" (28). Even when, out of desperation, they invent a homework assignment on family history to compel their father to talk to them, he instead tells them to "Make up whatever you like… Really, I don't mind" and goes for walk alone outside and out of reach of his children's pleading voices (29). Vanessa and Fletcher are repeatedly left alone and ignorant, wanting answers and intimacy they cannot get from either parent.

Neither Christine nor Michael is rooted to the world that Vanessa and Fletcher must learn to live in and claim as their own. Whereas Christine is depicted as inhabiting the air, high above her family, Vanessa describes her father as living underwater, rarely able to emerge and join his children: "His silence is so deep and seductive that it seems he has had to travel a great distance to the surface like a swimmer or some other temporary guest to water. His life is down there – in deep blue, in gray, in green, in tangled plants, in dim light" (19).[58] Michael is drowning in a dark, silent world fathoms away from his children. The waters enveloping him are associated in Maso's prose with Christine's "bottomless blue eyes" (28) as well as the vast ocean he crossed as a young child to come to this country with his parents.

Michael, just a boy when he immigrated, did not choose to sever his connection to Italy. His father decided to assimilate and imposed rather than opposed his son's

[58] In his remoteness, Michael is a very seductive figure for Vanessa, who repeatedly attempts to get close to him, needing to court his attentions and affection. De Salvo argues a possible incestuous relationship between Michael and Vanessa that I hesitate to accept. I am more convinced by Pipino's argument that Maso undercuts the romance of the family by linking it to sexual romance, a point she finds illustrated not in Vanessa's relationship with Michael but with Christine (150). Both parents are eroticized in Vanessa's perception. As powerful and inaccessible figures, they become objects of a strong desire that, in the confusing and indeterminate family roles within the Turin home, is sexualized but not necessarily sexual, with Vanessa in the role of unrequited lover.

Americanization, contradicting Hansen's famous formulation of the first and second generations. At first Michael's silence, particularly about the past, may seem an extreme manifestation of the escape from one's ancestral culture that Hansen ascribed to the second generation. Superficially, Michael fits this type perfectly, a fully-Americanized, Princeton-educated stockbroker with no present signs of *italianità* in his life. However, though Hansen's theory of the third-generation "rescuer" of ethnicity is applicable to Vanessa, his premise of the second-generation "betrayer" of ethnicity is not appropriate for different reasons than in *Native Speaker*, where escape of Asian heritage is blocked by others' perceptions of physical difference. In *Ghost Dance*, Maso qualifies the generational metaphor by emphasizing individual experience over cultural meta-narrative. Michael's silence is not a deliberate act of suppression but stems instead from his perpetual grieving for a lost home and culture. To talk about a past he's been forced to suppress would be traumatic, so he repeats in his own children's life the involuntary severance from ethnic memory that caused his own pain.

Although Michael is in many ways a prototypical American man, he, too, like Christine, is an eternal outsider, unable to find the place where he belongs. At Princeton, "not a pusher, a striver, a tweed bag, a jock, or a lounge lizard" (21), he didn't fit in. And Vanessa is certain he doesn't belong in the halls of finance. Looking at his wing-tip work shoes on the floor of his closet, she associates this everyday life of his with his unhappiness. "I was afraid of those shoes," she confides. "They seemed to me in some way testimonies of sadness …He must have been uncomfortable in them, I thought. He wore those shoes when he shook other men's hands half-heartedly, I imagined, alone in their company, too" (70). To function in the world outside the family, in the world of

business, Michael Turin, lover of classical music and cooking and the movies, is forced to walk in shoes that don't fit. These shoes, metaphors for Michael's conformity to the demands of mainstream society, suggest to Vanessa his loneliness and sorrow.

His yearning for his Italian heritage is revealed in two memorable events from Vanessa's childhood. One afternoon while walking outside with Vanessa and Fletcher, Michael bristles with joy and excitement when he comes upon a large, flat leaf he remembers his grandmother dipping in egg and flour and frying for him as a boy in Italy. With unprecedented candor and emotion he tells his children how this weed was transformed into a delicious treat. Vanessa recalls: "This was one of the happiest days of my life: clutching his hand, holding close the story of how his grandmother, who had never lived before this day changed simple leaves for a young boy into veal" (93). This is one of the only times Michael speaks of his early years in Italy or the family left behind there. He speaks with wonder, nostalgia, and warmth that melt the chilly reserve distancing him from the children. This reconnection through memory with a past he had lost revives a living spirit and humanity in Michael that his children rarely see.

Michael's suffering from the loss of his ethnic roots is also apparent when he takes his family to see Michelangelo's *Pietà* at the 1964 World's Fair. So animated is Michael that to Vanessa, glowing in his warmth, he "did not seem like our regular father," usually so sad and remote (120). The rest of the family, even Michael's parents, whom he insisted join them, is largely indifferent; "Italy did not interest my grandfather anymore … America was everything now" (125). The *Pietà*, an early masterpiece of Italian Renaissance art, represents for Michael not only his lost Italian culture but also his sorrow. The famous statue depicting the holy mother holding her dead son across her lap

represents a young, beautiful Mary whose expression is one of restrained, rather than harrowing grief, and resignation. And if one looks beyond its religious meaning, it is a family scene of mother and son forced to endure loss. Michael identifies with the subtle agony and quiet acceptance of this loss as depicted by Michaelangelo. He is, as Mary Jo Bona suggests in her reading of the *Pietà,* the Madonna figure grieving the loss of his Italian parents, whom he cradles in his arms (178). He is also the son sacrificed to appease the heartless cries of the crowds, a son whose mother cannot save him and must suffer his pain and hers.

Michael enlists Vanessa into this suffering. Reading of the statue's long journey across the ocean from the Vatican City in Rome to America in the newspapers, he shared the details with his young daughter as he never could about his own similar journey years ago. His "partner in sorrow," Vanessa listens to his reports attentively, and at the fair, when the rest of the family scatters after a first or second viewing, she spends the entire morning with her father in front of the "sad statue." She does not understand why the statue is so important to her father, but she stands by him and absorbs his sadness: "for no real reason I felt Father's tears in my eyes" (Maso*, GD* 124). Vanessa receives the emotional effect of her father's unmastered grief without experiencing or even knowing its source. His emotional pain is being impressed upon her through his tears before the *Pietà* and his silence and detachment at home.

As with her mother, Vanessa wants to save her father and help him live in the world with her and Fletcher but cannot. "I would like to dredge him up from those depths, breathe life into him, beach him on some even shore. I dive, once, twice, hold his head in the air, push water from his lungs" (19). Michael, too, is depicted also as the

living dead, in need of his daughter to resuscitate him but never granting her the opportunity. As Bona declares, he is emotionally killed by the forcible suppression of Italian culture and identity in his childhood (178). Other than brief moments of cultural revival, very little brings Michael back to life. Music, his unpursued passion, provides one of the few means of soothing his agitated soul. He sits silently in the house listening to his music; his most frequent communication with Vanessa are the recitations of classical composers scattered throughout the novel. Christine, the most beautiful woman he's ever seen, "more beautiful than Grace Kelly," is the only other thing that rallies Michael to life. After Christine's death, Michael has no interest in even the half-life he had been living only for her. He abandons his job, his home, and his children to travel alone on the ocean toward the cold, dark countries of Northern Europe that, in Vanessa's mind, he never reaches. Far from land and any home he's ever had or longed for, Michael remains endlessly adrift on the stormy seas, an apt context for his darkened and disconnected existence.

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I thought of him coming here, his dreams of being a real American…

Michael and Christine both suffer from a lack of roots traceable in part to their parents' immigrant histories. Literary critic Edvige Giunta, in her study of Italian-American women's literature, states that immigrant identity is defined by "a fracture, a separation, and a complicated longing for connection" (72). In *Ghost Dance,* this condition of identity built around loss and longing is passed on from immigrant parents to their children and grandchildren. Vanessa's returns, through memory and imagination, to this generation's experiences suggests how crucial this history is to her own struggle to construct a viable identity. The story of immigrant grandparents is submerged in

Vanessa's story, but Giunta's description of immigrant identity aptly describes Angelo and Maria Turin and Sarkis Wingarian, who all seek a connection to place and people but cannot achieve it. Only Maria's loss is connected to the original loss of homeland. The grandfathers, who eagerly embrace America and Americanization, experience their identity-shaping separation and fracture in the loss of their belief in America.

The Turins arrive in America seeking a better future than possible for them in Italy. They leave behind the persistent discontent of *la misèria* and political injustices directed toward Southern Italians to settle in the appropriately named New Hope, Pennsylvania. Arriving in the 1930s, after the large waves of Southern and Eastern European immigrants had been stemmed by the 1924 immigration acts but before an acceptance of these groups into whiteness had been achieved, the Turins, by virtue of their place of origin and being part of a still undesirable immigrant group, would have been viewed as un-American due to not only their foreignness (especially with Italy becoming an enemy nation during World War II) but also their "racially in-between" status. Though the text doesn't address any discrimination or marginalization, this historical context helps to explain Angelo's avid and accelerated project of assimilation through which he moves himself and his family beyond "un-American" racial and ethnic categories as quickly and completely as possible.

Upon their second day in the country, he signs himself and his wife up for English classes and begins actively to turn himself into an American. Aware that language acquisition will be a key factor in his movement into mainstream society, he is a dedicated student, "staying late, trying to improve his pronunciation, persevering" and nightly admonishing himself that "the accent must go" (Maso*, GD* 17). He also anglicizes

names to shed the foreign markers of Italian language and culture on their identities: "'Maria,' my grandfather said one day long ago, 'today your name is Mary. Today I change my own name from Angelo to Andy. Today we are real Americans'" (76). A common element in immigrant fiction, clothes, too, must be exchanged for American styles. Angelo becomes especially interested in "the dress of the Negroes whom he considered the most authentic Americans. They were new and exotic, like America itself. And above all, they were not Europeans. Europe became 'for the birds'" (77). However, what he identifies as most American is, ironically, the group and culture most egregiously excluded, civically and culturally, from the nation. His attraction to African American culture ignores the horrific history and continued oppression of African Americans. He sees only the romanticized possibilities represented in Harlem, jazz, and jive, but he is blind to the reality of American racism.

Angelo's passion for being all-American, which Vanessa witnesses as a young child, is associated in her mind with her father's great sadness and silence. She imagines a traumatic scene of her father's childhood in which the boy watches in terror from his bedroom window while Angelo, axe in hand, hacks down their tomato plants. Vanessa wonders:

> Is that what he is forgetting - his father out in the garden chopping the tomato plants into pieces, insisting that they are Americans now, not Italians? Did his father announce that there would be no more Italian spoken in his house? No more wine drunk with lunch, as he burned the grapevines? Did he tell his wife there would be no more sad songs from the old country? How much she must have wept, hugging her small son to her breast! (74)

Gaps in the transmission of Turin family memory and cultural heritage are traced to this imagined moment. Paralleling Vanessa's own childhood memory of her mother tearing up flowers from the garden, Angelo symbolically chops down the stalks of Italian culture they'd planted in America and violently severs connections to the past.

The image of mother and son weeping at Angelo's dictates after the chopping of the tomato plants attests to Vanessa's sense of her grandmother Maria's pain. Maria suffers from separation from Italy as her husband never does. Similar to Cesar and Nestor Castillo, Angelo and Maria represent opposite emotional responses to immigration. Angelo, like Cesar, is forward-looking and excited by the prospects for an American future. Maria, like Nestor, grieves the loss of a beloved homeland. "She felt lonely. The village where she was born and had lived her whole life welled in her stomach. She had to eat a lot of bread to keep it down; she had to sleep under heavy blankets" (77). She viscerally desires to preserve her *italianità* in the new country, a task impeded by her husband's great enthusiasm for complete transformation. His mission undermines her traditional function as Italian-American mother – to preserve ethnic culture within the immigrant family. And though she resists in small ways, her victories are double-edged. For example, as Vanessa reports, "she never once called him Andy and the name, unused, faded. And when she refused to answer to Mary, my grandfather sadly returned to Maria, for he missed my grandmother too much. She would not look at him or say one word; he was addressing a stranger" (76). Maria clings to vestiges of her Italian identity, refusing to surrender her name as emblem of her being, but does indeed begin to become a stranger to her own loved ones. Disgruntled, overly practical, pessimistic, and, perhaps weighed down by bread and heavy blankets, she grows distant from her husband and son.

The very trauma that unites her and Michael in sorrow, a commiseration he perceives in the *Pietà*, simultaneously separates them as each retreats alone within a wounded self.

Angelo, on the other hand, does not recognize the significance of his loss of ancestral culture until, confronted with the ugly face of American racism he had chosen not to see before, he is left with nothing. This intense disillusionment with America occurs on the same day his son is momentarily reconnecting with Italian culture – at the World's Fair. Amid the light displays, parades, beauty queens, and pavilions showcasing technological innovation, Angelo, with Fletcher in tow, witnesses the arrest of Black protestors lying on the floor, blocking the entrances, and staging a mass sit-in at the Ford Pavilion. The hypocrisy of American rhetoric of freedom and equality is illuminated against this backdrop of international display of multicultural celebration and unity when juxtaposed with the masses of excluded black bodies demanding their place in Tomorrowland, the theme of the fair.

When the demonstrators' chants of "Freedom now" are returned by members of the crowd crying "Ship 'em back to Africa" and ""Get the gas ovens ready!" Angelo is stunned into silence but moved to action: "My grandfather felt a wave of sickness pass through him. 'No,' he said, holding my brother's tiny hand, and he suddenly felt the need to dissociate himself from the people he stood with and, still holding my brother's hand, he crossed the line and lay down with the demonstrators" (127). The people Angelo stood with are the mainstream white Americans he had wanted so badly to join and who now with their callous inhumanity incite a life-changing transformation. Angelo is now aware of his complicity with American racism in his idealized view of America, his naïve perception of African American experience, and his relatively easy access to privilege

and advancement denied others, indeed at the expense of others, with far longer tenure in the country. So he turns his back not only on the bright shiny lights of progress and capitalism on display at the World's Fair but also on contemporary American society, founded on "a system of hatred and fear so elaborate and so subtle and efficient – in short, so perfect – that it would be nearly impossible to crack" (129). He crosses the line, literally and figuratively, to join the protestors for equality.

Feeling "betrayed to the core" by his initial attempt to find better future in America, Angelo turns to the past, not his personal past but America's haunted past, to find a different path for the future. He sheds his American self as he had his Italian self years ago and is left, in the words of Fred Gardaphè, "without a life philosophy" (144), until, directed by his dreams, he finds a new way of life and thought in the Black Hills and Native American culture. The interpolation of the character into the history and culture of this oppressed group is a problematic move by Maso. Not only is the premise that Angelo would be accepted into the Lakota tribe and allowed to undertake a cultural apprenticeship unrealistic, but the prospect of slipping into a primitivism that employs a flattering but nonetheless essentialist image of the Noble American Indian as a powerful counter-example to modern American society also emerges.[59] The practice of appropriating Native American culture and identity, according to Shari M. Huhndorf in *Going Native,* her study of this phenomenon in American culture throughout the twentieth century, threatens to reinscribe colonization via its "very contemporary desire to occupy the cultural space" of the Indian in order to regenerate the white culture (179). Maso treads on dangerous ground here; I am not certain she escapes primitivism or

[59] Native American scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., in his foreword to *The Pretend Indians,* describes the wise Indian who instructs a white apprentice in Indian lore and tradition as a prevalent white fantasy.

misappropriation. However, Angelo's turn to Native American culture allows her to emphasize the American process of consent as well as the need to revive devalued cultural histories. Angelo participates in what Sollors identifies as the essentially American practice of choosing one's own ancestors. Having betrayed his Italian ancestry and been betrayed by his previously claimed American affiliations, he selects a different and arguably more American legacy.

Angelo's decision to affiliate himself with Native American culture following his witnessing injustice attests to a new belief in the value of the past and its ability to be carried over into the present. He challenges the discourse of progress so essential to dominant American thought and rationales for otherwise inexcusable actions; instead, he asserts an indispensable value and lesson to be found in the past. As Bona suggests, his move back in time speaks to his "love of heritage and his awareness of its necessity to give meaning to his final years" (178). He turns to a culture that is endangered and oppressed in America but that does not require sacrifice of his ethical self in connection to a brotherhood of oppressed and exploited peoples. Hope for the future in America, if guided by this undervalued American culture, is also revived.

Adhering to this new (to him) set of traditions and cultural beliefs, Angelo can now become the ancestral guide, so common in ethnic American fiction, for his grandchildren. The culture he nurtures his grandchildren with is, in the terms of Werner Sollors, one of consent. He chooses the beliefs and history of Native Americans to bequeath to Vanessa and Fletcher, to teach them how to live a good life in proper balance with nature, in brotherhood with the oppressed, and in connection with but not endangered by the dead. He offers them the belief in an alternative possibility for

America and teaches them a responsibility for working toward this better America. And only at the end of his life, when Vanessa overhears him speaking Italian for the first time from his deathbed, does it become clear that despite his dedication to Native American culture and decades-long repression of the Italian, this latter heritage was never fully effaced. "The grandfather ultimately leaves his grandchildren a complex legacy, which includes both his culture of heritage and his adopted Native American traditions" (Bona 179). He bequeaths a legacy of both Native American and Italian cultures.

Much of the criticism on *Ghost Dance* concentrates on the negotiations between loss and recovery of *italianità* in the text, thus on the Turins, but Maso insists upon multiple sites of ethnic origin and recovery in Vanessa's grappling with the past, and Christine' father, Sarkis Wingarian, also looms large in Vanessa's life and project. Sarkis immigrated to America from Armenia with grand ideas about what this country has to offer:

> Marilyn Monroe, Veronica Lake, Jean Harlow …In America there are blonde women. In America everyone has a big car, a Cadillac or a DeSoto or a Lincoln, with fins, with wings… Everyone smokes cigarettes.
>
> No one worries about cancer yet; no one wears seat belts. They cannot help this feeling: that no matter what they do, how fast they drive, nothing can hurt them. They are indestructible. This is America. Everyone will have a job. There will be plenty of money. They will bounce back when hit. Everything will be fine. (Maso*, GD* 182)

Having lived through violent persecution under the Turks, Sarkis embraces America not only for what it offers in terms of prosperity – money, fancy cars, and beautiful women –

but also for the promise of security and position of strength not available to him in a besieged Armenia.[60]

Though he eagerly changes his name to Frank Wing, marries the beautiful but frail daughter of German immigrants, and begets a beautiful blonde daughter who appears to be both key to and sign of success in America, his dream of this new world, shaped largely by the movies, never becomes a reality. Sarkis obtains a job in America, as a silk weaver, but must work two and three shifts daily, including weekends, to support his family and pay his wife's medical bills. For even in America, he has not escaped tragedy. His beautiful wife Alice suffers from a rheumatic heart and hinders rather than aids him in fulfilling his dream. Her overwhelming medical bills devour his earnings and, by the time his daughters are born, Alice can barely leave her bed in their small, dark, dingy apartment in New Jersey. It is only imaginatively, through reading the travel section of the *Paterson Sunday News*, that he and his family can explore America.

Upon the birth of his first daughter, Christine, his hopes revive. Vanessa imagines her grandfather thinking, "Girl babies in the old country were nothing to dance about, but he danced at the birth of my mother. …He was proud of her light hair that waved. He had made an American girl, with blue eyes like the Pacific, her long graceful body – California. He had made a real American beauty" (180). Christine, "a product of this new country," not dark and foreign like her father, would provide a new way for him to claim America; she embodied America for him. She would grant him all the riches America

[60] Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, Armenians were an ethnically marginalized and violated group in Eastern Europe. The Turks persecuted Armenians as part of the Ottoman Empire. A genocide of approximately one million Armenians began in 1915 and instigated the Turkey-Armenian War in 1920. This war was followed quickly by a Soviet invasion. The USSR and Turkey divided up the region; Armenia, with no input, was incorporated into the Soviet Union, and in 1936 endured a new reign of terror under Stalin. Millions of Armenians were executed or deported as part of his Great Purge.

promised because "In America you can make movie stars… Beautiful babies could make money just for being beautiful" (181). As a baby and young girl, Christine was a golden child, her blond beauty transformed not only into much needed money but also keeping alive, despite unyielding material and emotional hardships, a belief in the opportunities and possibilities in America.

Christine is turned into a child model, and Sarkis, becoming more ambitious, even takes her for a screen test at MGM studios. Vanessa imagines that, like many before him in American history and literature (including Hijuelos's Castillo brothers), her grandfather travels west to claim his share of America's riches. A year before his wife's death, he packs his lovely daughter into the car for the long drive to California, his one trip across America. However, even as a child, Christine resists this attempt to force her to be someone she is not or to reduce her to her outward appearance. Christine cries throughout her screen test, eliciting the angry hisses of "Turk-breath" from her father, who also informs her that "In the old country we drown children like you" (183). If unwilling to perform as the beautiful American blonde, Christine has little value for Sarkis and loosens his ties to and claim on America.

Her stubborn refusal and disobedience shatters her father's dream of making it big and, compounded with the death of his wife soon after, all his faith in America. In the following years, Vanessa claims, "My mother was not the blonde my grandfather wanted. She tied her hair back, kept her legs covered by pants, rarely smiled or spoke… She could not be pushed. She would not fulfill the dream" (182). The rift between father and daughter widens as they turn away from one another. She opposes the men who want her to be pretty and silent, and takes up books, language, and the cultivation of her inner self

in contradiction of Sarkis' desires. In doing so, she distances herself from not only her father but also a new self unattached to either culture in which her father has declared her worthless.[61]

Sarkis departs from America and his American daughters. He is utterly disillusioned and disappointed, "every American hope dashed, every bloated dream deflated. The movies had tricked him. No quiet, beautiful daughter had ever resisted stardom in them. No wife died of a rheumatic heart at the age of thirty-five. No family was broken into little pieces" (184). Despite his hard work and faith, America has failed him, failed to live up to its image on the big screen. He has found neither wealth, security, nor respect in America. He feels undervalued as a man in American culture and goes back to his departed homeland where he may find some degree of respect for his age and girth (Bona 176). He reclaims his Armenian name and, leaving his two college-aged daughters behind, reverses his migratory journey. However, like Cuba radically transformed by political and historical events after Hijuelos's Castillos emigrate, Sarkis Wingarian's Armenia no longer exists. It had been absorbed into the Soviet Union, "the old country, now many countries strewn across the continent" (Maso*, GD* 212).Vanessa imagines him, rendered homeless by the vicissitudes of immigration and history, endlessly roaming Eastern Europe in search of a home he will never find.

Not only does Sarkis leave Christine and Lucy physically, he also severs all communications with his daughters, adding another layer of silence and loss to Vanessa's family history. Vanessa will never meet her grandfather, for although Christine calls and invites him to visit when Vanessa, his first grandchild, is born, he declines. Having been

[61] Ironically Christine becomes a part of American culture through her poetry. However, as a person she never really feels that she belongs, and even as a poet she continues to be subjected to a public that, to her great chagrin, overemphasizes her beauty.

disappointed enough in the false promise of American women, perhaps, he says to call when a boy child is born, but Christine makes no call a year later when Fletcher is born. Sarkis remains a palpable absence in the Turin home; Christine and Lucy call every Christmas only to be informed that "no one who calls himself that" is there (235). So Vanessa grows up with a longing for this large, sad, and disappointed man she never knew. She creates memories of this man and feels her life is intricately related to his. "I miss him, this enormous Grandpa Sarkis. When I get older and begin to gain weight myself, I know I will think of him. I will watch my hips turn to gold. And in the silk dress I someday buy will see him in Paterson, setting the weave all day and all night for love. As I slip into that smooth dress, I'll think of him, whenever he is, coaxing silkworms into productivity for me" (212). She creates a connection to him based on respect for his ethnic heritage, hard work, and hardships that have all been for her.

***

"Live," he said, "or die!"

For the year since her mother's death, Vanessa herself has been trapped in a form of living death. Vanessa's emotional and psychological state is paralleled by her college lover Marta's physical coma. Marta's story, in many ways, parallels Vanessa's. When Vanessa meets Marta, she recognizes her own longing for the unattainable Christine in Marta's grief over the death of her previous lover Natalie. Marta was "paralyzed with grief, every word colored by it, every movement determined, defined, by its cruel properties," and she lures Vanessa into this dark melancholy, introducing her to drugs and alcohol (147). Vanessa identifies with Marta's loneliness and desire: "In her voice I recognized my own, many years ago, begging my mother not to leave my darkened room" (148). She empathizes with Marta's cries of "Why?", craving an explanation for

the inexplicable – a cry that within months will become Vanessa's cry, too. Vanessa wants to save Marta from her sadness, as she'd always hoped to save Christine and Michael. She tells Marta to "[i]magine it differently" (194), but Marta cannot. And upon returning to Vassar after Christmas break, Marta slits her wrists and falls into a coma.

In her attempts to save Marta, Vanessa is also, without being aware, working toward saving herself. In looking back at her relationship with Marta, she sees it as a rehearsal for the grief she would encounter upon Christine's death. Vanessa tries to follow her own advice – to imagine it differently –but runs up against what, in regard to Christine's conjuring a grand ball to tend to a young Vanessa's torn up and bloody knee, De Salvo calls "the limits to the curative potential of pretense" (4). Just as Christine managed to make Vanessa feel better with her pretense of a ball but failed to care for the child's knee, Vanessa's practice of invention is positive but limited. Vanessa has relied upon imagination her entire life to assuage loneliness. She tells us, "Invention was everything to my mother and in that quiet, dark house I too learned how to fill empty space and dispel silence" (16). Throughout her childhood she would conjure her mother's presence, as well as her dead grandmother Alice's, and reasons for her father's sadness.

After Christine's death, Vanessa turns more fully to imagination, her inheritance from her mother, to create a context for a new sense of self that can help assuage her more desperate and complete loneliness and sorrow. She creates a cultural memory that exists before and/or outside of Christine and enables personal connections to people and traditions that she needs to strengthen her own sense of identity. For example, she transforms Maria into the desired ancestral figure connecting Vanessa to Italian culture. In a memory, false according to Fletcher, of visiting her grandmother on the Fourth of

July with her brother and father, Vanessa recalls a "bizarre image, a picture of eeriness in the fog": "In front of us through the early morning we saw what seemed to be an old, old woman, or the ghost of a woman, dressed in a strange elaborate costume and posed on the large front lawn of the nursing home" (221). Maria, imbued with ingenuity of her own by Vanessa, is wearing a long beaded skirt, a white peasant blouse, red rosaries, and streamers flowing from her braided hair. She shakes a tambourine devised from tin pie plates, yarn and bells as she begins, slowly at first and then more quickly, the lilting steps and twirls of the tarantella.[62]

Maria performs a ghost dance of her own, reviving within herself and for her family the Italian culture and home that she'd long suppressed. The awakening of her Italian cultural memory, of not only the tarantella but also foods, family, and songs, also softens Maria's sternness and allows her to, in Vanessa's words, make "her peace with us and with the world at the last moment – and we with her" (223). Vanessa feels closer to Maria than she ever has through this memory, real or imagined, in which Maria embraces her son and grandchildren in her arms and in her revived Italian culture. In this moment, Vanessa achieves both closure and continuity in her relationship with her grandmother. This scene of making peace between Maria and her family resolves any conflict, resentment, or regrets that affected their relationships; and the introduction of Italian culture into Vanessa's consciousness has potential as a continuing influence in Vanessa's life.

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[62] The tarantella is a traditional Southern Italian peasant dance performed to cure one, usually a woman, from a trance-inducing spider's bite through continued, frenzied dancing. Another theory on the history of the tarantella is that the dance was a remedy for the frustrations and depressions of women in an oppressive society. For more information on the history of the tarantella, see Frances M. Malpezzi and William Clements, *Italian-American Folklore.*

Invention may be a means of helping Vanessa maintain a connection with her long suppressed cultural heritages and lost loved ones, but it will not necessarily help her to survive. Try as she may, she cannot imagine her mother into life without destroying herself in the process. Imagination can be used to fill in blanks; it cannot function to replace painful realities, like her mother's death, the slaughter of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans in America, or the poisonous greed of corporate America. Vanessa must be able to face these truths about her world and decide whether or not she wants to continue to live in it. Once recovery of a familial and cultural context for her identity is accomplished, she has a grounding from which to make possible survival but, as her lover Jack repeatedly tells Vanessa, she must choose to live rather than follow Christine into death. Jack and Sabine are crucial in this aspect of Vanessa's development.

Her sexual encounter with Sabine has the dangerous potential to efface Vanessa in her attempt to reconnect with Christine: "We moved very slowly, carefully, deliberately, and the descent offered great pleasure as we burned slowly into a fine ash. To die with her. To be nothing but ash. To mix together. To end… and we were not anything anymore – nothing, no one, ash on top of ash on top of ash with her" (253). So great is the desire to reunite with Christine that Vanessa and Sabine are drawn to death, reduced to ashes in a fiery end. At this end, they seek Christine. However, "the world rose up again" and called them, unwillingly, back from the ashes. And Sabine, recovering herself, accomplishes what she came for: to tell Vanessa that Christine was a survivor and Vanessa, too, must fight to survive. Sabine, lover and best friend, knew Christine intimately and could share knowledge about this always mysterious woman in Vanessa's life. Sabine specifically informs Vanessa of her mother's fierce maternal love when

informed by her psychiatrist that, due to her illness, it was inadvisable for her, pregnant with Vanessa, to have children. He advised termination of the pregnancy, but Christine railed violently against him and his advice, asserting that "I will have children. I will write poetry" (256). Motherhood was difficult for Christine, as Vanessa clearly knew, but Christine fought for Vanessa's life and now Vanessa must do the same. As Sabine tells Vanessa, her mother was unafraid to suffer, unafraid to fight "even in the face of terrible sadness" (257). This is a part of her mother's legacy Vanessa must claim as her own.

The mysterious, brutish, and sometimes fierce Jack, though "a dangerous partner for her" (De Salvo 4), is also essential to Vanessa's development of a fighting spirit. Pipino explains that Vanessa's project of constructing an identity and story for herself are body-centered and that her sexual affair with Jack is "a body-centered attempt[] to make meaning in her life" (157). Jack prepares her, pushes her to fight to change the sad ending she seems to have accepted for her life. He entreats her to stop punishing herself for the fate of her family and to "love [her]self first" (Maso*, GD* 211). His techniques for furthering this development in Vanessa are visceral and often disturbing, ranging from the refusal of sex as he poses as a strict math teacher to one alarming scene in which he ties Vanessa up and whips her with his belt begging her to ask him to stop. "'How long can you go on like this?' he demanded. 'You can get out of it if you want. Picture yourself free …Fight back.' His voice sounded very sad… 'You have the ability to escape, Vanessa, but you don't want to'" (190). He is right; she does not yet want to escape her pain. She responds "I can never suffer enough" (191), and he beats her till she loses consciousness.

Jack's ultimate lesson, however, requires Vanessa to imaginatively experience her mother's fiery death. Dragging her out into a colorless world, coated white by the biggest snowstorm of the year, Jack brings Vanessa to the boundary between life and death. Moving with a desire and excitement characteristic of the sexual intensity between them, he leads her on an exhausting walk in the treacherously cold night to a pier between the Hudson River and the West Side Highway. Here, in extreme weather, between the water and the road, he initiates a threshold experience, forcing Vanessa to decide between life and death. He tackles throws her down to the snowy ground while in her mind she imagines a car slam into her from behind.

> I screamed and screamed, feeling some excruciating form enter me again and again in the snow. I was being slammed over and over. 'Oh, God!' I cried.
>
> "Live," he said, "or die!"
>
> There were flames everywhere: flames in my mouth, flames in my hair. There was no stopping this. Blue flames, orange, white –everywhere. "Why?" I shrieked with the last part of me before the brain closed down. "Oh, God," I sighed. "Why? Why?" (266-267)

With violent force, quite possibly sexual, Jack thrashes her, bringing her to the brink of what she thinks she wants, to die with Christine, in the obliterating fire of the snow. She begins to give way to the flames engulfing her, still clinging to Marta's question "Why?", still hoping there is a rationale for death and suffering.

This time rather than the world rising up around her from the ashes, Vanessa herself rises with a new purpose in life:

> I grew large and rose above the flames. “Did you think you could kill us just like that, you stupid bastards? Did you think we would just forget?” I laughed. “Did you think we’d be quiet forever?” My voice grew enormous, my body the tremendous body of rage.
>
> “There is no getting away with it. There is no escape. We will speak and bear witness. You can poison us, you can hack us into little bits, you can burn us in your furnaces, and still we will live. We will never stop speaking…” (267)

Anger at the senselessness of it all replaces grief, and Vanessa rises above flames on the tide of injustice and rage for the betrayals and injustices of the world. She rises like the phoenix to seek vengeance by bearing witness to the evils of man against man. Vanessa has found her own spirit animal in the mythical phoenix, who is resurrected to begin a new life. Vanessa’s renewal is perhaps also connected, in a reclamation of another facet of her ethnic heritage, to the Armenian Hazaran Blubul, or “The Nightingale of a Thousand Voices.” In the fairy tale “Hazaran Blbul,” written by Stepan Zorian, this magical bird is the object of a quest for which the hero must endure a difficult journey before returning home with the prized bird. Unlike the Russian firebird more closely associated with the phoenix, however, the Hazaran Blubul does not glow but rather renews the land to full bloom with its song. In her rebirth from the ashes, Vanessa finds her own song of a thousand voices to renew her world and the motivation to survive. She will speak out against injustice rather than allow herself to be so easily destroyed by sorrow.

Vanessa now identifies with a "We" that is not limited to her and Christine. Nor is this collectivity limited to family or cultural associations. Her "We" includes all who endure and have endured "racial, political, social, or economic injustice" (Pipino 162-3). Her healing is also achieved through a sense of communal belonging. She is able to accept that there is no good reason for her mother's death or any of the losses her family suffered but is able to understand that these losses are part of a larger canvas of American tragedy. Vanessa need no longer be alone in the world. Not only has she revived cultural connections to her ancestors through her work of invention but now she also claims a place in a community that transcends blood lines, ethnic groups and racial categories. This community of survivors of betrayal and injustice can include her grandparents and her mother as well as the Native Americans and allows Vanessa to find her own way back to the traditions her grandfather Angelo had taught her.

Only then, with this realization and her rebirth as a survivor, is Vanessa ready to say good-bye to Christine. To do so, she must find Fletcher, who is also in New York. The siblings had been within close proximity of one another for months, but each was so in absorbed in his or her individual sorrow that a great distance formed. But now Vanessa is ready to join her brother in the Ghost Dance taught them by Angelo. In the 1890s, the Ghost Dance provided Native Americans with hope for the future and spiritual consolation for physical and cultural violence perpetrated against them in the present (Young 278, 299). Its promise of renewal depended upon honoring the past by reviving a vision of that which had been lost to guide one toward a good life according to the old practices. It was a ritual of spiritual revitalization in the face of catastrophe and cultural destruction (La Barre 296), and it serves similar purposes for Vanessa. The Ghost Dance

offers her a way to bring Christine and the other the ghosts of America back in order to guide her toward the vision of a better future and way of life that can be found by incorporating aspects of the past into her present.

Dancing and chanting for days to Fletcher's rhythmic beating of a drum, the two mourners call forth Brave Ghost. Her arrival, in response to Vanessa's plea to "Help me live" (Maso*, GD* 271), transports them to an uncorrupted, fertile land where the Topaz Bird sings its exquisite song from its perch in a fruit tree. Christine appears in resplendent beauty and calm and takes her children on a journey through time to witness both the horrors (e.g. the slaughter of the Native Americans, Lincoln's assassination, migrant workers struggling through their laborious lives, the starving and homeless on the streets) and the beauty (e.g. the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, the arrival of various immigrants at the ports of New York City, her friend Mary picking apples, her father singing Sinatra) of American history. The ghost dance is the climax of the novel: linear time utterly collapses and synchronic voices emerge. In this sense, the entire novel is itself a ghost dance, reviving the ghosts of the past, of not only lost loved ones but also suppressed memories and histories, in the service of creating a meaningful future for Vanessa, who can keep the past and the dead alive within herself. She honors the past by choosing to live. Finally strong enough to let go of her suffering, she releases her mother's spirit, asserting "We can't come yet, Mommy… We must live" (275). As Leila, Eugenio, and Henry had done, Vanessa finds a way to survive and carry the vestiges of an otherwise lost immigrant history and culture, its beauty and its sorrow, into the future.

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