

Article

Genre Hybridization: Cosmopolitanism as a Literary Approach in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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Abstract: This study explores how Chang-Rae Lee, a Korean American writer, adeptly reworks the generic elements of spy fiction to serve as a conduit for interweaving his semi-autobiographical elements into *Native Speaker*, ultimately yielding a literary precondition sought by literary cosmopolitanism. The examination engages in a continuous search to identify literary preconditions that can address the challenges posed by prevailing power imbalances in discourse systems, which persist in impeding the progress of comparative exchanges toward a genuinely cosmopolitan literary ecology. It positions Lee's literary practice within the landscape of U.S. literature, where he navigates similar challenges posed by the American publishing industry and the expectations of the reading public for ethnic writers to conform to formulaic representations that reinforce essentialist notions of identity. Analyzing Lee's literary construction within this context reveals how his formal blend, in and of itself, not only subverts the role of genre as an ideological reinforcer but also empowers him to convey his authentic personal narratives without being reduced to a simplistic representation. This approach, therefore, ensures the preservation of authentic selfhood before embarking on further comparative literary exchanges.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; literary precondition; comparative literary; genre blending; power subversion



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1. Introduction

While thematic content often takes center stage in discussions of cosmopolitanism in literature, the form of the text itself plays an equally critical role. Literature is more than just a collection of texts and the ideas they express. As Marshall McLuhan famously noted, the method of delivery—the medium—can be just as impactful as the message (McLuhan and Fiore 2005, p. 9). Beyond its content, literature also encompasses the artistic arrangement of language, narrative structures, and stylistic choices, all of which determine how readers engage with the work. These formal elements are not simply passive echoes of broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. They actively interact with these forces, sparking a dynamic exchange that can subvert established norms or cultivate new cultural ways of thinking and being (Bakhtin 1982, pp. 39–40). The study of literary cosmopolitanism might, therefore, benefit from looking beyond what is explicitly communicated.

The pursuit of an authentic world literary ecology—one that is genuinely inclusive and interconnected—remains an ongoing area of inquiry. The postmodern reinterpretation of world literature has positioned comparative literary practices as a crucial pathway to realizing cosmopolitan ideals. In this reevaluation, comparative literature moves beyond merely mapping similarities and differences across literary traditions. It evolves into a reciprocal exchange in which texts mutually influence and complement each other, acquiring

global characteristics through processes of translation, reinterpretation, and circulation. While the comparative literary approach has proven beneficial, it remains hindered in its ability to fully realize the cosmopolitan dream. Two pivotal questions are central to this challenge. First, can cultural interaction truly alter core cultural characteristics, leading to the blurring of essentialist boundaries? Second, how can we address the deeply ingrained power imbalances in the current discursive structures that govern such exchanges? The comparatist approach persists in grappling with fundamental methodological challenges.

This study engages in the ongoing debates that seek to resolve these methodological impasses. Chinese scholars have actively worked to uncover the key preconditions that support the comparative approach in the actualization of a cosmopolitan ecology, with a strong emphasis on approaching it from a standpoint of true self-awareness and openness to difference. In this context, I propose a scrutiny of the literary construction behind *Native Speaker* (1995), showing how Chang-Rae Lee's formal experimentation can tackle these dilemmas. Born in South Korea in 1965 and raised in the U.S. after his family's relocation in 1972, Lee has established himself as a distinguished voice in contemporary American literature. With *Native Speaker*, his debut novel, he secured a significant place in the country's literary landscape, a space where ethnic authors often face pressures to conform to traditional storytelling norms. His bicultural upbringing and experiences led him to understand that no single national literary tradition can fully capture the complex, intersecting identities of individuals. To transcend these limitations, Lee transforms spy fiction into a flexible, neutral framework for retelling his ethnic narratives. This approach enables the work to be understood on its own terms, detached from preconceived norms. The novel demonstrates how genre blending, rooted in personal particularities, helps establish the preconditions for the comparative process, already performing cosmopolitanism in a foundational layer.

2. The Precondition: The Methodological Bottleneck in the Path to the Cosmopolitan Dream

The concept of cosmopolitanism in literature has garnered increasing attention in recent years, particularly through David Damrosch's framework of world literature, often drawing connections to the principles of comparative literature. Damrosch envisions world literature not as "a set canon of texts but a mode of reading" that foregrounds textual mobility across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Damrosch 2003, p. 281). This perspective views literature as an interconnected ecological system, where texts, as they travel farther from their origins, acquire new meanings through reinterpretation and translation in diverse contexts. Rather than reinforcing essentialist hierarchies of nationally based literary canons, this cross-cultural movement causes texts to become more refracted, diffused, and mutually influential, ultimately evolving into a potential antidote to the dangers of nationalistic separatism, militant patriotism, and internal conflict (Damrosch 2003, p. 282). The rethinking of cosmopolitanism through this lens of world literature—centered on one culture's exposure to and reception of others—naturally resonates with the comparatist approach. Many scholars have thus gravitated toward comparative literature, seeing it as mutually definitive and generative in relation to cosmopolitan literature, while also positioning it as a "grand corrective to nationalistic heresy" (Damrosch 2003, p. 282).

With cross-cultural exchange at its core, comparative literature has established itself as an essential pillar of cosmopolitan literary scholarship. In a postmodern context that challenges essentialism, Chen Yuehong contends that the comparative literary approach is crucial for promoting diverse literary values and standards necessary to the construction of a global literary ecology (Yue 2023, pp. 33–34). Comparative literature here refers not merely to the juxtaposition of unrelated materials but to the process of translating texts across

different cultures, disciplines, and languages, where one's literary elements are woven into the literary and cultural traditions of other nations (Yue 2023, p. 56). To put it differently, this reinterpetive process introduces new elements into original national literature and, as a result, endows them with global characteristics (Yue 2023, p. 56). This idea aligns with Walter Benjamin's view on translation, in which the exchange process addresses linguistic gaps, enriching and complementing the receiving linguistic system, while allowing the essence of the original text to shine through (Benjamin 2002, pp. 254–55). In this way, comparative literature helps prevent global literature from devolving into a collection of disjointed texts by acting as an essential epistemology that fosters interactive cognition and mutual complementation (Benjamin 2002, pp. 254–55). The comparative approach has thus made significant inroads into literary theory, critical analysis, and literary historiography, fostering the broader reconstruction and growth of cosmopolitan literary scholarship.

Despite the burgeoning global literary era, in which comparative literature, grounded in cross-cultural literary scholarship, is considered a foundational precondition for global literary studies, the comparatist approach remains confronted with unsettled and emerging theoretical challenges. A lingering question continues to hover over its potential to dissolve entrenched essentialist distinctions. As Daiyun Yue observed, the central issue at hand is whether a culture's engagement with and reception of other cultures can alter its fundamental traits and eventually lead to the reduction of cultural differences (Yue 2023, p. 34). Since the self is comprehended in opposition to what it is not, namely the "other", the heterogeneity between the two must be disclosed before the "other" can act as a reference point for self-introspection (Yue 2023, p. 34). However, if heterogeneity is disproportionately emphasized, it could hinder effective communication and precipitate a division between the two realms. (Yue 2023, pp. 34–35). Conversely, if heterogeneity is downplayed, the unique traits of the "other" might be neglected, bringing about the expression of an inauthentic identity (Yue 2023, p. 35). The challenge, then, lies in resolving the paradox between the "self" and the "other" in dialogues across cultural demarcations.

Yue also draws attention to the structure of discourse that governs cultural interactions as a core concern (Yue 2023, p. 35). A fundamental condition for meaningful dialogue is the existence of a discourse that both parties can understand and agree upon. However, developing countries today find themselves dependent on a discourse system that has been firmly established by the developed world, driven by its political, economic, and cultural dominance (Yue 2023, p. 35). This system has become deeply embedded over centuries of intellectual contributions, particularly in areas concerning humanitarianism, to the point where it is now unimaginable to express ideas without referencing it. Many distinct cultural expressions that do not fit within this system risk being excluded, undermining the possibility of genuine cultural dialogue and reducing it to a monologue in disguise (Yue 2023, p. 35). Should this be the case, it prompts the question of the very framework that underpins such exchanges: how can we move toward creating a new discourse system that facilitates equal and meaningful dialogue?

Numerous Chinese scholars have engaged with these ongoing issues. Yang Zhouhan, the founding president of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association (CCLA), for instance, maintains that a crucial prerequisite is the cultivation of a "Chinese soul", meaning a deep understanding of one's cultural identity and heritage (Yue 2023, p. 54). This grounding allows scholars to engage with the world through a distinct "Chinese soul interpretation" (Yue 2023, p. 54). Professor Chen Sihe of Fudan University echoes a comparable view, though without offering an in-depth theoretical discussion, asserting that abstract notions such as "penitent conscience", "awareness of inner demons", and "survival consciousness" are essential to the progression of comparative literature toward a genuine global literary ecology (Yue 2023, p. 54). A group of young scholars in Beijing has also introduced fresh

perspectives to the study of world literature, underscoring the importance of a dynamic and open-minded approach to literary engagement (Yue 2023, p. 54). Notably, however, these efforts often prioritize the necessary preconditions for facilitating the comparative process.

If cosmopolitanism, as envisioned through the lens of world literature, aims to create a mode of reading that transcends the nation-state and the essentialist us-versus-them mentality, what path might lead to this? Postmodernism has ushered in an era of pluralism and vitality, laying a comparatist foundation for cross-cultural communication that resists homogenization. However, this new iteration of genuine global literature, still in its nascent stage, continues evolving, adapting to the ever-shifting global landscape. It remains far from its idealized form, with unresolved issues like the imbalance between the self and the other, as well as the unequal distribution of power in expressive frameworks. Many Chinese scholars stress the importance of understanding the self and embracing open-mindedness as key foundations for the comparative approach to the global stage. This study positions itself within this discourse, reconsidering the methodological preconditions that, while not indispensable, may aid in cultivating literary cosmopolitanism.

3. The U.S. Literary Landscape and Its Codifier of Otherness

Lee's novel can be understood as situated within a landscape that grapples with the previously outlined power imbalances. This section contextualizes his work against the backdrop of U.S. publishing practices, where expressive systems are reinforced by the dominant culture's political, economic, and cultural supremacy. This framing enables us to view his writing as an endeavor to transcend these challenges, illustrating how this pursuit has culminated in a form of literary creation grounded in authentic self-expression, aligning with the literary preconditions valued by the comparatist ideal.

U.S. literature has evolved in step with the nation's demographic transformations. The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, driven by mid-20th-century labor shortages, opened the door to a new wave of immigration. This wave brought immigrants from countries like South Korea, the Philippines, South Vietnam, and Cambodia—nations profoundly affected by American colonialism, war, and neocolonialism (Lowe 1996, p. 16). Their arrival not only diversified the nation's demographics but also played a key role in cementing ethnic literature as a mainstream genre, which further reinforced the U.S. self-image as a multicultural society (Lowe 1996, p. 87).

The increasing visibility of ethnic literature, however, does not guarantee its promise of equality. While the genre's growth signals inclusivity, it often confines ethnic authors to predefined racial categories. Cathy Park Hong, in *Minor Feelings*, critiques the expectation from both audiences and publishing houses that ethnic writers present their racial trauma as a realist, anthropological account (Hong 2020, pp. 45–47). These stories are often framed by the “show, don't tell” directive, which seeks to evoke sympathy and allow readers to experience the pain without confronting the uncomfortable reality of their own privilege in the same context (Hong 2020, pp. 48–49). Gayatri Spivak argues that such practices prioritize visibility over the authenticity of ethnic experiences (Spivak [1993] 2009, p. 7). The conventions of the genre push authors to hyper-visualize their cultural identities, reclaim their narratives in response to historical injustices, and align their work with mainstream expectations (Lowe 1996, p. 115). This reduces them to commodified representations of ethnicity for the dominant culture. The label “ethnic literature” ultimately demands a focus on difference, positioning ethnicity as the central marker of identity for these writers and reinforcing essentialist frameworks (Schlund-Vials 2018, p. 465; San Juan 2002, p. 104). Thus, the claim of diversification in the American literary scene rings hollow when considering the ongoing power imbalances.

This imposed categorization raises essential questions about authority and representation. According to Homi Bhabha, the act of representing difference inherently involves power—who holds the authority to define and legitimize cultural identities? (Bhabha 1994, p. 86). In the case of ethnic literature, this power remains with the dominant cultural ideology, which ensures that representation remains partial, fragmented, and virtual (San Juan 2002, p. 175). The genre’s supposed neutrality, framed as a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment, ultimately reduces ethnic literature to a hollow metonym for presence—or worse, a self-reinforcing rhetoric of (re)differentiation (Bhabha 1994, p. 90). As authors tailor their work to meet the expectations of mainstream publishing, their cultural expressions risk being absorbed into a manufactured common culture that sustains Eurocentric multiculturalism in the American nation-state (San Juan 2002, p. 98). The real question, then, is whether this literary space grants authors control over their narratives, or if it merely serves as a stage for performing visibility that furthers external agendas.

It is within this cultural backdrop that Lee seeks to dismantle the a priori ethnic codes embedded in generic conventions, striving to reclaim agency in self-representation. Beyond *Native Speaker*, his works consistently push against the conventional expectations of ethnic literature, expanding both thematic depth and formal experimentation (Page 2017, p. 4). His career reflects a direct response to the limitations placed on ethnic authors—dictated not only by what they should write but also how they should convey their stories, as well as the assumption that their work must represent, while white American writers are granted the freedom to explore creativity (Page 2017, pp. 4–5).

However, liberating himself from traditional genre constraints was not solely an exercise in creativity. In his early efforts, Lee became overly immersed in the works of influential authors such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, John Cheever, and Saul Bellow, seeking authenticity through their styles. This led to his first novel, *Agnew Belittlehead*, which ultimately went unpublished. Its postmodern syntax and raceless aspirations resulted in a texture that could be interpreted as somewhat white (Page 2017, p. 6). This outcome echoes David Palumbo-Liu’s critique that, while postmodern aesthetics may appear innovative, they often obscure an underlying whiteness embedded in their ideologies and systems of meaning (Palumbo-Liu 2012, p. 164). In recognizing that his literary mimicry had stifled his own voice, Lee pivoted toward a more authentic mode of expression (Lee 2004). His writing, then, becomes both an effort to carve out a space for ethnic writers beyond these inherited structures and a means of reclaiming and articulating his Korean American identity as a counterweight to formulaic cultural representations.

4. Dissecting Lee’s Literary Construction

This section scrutinizes how Lee adeptly repurposes generic conventions as a portal to weave in his personal experiences as a Korean American, thereby transforming the genre into a neutral framework for expression. This analysis is framed by the broader question of which forms of storytelling—and the power they hold—are challenged or elevated in this process.

4.1. *Spy Fiction as a Catalyst for Ideological Discourse*

Though the spy genre may not be defined by whiteness, the very act of engaging with spy fiction can be seen as a literary gesture that subverts power dynamics. For ethnic writers, and Asian American authors in particular, launching a career with spy fiction was not a typical choice during that period. Certain critics went so far as to assert that *Native Speaker* would have been more engaging had Lee “scrapped the spy elements” (Page 2017, p. 2). Several reviewers also worked to discredit the work as creative fiction, given its marketing as the first Korean American novel in the mainstream (Page 2017, p. 2). It seems

as though the creative space, which encompasses the spy genre, was not reserved for ethnic writers, making Lee's foray into this territory a subversive move.

Spy fiction was predominantly white in texture around the time Lee was constructing *Native Speaker*. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it served as a conduit for American exceptionalism, reinforcing the idea that the U.S. held a privileged position to assert its values on the world stage. Grippled by Cold War tensions, the nation lived in constant fear that war could erupt without warning. This pervasive anxiety heightened the genre's appeal, solidifying its conventional portrayal of the white American intelligence agent as a heroic figure working behind the scenes to safeguard national security (Weir 1998, p. 6). As the U.S. engaged in new geopolitical conflicts, the genre reflected these realities by increasingly depicting foreign adversaries through racial stereotypes. Rather than being seen as ideological foes, spies confronted enemies defined by their language, religion, and ethnicity. These figures were often characterized as morally inferior threats to Western ideals. In this way, the genre reinforced a binary view of noble American operatives versus villainous non-Western enemies, thereby upholding the notion of American supremacy as a justified moral authority in global affairs.

4.2. *Spy Conventions as Portals to Self-Reflection*

In contrast, Lee's literary approach challenges the moral absolutism that underlies the genre. He intentionally disrupts its linear progression and exploits the constraints of secrecy and self-concealment to transform it into a neutral narrative framework. Information about Henry's mission and the nature of his work is revealed gradually, rather than explicitly stated. As readers piece together these fragmented narratives, they discover that Henry Park, the protagonist, works as a spy for Glimmer and Company, a political consulting firm based in New York City. The firm's agents consist of "[f]oreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, and neo-Americans", including individuals from various backgrounds such as Chinese, Koreans, Laotians, Singaporeans, Filipinos, and Japanese, with freelancers filling roles as needed (Lee 1995b, p. 17). These spies are recruited and deployed by Dennis Hoagland, Henry's superior, who functions as "the cultural dispatcher" (Lee 1995b, p. 18). Each agent engages with their respective communities, embedding themselves within specific social circles to compile detailed reports while being strictly prohibited from expressing loyalty to any group (Lee 1995b, p. 17). Similarly, Henry is assigned to infiltrate John Kwang, a Korean American mayoral candidate, with the objective of sabotaging his campaign. During this mission, he becomes increasingly captivated by Kwang, who embodies the successful assimilation Henry once yearned for. However, despite his admiration, Henry ultimately exposes Kwang's use of *gghe*—a method of capital accumulation that circumvents established financial and governmental regulations in the United States—leading to Kwang's downfall. Although the espionage plot constitutes the novel's core, its significance is diluted by the incessant interferences of Henry's complicated personal relationships, necessitating that readers piece together the narrative's broader implications beyond the moral confrontations.

The amalgamation of espionage and personal narratives transfigures Henry's covert operations into a symbolic framework of assimilation, with the central objective of elucidating the toll that assimilation exacts on his relationships. The initial three chapters oscillate between Henry's interactions with the English language—mirroring the broader context of his emotionally distant marriage—and the exigencies of his covert operations. The narrative opens with Henry reading the farewell note left by Lelia, his ex-wife, who uses various labels to describe him, many of which echo stereotypes commonly associated with Korean Americans. Among these, the phrase "the false speaker of language" stands out as particularly defining (Lee 1995b, p. 6). Lelia notes Henry's caution in speech, particularly

around those with a more defined sense of self, like herself, a white American (Lee 1995b, p. 12). This fixation on mastering language is contextualized later in the third chapter, revealing how his espionage work has ingrained in him a habit of recalibrating his identity (Lee 1995b, p. 18). Within Glimmer and Company, ethnic individuals like Henry often excel as spies compared to their white American counterparts, who are described as “inclined to run off at the mouth” (Lee 1995b, p. 172). This focus on ethnic spies’ impersonation reinforces the stereotype of immigrants lacking agency, enabling their identities to be commodified and reshaped for specific missions. Their movement along the “in/visible” spectrum is fluid, contingent upon how authentically they navigate cultural channels such as language (Narkunas 2008, p. 329). The spy plotline serves to illuminate the repercussions of external expectations on the genuine performance of identity, ultimately causing Henry’s self-removal.

This dynamic concurrently functions as a conduit for Lee to weave his lived experiences into the novel’s hidden yet irremovable infrastructure. The malleability of Henry’s identity, in light of his obsession with the English language as a cultural marker of ethnic passing, can be interpreted as a fictionalized echo of Lee’s own assimilation journey (Cooper 1995). He has openly acknowledged how his experiences with language and identity influenced the development of Henry (Lee 2017). After immigrating to America in 1968 at the age of three, Lee began school with limited English skills. His mother’s constant admonitions about the necessity of mastering the language to succeed intensified his desire to assimilate. Through tireless effort, he swiftly became fluent, excelling academically and taking pride in his reading skills. Yet, this linguistic mastery did little to assuage an enduring sense of inadequacy, prompting him to pursue English in its most complex form—literature (Belluck 1995). Much like Henry, Lee once depended on language to mold his identity in his quest for acceptance.

The recurring movement between the plotlines forms a consistent pattern throughout the novel. As the narrative nears its midpoint, with Henry becoming more deeply ensnared in his false persona, the approach allows Lee to heighten his portrayal of how assimilation impacts family bonds. Lee exploits the constraint of silent observation to construct moments that provoke Henry’s introspection regarding his relationships with his father and the *ahjuma* (a term that refers to a middle-aged Korean woman), who was brought into the household by his father to take on responsibilities once handled by his mother.

One significant moment occurs during a party hosted by Kwang, where he watches others connect emotionally and realizes, “I had become the very thing I had resented in my father—a man who concealed his feelings, who wore a mask to hide his true self” (Lee 1995b, p. 162). Mr. Park, Henry’s father, embodies the model minority stereotype of a first-generation immigrant who prioritizes hard work and success. However, his business-oriented mindset results in emotional detachment evident in his lack of affection for his wife and his dismissive treatment of the *ahjuma* as if she were merely a housemaid, despite their former intimate relationship. Like his father, Henry exhibits indifference to the *ahjuma*, who remains a constant presence in his life (Lee 1995b, p. 60). While Lelia points out the absence of intimacy in his home, subtly indicating that he has unwittingly become a reflection of his father’s emotional detachment, it is through these moments of quiet observation that he experiences self-realization (Lee 1995b, p. 58).

Among numerous recurring instances, another illustrative moment takes place during a cultural reconnaissance mission, where he eavesdrops on older women conversing. Their exchanges are infused with warmth and camaraderie, prompting him to reflect on the nature of the *ahjuma*’s estrangement (Lee 1995b, p. 129). He recalls the monotonous and isolating routine of her existence: “She prepared fish and soup every night; meat or pork every other [. . .] She carefully dusted the photographs of my mother the first thing every

morning, and then vacuumed the entire house. For years I had no idea what she did on her day off [...] because she never learned three words of English" (Lee 1995b, p. 78). The warmth among the women solidifies his realization: "I had taken her presence for granted, just as I had with my own parents" (Lee 1995b, p. 145). His position as a silent spectator compels yet another moment of self-examination, revealing how assimilation has frayed his ties to family.

This dynamic between Mr. Park and the *ahjuma* mirrors the relationship between Lee's parents. Young Yong Lee, Lee's father, likewise grappled with the model minority ideal. After arriving in America in 1961, Young Yong Lee faced challenges due to his limited English and his Asian appearance. However, his passion for German literature enabled him to master the language quickly (Lee 2004, 1995a). With his newfound fluency, he secured a position at Bellevue Hospital (Page 2017, p. 6). Yet, his success came at the cost of his mother's quiet erasure. In Korea, Inja (Hong) Lee had been a celebrated athlete, serving as the point guard for the national high school basketball team that won the all-Asia championship (Lee 2004). However, in America, her world shrank to the confines of the home, where she dutifully assumed the roles of housekeeper, launderer, disciplinarian, driver, secretary, and cook (Shteyngart and Lee 2014). Isolated by language and cultural barriers, she never attained fluency in English before her death from stomach cancer at 51 (Lee 1995a). Their divergent trajectories underscore the paradox of acculturation—one defined by professional ascendancy, the other by quiet effacement.

The repeated invocation of spy motifs as vessels to convey the emotional and relational costs of assimilation establishes the foundation for Lee to develop a compelling thesis that that true coexistence that true coexistence hinges on the embracement of one's identity. After Kwang's death, Henry resigns to rebuild his relationship with Lelia. Free from his past as an ethnic spy, he joins her in speech therapy, wearing a green mask to play the "speech monster" in a game for ethnic children with speech impediments (Page 2017, p. 34; Miller 2016, p. 132). The mask creates a non-threatening space that encourages children to open up, turning these sessions into arenas for his emotional healing and confrontation with his troubled relationship with language, long viewed as a symbol of ethnic passing. English transforms into a "real living idea", a dynamic medium that allows individuals to confront their authentic selves and explore new possibilities for communal connection (Miller 2016, p. 132). Henry realizes his father's emotional distance stems from his relentless efforts to ensure the family's survival despite challenges in adapting to American culture (Lee 1995b, pp. 334–35). Ultimately, he expresses a desire to repair their fractured relationship, stating his willingness to hear his father's imperfect yet genuine pidgin (Lee 1995b, p. 337). This leads Henry to recognize the need for a new syntax in English—one that fosters a personal framework of existence (Engles 1997, p. 29).

To that end, Lee's formal experimentation creates fertile conditions for a truly cosmopolitan dialogue to develop. His literary approach transfigures the novel into a locus for multidirectional negotiation of the self. Practicing what he preaches, *Native Speaker* navigates the contours of the U.S. literary landscape, much like the unfolding allegory of the English language in its final pages. It stands as Lee's own syntax of lived truths. While the novel's semi-autobiographical structure enables it to transcend the post-Cold War nationalist boundaries of the spy genre, the spy elements allow Lee to establish himself as a fiction writer whose creativity is as profound as that of white American writers. The approach insists that the novel be seen as creative fiction, not ethnic literature, as often labelled by the American reading public, and that it be understood through Lee's distinct spatial and temporal contexts, without defining his selfhood in relation to the referent Other. At the same time, this act of self-expression does not negate the manifold forces that have shaped him but rather interacts with them as they were lived, steering clear of

hyperbole and thereby addressing the paradox explored earlier in this essay. Ethnicity, or Asian Americanness, is deconstructed as a rigid classification and reconstructed as a distinct experience, one that resists simplification into a uniform depiction of the Korean American community. These subversive and self-affirming dynamics illustrate how literary form can undo confining expressive norms and essentialist identity constructs, expanding the avenues for authentic self-representation that supports mutual engagement in the context of literary cosmopolitanism.

5. Conclusions

As cosmopolitanism in literature develops in tandem with an evolving view on world literature, it brings its own set of methodological challenges. The necessity of cross-cultural exchange in fostering a more global character within national identities has positioned comparative literary approaches as key fostering a cosmopolitan literary ecology. Despite comparative literature being redefined not as a mere comparison of literary similarities and differences but as a mutually generative process, realizing the cosmopolitan vision also demands a deeper reflection on the literary prerequisites that facilitate this exchange. The comparative approach should take into account preconditions that confront the power imbalances within the discourse systems governing cultural interactions, ensuring that every voice is acknowledged and represented in this dynamic environment.

A growing scholarly dialogue on beneficial literary preconditions has, therefore, emerged, with numerous Chinese scholars asserting that literary engagement should stem from genuine self-awareness and a receptiveness to cultural diversity. Engaging with this dialogue, this study investigates Lee's *Native Speaker* as an example of literature that may address these issues through its adept blending of genre conventions. Lee's literary pursuit unfolds within the context of the U.S. publishing industry, where entrenched power dynamics have sculpted the expectations and guidelines for ethnic writers regarding their literary outputs. This frames Lee's literary work as an effort to overcome similar power-laden constraints that we aim to dismantle, rendering his writing toward a creative literary that is profoundly anchored in the nuances of his lived experiences.

A closer examination of his literary craft reveals how *Native Speaker* serves as an arena for multidirectional self-negotiation, paving the way for reciprocal exchange in comparative literature. Lee reconfigures the conventions of spy fiction, once tied to U.S. exceptionalist ideology in the aftermath of the Cold War, into a neutral framework for personal storytelling. The constraints of spy fiction, particularly its use of espionage and silent observation, are repurposed as channels through which he subtly integrates his lived experiences, establishing a concealed yet essential infrastructure within the novel. This fusion of forms stands as an exemplary act of self-assertion, capable of countering the dominant discourse paradigms that, as discussed earlier, restrictively define self-introspection and ultimately distort self-expression, leading to unequal dialogue. In the end, it not only challenges the ideological role of spy fiction but also enables Lee to elevate his personal stories into creative fiction, conveying them in ways that avoid being simplistically reduced to a broad representation of the Korean American community. Positioned within U.S. literary practice, where ethnic writers are tasked with amplifying their ethnicity to bolster the essentialist foundation of the U.S. multicultural nation-state, this analysis demonstrates how the approach allows *Native Speaker* to be read as a work in its own right. The novel becomes a reflection of Lee's personal spatial and temporal experiences—a blueprint of his authentic existence. If we embrace the idea that “world literature is not a fixed canon of texts but a mode of reading,” which nurtures a mutually constructive literary ecology, then the path forward must involve active participation on both sides (Damrosch 2003, p. 281). Through his formal experimentation, which challenges the power imbalances inherent in

literary discourse to facilitate authentic self-expression, Lee sets the stage for comparative literature, ensuring active participation that extends beyond the receiving end.

Perhaps this explains why his novels, including *Native Speaker*, have become some of the most engaging works in discussions of cosmopolitan literature. The blending of genres is not a new concept, as many authors have previously incorporated elements of espionage into their narratives before, often focusing on war and moral dilemmas. However, *Native Speaker* has often been credited with achieving this blend first in a significant and mainstream way, thereby setting a new standard for ethnic storytelling. Published in 1995, the novel combines spy fiction with autobiographical elements to explore the complexities of identity. With its winning of the Pulitzer Prize, it underscores Lee's influence on contemporary American literature. This influence is evident in Viet Thanh Nguyen, who noted in an interview that his novel, *The Sympathizer*, drew inspiration from Lee's innovative approach, along with many other authors whose works have become central to discussions on literary cosmopolitanism today (Nguyen 2019). Ultimately, the significance of Lee's novels lies as much in the form of his narratives as in their content.

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