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Junior Year Writing

24 October 2021

The Effect of Intersectionality on Romantic Interest

For centuries, propaganda in the mainstream Western media has reinforced the notion that Asian men are effeminate, desexualized, and unattractive. These ideas originally surfaced as an imperialistic practice to take power away from colonized people; however this message still has a tremendous impact today on the way the Western world views Asian American men and how they view themselves. This racist notion of Asian American men as unattractive and effeminate, coupled with the Western obsession with speaking perfect English, has strong implications for protagonist Henry Park in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, particularly in regards to Henry's romantic interests and marriage to Lelia, a white woman and speech therapist. Due to a lifetime of experiences that have degraded Henry solely on the basis of his being an Asian-American non-native English speaking man, he feels drawn to white, native English-speaking women potentially because of the social value they can offer him and his potential offspring.

From the very first time they meet, Henry feels inferior to Lelia because of his status as an Asian-American man. Before they even begin their first conversation, Henry imagines that her boyfriend at the time feels at ease and unthreatened by Henry's presence because he is an Asian man and therefore viewed as undesirable to Lelia (Lee 9). This first impression of Henry's is informed by a lifetime of microaggressions that reinforce his lack of desirability as an Asian man. For example, when Henry's father learns that he is taking a white girl to the 8th grade

dance, he scoffs at the idea that she would find him attractive and implies that she is using Henry for a free ticket to the dance. He tells his son seriously, “this American girl, she nobody for you”(74). His pervasive discomfort from the pairing of an Asian man and a white woman is echoed by Lelias’s father, Stew, when he tells Henry he “wasn’t so happy” to find about his daughter dating “some bright Oriental kid” (120). These interactions are indicative of the broader feelings of the world around Henry, which has driven home for him the message that he, as not just an Asian person and not just a man, but specifically the intersection of his ethnicity and gender cannot be sexually desirable for white women.

Henry is also made to feel unworthy in American society because of a lifetime of struggling with and feeling insecure about his speaking of the English language. His status as a non-native English speaker isolated him socially as a child as other students ridiculed Henry for struggling with the pronunciation of English sounds. Bullying from his peers and teachers as well as being singled out for help wreaked havoc on his self-esteem. As a student needing English language learning services, he was lumped in with other students whom he deemed “misfits” and “dumb as the dead” (235). Being placed in this kind of class setting reinforces to Henry that he is unintelligent and unworthy: “we were the school retards, the mentals, the losers”(235). This self perception augmented by the school has long-lasting consequences on his confidence as an English speaker. Despite eventually achieving a high level of fluency in English, Henry feels that he “will always make bad errors of speech,” doomed to never achieve the so highly coveted native speaker status (234). Henry’s experience in school deeply ingrained in him the idea that proficiency in English is directly correlated with social and academic worth in American society.

Henry has been made to feel inferior in American society both because of the

desexualization of his intersectional identity and because he is a non-native English speaker. Interestingly, it is extreme whiteness and strong command of the English language that he finds highly attractive in women, specifically Lelia. Henry's description of her as an "Anglican goddess" (15), demonstrates that he associates "Anglican" with being of a godly status. The word "goddess" implies an otherworldly level of grace and beauty that perhaps in Henry's eyes can only be achieved by white Anglican-looking women. He pointedly notes her "white skin... Bone white, purple white" (228) as an attribute of hers that arouses him. Without even considering Lelia's intensely white American identity, it is clear that Henry is extremely attracted to Lelia's whiteness even on a purely shallow and superficial level.

However, in the United States, there is much more to whiteness than having physically pale skin. Most significantly to Henry is the hold Lelia has on the English language, both by nature of being white and born in the U. S. as well as being a speech therapist and a teacher of English as an additional language. From their very first meeting and even before he knows her profession, Henry's attention is drawn to the way Lelia speaks. He finds the way she "executes the language" highly sensual (11). Not her voice, not even the words she uses, but the very way she speaks, the way she forms her sentences, the command she exercises over the English language stands out to him as an attractive quality. She is a self-acclaimed "standard-bearer" of the English language (12); a significant part of her identity is that she works with the English language by both writing and teaching English. As such, she epitomizes English fluency. Henry is attracted to both the physical aspects of Lelia's whiteness as well as the more nuanced attribute of her mastery of the English language.

It is important to note that Henry has long been attracted to these qualities in women other than Lelia as well. Henry recalls a former classmate, Alice Eckles, whose perfect English

he used to try to imitate while practicing English pronunciation. Henry “adored and despised her height and beauty and the oniony sheen of her skin” (234). Despite claiming that he “despised” her, Henry admits that he finds her beautiful. His use of the word “sheen” to describe her pale skin parallels his use of the word “goddess” as he implies that there is a certain glow about her due to her whiteness. Also, her “height” as an equally adorable and despicable quality to him is noteworthy. Tallness in itself is an extension of white beauty, for a small stature is a key component of the narrow beauty standard for the Asian women that Henry has been made to feel are the only women he can and should pursue. Furthermore, perhaps he is drawn to someone taller than him because height represents a woman’s superiority to him in yet another aspect beyond mastery of English and social standing. Beyond being physically imposing, Henry also views her as the pinnacle of mastery of the English language in the classroom, which contributes heavily to both jealousy and feelings of inferiority as well as his attraction towards her.

Henry also feels attraction towards his old speech therapist, Miss Haven. He describes the way she would ask the students to feel the vibrations in her throat, “her mottled milky skin still damp with the sweat of other palms, her breath sweet” (235). This imagery of the dampness of her skin and the sweetness of her breath demonstrates a certain sensuality in the way that Henry views her. He also draws attention to her whiteness, her “milky skin”, in such a way that it seems he finds it sexually appealing. It is significant that he describes his speech therapist in this way, revealing that he associates English language mastery, the very formation of English sounds, and whiteness with sensuality.

It is likely that Henry finds these qualities so appealing because he has long received the message that whiteness and command of the English language ensure one’s status as truly

American, and therefore valued in society. Romantic attraction is a highly complex phenomenon that will probably never be fully understood. However, if one examines romantic attraction using a lens informed by evolutionary psychology, it becomes clear that humans, first and foremost, are attracted to mates who have desirable genes to pass onto offspring and who offer a high-status position in society. Due to his experiences in feeling devalued because of his Asian-American male identity and his struggles with English, it makes sense why Henry would be attracted to such qualities in women. Part of why Henry is so attracted to Lelia's physical whiteness is likely because it ensures his future children will be more white, and in Henry's eyes more accepted by society. When Henry's son, Mitt, is born looking very Korean, Lelia comments casually on how he hardly resembles her. Though she is unbothered by this fact, Henry is deeply upset and realizes that "[he] was the one who was hoping for more whiteness for Mitt, being fearful of what [he] might have bestowed on him..." (285). Among other aspects of hers, Henry is attracted to Lelia's white genes and the benefits they could have for his offspring.

Henry is also attracted to what Lelia can provide for their child in a linguistic sense, how she will raise him to speak English in a way that Henry never could. Henry reflects on how he never wanted to read aloud to Mitt, because he "feared [he] might handicap him, stunt the speech blooming in his brain... Lelia would provide the best example of how to speak" (239). The attraction he feels for women who excel at the English language is directly related to what he wants for his child: mastery of English. It's incredibly sad that Henry feels he should not read aloud to his son for this reason, however, it has been so ingrained to him that the farther one strays from perfect native English the less value one has in society. Henry, like any father, wants only the best for his son.

Henry feels a strong attraction for white women who have a strong command of the English language, exemplified most notably by his wife Lelia, an Anglican-looking speech therapist. This attraction is likely informed in part by how Henry has been made to feel inferior due to his status as an Asian-American man and a non-native English speaker. Becoming romantically involved with someone like Lelia would, in Henry's mind, secure a higher position in Western society for both himself and any offspring. Henry's eurocentric and self-degrading ideals are a product of living a racist society that devalues him as an Asian man and non native English speaker. American white beauty standards and speech expectations inform his sexual preferences and push him towards women like Lelia, who reinforce the system that has discriminated against him for his entire life. Though he himself will never be white nor a native speaker of English, he positions himself as closely as he can to that ideal by marrying Lelia and never fully embracing the richness of his own identity. Like so many of us, Henry continues to chase the standards of the society that he was born into, even though it rejects and degrades him.

Works Cited

Lee, Chang-Rae. *Native Speaker*. New York, the Penguin Group, 1995.