Troubling English:
Reading Li-Young Lee’s *Rose* as Minor Literature

Donna T. Tong
Department of English
Fu Jen University, Taiwan

Abstract

In *Rose*, Li-Young Lee employs a poetics that plays on and with language which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of a minor literature can help to illuminate. In particular, the poem “Persimmons” with its themes of family, memory, and language condenses various counter-hegemonic strategies. Lee’s poetics defamiliarizes English as a language, drawing attention to its constructedness and thereby exposing the inherently political interconnections of language teaching, language usage and racial hegemony. Lee defamiliarizes English in order to lay bare its senses of alienation and exile. Thus in “Persimmons” the poet shows us the precise linguistic and cultural processes through which persimmons are deterritorialized and reterritorialized. These tactics and concerns are broadly resonant with, and also critique, the ways in which Asians in America are imagined as Asian Americans; they provide us with a lens which focuses on this hybrid category *qua* category and refracts it. Here then I will analyze Lee’s poetry not only in terms of its mechanics and content but also as being broadly resonant with the ways in which Asians in America are imagined as Asian Americans, that is, as part of a racial order and the place of language in that matrix.

Keywords

minor literature, deterritorialization, Asian American literature,

Li-Young Lee, *Rose*, “Persimmons”
But there is wisdom
in the hour in which a boy
sits in his room listening
to the sound of weeping
coming from some other room
of his father’s house,

and that boy was me, and he
listened without understanding, and was soon frightened
by how the monotonous sobs resembled laughter.

—Li-Young Lee
“Epistle”
(Rose) To Start With a Letter

Li-Young Lee opens his collection of poems in *Rose* with “Epistle,” splitting the voice of the speaker in the poem by alternating between first-person singular and the third-person figure of an unnamed boy. Though the speaker claims “that boy was me” (13) in the sixth stanza of the poem, the same speaker later goes on to speculate about “[w]ho was weeping? Why? / Did the boy fall asleep? / Did he flee that house? Is he there now?” (14). These questions indicate that the two figures, the first-person speaker and third-person figure of an anonymous boy, are not actually the same despite the claim made earlier in the poem. This ambivalence and contradiction establish an abstract and abstracted tone and define a poetics which pervades and characterizes Lee’s poetry. The loneliness and emptiness of “the boy” who “sits in his room listening / to the sound of weeping / coming from some other room,” as well as the “monotonous sobs,” also echo and perhaps parody or subvert the very Anglo-American, New-England-based poet Wallace Stevens near the end of “The Snow Man,” where we hear “the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves, / Which is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind / That is blowing in the same bare place / For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (8).

I begin with Lee’s “Epistle” not only because it is the starting point of his *Rose* but also because in, through, and alongside the abstract and abstracted ambivalence and contradiction which characterize this poem specifically, as well as Lee’s poetry in general, one is able to discern a poetics that plays on and with language itself, a poetics that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of a
minor literature may help to illuminate. Here I intend to look closely at Lee’s well-known poem “Persimmons” and at its condensation of various counter-hegemonic strategies characteristic of his poetics in Rose, strategies closely tied to the central thematic concern with family, memory, and language. Alongside and through this matrix, Lee’s poetics, as “Persimmons” demonstrates, defamiliarizes English as a language, drawing attention to its constructedness and thereby exposing the inherently political interconnections of language teaching, language usage, and racial hegemony to expose its inherently political interconnections. Moreover, these tactics and concerns are broadly resonant with, and also critique, the ways in which Asians in America are imagined as Asian Americans; they provide us with a lens which focuses on this hybrid category qua category and refracts it.

**Minor Poetics**

To begin with, I wish to show how Lee’s poetics in Rose in general, and “Persimmons” in particular, defamiliarizes English. To do so, I propose to analyze his writing as a form of “minor literature.” In Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, Deleuze and Guattari claim that “[t]he three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (18). But what does it mean to “deterritorialize” a language? In its ordinary sense “deterritorialization” is the action or condition of removing, separating, or negating the jurisdiction of a governmental authority or country or otherwise the boundaries of an area delineated by an animal or group of animals as its or their nesting and/or denning site. Additionally, an affective element may underlie this process. Thus, the

1 A “territory” according to Merriam-Webster Online is “a geographic area belonging to or under the jurisdiction of a governmental authority,” “an administrative subdivision of a country,” or “a geographic area (as a colonial possession) dependent on an external government but having some degree of autonomy.” It could also refer to “an assigned area,” “an area often including a nesting or denning site . . . occupied and defended by an animal or group of animals,” or in contradiction to “an indeterminate geographic area.” The etymology of “territory” possibly originates from Latin territorium and terra, but it could also derive from terrere based upon its vowels (Online Etymology Dictionary). The former Latin roots definitely find purchase in modern definitions of “territory,” while the latter implies an affective quality (terrere means “to frighten” as in modern English’s “terrible”) that seems wholly absent from the previous denotations. The suffix “-ion” denotes “action or condition” (Dictionary.com). The prefix “de-” indicates “privation, removal, and separation . . . [and] negation” (Dictionary.com).
“detrimentalization” of a language involves the removal or negation of its boundedness or boundaries, a practice potentially affectively disturbing.

Deleuze and Guattari further explain this process through their analysis of deterritorialization in Kafka’s writing. For them, when Kafka deterritorializes German, “What interests Kafka is a pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to its own abolition—a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words” (6; emphasis in original). Moreover, “the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization,” and “[i]n this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (16). Not writing is impossible “because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature”; writing in German is impossible because “for the Prague Jews” there is an inevitable “feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality”; yet “writing otherwise” is also impossible because “writing in German” expresses “the deterritorialization of the German population itself” and the fact that the Jewish minority “speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a ‘paper language’ or an artificial language” (16).

Deleuze and Guattari thus claim that Kafka’s “Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses.” They note parenthetically that “[t]his can be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language” (17).² In the words of Réda Bensmaïa in his “Foreword” to Deleuze and Guattari’s text, the deterritorialization of language has to do with the way in which a given form of literary or poetic speech or writing “affects the language in which it is effected” (xvi).³ We can also see, then, as deterritorialization encapsulates the defamiliarizing

---

² While Deleuze and Guattari leave the reader with this tantalizing glimpse into the potentiality of minor literature to intersect with concerns about race and postcoloniality, they do not address the controversies of dialect versus language, of how Franz Fanon theorizes that “[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17-18). However, I would argue that an interstice for such considerations is opened here, and one that I will later address in regards to Lee’s Rose.

³ Caren Kaplan elucidates in “Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse” that deterritorialization “is one term for the displacement of
estrangement of sound from sense, it is a defamiliarization that nonetheless paradoxically “enables imagination, even as it produces alienation” (Kaplan 188).

Here I will contend that Lee’s poetics in *Rose* is imbued with these impossibilities that Deleuze and Guattari assign to Kafka, for if writing in German is both necessary and impossible for Kafka, then so is writing in English both necessary and impossible for Lee. This Chinese American poet defamiliarizes English to create a hybrid language that generates out of itself, as its own *effect*, alienation and exile but also sensuousness and love. When the speaker’s sixth-grade teacher punishes him for his slowness in learning English, that is, “for not knowing the difference / between *persimmon* and *precision*” (17; emphasis in original) the speaker thus responds:

How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. . . .
 . . .
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart. (17)

We are told here that there is “no precision in a persimmons,” where “precision” might suggest western logic or rationality and “persimmon” may symbolize, as becomes clear later in the poem, the aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture, and yet the “precision” of the poet’s moves with and *within* the English of his text, which also deterritorialize this English, are also “beautiful.” In various ways the poet’s Chinese “persimmons” (or “Chinese apples” as they are called later in the poem) are reterritorialized.
Here then Lee inverts traditional patterns of language learning not only to draw attention to the arbitrary nature of distinctions in language but also to show, that is, to perform the way in which those very patterns, used initially to establish the authority of the pedagogue over her pupil, can be retooled by the pupil in order to demonstrate his or her own authority and expertise in English. That is, Lee defamiliarizes English, showing a command of the language that affects it and also appears (in Deleuze-Guattarian terms) as an effect of it. Beginning with the seemingly nostalgic scene of a teacher-student interaction in primary school, where the student mistakes “precision” for “persimmon,” the poet goes on to demonstrate his own precise understanding of the differences and similarities between these two words linguistically, semantically, and culturally. In this way he draws the reader’s attention to the arbitrary and artificial constructedness of English as a language and reservoir of culture and history, as if perhaps this or any language were a vast man-made maze (or persimmon) within which we all become lost or alienated. Yet we also have here the “finding” or reintegration or reterritorialization of the Asian-American poet’s own authoritatively Asian voice.

Indeed all languages are often taught as being something neutral and ahistorical, detached from the immediate context and in this sense artificial. Yet Lee’s inversion works here by moving from the cold, mechanical rationality of “precision” to the living nature, beauty, and sensuousness of the “persimmon,” where the latter is correlated with his family, his childhood memories, and traditional Chinese culture. This move also implies an active questioning, critiquing, and deconstructing of the cultural and linguistic constructions embedded in the English language. Here then I will look at Lee’s poetry primarily as a medium of expression that resonates with the ways in which Asians in America are imagined as Asian Americans, that is, as part of a larger racial and linguistic order.

To read Lee’s poetics in the context of “minor literature” is to foreground one of the underlying concerns in Asian American studies and literature. In Imagining the Nation, David Leiwei Li comments on the uncritical acceptance of English as the lingua franca of Asian Americans and Asian American literature. He points out

4 It is only superficially nostalgic; a traumatic element underlies the scene not only in the pedagogical, emotional, and physical chastisement of the student by the teacher but also in the use of repetition and displacement in the poem. Arguably the rest of the poem from this moment of trauma is a working-through of the trauma rather than, in Freud’s terms, a melancholic narcissism of simply dwelling on and worrying at the traumatic incident.

5 “Artificial” in its conventional sense means “man-made,” not occurring in nature or natural. However, the word also of course contains within it the term “art.”
that “[i]t is ironic that the formation of a separate canon, with all its subversive energy against the nation that has historically suppressed it, actually works to supplement the national tradition” (29) through this uncritical assumption. Moreover, “[i]n this sense, English as the mode of expression for an Asian American cultural body speaks of the language of minor literature, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘doesn’t come from a minor language’ but rather ‘constructs itself within a major language’” (29). Li argues that deterritorialization occurs “in [that] inheriting a language not their own, Asian Americans have so appropriated, challenged, and colored English that it is made into a minority literary agency in the redefinition of the nation” (29). Yet the acceptance of “a monolingual English tradition is at sharp odds with the reality of a bilingual, multidialectal Asian American constituency” and “also fails to reflect the reading habits of a significant proportion of the Asian American community, whose subjective interests it intends to incorporate” (29). For Li, there has not been a clear literary theory of Asian American literature and/or aesthetics, beyond David Wand’s rather tepid and somewhat Orientalist idea of a dual cultural heritage. Here I am not attempting to theorize an Asian American literary theory or aesthetics. Rather, I am concerned with investigating the manner in which Lee’s poetry demonstrates how, in Li’s own words, “by inhabiting the nation as a space of contradiction, the Asian American also constitutes a critique of the national community and proposes an alternative reconstruction” (12).

In other words I am interested in the negotiations involved in the paradoxical situation whereby a language used to hail the subject, to use Louis Althusser’s terms, as subordinate is also the same language employed by that subordinated subject to contest his or her subordination. Deleuze and Guattari gesture towards this complication in their summation of the “impossibilities” that they claim Kafka faced and which his writings confront. While many of the poems in Rose are concerned with these problematic of language, culture, and politics, I consider Lee’s poem “Persimmons” to concentrate in the most overt fashion on the complex relationship of an Asian American to the English language. I will focus upon this poem in my analysis of Lee’s poetics, due both to its exemplary status within the collection and for the sake of space. This poem shows very clearly how the speaker is haunted by the external and visible signs of his racial identity, and thus his perceived status as a perpetual foreigner, and also how he works to challenge, resist, even subvert the terms of such racialization.

Many Asian Americanists have written about the long-standing stereotype of Asians in America as being perpetually alien and foreign, as never fully belonging
to the American majority, and of the particular historical circumstances and racial projects which perpetuate this image. However, as Kandice Chuh has proposed, conceiving of “Asian American” as an analytic may enable us to go beyond the surface of these projections (124-25). This is a crucial point with Lee’s poetry, which is not about propagating this stereotype or others like it. This is no doubt in part because of his own complicated history of dislocation. Lee immigrated to the U.S. at six years of age, having been born in Indonesia and lived in Japan, Malaysia, Macao, and Hong Kong (Duesing 306). Even upon entering the United States, Lee and his family still had a peripatetic life, residing variously in Seattle, Pittsburg, and Chicago (Duesing 306).

Indeed, because of his engagement with English as the language through which Asians in America are imagined and represented, Lee in his poetry exhibits a “political immediacy,” another integral aspect of minor literature in Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation. In fact, the parenthetical comment about Black English in Deleuze and Guattari’s Kafka calls to mind Fanon’s conceptualization of the intersection of race, colonialism, and language, and both Deleuze-Guattari and Fanon can shed light on Lee’s political immediacy in Rose. As Fanon writes in Black Skin, White Masks, “[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17-18). In this way the first two characteristics of minor literature are interwoven. To deterritorialize English is for Lee an inherently political act since English is itself already heavily politicized. For any speaker of English assumes “a certain syntax . . . [and] culture,” and in the context of the United States this is a culture steeped in a history of white privilege and of asymmetrical relations of power across categories of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and gender. As Lee shows us in “Persimmons,” for Asian Americans the cultural context of English-language monolingualism in the USA disdains and penalizes non-native speakers of English.

Furthermore, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, Kafka’s political immediacy is necessarily integral to his writing. For them, “[t]he second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political” (17). Deleuze and Guattari explain that “[i]n major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background; this is so much the case that none of these

---

6 As Chang-rae Lee’s novel Native Speaker represents and imagines, this system of cultural and social capital also excludes even those merely perceived as non-native speakers of English.
Oedipal intrigues are specifically indispensable or absolutely necessary but all become as one in a large space. . . . Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (17).

As for the third and last characteristic of Deleuze-Guattari’s minor literature, I would suggest that in his politicized deterritorialization of language, Lee enables a “collective assemblage of enunciation.” Deleuze and Guattari explain that “[t]he third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation” (17). The authors see the collectivity of minor literature, then, as being not dependent on or derived from the writer’s minoritized background; rather, such a collectivity is dynamic and enacted through the text. In other words, the “enunciation” of the text produces it. The collectivity does not exist prior to the text. Minor literature then “is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (17).

Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd assert that the emergence of “the possibility of a collective subjectivity formed in practice rather than contemplation” validates Deleuze and Guattari’s point “that ‘minor’ literature is necessarily collective” (10). Perhaps the most simplistic interpretation of “collective enunciation”—which Deleuze and Guattari carefully distinguish from individual enunciation—is that the reading of a text enables and produces a kind of collectivity. As such, the final quality of minor literature exists solely in its praxis.

However, in “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?” JanMohamed and Lloyd criticize Deleuze and Guattari’s contention that “talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature,” for, as JanMohamed and Lloyd indicate, “the collective nature of minority discourse is due not to the scarcity of talent, as Deleuze and Guattari claim, but to other cultural and political factors” (9). I agree with JanMohamed and Lloyd that Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization here is contentious and not necessarily supported by numerical evidence. Yet, this observation lends little to help further explain the concept of minor literature.

Here, I understood Deleuze and Guattari’s delinking of individual enunciation from this collective assemblage of enunciation as grounded in such methodological approaches as argued in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author.”

Yet, Deleuze and Guattari simultaneously bolster and undermine this potential with their assessment that “if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (17). Here, they reify minoritization, and therefore asymmetrical relations, while, in Bensmaïa’s words, pointing to “the
qua literature. This brings us back to Lee’s poetics as a focusing, refracting, and scrutinizing of the category of Asian-American qua Asian-American. However, while these three components of minor literature are closely conjoined, there also exists within this circuit the temptation to generalize, homogenize, and oversimplify that must be avoided.

In my view, Lee’s strategy of poetically defamiliarizing English, by calling attention to how this language affects as it is effected, is necessarily politicized within the context of the intersection of racial and linguistic hierarchies. The motif of “precision” and “persimmon,” like the two terms themselves, loops back upon itself almost recursively. The poem begins with persimmons and precision in a classroom and concludes with how “[s]ome things never leave a person” especially and precisely “the texture of persimmons / in your palm, the ripe weight” (19; emphasis in original). The poem performs a kind of language-based mise en abîme with the word-images of “precision” and “persimmon” appearing in each frame even if indirectly. This is a recursive movement inasmuch as Lee’s poem is illustrating how to affect language by being itself an effect of language. Lee’s poetics in “Persimmons” establishes a collectivity through their invocation and representation of English language-learning. In an interview following a poetry reading, Lee remarked that he aims to have “the deepest thing in me speaking to the deepest thing in the audience. In a poetry reading if I can remind people of their inner spaciousness, their own inner richness, then I’ve done my job” (Bilyak 601). This objective of his poetics suggests again the notion of collectivity as well as his tactics of disruption, which may be enacted through a visual rupture of/within the text, a linguistic rupture of/within conventional meaning, or a narratological rupture, to name a few possibilities.

sense in which further activity is no longer related to a unified instance” (xviii). This reification indicates both the superficial attractiveness of minor literature as a concept as well as the dangers thereof. JanMohamed and Lloyd engage with and revise Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature, distinguishing between minor literature and minority discourse. Minority discourse, according to JanMohamed and Lloyd, functions to articulate the relationship between “various minority discourses and their theoretical exegesis” so as “to describe and define the common denominators that link various minority cultures” (1). However, JanMohamed and Lloyd also caution against the pitfalls of generalizing, homogenizing, and oversimplifying the “common denominators” linking minority cultures by pointing out that “the study of minority cultures cannot be conducted without at least a relevant knowledge of sociology, political theory, economics, and history; otherwise, the specifics of the struggles embodied in cultural forms remain invisible” (10).
Asian American Letters

We have one example of this disruption in “Persimmons,” where Lee troubles and makes troubling the arbitrary distinction between “persimmon” and “precision,” a figural juxtaposition which commences and frames the poem. Here, the arbitrariness of language is only highlighted; I am not claiming that Lee himself makes language arbitrary. He deterritorializes the meanings of both words to underscore how “common sense” understandings of the ideas and objects conveyed through “persimmon” and “precision” are anything but common, and the senses, in terms of both meaning and the physicality of these words (the sense of them being spoken as well as the physicality of one opposed to the abstraction of the other), are learned rather than intrinsically contained in or manifested by the juxtaposition of their letters. Before entering into a more in-depth analysis of Lee’s poetics, some further contextualization of his poetry is first needed. In Dianne Bilyak’s interview with Lee, she asks whether “it’s [his] dislocation that allows [him] to tell the truth,” and Lee answers that he “think[s] poetic speech is dislocated, and we recognize it because of its strangeness. It’s the language of a stranger” (603). Here, Lee himself acknowledges the thread of deterritorialization running throughout and holding together his poetry. He estranges the language, shows it to be the “language of a stranger” whether or not spoken by a so-called native speaker.

In this process of linguistic estrangement, issues of linguistic imperialism and linguistic hierarchies come into focus. This linguistic “estranging” resonates with Lee’s personal history of exile where, as Tod Marshall details, Lee, “[b]orn in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia . . . [spent his] first five years . . . in exile throughout Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan” until his family “eventually settle[d] in Pennsylvania” (129). This background of forced itinerancy is clear in the subject matter, tone, and poetic forms of Lee’s writing. Moreover, as Dorothy Wang points out in Necessary Figures: Metaphor, Irony and Parody in the Poetry of Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, and John Yau, “[t]hough speaking ‘good enough English’ does not insure acceptance, not speaking it undeniably writes one off” (11) from (if not necessarily full) inclusion in U.S. society. Understanding these views of English language

---

10 One example I use in teaching is that the word “tree” in English is not the same across languages. If the relationship between signs and the things to which they refer inheres an intrinsic naturalness then this would not be the case. Moreover, one cannot invoke a “tree” by simply writing or saying the word which denotes it. Similarly, there is no direct, natural relationship between “precision” and its semantic concept, and similarly for “persimmon.”
proficiency in the U.S. is particularly crucial to a comprehension of the political immediacy of Lee’s poetics. It is not the personal divorced from the political but the personal as inherently political. Here, I do not refer to the consciousness-raising or other community activities undertaken by those involved in the women’s movement as the phrase originally referenced. Rather, I use the phrase to underscore the ways in which the speaker’s ethnic identity and cultural heritage become politicized. Specifically, these personal factors become the target of the teacher’s denigration as they are judged as a liability to the speaker’s social capital. Deleuze and Guattari’s focus on deterritorialization is a purely rhetorical move without giving any attention to its socio-political context, that is, to pertinent historical frameworks such as colonization and immigration. This is why the historical context of both Asian American histories and Lee’s Rose, particularly “Persimmons,” is vital to a comprehending of the multiple levels of meaning behind Lee’s poetry.

However, a generalization such as “Asian American experiences” oversimplifies what is actually an extremely complex situation. As Elaine Kim says in “Defining Asian American Realities through Literature,” “Asian Americans may seem squarely placed in the so-called hegemonic stage of domination. Our literature is written primarily by American-born, American-educated Asians whose first language is English, whether we concur and collaborate or resist” (147). Under these circumstances, Kim points out that writers such as Lee “cannot be expected to speak in the voices of the vast numbers of immigrants and refugees whose stories have never been well represented in our literature, past or present” (148). In addition, as Chuh persuasively argues in Imagine Otherwise, “Asian American history” is a term that obscures important differences between and among the experiences of those lumped together under the label of “Asian American.” For instance, the theme of immigration is predominant in Asian American history, and therefore obfuscates the fact that Filipino Americans were not immigrants in the early entwined history of the Philippines and the United States created through American imperialism at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, Zhou Xiaojing in “Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee’s Poetry” contests the “[e]thnocentric readings of Lee’s poems by Stern, Wang, and Zhao” as “misleading” and “reductive of the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee’s work and of the creative experiment in his poetry” (114). As

---

11 This phrase is associated with the women’s movement and is usually credited to Carol Hanisch for her essay of the same title. It is usually used in reference to the consciousness-raising groups and other community activities related to feminist education and outreach.
Zhou points out, these critics “presuppose a misconception that a pure and fixed Chinese culture has been inherited and maintained by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America” (114). Furthermore, drawing upon Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Zhou asserts that “one’s heritage is not possessed once for all, nor is it necessarily inherited through ethnic lineage. Rather, it is changed and renewed with the changing conditions of human life and human consciousness” (115). In this vein, Zhou analyzes how “Lee’s method of organizing the narrative, description, and meditation around a central image enables him to present several different periods of his life, including his cross-cultural experience in grade school” in “Persimmons” (117).

Therefore, in the debate regarding Asian American identity and culture, and Asian American as an analytic, a central issue remains that of how one may go about actually reading Lee’s poetry. I have argued that Lee’s poetics can be read as minor literature, and one feature of minor literature is its collective assemblage of enunciation. Given that Lee’s poetic strategies help us to situate and better understand the histories and experiences of Asian Americans, and that this positioning and comprehension are necessarily partial and incomplete, it is after all only in reading his poetry that these threads can be perceived. And the practice of reading is itself a dynamic one and one that is distinct from Lee’s own expressed intentions and his biography, however much his personal history catalyzes and enters into his writing.

**Troubling Words**

Keeping these reservations in mind, I am claiming then that in poems like “Persimmons” Lee successfully deterritorializes English. He does this in such a way as to highlight this language’s political aspect while evoking a collective assemblage through his enunciation, a collectivity that is Asian American in flavor. Yet here Lee is also not making over-simplistic claims which ignore the multiplicity and heterogeneity of “Asian Americans” as well as this umbrella term’s own artificiality, its constructedness. Indeed Kaplan cautions against the danger of assuming, as Deleuze and Guattari do, that “we are all deterritorialized on some level in the process of language itself and that this is a point of contact between ‘us all,’” since “we have different privileges and different compensations for our positions in the field of power relations” (191). Lee’s speaker never presumes to speak for others though his text nonetheless speaks to many and about many recognizable experiences. Lee commences “Persimmons” with a simple reference
to a primary school reminiscence of how “[i]n sixth grade Mrs. Walker / slapped the back of my head / and made me stand in the corner” (17) as punishment for failing a vocabulary exercise. In “The Language Situation of Chinese Americans,” Sau-ling Cynthia Wong observes that, in the late twentieth century, “Chinese immigrant students, being members of not only a visible minority in this country but also one with a long history of denigration and discrimination, are often made to feel their Chinese linguistic and cultural background as a source of shame” (208). Unlike a European accent, as Wong explains, “[a] Chinese accent . . . is regarded as ugly” (208). In this scene in “Persimmons,” and particularly with the corporal punishment the offending student suffers, some correlation with this history is suggested.

Lee’s speaker is harshly and publicly penalized for his troubles with English, and the rest of the poem negotiates and recounts his troubling relationship with English. As Angelo Ancheta notes, “[e]ducational segregation was another common form of subordination” (29) that Asians in America experienced prior to the Civil Rights Movement. Even prior to the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927), Ancheta documents that “[i]n 1860, California barred Asians, blacks, and Native Americans from attending the public schools,” and, when this state statute was deemed unconstitutional, “segregated schools were established in California” such as the “‘Oriental school’” (29) established in San Francisco. Furthermore, regarding *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), Ancheta details how, “[d]espite efforts by parents and community activists urging the San Francisco Unified School District to implement programs to assist” the “nearly 3,000 Chinese American students attending public schools in San Francisco who spoke little or no English,” the school district failed to assist “nearly 1,800 of the students” and provided “less than an hour of daily instruction in a supplemental English class to the remainder” (104), facts which served as the basis for the civil rights suit. The situation was exacerbated, as Ancheta points out, by the policies of “schools that had been racially segregated for decades” (104) and only recently (at the time of the suit) federally desegregated.

In “Persimmons,” the speaker discusses his trouble with words, and at the same time he troubles these words through an unusual and unconventional mimicry of conventional language lessons. Of course, as a poet, Lee is interested in plays upon words, and his other poems in *Rose* also demonstrate this deliberate and self-conscious “troubling” of words. In the titular poem of the book “Always a Rose,” the speaker considers the ways in which his family would have either “ignored [the rose],” or “ravished it,” or even “rival[ed] its beauty” (37). The rose therefore becomes nuanced not only by musings on its shape and “speech” (i.e., by what it
“speaks” to the speaker), but also by the speaker’s relationship with and understanding of his family.

However, it is in “Persimmons” that Lee’s speaker pinpoints his “trouble” with English. The first pair of words that the speaker complicates is “the difference / between persimmon and precision” (17; emphasis in original): “How to choose / persimmons. This is precision” (17). Then he presents a lesson on how to select a ripe persimmon, how to prepare it for consumption, and how to eat it. He mimics a pedagogical practice in his reminiscence about his difficulties in learning English, just as a young child “[p]eel[s] the skin tenderly”—the skin of language from meaning (17). This pairing of “persimmon” with “precision” not only expresses a remembered difficulty in distinguishing the two words as a child unfamiliar with the English language; it also draws attention to the arbitrariness of this distinction in the first place, and demonstrates the speaker’s proficient grasp of English as a language. As we know from Saussure’s arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in the sign and contrary to Plato’s theory of absolute Ideas or Forms, there is no inherent “persimmon-ness” to a persimmon. Therefore Lee’s speaker alludes to the essential arbitrariness of language as well as the “precision” necessary to choosing a “persimmon.”

This speaker who is presumably a second-language learner is thus able, through his liminal position, to hybridize not just the concept of any language (including English and/or Chinese) but also his own process of learning English. Moreover, in structuring the deterritorialization-reterritorialization of the English language as a sort of “language lesson,” Lee also allows his speaker to challenge the centrality of the pedagogue’s authority in the classroom. The speaker’s lesson in precision/persimmons underscores the teacher’s own ignorance about this matter, this whole broader theoretical context. The speaker provides the reader with a step-by-step manual on how to “[p]eel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat. / Chew the skin, suck it, / and swallow” (17), where, as Zhou points out, these precise steps “illustrate his knowledge of both persimmons and precision, which undermines the reason Mrs. Walker punished him” (118). According to Zhou, the speaker’s “empirical knowledge of persimmons also provides a contrast to the way his teacher and classmates have their first taste of a persimmon” (118): “Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class / and cut it up / so everyone could taste / a Chinese apple” (18), although at this point the speaker refuses to eat it because he knew “it wasn’t ripe or sweet” (18). Here Lee inverts the traditional teacher/student (knowledge/power) hierarchy by recognizing that in this instance it is Mrs. Walker who fails to practice precision in connection with persimmons.
The italicized “Chinese apple” is a sort of in-between or hybrid term, being neither the English word “persimmon” nor the Chinese word for “persimmon”\(^\text{12}\) (meaning unclear. Explain in the text or with a note.), one which not only indicates the teacher’s own inability to be precise about persimmons but subtly exemplifies her racial prejudice. She may see the speaker himself as a Chinese apple, someone who has a hybrid or ambiguous (racial) identity. Yet the latter, in analyzing more precisely the distinction between precision and persimmons, contests the power of his teacher and more generally of pedagogues. In fact, as his mother explained to him, “every persimmon has a sun / inside, something golden, glowing, / warm as [his] face” (18). This pun on “sun” and “son” again decenters the authority of the teacher by juxtaposing the lessons he learned from his parents with the one about distinguishing persimmons and precision learned from his teacher. His family becomes a site of resistance to his troubles with English, a resource for counter-knowledge but also, of course, a “warm” source of love and caring.

Lee’s other poems also contain family and cultural tradition as a strong thematic thread. For instance, in “The Gift” the speaker recounts how his “father recited a story in a low voice” (15) while extracting his son’s splinter in order to distract his son from the pain. Afterwards, the speaker confesses that he “can’t remember the tale, / but hear[s] his voice still, a well / of dark water, a prayer” (15), drawing upon his own memories as the son of a minister. Here, as in “Persimmons,” Lee focuses on counter-hegemony and on a certain priority to family over public institutions like schools or (we would assume) governments, and to poetic or religious language/speech (his father’s voice like a “well of dark water” or like a “prayer”) over rational, discursive language such as that of school textbooks. In Lee’s “Persimmons,” then, the tactics of countering and disempowering the cultural and linguistic hegemony represented by the figure of Mrs. Walker, the speaker’s sixth-grade teacher, become a strategy of survival within the specific context of the history of Asian Americans in the United States. There may be similarities to the experiences of others, whether or not members of minorities, but the traditional Chinese cultural references in the poem as well as Chinese-American cross-cultural references are clear.

Lee’s speaker in “Persimmons” makes it clear that his mimicry of lessons in language and culture has to do with “words / that got [him] into trouble” (17), the very words that he redeployed to untrouble his relationship to language and power. He says that “[f]ight was what [he] did when [he] was frightened, / fright was what

\(^{12}\) The Chinese word for “persimmon” is 柿子 or shìzi in Hanyu Pinyin.
[he] felt when [he] was fighting” (17). This coupling of “fight” and “fright” echoes popular notions of survival mechanisms which can be reduced to two basic responses: fight or flight. Thus the speaker reterritorializes these English words, and imbues them with the visceral element of the human drive to survive. It is a situation of fight-or-flight, or as this speaker recasts it, “fight” or “fright.” This recasting of primal reactions to dangerous threats is a paradox of “language torn from sense.” It alienates and dislocates the original phrase only in order to relocate it elsewhere, troubling the language while also highlighting how it is troubled.

In “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?” JanMohamed and Lloyd wrestle with the idea of “the possibility of a collective subjectivity formed in practice rather than contemplation” (8). Rather than limiting the notion of collectivity to works of minor literature as in Deleuze and Guattari’s theory, they see it as a function of the academic and critical engagement with particular literary works which make them part of a larger discursive community. Minority discourse, according to JanMohamed and Lloyd, functions to articulate the relationship between “various minority discourses and their theoretical exegesis” so as “to describe and define the common denominators that link various minority cultures” (1). They take minor literature as operating specifically within a larger minority discourse, that is, they see its collective assemblage of enunciation as coming into being only within the process and practice of minority discourse.

Expanding Deleuze and Guattari’s model of deterritorialization, Kaplan contends that their theory can be viewed as a paradox of dynamism. In her words, it is “both deterritorialization and reterritorialization—not imperialism but nomadism” (189). Kaplan refers to nomadism as a way of better understanding and employing deterritorialization; nomadism, according to Stephen Muecke’s work on Deleuze and Guattari’s Mille Plateaux, furnishes a “formulation of ex-centric nomad societies as models of ‘becoming and heterogeneity’ as opposed to the ‘stable, the eternal, the identical and the constant’” (Muecke 27; qtd. in Kaplan 189). Nomadism thereby is “a paradoxical ‘model’ of becoming” (Muecke 27; qtd. in Kaplan 189). Deterritorialization, which already implicitly implies reterritorialization, is therefore a way of understanding a state of dynamism in language and literature, one that counters the hegemony of “stable,” “constant,” homogeneous models and modes of language and literature. In Lee’s play on and playing with persimmon and precision, the reader can perceive nuances of this dynamism, particularly in the heterogeneity of language and the cultural meanings attached (or that any speaker can attach) to words and concepts. Lee and Kaplan
both underscore the inherent instability of language, though Lee concentrates on the ways in which each speaker brings a cultural and social plurality and multiplicity that interrupts any idealization of a language as something static, especially in the context of our contemporary era of expanding English-language imperialism.

In the context of cultural plurality, I would suggest that Lee’s minor poetics can be further illuminated through the concepts of mimicry and hybridity. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” so that “[m]imicry is also the sign of the inappropriate . . . a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategy function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (86; emphasis in original). Assimilation entails a system of imitation and yet this very activity, as Bhabha points out, is “a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) . . . becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (86; emphasis in original). In other words, the colonial citizen-subject, despite or because of his or her mimicry, is “both [an] ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’” social and cultural citizen-subject (86). Thus the promise of assimilation is one that is never fulfilled, and paradoxically this inevitable failure is the fundamental premise of the process.

Clearly we can see the speaker in Lee’s “Persimmons” as using mimicry precisely in order not only to underscore this ambivalence but also to demonstrate how it opens a space of agency, of possible critique and of resistance to hegemony. His is a counter-hegemonic mimicry, one that opposes a passive acceptance of the difference between “precision” and “persimmon” that his teacher insists upon, a difference which functions implicitly as a model of linguistic hegemony (so-called “standard” English versus “non-standard” English). Here I do not mean to suggest that the two words are interchangeable but instead I wish to highlight how English language teaching in this instance assumes a natural difference between these words and ignores how language itself is a socio-cultural and historical construct. The speaker refuses the terms of assimilation; in fact, he seemingly recognizes the foreordained failure of the strategy of assimilating, as Bhabha suggests, and so reworks the linguistic and cultural exigencies placed upon him as seen in the various moments of disruption in the poem. Moreover, in refusing assimilation, Lee’s poetics also highlights Bhabha’s other crucial point about cultural hybridity: culture is always already hybrid, and that searching for or delineating of a “pure”
culture is not only an exercise in futility but also one that falls into the trap of Orientalism, reifying a system of unequal relations and knowledge production. I thus disagree with critics such as Steven Yao who claim that “critics have relied on an overly simplistic model for cross-cultural literary production, one that tends to elide important differences between the various traditions and languages that underlie the category ‘Asian American,’ differences which themselves create distinct expressive and referential possibilities . . . [and] they have yet to examine in sufficient detail the precise ways in which specially Chinese language and cultural elements function in [Lee’s] verse” (3). Lee obviously speaks and draws from his own experiences, as all writers do, but to narrow our analytical engagement with his writing solely to the examining in detail of “the precise ways in which specially Chinese language and cultural elements function in his verse” merely reifies Orientalist notions of “pure” culture and the dichotomy of East/West.

However, if Lee’s poetry presents an aesthetic of disruption, playing upon and with the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of English, nonetheless it is a poetics that refuses generalization. Kaplan notes that “[w]hat is lost in Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation is the acknowledgement that oppositional consciousness (with its benefits and costs) stems from the daily, lived experience of oppression” (191). In other words, Deleuze and Guattari fail to contextualize “the universalizing of the term ‘us’” (192) that they employ, and Kaplan questions their unproblematic use of this particular rhetorical move, rejecting any sweeping generalizations or abstractions. In fact, the forces binding together members of minority groups are both instructive and deceptive. Keeping this paradox in mind, Lee makes history an important part of his poetry.

Indeed, Mary Slowik argues that Lee’s poetics recalls history as “an insistent present which keeps revising our most immediate perception of where and who we are” (234), contrasting with the ahistorical assumptions of Deleuze and Guattari. Slowik says: “Always spliced into Lee’s immediate experiences are the re-lived experience of the terrifying flight from Asia,” and that more generally “the poets still feel themselves ‘in the middle,’ not having fully left Asia, not having fully embraced America” because “their displacement is reinforced by the fact that immigration is not a one-time event in their family histories” (234). This complex perspective is clearer in some of Lee’s other poems but still present in “Persimmons”—for example, in the juxtaposition of “flight” and “fright.” In that word pairing are perceptible nuances of exilic histories, longings, and displacements. Lee recounted in an interview that he “think[s] poetic speech is dislocated, and we recognize it because of its strangeness. It’s the language of a
stranger” (Bilyak 603). These images, these themes of dislocation and strangeness may already suggest the experience(s) of diaspora, though it would be dangerous to generalize and argue that Lee’s poetics speak for all exiles and immigrants.

Further discrediting any Orientalist and hegemonic readings of Lee’s poetry is the fact of Asian/American multiplicity and plurality. Wong points out that, despite Eurocentric assumptions about Asian cultures in general or Chinese culture in particular, the historical and linguistic situations even of Chinese Americans vary greatly. Wong reminds critics and readers that “[t]here is no single language situation shared by all Chinese Americans: an adequate account must focus on each subgroup separately” (201). After all, “[t]here are seven major dialect families in the Chinese language” (202), not even counting minor dialects and changing linguistic ecologies, while common misperceptions about the Chinese American community allow for, at most, Cantonese and Mandarin. Cantonese, as Wong says, “as used in the American context, is used to refer both to the immigrant’s origin (Guangdong province) and the dialect,” and yet this identifier “is inadequate for describing the nuances in language use among Chinese Americans from Guangdong” (202).

Attempts to do an exegesis of Lee’s poetics as Yao urges would be stymied not only by these considerations, but also by the fact that Lee’s family background was already diasporic and multicultural prior to his family’s arrival and settlement in the United States. And in the U.S. context, Wong notes the rapidity with which “Chinese immigrant students ‘lose their accents’” as well as their acquisition of “accent-free speech” but continued “difficulties with written English” and their tendency to interact “primarily with other speakers of their Chinese dialect” in reaction to the “hostility of the target language group” (208). Moreover, “[i]n situations of linguistic discrimination that are, in the last analysis, racially motivated, high socio-economic status does not necessarily afford protection” (208), and so rapid linguistic and cultural assimilation of young foreign-born Chinese Americans, the subject of many a success story in the media, is often achieved at a high cost to self-esteem” (209).

These concerns and their contextualization appear in Lee’s poetics, particularly in his strategy of “troubling English.” Lee “troubles” pairings such as persimmon and precision, fright and fight, drawing the reader’s attention to their denotations and connotations while simultaneously challenging these, and in “Persimmons” he says that “wren and yarn” were also “words / that got me into trouble” (17). Lee’s speaker explains that while he has come to understand that “[w]rens are small, plain birds” and “yarn is what one knits with,” he still connects
them to a culturally-embedded childhood memory of how his “mother made birds out of yarn,” and he “loved to watch her tie the stuff; / a bird, a rabbit, a wee man” (17). Zhou comments on how the word “yarn” “evokes Lee’s memory of his mother” (118), and here we also have Chinese domestic folk arts or handicrafts coming into play, specifically (as with “persimmon”) with the mother’s or the maternal “arts” broadly speaking. As with *persimmon* and *precision*, and the pun on *sun/son*, Lee complicates the distinction between these juxtaposed words, imbuing them with personal meanings and memories, using elements from his personal background in order to critique, challenge, and rewrite them, and in so doing opening a space to resist the devaluation of cultures and languages—by people like Mrs. Walker and pedagogies like hers—that are not Anglo-American. In “Forming Personal and Cultural Identities in the Face of Exodus: A Discussion of Li-Young Lee’s Poetry,” Tricia Jenkins argues that through this space “Lee suggests that despite America’s history of negative stereotyping and harsh treatment of many Asian-Americans—primarily stemming from World War II, the Exclusion Acts and the subsequent ‘Yellow Peril’—immigrants must be willing to call attention to their Asian ‘peculiarities’ and speak about their cultural origins” since “[s]uch vocalization is the only way that both the past and the immigrant’s Asian identity can thrive” (201). For Jenkins, Lee’s “poetry does not encourage the feelings of alienation that often accompany pure individualism and deconstructive philosophies” since it instead “encourages readers to relish ethnic variety and individual diversity without undermining the importance of shared cultural experiences that provide members with a sense of community and belonging” (200).

In the apparently disjunctive episode in which the “Persimmons” speaker recounts a romantic liaison, this space is not just about the value of cultural origins but also about both the attempt and failure to perpetuate them. Lee underscores the cultural and linguistic complications in his allusion to that primal drive to survive which inflects the abortive Chinese language lessons given by his speaker to his young white lover. The speaker recounts that he tried to “teach her Chinese” and mentions the Chinese for “Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I’ve forgotten. / Naked: I’ve forgotten” (17). The only pairs of words he is able to recall are crickets/*chiu chiu* and “Ni, wo: you and me” (17). Although it may at first seem somewhat jarring within the larger context of the poem, this erotic passage that begins “Donna undresses, her stomach is white” follows the very sensuous, if more innocent, description of “how to cut open a persimmon”—“Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted. / Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one / will be fragrant. . . . Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat. / Chew the skin, suck it, / and swallow”—and also
mirrors and is echoed by the father’s implicit longing for his deceased wife: “Some things never leave a person: / scent of the hair of one you love” and “the texture of persimmons / in your palms, the ripe weight” (19; emphasis in original). Within this context, the two lovers’ “Chinese language lesson” is a reflection of the speaker’s parents’ love for each other, also somewhat distorted by time and space as is the speaker’s Chinese by his relocation.

Moreover, this moment of sexual desire can also express the speaker’s unspoken desire to survive, biologically, genealogically, culturally and linguistically, a desire that haunts the poem and is played against the slow erosion of his ethnic and linguistic heritage, one that can only be recalled, ironically, through particular word pairings, the same mnemonic method that his teacher uses to indoctrinate in him the English language and Anglophone culture. These word pairings are few, and in the case of “Dew: I’ve forgotten” as an example of Chinese language obviously incomplete. Yet one might think the ongoing noise of a cricket chorus (another form of collectivity and one that Deleuze-Guattari would be interested in, in for example the “Of the Refrain” chapter of A Thousand Plateaus) through the night can suggest the entirety of a language as pure sound, and one could more easily argue that the fullest possible account of human love is already present in the two words “Ni, wo: you and me.” On the other hand, one could say that this is only a love that bridges two people (husband-wife, parent-child) and cannot pass on the speaker’s Chinese heritage, thus showing in Slowik’s words “a fractured sense of culture, a being on the outside among fragments of an unknown whole” as when “people decide which few things they can take with them as they plunge out of one life and into another” (228), a process which points to how “[t]hings brought from the old country have a peculiar though unexplained force on life” (229). However, given Lee’s and his speaker’s interest in intimate relationships like those between father-son and husband-wife, perhaps we might see a major theme of the poem as being the tension between these two sides, the intimate (binary) love relationship and the harmonious multiplicity of a social or ethnic community or collectivity.

A Migrant Rain

Zhou Xiaojing praises the way in which in Lee’s poem “[t]he central image, persimmons, while allowing Lee a wide range of associative narratives, meditations, and descriptions, always pulls these associations back to its center, thus giving coherence to the disconnected incidents described in the poem and to the poem...
itself. At the same time, this composition method renders the development and transitions of the poem spontaneous and smooth, like the movements of musical variations on the same theme” (119). Ultimately, Zhou finds that “Li-Young Lee’s poems, like the poems of Marilyn Chin and others, illustrate that Chinese-Americans can remake themselves in images of their own invention. However, rather than rejecting the broken image of the ‘great-grandfather’ who helped build America’s railroads, the invention of new Chinese-American images in Lee’s poems is rooted in the reality of Chinese-Americans’ lives” (131).

I would add that this active self-invention in “Persimmons” lends itself to multiple valences going beyond the denotative, as evidenced by the varied nature of critics’ responses to Lee’s poetry. Thus, “Persimmons” (re)presents the dynamic, creative energy not only of human identity (identities) and history but also of language(s) in general. Lee “troubles” English words, English signifiers, deterritorializing them so as to complicate their histories, contexts, meanings. In his closing poem in Rose, “Visions and Interpretations,” the speaker muses that “[e]ven this is not accurate” and asks to “begin again” (69). He leaves us with the thought that “between [his] eyes is always / the rain, the migrant rain” (69), where this image might evoke the tears in his eyes (as a lonely boy, a displaced Asian American) but also, more broadly, his experiences, his confused memories of his experiences as an immigrant child who was often traveling from one “home” to another. The essential dynamism of Lee’s poetry has something to do then with “a vision / of a world about to come, and a world about to go” (68).

This dynamism in Lee’s writing is also that of the America he envisions, one that resists a linguistic and cultural hegemony which would exclude ethnic others. As Elaine Kim argues, “[w]hat Asian American writers express is the desire to remain as ‘others’ by defining our own ‘otherness,’ not as foreigners but as American ‘others.’ Our claim on America, then, is part of our resistance to domination” (170). I think that by “troubling” his words, Lee conveys paradoxically both his claim on America and his resistance to the interconnected power structures of racism and classism underlying English monolingualism which still seem to serve, like this monolingualism, as the not so invisible foundation of U.S. cultural citizenship. In any case it is clear that the greatest proficiency in English does not necessarily assure Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans or African-Americans of full acceptance as “fellow Americans.” Therefore, Lee’s claim on America is also a “troubled” claim, one betokening a troubled sense of belonging, one fraught with contradictions and ironies.
Works Cited


---

**About the Author**

Donna T. Tong is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Fu Jen University. Her research interests include Asian American literature and studies, Anglophone literature which focuses on English language learning and usage, critical race studies, gender studies, and psychoanalysis.

[Received 1 February 2013; accepted 7 June 2013]