University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

# Belonging in *A Gesture Life*

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Master Thesis

2025

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2024/2025

# ZADÁNÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

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|---|---|
| Jméno a příjmení: | **Bc. Barbora Frizelová** |
| Osobní číslo: | **H23343** |
| Studijní program: | **N0231A090011 Anglická filologie** |
| Téma práce: | **Pocit sounáležitosti v románu A Gesture Life** |
| Téma práce anglicky: | **Belonging in A Gesture Life** |
| Zadávající katedra: | **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky** |

## Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude věnovat tématu sounáležitosti v románu *A Gesture Life* (1999) Chang-rae Leeho. Práce bude zaměřena na hlavní postavu Franklina Haty a na jeho zkušenosti, které kvůli traumatu neustále ovlivňují jeho přítomnost a mezilidské vztahy. Ve spojitosti s tím se dále práce také zaměří na problematiku identity, získávání amerického občanství a asimilaci v adoptované zemi. Román bude analyzován především postkoloniální kritikou (a teorií postkoloniálního trauma), ale v relevantních případech bude prostor věnován i dalším literárním teoriím (např. feministické a psychoanalytické analýze např. u rasové melancholie). Podrobněji budou probrány pojmy jako např. diaspora, nacionalismus, rasová melancholie a stereotyp modelové menšiny apod. Své analýzy bude studentka vhodně dokládat ukázkami z primárních zdrojů, a také je bude konfrontovat s vhodnými sekundárními zdroji.

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:
Rozsah grafických prací:
Forma zpracování diplomové práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:


Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
Carroll, Hamilton. "Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 592–616. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26287049.
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Datum zadání diplomové práce: **14. října 2024**
Termín odevzdání diplomové práce: **14. října 2025**

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V Pardubicích dne 14. října 2024

**Prohlašuji:**

Práci s názvem Belonging in *A Gesture Life* jsem vypracovala samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využila, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Mgr. Petra Kohlová, for her guidance and valuable feedback, and for devoting her time to our consultations.

## ANNOTATION

This diploma thesis deals with the theme of belonging as portrayed in Chang-rae Lee's novel *A Gesture Life*. It examines how Franklin Hata's traumatic past and his internalization of transnational ideologies influence his formation of identity, processes of assimilation, and sense of belonging. The thesis discusses key concepts such as diaspora, nationalism, racial melancholia, and the model minority stereotype. The novel is analyzed primarily through postcolonial criticism and postcolonial trauma theory, with additional reference to feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and critical race theory. This approach highlights the psychological costs of assimilation for racialized subjects and reveals how postcolonial trauma shapes identity.



## KEYWORDS

Belonging, identity, trauma, model minority stereotype, racial melancholia, Asian American literature


## NÁZEV

Pocit sounáležitosti v románu *A Gesture Life*


## ANOTACE

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem sounáležitosti a jeho vyobrazení v románu *A Gesture Life* Chang-rae Leeho. Práce zkoumá, jak traumatická minulost Franklina Haty a jeho internalizace transnacionálních ideologií ovlivňují jeho formování identity, procesy asimilace a pocit sounáležitosti. Práce se soustředí na klíčové koncepty, jako je diaspora, nacionalismus, rasová melancholie a stereotyp modelové menšiny. Román je analyzován především postkoloniální kritikou a teorií postkoloniálního trauma s dodatečnými poznatky z feministické teorie, psychoanalýzy a kritické rasové teorie. Tento přístup poukazuje na psychologické důsledky asimilace pro jedince, kteří se potýkají s rasovou diskriminací a zároveň odhaluje, jak postkoloniální trauma formuje identitu.



## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Sounáležitost, identita, trauma, stereotyp modelové menšiny, rasová melancholie, asijsko-americká literatura

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# Introduction

Belonging is a complex idea that can be hard to define yet deeply felt in everyday life. At its core, it reflects the essential human desire to feel connected, valued, and recognized within a community or social structure. This thesis examines how the concept of belonging operates in Chang-rae Lee's novel *A Gesture Life* through an analysis of its protagonist, Franklin Hata, a Korean-born man raised in Japan who later immigrates to the United States. In the suburban town of Bedley Run, Hata carefully constructs the image of a respectable, well-assimilated citizen. However, beneath this carefully maintained exterior, Hata is haunted by his past, particularly his role as a soldier in the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. The novel explores how his personal history, shaped by colonialism, war, and migration, fractures his identity and continually undermines his attempts to belong. Hata's story reflects the tension between outward assimilation and inner alienation, making his narrative a powerful lens through which to explore the fragile, performative nature of both belonging and identity.

Throughout the novel, Hata's experience reflects an ongoing struggle to negotiate and perform belonging. His search for belonging is marked by the tension between his self-perception and how others perceive him, with external forces of race, culture, history, and politics continuously influencing this dynamic. Positioned between multiple cultural spaces, such as Korea, Japan, and the United States, Hata is repeatedly excluded or placed at the margins. His alienation is further reinforced by the political histories and cultural expectations of these nations, all of which complicate and undermine his ability to achieve a stable sense of belonging. Belonging is deeply connected to the formation and negotiation of identity, particularly in contexts shaped by historical and political forces such as nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. As this thesis will demonstrate, these forces have historically defined who is permitted to belong and under what conditions.

Elsbeth Probyn argues that belonging reflects a longing for something beyond the present realities, a desire that exceeds individual needs and wants. She highlights that the desire to belong is both persistent and fragile, performed with the awareness that true belonging may be impossible and that its former stability is lost. While this uncertainty may stem from postmodern disillusionment or the aftermath of economic crises, the longing to belong remains powerful, often placing individuals at the margins of society.[1] Similarly, Vikki Bell proposes that "one does not simply or ontologically 'belong' to the world or to any group within it.

[1] Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 6–9.

Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction."[2] In this view, belonging is not an inherent condition, but a state that requires continuous effort and negotiation. Nira Yuval-Davis adds that constructions of belonging emerge through repeated acts situated within specific social and cultural contexts. These acts link individual behavior to collective identity and are central to sustaining narratives of attachment.[3] Bell further emphasizes that the performativity of belonging involves invoking or citing social norms that define and maintain community boundaries. Through ritualistic repetition, these norms materialize the very belonging they claim to merely reflect.[4] Thus, scholars such as Probyn, Bell, and Yuval-Davis assert that belonging is not a stable or inherent condition but a dynamic, constructed, and performative process. In this framework, belonging is not a passive state of being but an active process of doing – of gestures, speech, rituals, and behaviors.

This performative dimension is particularly relevant in the context of *A Gesture Life*, a novel explicitly concerned with outward appearances and ritualized gestures. The title itself reflects the tension between external performance and internal turmoil, as Hata's life is composed of symbolic gestures that fail to produce genuine belonging or emotional fulfillment. The performative nature of belonging is closely connected to the construction of identity. As Bell notes, "[i]dentity is the effect of performance, and not vice versa."[5] Like belonging, identity does not precede action but is constituted through it, emphasizing their mutual formation through repetitive social acts. Stuart Hall's influential work on identity within cultural studies and postcolonial theory reinforces this perspective. According to Hall, identity is not fixed or innate, but fluid, shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors. It is always evolving, emerging through the interplay of history, language, culture, and power relations.[6]

Hata's experiences reflect this dynamic process. His efforts to first assimilate into Japanese and later American society, alongside his internal conflicts and unresolved memories of war, reveal the fragmentation that marks identity formation. Even as Hata adopts dominant ideologies in his pursuit of belonging, those very ideologies ultimately marginalize him, exposing the instability of both identity and belonging.

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[2] Vikki Bell, "Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction," in *Performativity & Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 3.
[3] Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 203.
[4] Bell, "Performativity and Belonging," 3.
[5] Bell, "Performativity and Belonging," 3.
[6] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity,'" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 4–5.

This thesis draws on postcolonial theory as its guiding framework, with particular attention to the intersections of belonging, identity, and historical trauma. The first chapter focuses on Hata's role as a colonizer during his time as a soldier in the Japanese Imperial Army, establishing the historical context of the novel, particularly Japan's colonial and imperial domination over Korea. This chapter introduces key concepts such as colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and gender ideology, all of which shaped the ideological framework that Hata internalized. The complexity of Hata's character stems from his unique position as both colonizer and colonized, standing on both sides of this binary opposition. The second chapter shifts focus to Hata as a colonized subject, examining how imperial and colonial ideology have shaped his trauma and fractured his sense of self. This chapter further situates *A Gesture Life* within its literary context, particularly in relation to Asian American and Korean American literature, as Chang-rae Lee is of Korean American descent. The final chapter turns to Hata's life in the United States, exploring his experiences of immigration and assimilation through the frameworks of racial melancholia and racial dissociation – concepts that link these processes to structures of unresolved loss. The chapter also addresses how Hata is affected by the model minority stereotype, which pressures him to conform to certain cultural expectations because he is an immigrant of East Asian descent in America.

By combining literary analysis with theoretical insights from postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytic, critical race theory, and trauma studies, this thesis seeks to illuminate the unstable, performative, and contested nature of belonging as embodied in Franklin Hata's life. His story reveals that belonging is not a final achievement but an ongoing negotiation shaped by personal desire, external recognition, historical forces, and social power.

# 1 Franklin Hata as the Colonizer

This chapter introduces postcolonial literary theory, which is the guiding framework for analyzing the primary text of this thesis, *A Gesture Life*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin specify that postcolonial studies are grounded in the historical fact of colonialism and the various material consequences that ensued from this occurrence.[7] Due to the complex interplay between colonial histories and the development of postcolonial thought, the historical context of the novel will be discussed alongside the important terms of postcolonial criticism, namely colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism.

First and foremost, it is necessary to provide the groundwork for postcolonial literary theory, as it will be used to examine the novel. It is helpful to begin by addressing the spelling of the term postcolonial as it appears in hyphenated and unhyphenated forms across a wide range of scholarly discourses. Dean Baldwin and Patrick J. Quinn address this in their introduction to postcolonial theory, stating that "the hyphenated spelling refers to the historical period, 'after colonialism,' while the un-hyphenated word denotes the body of literary theory and practice used to describe this quite new area of study."[8] As this paper is primarily concerned with the theory and practice of postcolonial analysis, the spelling postcolonial will be used throughout, following the standard scholarly practice in the field of postcolonial studies.

With the spelling clarified, it is now essential to outline the foundations of postcolonial theory. Gurminder K. Bhambra observes that the postcolonial traditions of thought have a long and diversified history. Bhambra names Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri C. Spivak as some of the most influential theorists in the development of postcolonial criticism.[9] Among postcolonial theorists, Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry is particularly relevant to understanding Hata's internal conflict between colonizer and colonized roles. In addition, Dino Franco Felluga emphasizes that postcolonial critics are also significantly influenced by other critical traditions such as Marxism, feminism, cultural studies, or psychoanalysis.[10] These interdisciplinary frameworks enhance the understanding of postcolonial conditions by addressing the interconnected issues of power and identity. In particular, insights from feminist and psychoanalytic theories will be employed alongside postcolonial theory in this thesis, as

[7] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "General Introduction," in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), xxix.
[8] Dean Baldwin, and Patrick J. Quinn, *An Anthology of Colonial and Postcolonial Short Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 9.
[9] Gurminder K Bhambra, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (December 2014): 115.
[10] Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 224.

their combined use enables a more comprehensive examination of how colonial legacies continue to shape individual identities.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin indicate that postcolonial studies engage with diverse issues, including migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, and representation. These concerns are interconnected with questions of difference, race, gender, and place. While these are not exclusively postcolonial on their own, they form the complex and multifaceted fabric of the field.[11] Similarly, Baldwin and Quinn stress the importance of interpreting phenomena like racism, identity, and economic exploitation from the perspective of formerly colonized people. This approach invites a rethinking of history, literature, language, and culture.[12] This is precisely one of the central aims of this thesis – to see the world and analyze it through the lens of Franklin Hata, the main character of *A Gesture Life*, and to uncover how his narrative reflects broader postcolonial themes.

As it is vital for the analysis, the key terms of postcolonial theory will now be discussed. Postcolonial theorist Robert J. C. Young emphasizes that the "knowledge of the histories that [colonialism and imperialism] name is essential for any engagement with postcolonial critique."[13] Young stresses that while the terms are sometimes used interchangeably since both include forms of subjugation of one group by another, it is preferable to distinguish between them.[14] Given their distinct meanings, this thesis will employ the terms as defined below.

Young characterizes colonialism as a decentralized and pragmatic practice, typically operating at a distance from centralized government control. The primary objective of colonialism was economic gain, pursued through various forms of expansion and exploitation. Young then distinguishes between colonies primarily founded for settlement purposes and those established for economic exploitation without substantial settlement.[15] While colonialism took many different forms and was practiced in a variety of ways across regions and periods, this thesis provides only a general overview as a full exploration of these variations lies beyond its scope. To understand the complexities of Franklin Hata's identity in *A Gesture Life*, it is essential to situate the novel within the history of Japanese imperialism.

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[11] Ashcroft et al., "General Introduction," xxix.
[12] Baldwin, and Quinn, *An Anthology*, 4–18.
[13] Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 15th Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001; Oxford and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 15. Citations refer to the Wiley-Blackwell edition.
[14] Young, *Postcolonialism*, 15.
[15] Young, *Postcolonialism*, 16–7.

Young's definition states that imperialism uses institutions and ideologies to facilitate the exercise of power, either through outright invasion or through political and economic influence that essentially amounts to a comparable kind of dominance. Imperialism is usually driven by a centralized political system, extending its power to other peripheral regions. Imperialism emerged in the nineteenth century and developed alongside colonialism; however, it had minimal impact on the daily lives of colonial subjects, other than changing the form of their administration. According to Young, "imperialism was always a product of, and always addressed to, global power politics."[16] Given this fact, imperialism was highly dynamic, reflecting the international situation of power disputes.

Young further adds that by the nineteenth century, the United States, Germany, and Japan emerged as major powers alongside Europe, with their overseas expansion motivated by the pursuit of new markets and resources. Given the limited amount of territory available for conquest, such competition inevitably led to conflicts. Young continues that this expansion was driven not only by economic interest but also by the drive to modernize the world and spread Western capitalism. These motivations helped transform colonial structures into the dominant ideology of imperialism.[17] Summarizing the distinction, James L. Huffman offers that "[i]f imperialism seeks dominance (either formally or informally), colonialism acquires territory."[18]

Having established the theoretical groundwork, it is now appropriate to turn to the specific historical context of Japanese imperialism in order to better understand its influence on Hata's identity. Andrew Gordon outlines Japan's rapid political and expansionist rise:

> Japan's regional and global role has been remarkable for its variety and above all for its devastating impact in the first half of the twentieth century. Japan was a dependent semicolony dominated by Western powers from the 1850s through the 1880s. The new nation became a colonial power almost equal to the Western powers by 1905. It turned to imperialist expansion and a war seeking hegemony over all of Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, with tragic consequences.[19]

Gordon reveals the nation's complex involvement with different forms of domination and its interaction with various global powers of the century. Nevertheless, examining the full history

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[16] Young, *Postcolonialism*, 27–8.
[17] Young, *Postcolonialism*, 28–31.
[18] James L. Huffman, *Japan and Imperialism, 1853-1945*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2017), 2.
[19] Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xii.

of Japan falls outside the limits of this paper; therefore, the focus will be narrowed to the period spanning from Japan's colonial expansion to the establishment of its imperial empire.

*A Gesture Life* follows Hata, an ethnically Korean man adopted into a Japanese family, whose identity is shaped by the internalization of Japanese imperial ideology. This ideology, including its gender roles, nationalist values, and hierarchical attitudes toward Koreans, forms part of his assimilation process and influences his later complicity as a medical officer overseeing the abuse of comfort women. As Ania Loomba explains, ideology is not limited to political ideas; it also encompasses the mental frameworks, beliefs, and concepts through which we understand and relate to the world.[20] Through the provided definition, Hata's psychological formation can be analyzed. The Japanese imperial ideology, which Hata absorbs through his adoption and upbringing, is not only political but also psychological, as it shapes his understanding of duty, gender, ethnicity, and self-worth – all of which become part of his mental framework.

Given this context, Hata's identity cannot be understood solely within national boundaries. His life reflects a transnational process, shaped by overlapping forces of Japanese colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism. Furthermore, the protagonist's experiences are not restricted to a single national context. As Steven Vertovec notes, transnationalism refers to the sustained cross-border relationships that transcend geographic distance and political boundaries, along with the ideological frameworks those borders entail.[21] Magdalena Nowicka further explains that migration creates new spaces where individuals must negotiate both old and new identities. Thus, as Nowicka puts it, transnationalism is "the outcome of multiple belongings, practices, and dispositions coming together."[22] This is particularly relevant to Hata's character, who first seeks to belong within the structures of Japanese colonial and imperial practices and later as an immigrant in the United States. These layered influences of transnational ideologies, especially those rooted in imperialism, nationalism, and patriarchy, as well as historical trauma and the need for belonging, make Hata's psychological formation rather complex.

As has already been explained in the introduction, Stuart Hall's theory of identity as fluid and constructed provides a basic understanding that identities are never fixed but

[20] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 26.
[21] Steven Vertovec, "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 447.
[22] Magdalena Nowicka, "(Dis)connecting Migration: Transnationalism and Nationalism Beyond Connectivity," *Comparative Migration Studies* 8, no 20 (2020): 1–10.

constantly shifting due to historical, cultural, and political forces. Hall's theory helps to illuminate Hata's fragmented sense of self, shaped by shifting allegiances to Korea, Japan, and later America. Building on Hall's conception of identity, Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry adds further insight into Hata's psychological conflict. Homi Bhabha explains that colonial mimicry is the colonized subject's imitation of the colonizer as "*almost the same, but not quite*."[23] According to Bhabha, this mimicry arises from the colonizer's desire for a reformed, recognizable Other – one that reflects their values but remains subordinate. The colonized subject then becomes a partial, incomplete presence. Mimicry thus blurs boundaries, exposing the fragility of colonial power by simultaneously reinforcing and undermining it.[24] For Hata, mimicry is both a survival strategy and a source of anxiety, as his performance of Japanese identity never fully conceals his Korean origins, leaving him trapped between the states of belonging and alienation.

This instability of colonial power, as revealed through mimicry, unsettles both colonizer and colonized, trapping the former between authority and vulnerability. This chapter, as its title suggests, focuses on Hata's role as a colonizer, drawing on Albert Memmi's assertion that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is mutually harmful and at the same time formative, as it reshapes both parties into fixed roles. Memmi argues that colonizers eventually recognize that their comfort and privilege depend directly on the exploitation of the colonized. This awareness creates a moral dilemma – whether to accept the privileged position or to reject the system that sustains their advantage.[25] To understand Hata's moral conflict, it is helpful to consider Albert Memmi's distinction between two types of colonizers – those who accept and those who refuse the system. For the purpose of this thesis, the characteristics of the latter are most relevant, as the protagonist resonates with this role more. Memmi notes that such colonizers may feel sympathy or guilt towards the colonized or even reject the system, but despite this, they remain bound to colonial privilege and social ties. This contradiction fuels inner turmoil, as attempts at resistance risk ostracism and being labeled a traitor. Unless they leave the colony, their continued presence often requires silence and complicity to maintain their status.[26]

[23] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
[24] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.
[25] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974; London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), 51–62. Citations refer to the Earthscan Publications edition.
[26] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 63–6.

Together, these perspectives frame Hata's story as an example of a self shaped by, and complicit in, transnational ideologies. Taken together, Hall, Bhabha, and Memmi provide a framework for understanding Hata's fractured identity as the product of overlapping forces. Hata's story reveals how transnational ideologies do not simply dominate from the outside; they shape the very core of the self.

Understanding Hata's internalized ideology requires situating him within Japan's imperial agenda, which emphasized both military conquest and cultural assimilation of colonized communities like Koreans. As stated by Huffman, the colonial expansion began with Taiwan in 1895 and extended to Korea, Manchuria, and others by the 1930s, driven by Japan's need for economic self-sufficiency due to the Great Depression. Huffman then refers to the features of Japanese colonialism to demonstrate its distinctive imperial characterization. He challenges views that Japanese imperialism is unique and exceptional, arguing that, on the contrary, Japan had similar tendencies to the Western powers, such as economic exploitation and authoritarian rule justified by "bringing civilization" to its colonies.[27] However, Huffman acknowledges that Japanese imperialism also had its unique characteristics, such as geographic proximity and cultural affinity with its colonies, which were well-developed by the time of Japanese occupation, and later they were industrially and infrastructurally advanced by Japan while being strategically coordinated.[28] Essentially, all these factors allowed Japan to be highly organized and increased its ability to operate as one.

Huffman claims the defeat of China in the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War marked Japan's emergence as East Asia's dominant power, fueling national pride and imperial ambition. Simultaneously, this victory also sparked ambitions to rival the European giants, such as Russia or Great Britain. Although further expansion provided Japan with prestige and power, it also led to new conflicts, most notably the 1904 war with Russia. Despite the challenges of the costly, lengthy, and less straightforward war, Japan was able to secure a new settler colony in Karafuto and pave the way for the acquisition of Korea. This period is pivotal in Japan's imperial evolution and strengthened national identity.[29] The objective was then to include the colonized subjects in participating in the Japanese imperial ambitions. While nationalism was not to be deemed a novelty in Japanese society, Gordon notes that it took decades to instill a patriotic attitude that motivated Japanese citizens to serve their nation and the emperor, with

[27] Huffman, *Japan and Imperialism*, 3–4.
[28] Huffman, *Japan and Imperialism*, 3–4.
[29] Huffman, *Japan and Imperialism*, 22–7.

the imperial institution emerging as a tremendous uniting force between the 1880s and through the 1930s.[30]

Expanding on nationalism's role in shaping identity, Nowicka claims that its impact differs based on factors like class, gender, age, and social context, often intersecting with broader issues such as economic instability and racial tensions. While national symbols and narratives are shared, they are interpreted differently depending on one's social position. Nowicka stresses that nationalism is not just a conceptual framework, but it also deeply shapes emotional experiences. To capture this, Nowicka adopts the concept of the deep story by Arlie Russell Hochschild.[31] Hochschild explains that a deep story means "a story that *feels as if* it were true."[32] Nowicka then clarifies that these deep stories provide individuals with moral and emotional frameworks that affirm their beliefs and feelings as true, influencing their perceptions of fairness and justice. Furthermore, Nowicka notes that deep stories link personal and national histories, making national ideologies feel like personal truth. She adds that transnationalism exposes how deeply embedded these stories remain.[33] For Hata, these deep stories justify his complicity in the comfort women system and provide a sense of purpose to his internalization of Japanese nationalism and patriarchy.

Building on Nowicka's emotional framework, Smith's theory highlights the practical aims of nationalism. Anthony D. Smith highlights nationalism's practical goals. By advancing the nation's interests through collective loyalty and symbolic narratives, nationalism is inherently goal-oriented, requiring certain actions to realize its aims.[34] Given the importance of these goals, it is crucial to further explore Japan's historical context and national practices to better understand how such ideology shaped Hata's identity formation.

In Japan's imperial context, nationalism aimed to foster loyalty and military service to advance Japan's leadership in Asia. Takashi Fujitani notes that the media across the empire encouraged its subjects to embrace patriotism and support the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.[35] Gordon explains that this vision, promoted by Prime Minister Konoe in 1938, called for pan-Asian solidarity and unity against Western imperialism, though in practice it resulted in

[30] Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 67–70.
[31] Nowicka, "(Dis)connecting Migration," 5–6.
[32] Arlie Russel Hochschild, *Strangers in their own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 16.
[33] Nowicka, "(Dis)connecting Migration," 6–11.
[34] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 9.
[35] Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2013), 302.

a harsher colonial rule.[36] One of the key strategies of the Japanese Empire was to undermine the identity of the colonized people while simultaneously asserting the Japanese national identity.

However, this rigid dichotomy was complicated by the shifting demands of wartime. Fujitani further proposes that the material and personnel requirements of a war compelled the development of a discourse of commonality between Koreans and Japanese. As war conditions worsened for Japan, a sense of desperation grew, causing the discourse on the sameness between colonizers and colonized to reach its most extreme form.[37] Fujitani notes that various media portrayed the idea of an empire of equality throughout the Japanese imperium. The Japanese government broadcasted that if men demonstrate a "great desire to participate in the draft," they can become "in a commonly invoked phrase, 'now, indeed, truly Japanese.'"[38] Therefore, such a policy demonstrates how nationalism often ties belonging to the ideas of ethnicity, language, and shared heritage, creating boundaries between those deemed insiders and those labeled as outsiders. This means that national identity decides who gets to belong, privileging certain identities while marginalizing others. In this case, the belonging of Koreans, and in a sense the literary figure of Hata, since he was directly concerned with this policy, largely relied on their conformity to the Japanese ideology and Japanese national identity.

Furthermore, Fujitani records that since the 1920s, colonial policy in Korea had actively promoted intermarriages and facilitated the adoption of children across Korean and Japanese families, as a part of a broader effort to assimilate Koreans and reinforce imperial unity.[39] Hata's adoption by a Japanese childless couple embodies this policy designed to dissolve Korean distinctiveness through familial assimilation and reinforce Japanese dominance.

While the Japanese imperial discourse often stressed a shared ethnic and cultural heritage to justify colonial rule, it masked the fundamentally hierarchical and exploitative relationship by blurring the lines between colonizer and colonized to serve imperial interests. It is against this backdrop that the protagonist's dual positioning, as both colonized and complicit in colonial domination, becomes particularly significant. Understanding Hata's position as both colonized and complicit exposes how imperial ideologies fracture individual identity, leaving a lasting influence even across national borders.

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[36] Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 210–11.
[37] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 323.
[38] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 299–302.
[39] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 339.

Hata's adoption of Japanese national identity reflects his deep internalization of Japanese imperial and gender ideologies. He embraces these to align himself with the dominant culture. This ideological framework is not a set of separate forces; rather, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and patriarchy intertwine as interconnected elements of Japan's broader imperial agenda. Hata's involvement in the comfort women system exemplifies this complex entanglement. The comfort women system itself was a direct outcome of Japan's imperial ambitions and patriarchal structures enacted through colonial practices. In the following section, these concepts will be examined through selected occurrences from the novel, illustrating how the novel portrays Hata's complicity within them.

Reflecting on his childhood, Hata shares that he "had been a difficult child,"[40] and only on the brink of his adolescence did his senses clarify, leading him to recognize what he describes as his obligations. This moment of personal transformation appears to coincide with the early influence of Japanese imperial propaganda, which promoted the idea that colonized Koreans could become truly Japanese through loyalty and service by participating in the Japanese war effort. For Hata, his adoption marks not just a familial transition from the Oh family to the Kurohata family but the beginning of his ideological formation that is shaped by Japanese nationalism and the internalization of imperial values that continue to influence his identity and actions throughout the novel.

Hata acknowledges that after his adoption came a period when "[he] first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relation between a self and his society. There is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating."[41] Hata's words suggest that he was influenced by Japanese nationalism and strived to attain the Japanese national identity that had been marketed as a way to come together under the emperor and nation for the same goal. Hata mentions that he had been fortunate as he "scored exceptionally high on several achievement tests"[42] and was selected among a few other boys of his kind to enroll in a special school near a large city. Hata remarks that he was "readily leaving the narrow existence of [his] family,"[43] highlighting his eagerness to change his life status and position. Hata was then chosen to live with a Japanese family and therefore earned the Japanese family name Kurohata.

[40] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.
[41] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.
[42] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.
[43] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.

It is also appropriate to mention that his name while he stayed in Japan was Jiro, not Franklin; therefore, he performed under the name Jiro Kurohata in the army. The protagonist changed his name upon his arrival in the US, which will be covered in more detail in the third chapter of this thesis. Hata refers to the period of his adoption as "the true beginning of '[his] life'" and later describes the Japanese society as purposeful and vigilant, "entrusting to its care everything [he] could know or ever hope for."[44] Hata displays a great sense of admiration for the Japanese nation and its ideals. He demonstrates that only the presumption of a shared bloodline and adopting the Japanese way of life was not enough. Hata had to learn about the greatness of Japanese society and then make a conscious choice to be a part of Japanese society to fully enjoy its benefits. This is in line with Fujitani's claims, as he states that national belonging was based on more than just the assumption of common blood and shared culture. Japanese nationalism was also founded on the premise that individuals could only become national subjects through self-determination rather than ascribed status.[45] Therefore, the constant choice to be Japanese was essential to achieve the Japanese national identity as well.

According to Elie Kedourie, this allowed misuse of governmental authority as he criticizes that "[n]ational self-determination is, in the final analysis, a determination of the will; and nationalism is, in the first place, a method of teaching the right determination of the will."[46] This quote emphasizes that being a part of a collective and sharing the same national identity is a conscious act chosen by an individual. However, at the same time, this choice cannot be considered exactly as an act of free will, since the formative force of nationalism influences people's decisions and decides what is right. Fujitani proposes that this presents a struggle for Koreans as they "learn to become national subjects but contend with the internal turmoil" arising from the fact that they are supposed to make a choice based on their free will.[47] However, such a decision causes an individual to sacrifice their individuality.

This internal conflict is tied to the issues of national identity, as seen in Hata's case. To affirm his belonging within the Japanese Empire and distance himself from his origins, Hata enrolls in the Japanese Imperial Army. The reason behind Hata's enrollment is to "prove to anyone who might suspect otherwise the worthiness of raising [him] away from the lowly quarters of [his] kin and reveal the essential, inner spirit that is within [them] all."[48] This quote

[44] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72–3.
[45] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 330.
[46] Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1961), 81.
[47] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 332.
[48] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 120

further demonstrates Hata's insecurity about his place of origin and his need to prove the severing of ties to the place of his previous belonging. Hata is keen to show his new belonging as a Japanese, not only to his adoptive parents but also to his comrades and superiors in the army. He feels delighted to "fulfill [his] duty to the Nation and the Emperor" and to be part of "the greater destiny and the mandate of [his] people."[49] Hata had been trained in emergency medicine, and he was eager to prove his abilities and bravery on the battlefield. This would grant him a sense of validation, as it is in line with what was expected from the soldiers of the Japanese Empire. Hata seeks validation and belonging through participation in imperialist expansion. Thus, his national identity is not only constructed but also performed within, and because of colonial and imperial frameworks, echoing Memmi's argument that a colonizer's position is inseparable from the structures of domination he inhabits.

At the beginning of the Pacific War, Hata was stationed as a medical assistant initially in Singapore and later in Burma. Hata describes the common notion of the Japanese soldiers as "everyone to the man was supremely hopeful of a swift and glorious end to the fighting,"[50] demonstrating the influence of the Japanese war propaganda. He further elaborates on the power of the Japanese army and its soldiers as well:

> the glorious brightness of our ultimate victory and its forever dawning reach. […] Famous, of course, is the resolve of the Japanese soldier, the lore of his tenacity and courage and willingness to fight in the face of certain death. But I will say too, that for every man who showed no fear or hesitance, there were three or four or five others whose mettle was unashamedly wan and mortal as yours or mine.[51]

This shows the harsh reality, which differs from the Japanese propaganda. Under the influence of carefully curated nationalism, soldiers were put under a lot of pressure to uphold the ideal of the Japanese soldier. Faced with the reality of war atrocities, violence, injuries, and even death, the resolute mien of the soldiers started to dissolve.

To Hata's surprise, his main task is not to treat the injuries of his comrades and to prove his bravery, as he is only field-trained and not formally educated. Instead, he faces quite an unexpected challenge, as his duty is to monitor the health of the comfort women. Therefore, the context of the comfort women system is relevant to the analysis since the main character interacted with it directly.

[49] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 120.
[50] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 105.
[51] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 170.

George Hicks establishes that the comfort women system constituted a large-scale, officially organized regime of sexual violence by the Japanese Imperial Army.[52] Sociologist Pyong Gap Min estimates that 50,000 to 200,000 women were forced into military brothels, known as comfort stations, during the Asia-Pacific War from 1931 to 1945.[53] Hicks further acknowledges that the statistics indicated a diverse range of nationalities of women that were concerned among which were Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, Philippines, as well as Dutch and Russia.[54] Min highlights that Korean women were primarily targeted due to Korea's status as Japan's main colony.[55]

Additionally, Hicks proposes that what makes the comfort women system especially disturbing is not only that women were sent across Japanese-occupied regions, often near active battle zones, but that most were deceived, abducted, or forced into sexual slavery. Although Japan had a legal prostitution system before the war, most comfort women were young, inexperienced girls coerced into service. In some cases, Japanese officials obtained signatures on so-called agreements, but the women's lack of understanding rendered any supposed consent meaningless.[56] Despite what the name suggests, comfort women and comfort stations provided virtually no comfort to the women subjected to these practices. The treatment these women received is remarkably brutal, as Min puts it:

> The majority of these women seem to have died as a result of physical abuse, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, injuries from bombings or other military attacks, or other tragic circumstances. Many others are presumed to have committed suicide or been killed by Japanese soldiers.[57]

Min highlights that after Japan's defeat in 1945, many comfort women faced a difficult return home, though some remained in countries like China, where they had been held. Their suffering was compounded by societal stigma, as patriarchal norms often forced survivors into silence about their traumatic experiences.[58]

The comfort women phenomenon can be analyzed through both postcolonial and feminist theory, which together offer valuable insights into the issues of wartime sexual

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[52] George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, 1st American Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 11.
[53] Pyong Gap Min, *Korean "Comfort Women": Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 1.
[54] Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 17–8.
[55] Min, *Korean "Comfort Women,"* 1.
[56] Hicks, *The Comfort* Women, 19–20.
[57] Min, *Korean "Comfort Women,"* 1.
[58] Min, *Korean "Comfort Women,"* 1.

violence. Anne McClintock argues that gender dynamics have been central to the sustaining and maintaining of imperial power from the beginning.[59] Expanding on this, Fujitani draws from feminist critiques of postcolonial nationalism to show that discourses of gender are inseparable from those of colonialism and nationalism. He argues that "colonial and imperial powers have worked to actually fashion gender, sex, and families in ways that have been enabling for colonial and imperial rule."[60] Fujitani emphasizes that in Japan's case, its imperial ideology promoted assimilation as a path to inclusion, but this was limited mainly to men through military service. Women, in contrast, were excluded from full national membership and relegated to a secondary status, facing oppression both as colonized subjects and as women. Fujitani then concludes that this resulted in the double oppression of women, based on both their gender and colonial status.[61]

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the novel demonstrates how gender shaped both the systemic violence of the comfort women system and Franklin Hata's identity. In his story, patriarchal and Confucian values, rooted in Japanese imperial ideology, profoundly influence his perception of women. As such, the comfort women system reflects not only colonial oppression but also the gendered hierarchies that underpin both imperial policy and individual subjectivity.

Extending the discussion on gender hierarchies within imperial ideology, Dino Franco Felluga summarizes that patriarchy, precisely the rule of the father, describes a social structure that privileges men and allows them greater power in political and cultural domains. This dynamic reinforces binary stereotypes, aligning women with emotion and domesticity, and men with reason and authority.[62] Such imbalances were especially evident in Japan and its colonies, where women were subordinated and subjected to the comfort women system without hesitation. Confucianism further reinforced this patriarchal order. In Jinwung Kim's words, Confucianism is a philosophy deeply embedded in Japanese governance and family life. As Kim outlines, Confucian principles emphasized loyalty, obedience, and gendered hierarchy, promoting allegiance to the emperor while subordinating women.[63] Uma A. Segal further adds

[59] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 7.
[60] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 336.
[61] Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, 371–3.
[62] Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 212.
[63] Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 65.

that Confucianism enforced strict behavioral codes that demanded female obedience.[64] Connected with Confucianism is the concept of women's chastity, which has been quite impactful. According to Michiko Suzuki, chastity, embodied through values like virginity and modesty, was central to the Confucian ideal of womanhood, shaping dominant gender norms and expectations.[65]

This emphasis on chastity is reflected in the treatment of comfort women, as Hata observes. Upon discovering that not all the comfort women brought to their station were virgins, he notes that the girl who had already lost her chastity was taken away while the other went to entertain the soldiers. Hata shares that "[virgins] would offer [soldiers] the salubrious and then other ineffable effects of his taking their maidenhood, which to a soldier is like an amulet of life and rebirth."[66] This quote implies that forcibly taking a woman's virginity is not only seen as permissible but also as something that grants a sort of spiritual benefit to soldiers facing possible death. It can be observed that during wartime, and under patriarchal ideology, women's virginity becomes a commodity – something to be seized by men for their own benefit. Hata's utterance reflects traditional patriarchal values heavily influenced by Confucianism. Describing the effects of taking a woman's virginity in such adjectives distances the act of rape from its brutal reality but rather masks it as justification and normalization of violence. This quote is then an example of how patriarchy and imperialism intersect to dehumanize women and justify sexual violence.

Hata's internalized patriarchal views become evident during his time in the Japanese army. In the early fall of 1944, Hata learned that female volunteers, as the military refers to them, would arrive at his station. He explains the routine to the younger soldier, Corporal Endo, who is eager to meet them. Hata says that "it is the officer corps that will first inspect their readiness. Enlisted men […] will be issued their tickets shortly."[67] Therefore, the system is hierarchical – the soldiers with the highest rank have the opportunity to be among the first to visit the comfort women. Hata not only normalizes this structure but encourages Endo to participate, as "[t]his is most regular."[68] When asked in turn if he will visit them himself, Hata

[64] Uma A. Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*: *Asians in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 65.
[65] Michiko Suzuki, "*The Husband's Chastity*: Progress, Equality, and Difference in 1930s Japan," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 2 (2013): 329, note 8.
[66] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 182.
[67] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 161.
[68] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 162.

replies matter-of-factly that, "[n]aturally,"[69] he will, demonstrating the ordinariness of the practice. Hata later reflects that:

> like everyone else [he] appreciated the logic of deploying young women to help maintain the morale of officers and foot soldiers in the field. […] And like everyone else, […] [he] assumed it would be a most familiar modality, just one among the many thousand details and notices in a wartime camp. But when the day finally came [he] realized that [he] was mistaken.[70]

Although this moment reveals a fleeting sense of unease, Hata's prior acceptance of the system portrays how deeply ingrained patriarchal and imperial ideologies shape his worldview. Hata views the exploitation of women as a logical and necessary sacrifice for the national cause, as he thinks it proper for women to serve their nation and the emperor. This is a sentiment that mirrors the rationalizations used by colonizers to justify systems of oppression. By framing the comfort women system as strategically useful, Hata participates in the dehumanization of these women, even though he does not end up visiting them once. Hata's acceptance aligns with a colonial practice that subjects individuals to suffer to reach imperial goals. Hata's complicity in the comfort women system reveals how patriarchy and imperialism intersect to naturalize gendered violence. While his later unease hints at a moral consciousness, it does not undo the fact that he, like many colonizers, initially rationalizes injustice under the guise of order and necessity. Thus, Hata's narrative demonstrates how patriarchal values coupled with imperial ambitions produce and sustain systems of abuse by masking their moral contradictions.

However, there is one comfort woman, Kkutaeh, mainly referred to as only K in the novel as well as in this paper, who grows closer to Hata. Undoubtedly, both Hata and K have been influenced by Confucianism throughout their lives. K's role is more complicated as she is a woman. K confesses that she is "one of four unwanted daughters."[71] About her father, she shares the following:

> [h]e would hardly ever speak to me, you know, or to any of us girls. To him we were unaddressable, even before all the trouble that happened to our family. He might say, toward my mother or one of our servants, that I should fetch his slippers for him, or that I should be quieter, or go play outside. I didn't sense hatred or bitterness from him. But what he had for me was mostly nothing at all, as if I were the most distant blood.[72]

K's father was a Confucian scholar who valued his only son the most. In his view, his daughters were sparable. This ultimately contributed to her and her sister's mobilization as comfort

[69] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 163.
[70] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 163.
[71] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 245.
[72] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 245.

women, the reason being, as has been demonstrated in the quote, the fact that their father did not consider them important enough and would rather save his son by selling his daughters.

K was singled out from the other comfort women stationed at the brothel because Captain Ono took a special interest in her. He instructed his subordinate medical officer, Hata, to keep her separated in a supply area in the infirmary. When Captain Ono addresses Hata regarding K, he states that:

> [t]here's clear breeding there […] [T]here are indeed Chinese and Koreans of special and high character, in fact, of the same bloodlines as the most pure Japanese. There is a commonality between someone like her and me, a distinct correspondence, if one very distant. This is one of the reasons I've separated her – you could say as a means of acknowledging that relation.[73]

Captain Ono, from a family of noble men, finds a connection to K, whose father was an influential Confucian scholar and official advocating for Korea's colonization by Japan. Ono reduces K to a symbol of imagined elite bloodlines, valuing her only for an idealized racial purity. His choice to isolate her is not compassionate but a way to preserve that lineage. His notion of Pan-Asian unity is a facade, serving the goal of Japanese supremacy. Captain Ono reinforces this idea by asserting that he does not care about K, as "[s]he is not of any consequence, except as a kind of rare vessel of us, to be observed and stewarded,"[74] further exposing the dehumanizing logic of imperial ideology, stripping K of any value beyond her usefulness to the imperial project.

Due to K's placement under Hata's supervision, they have the opportunity to develop a closer relationship. When Hata communicates with Kkutaeh in Korean, he realizes she is much more confident and highly educated, which is a sign that she comes from a higher class. Therefore, Hata's assumption, influenced by the general view that Korean people are inferior and unintelligent, is disproved. Additionally, they even talk about Japanese ideology. K shares that her father always told her that "[they] should revere [their] Asian heritage and protect it from foreign influences, that whether Chinese or Japanese or Korean, [they] were rooted of a common culture and mind and that [they] should put aside [their] differences and work together."[75] This further suggests that, as a scholar, the ideas of K's father were idealized and similar to those of the Japanese Empire, which proclaimed shared culture and common blood that united Asian people against the Western powers. It is also plausible that he could have been

[73] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 268.
[74] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 268.
[75] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 249.

under the influence of the Japanese ideology as well. Hata answers that "this is exactly our Emperor's mandate" […] to develop an Asian prosperity, and an Asian way of life."[76] Hata frames his answers in a way that reflects Japan's imperial ambitions and considers the Japanese conquest as benevolent leadership or guardianship. K's retort then exposes the hypocrisy and self-serving nature of Hata's and ultimately Japan's narrative as she replies that "it seems it is to be a Japanese life."[77] Her reaction reflects the betrayal felt when promises of unity and upliftment turn into oppression and exploitation. This is especially ironic given her position as a former comfort woman, a victim of the very regime that claimed to uplift all Asians. This occurrence, therefore, highlights the tension between imperial ideology and lived experience.

Being a witness to the various violent and atrocious acts the comfort women were subjected to, Hata seemingly remains unaffected. His narration stays detached and casual, and for the most part, focuses on the medical aspect of things. Memmi argues that the colonized are frequently dehumanized and depersonalized and described as "hardly a human being" and an object existing as "a function of the needs of the colonizer."[78] By employing this strategy, the colonizer can justify holding such dehumanizing views and behaving in appalling ways toward the colonized, as he does not possess a genuine sense of moral responsibility. According to Memmi, the colonizer treats the suffering of the colonized with indifference and emotional detachment, perceiving their pain as distant, unfamiliar, and unworthy of genuine empathy. This dehumanization allows the colonizer to remain unmoved even by acts of violence or profound personal loss experienced by the colonized.[79]

This can be observed when one of the comfort women, a young girl, jumps out of a window of the comfort station to her death. Hata was called to bring her dead body inside and wrap it up. Despite being the first dead person Hata had ever seen, his tone remains indifferent, describing her as "just a girl, otherwise unremarkable"[80] and comparing her wrapped body to "a sack of radishes,"[81] while his mate even likened it to an "English-style roast."[82] In another instance, Hata likens a girl's body to that of a "skinned billy goat or calf."[83] This comparison marks a shift from describing the girl as an inanimate object to depicting her as an animal.

[76] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 249.
[77] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 249.
[78] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 129–30.
[79] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 130–1.
[80] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 108
[81] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 109.
[82] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 109.
[83] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 173.

While this may suggest a minimal recognition of her as a living being, it still falls far short of acknowledging her humanity. This common notion of the Japanese soldiers is demonstrated further when the young officer who previously questioned Hata about the arrival of the comfort women kills one of the girls, K's sister. He was charged not with murder, but with "treasonous action against the corps," and he was considered guilty "as any saboteur who had stolen or despoiled the camp's armament or rations,"[84] further reinforcing the dehumanization of the girls and their status as a commodity of the army.

Young-Oak Lee explains that Hata slowly detaches himself from the Japanese colonial ideology.[85] Influenced by K, Hata realizes that:

> it seemed incongruous, as well, how it was that I, the only child of a hide tanner and a rag maid, should come to wear a second lieutenant's uniform of the Ocean Sky Battalion of the Imperial Forces, and that she, born into a noble, scholarly house (if perhaps one fallen), would have to sleep in a surplus closet of a far-flung military outpost, her sister already dead and buried, wishing upon herself the same horrid end.[86]

This moment marks a critical point of self-awareness in which Hata recognizes the ironic reversal of traditional class hierarchies under the influence of colonial and patriarchal systems. Despite his humble origins, Hata has been elevated through his alignment with imperial authority. At the same time, K, despite her noble Korean lineage, is dehumanized and stripped of agency under Japanese colonial rule. His reflection underscores how race, nationality, and gender override class in determining one's position within the colonial hierarchy. More importantly, this realization forces Hata to confront his own complicity in oppressive systems. He is not merely a passive observer of K's suffering but a direct beneficiary of the structures that enable it. In this way, Hata is portrayed as a colonizer who becomes aware of his superior position within an asymmetrical power dynamic. This recognition deepens his character's moral and psychological complexity, illustrating how colonial ideologies fracture not only the lives of the oppressed but also the ethical self-conception of those who occupy positions of relative privilege within them.

It is essential to acknowledge that Hata eventually exhibits a form of moral awakening and portrays a positive turn in recognizing the harmful conditions and brutal reality endured by the comfort women. Hata shares that he felt uncomfortable witnessing the long queues of the

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[84] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 189.
[85] Young-Oak Lee, "Gender, Race and the Nation in *A Gesture Life*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46, no. 2 (2005): 150.
[86] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 257.

soldiers waiting for their turn with the comfort women, having seen the condition of the comfort women firsthand when treating them to prepare them for their service in the following days. Hata envies the simplicity of emotions the waiting soldiers feel, wishing he could be "just the same" and feel "the simple sheerness of their anticipation."[87] Hata confesses that:

> But I did not have such a feeling, nor could I call it forth. I supposed I should be half-glad. Maybe it was because I knew enough of what would happen in the tiny room, or what would occur in turn over the long hours of the afternoon and evening. One could say it was a medical knowledge. Or so I chose to encounter it. I knew that twenty or even thirty or more would visit each one of them, and that the resulting insult would be horribly painful and ignominious.[88]

Hata attempts to frame his distance in medical terms, revealing his need to rationalize his detachment by placing it in the context of his medical profession, as feeling for the girls is not in line with the Japanese ideology. He approaches the state of the girls from a medical perspective, likely to avoid confronting the full moral implications of the comfort women system. Despite his distance, Hata clearly recognized the brutality the girls endured in the comfort station. His use of the word insult further suggests that such an act is a profound violation of human dignity, no longer a logical necessity.

His disillusionment with the Japanese imperial ideology, once considered a source of pride and belonging, emerges as he confronts the dehumanizing conditions imposed on women like K. Hata recognizes that he was misled by the imperial ideology he once upheld and that his ideals of duty and honor were betrayed by the very system he served. According to the previously defined typology of Albert Memmi, Hata can be considered a colonizer who begins to reject the colonial ideology. Hata displays the inner tension Memmi describes as being caught between his growing awareness of injustice and the privileges he has accrued through complicity within the same system. While Hata does not fully extract himself from the colonial framework, his emotional turmoil and guilt align with the colonizer who refuses characteristics, specified by moral conflict and disillusionment, but without complete detachment. His refusal is partial and largely internal, but it signals a rupture in his identity and a recognition of the ethical costs of imperial power.

As Young-Oak Lee declares, Hata continues to be a "subject to his adopted nation and its colonialism and is nurtured by the gender ideology of the traditional patriarchal society."[89]

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[87] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 226.
[88] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 226.
[89] Lee, "Gender, Race, and the Nation," 147.

In his effort to secure a sense of belonging within the Japanese imperial structure, Hata internalizes and enacts the very systems of oppression from which he seeks acceptance. He adheres to this ideology in order to assert his Japanese national identity and achieve a sense of belonging, but witnessing K's brutal death marks a profound rupture in this commitment.

His relationship with Kkutaeh exposes the contradictions in his beliefs: he is drawn to her, yet he passively complies with the very system that dehumanizes her. Hamilton Caroll proposes that "Hata falls in love with K or, perhaps more accurately, with the idea of her chastity and purity as something he alone can protect."[90] Hata indeed admits that "[he] must have wanted her unto death, and [he] could not bear anyone else having her, and [he] allowed events to occur because of that feeling, even if it meant [he] would lose her forever."[91] As Anne Anlin Cheng notes, K's plea would have required him breaking military rank, "transgressing not only military code but also his Japanese and masculine identification."[92] Although Hata was in a position to intervene, he remains passive, his desire for belonging blinding him to K's suffering. His failure to act reveals his internal conflict, making Hata a symbol of moral complicity through inaction. Rather than confronting this betrayal, Hata then rewrites his past, reimagining himself as a benevolent figure, both during the war and later in life. This self-deception allows him to avoid acknowledging his responsibility, but it fractures his sense of self and deepens his disillusionment with the ideals of national belonging he once embraced.

[90] Hamilton Carroll, "Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 601.
[91] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 296.
[92] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-Rae Lee to Jacques Lacan," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 562.

# 2 Franklin Hata as the Colonized

For a thorough postcolonial analysis, it is essential to consider the relevant literary context. This chapter therefore explores the emergence of Asian American literature, with particular attention to Korean American writing, as the author Chang-rae Lee is of Korean American descent. While the previous chapter examined the protagonist's role as the colonizer within the Japanese Imperial Army, this section shifts focus to his standing on the other end of the scale – as the colonized. Specifically, this part of the thesis analyzes how the protagonist's belonging, or rather not belonging, affects his life and identity. The case of not belonging or having trouble belonging can be very intense, to the point that such an experience can emerge as rather traumatic, a point that will be explored throughout this chapter. Since the previous chapter introduced the relevant historical context of colonialism and imperialism of Korea by the Japanese Empire and analyzed its portrayal in the novel, this chapter can focus on the effects that such historical events can have on the individual.

To begin the analysis, it is first appropriate to introduce Asian American literature at large. Presently, the field of Asian American literature is rather large, with substantial amounts of contributing authors and their writings. Rocío G. Davis and Sämi Ludwig propose that Asian American literature provides an extensive area of research as it comprises of "transcultural literary phenomena beyond geographic, national, ethnic, and even linguistic boundaries."[93] They further point to the fact that recent scholarship persistently hints at the "need to expand and deepen the approaches to this complex set of concerns and strategies."[94] As Davis and Ludwig allude, this literary field continues to grow and ask for different methods and viewpoints due to its expansive nature. Directly as a result, the field of Asian American literature and Asian American studies is always developing.

A key concept that informs much of this literary production and criticism is diaspora, another important concept relevant to postcolonial literary. Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin define diaspora as a result of the profound effects of colonial and imperial domination, leading to a widespread relocation through slavery, indenture, and settlement and a framework for surveying the personal and cultural effects of such displacement.[95] While the term originally referred to

[93] Rocío G. Davis, and Sämi Ludwig, "Introduction: Asian American Literature in the International Context," *Asian American Literature in the International Context: Readings on Fiction, Poetry, and Performance*, 2nd ed, ed. Rocío G. Davis, and Sämi Ludwig (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004), 9.
[94] Davis and Ludwig, "Introduction: Asian American Literature," 9.
[95] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), xxxiv.

dispersion, its meaning has evolved significantly over time. In the context of Asian American literature, Sau-ling C. Wong notes that the rise of multiculturalism and the growth of globalization creates a new diasporic condition.[96] Young-Oak Lee, similarly argues that unlike earlier generations, Asian Americans today have the option to engage with multiple cultures simultaneously, rather than being confined to assimilation or being caught between cultural conflict.[97]

Furthermore, Stuart Hall emphasizes that diasporic identity is inherently hybrid, shaped through ongoing processes of change and differentiation.[98] Hata's life symbolizes the complex realities of diasporic identity. As a Korean adopted into Japanese culture, and later an immigrant to the United States, he inhabits multiple places without fully belonging to any. This fractured belonging reflects Stuart Hall's notion of diasporic identity as hybrid and constantly evolving, yet for Hata, this hybridity is accompanied by alienation and trauma. His experiences reveal the lasting effects of colonialism and displacement on personal identity, illustrating how diasporic subjects navigate the tensions between cultural difference and the desire for acceptance. By examining Hata through the lens of diaspora, this chapter demonstrates how his struggles with identity and belonging are not only personal but deeply intertwined with larger histories of migration, and colonialism.

The complexities of diaspora and hybrid identity, as embodied by Hata, are reflected in the broader landscape of Asian American literature, which has itself undergone significant transformation since its emergence. King-Kok Cheung, literary critic and a scholar in Asian American studies, situates the rise of this literary field in the aftermath of the 1960s civil rights movement. Cheung also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging heterogeneity of such literary works, since it shifted its focus from the early concerns with the pursuit of America and cultural nationalism, toward addressing the multiple layers of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. Cheung stresses that the recent developments by no means replace the earlier topics but coexist within an expanding literary field.[99]

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[96] Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh, and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 127.
[97] Young-Oak Lee, "Transcending Ethnicity: Diasporicity in *A Gesture Life*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009): 66.
[98] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990). 402.
[99] King-Kok Cheung, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

This evolving complexity in Asian American literature parallels the multifaceted nature of diasporic identities. Impactful Asian American works, such as *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston have played a pivotal role in the transformation of this literary field. As Davis and Ludwig note, Kingston's work is a pioneering piece of literature that not only opened the doors for diverse voices within Asian American literature but also demonstrated "a narrative boldness and maturity regarding the appropriation and subversion of traditional genres."[100] Since then, Asian American writing has remarkably broadened its expression via experimentation, various literary techniques, and incorporation of components from many different ethnic backgrounds. Davis and Ludwig argue that "[t]oday the cultural production of Asian America has a scope and variety that is as aesthetically complex and sophisticated as any other literature, yet maintaining a very particular flavor of its own."[101]

The enlargement of Asian American writing in the United States is inseparable from the historical patterns of Asian immigration to the United States. Pyong Gap Min, a professor of sociology, outlines that between the years 1850 and 1882 a significant number of Chinese workers arrived in California due to the discovery of gold and the development of the American mining industry. The Chinese constituted the first large wave of Asian immigration into the US. However, the US government implemented a variety of policies to limit or prohibit Asian immigration, starting with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.[102] Nevertheless, the restrictions and exclusions of Asian immigrants will be further discussed later, together with the theory of racial melancholia. Continuing with Asian immigration, Min adds that prior to the 1970s, the number of Asian Americans was miniscule in comparison to the white, black, and Latino populations. The massive influx of Asian immigrants was then prompted by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act reforming the discriminatory laws.[103] Thus, this nullification of immigration laws restricting Asian immigrants directly contributed to the enlargement and diversification of Asian American literature, as more voices and experiences came to be represented.

Focusing more specifically on Korean American literature, David S. Roh highlights that "inasmuch as Korean American fiction belongs to Asian American literature, it also belongs to Japanese postcolonial fiction." Early Korean American works often engaged with Japanese colonialism either directly or indirectly, serving a political purpose of recruiting the American

[100] Davis and Ludwig, "Introduction: Asian American Literature, 9.
[101] Davis and Ludwig, "Introduction: Asian American Literature, 9.
[102] Pyong Gap Min, "Asian Immigration: History and Contemporary Trends," in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues*, 2nd ed., ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 7–9.
[103] Min, "Asian Immigration," 7.

public to support Korea's freedom against Japan during World War II. Roh explains that this colonial history irreversibly transformed Korea. Roh proposes that "a decolonized site does not simply revert back to a pristine precolonial state. Instead, much of postcolonial literature is marked by a national anxiety over questions of language, discourse, race, education, and infrastructure that has been forever altered."[104] Kandice Chuh echoes this by asserting that:

> [history of Japanese colonization] decisively transformed the meaning of Koreanness, ineradicably complicating what it means to be "one hundred percent Korean"—a condition already made impossible by the complex histories underwriting the emergence of Korea as a modern nation-state.[105]

Roh marks the 1990s as the turning point in discussions regarding the relationship between Korea and Japan due to the shift in Asian American studies towards a transpacific perspective and the publication of influential novels about comfort women.[106] By addressing the comfort women tragedy, Korean American authors were able to convey the implications of imperialism and colonialism in its broadest sense, fighting for social justice due to colonial trauma. Daniel Y. Kim and Viet Thanh Nguyen claim that the comfort women phenomenon has been addressed by several authors, the most notable being Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999).[107]

Chang-rae Lee revealed in an interview with *The New York Times* that he discovered comfort women randomly while reading about Korea. Lee shared that he was "blown away" by the treatment of these women. It ultimately led him to South Korea to conduct interviews with the former comfort women. Originally, *A Gesture Life* was meant to be written from the point of view of a comfort woman, but he felt like he could not appropriately express what he had experienced while meeting the former comfort women. This is why the novel is narrated by Franklin Hata, who was supposed to be only a minor character at first.[108] Narration from the male perspective allows for insights about how individuals such as the protagonist can find themselves being complicit in systems of oppression, either through passivity, rationalization, or adherence to duty, as has been discussed in the first chapter. *A Gesture Life* also allows for

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[104] David S. Roh, *Minor Transpacific: Triangulating American, Japanese, and Korean Fictions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 80.
[105] Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 91–2.
[106] Roh, *Minor Transpacific*, 77–8.
[107] Daniel Y. Kim and Viet Thanh Nguyen, "The Literature of the Korean War and Vietnam War," in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62.
[108] "INTERVIEW; Adopted Voice," The New York Times, last modified September 5, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/05/books/interview-adopted-voice.html

an analysis of the narrative of Hata's guilt and denial, making its interpretation more complex and challenging for the readers as they are placed in the role of the witness. This theme of witness by the readers will be studied in the later section of this chapter. Furthermore, it allows for a shift in the usual narrative from the point of view of the victims to the point of view of perpetrator or a bystander.

This presents a significant challenge to the author of such a work, since it might lead to problematic representations, especially when dealing with the issue of comfort women. However, Laura Barberán Reinares claims that Lee's writing purposefully resists an objectifying gaze because in a novel concerned with systematic mass rape, there are only a few passages related to rape and, if they are present, Lee frequently places Hata before or after an especially graphic scene. Barberán Reinares emphasizes that in doing so, the author prevents any acts of voyeurism. What the audience then witnesses are the wounds or corpses, emphasizing the brutality experienced by the women, without blatantly displaying ethically dubious imagery. Barberán Reinares concludes that:

> Lee's decision not to show an alive character experiencing sexual torture enables him to solve two major problems of representation: the collapse of language in mimetically conveying the corporeality of physical pain and violence (aesthetics) and the need for circumvention of potentially exploitative images (ethics).[109]

In this way, *A Gesture Life* succeeds in navigating the challenges of depicting sexual violence without falling into problematic representation

Chang-rae Lee, per Heinz Insu Fenkl's words, is "one of the most prominent Korean American writers in the literary mainstream,"[110] Amanda M. Page notes that Lee has built a distinguished career as an acclaimed contemporary American novelist. Born in South Korea in 1965, Lee moved to the U.S. at age three and grew up in a comfortable, middle-class, predominantly white suburb. Unlike typical first-generation immigrant narratives of poverty and alienation, his early life was marked by relative ease of integration. Still, his fiction often explores outsider tensions common in immigrant literature. His literary debut, *Native Speaker* (1995), was awarded the American Book Award and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for Best First Novel. His second novel*, A Gesture Life* (1999), was also critically acclaimed,

[109] Laura Barberán Reinares, "Writing Unspeakable Things: Speechlessness, Abjection, and the Ethics/Aesthetics of (Not) Representing Sexual Violence in Three Korean American "Comfort Women" Novels," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 395–6.
[110] Heinz Insu Fenkl, "The Future of Korean American Literature," in *The Sigur Center Asia Papers: Korean American Literature*, ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud, R. Richard Grinker, and Kirk W. Larsen (Washington: George Washington University Press, 2004), 20.

securing him a place among *The New Yorker*'s list of twenty best American writers under the age of forty. Page also underlines the issue of minority writers being frequently and unfairly expected to reflect their personal lives in their fiction – a tendency Lee critiques, particularly in *Aloft* (2004), arguing that such assumptions undervalue artistic imagination and the author's position as a fiction writer.[111] Lee shared his frustrations in an interview with Christine Zilka stating that:

> the assumption is that before *Aloft* I was writing more from "experience" rather than employing whatever artistic skill and sensibility I possessed, which is terribly frustrating. All writers work from experience to some extent, of course, and yet there's something about the American reader and culture at the moment that obsesses on the personal, giving primacy to "reality" narratives and "essential" identities and ignoring or diminishing the great wonders of imagination.[112]

Therefore, it is important not to limit the authors by grouping them into certain categories. While *A Gesture Life* addresses issues and topics typically present in the works of immigrant and diasporic literature, it also transcends this category by implementing the realities of every human being, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity. Due to the pervasiveness of traumatic experiences and their effects on the narration of the main character, the novel can be read as an example of trauma fiction.

Regarding trauma fiction, Anne Whitehead presents a paradox: "if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativized in fiction?"[113] Whitehead suggests that there are ways in which trauma can be represented, which is usually done in the novel's form that mimics the traumatic symptoms, such as the collapse of temporality and chronology, repetition, and indirection.[114] Such characteristics can be observed in the novel. The story of Franklin Hata, going from being adopted into Japanese family to serving in the army to moving to the US, is told in a nonlinear structure as the character portrays a fragmented story, which is often disrupted by flashbacks and memories. A notable feature of the novel's narration is that it is told from a first-person perspective, which marks Hata as an unreliable narrator since his storytelling is greatly subjective.

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[111] Amanda M. Page, *Understanding Chang-rae Lee* (South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 1–3.
[112] Christine Lee Zilka, "Interview with Chang-rae Lee," *Kartika Review* 6 (Fall/ Winter 2009), 98.
[113] Anne Whitehead*, Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.
[114] Whitehead*, Trauma Fiction*, 3.

Furthermore, Hata's elusiveness and emotional restraint make his narration rather measured. The controlled language of the main character contrasts with the violent and traumatic events of the book. As a result, the novel's emotional depth does not arise explicitly from the dialogue, but rather from the omission in the dialogue, reflecting Hata's struggles to confront or accept his doing as well as what happened to him. Alexis Motuz agrees that the novel provides a narrative "in which much of what is communicated remains unwritten; woven, instead, into a narrative structure that mirrors the symptoms of the traumatized psyche and challenges readers to bear witness."[115] Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, analyzes the role of the witness, or in other words, the listener, as follows:

> The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation. […] By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through [their] very listening, [they come] to partially experience trauma in [themselves]. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. […] [They] nonetheless [do] not become the victim – [they] preserves [their] own separate place, position and perspective. […] [They have] to pay attention and respect if [they have] to properly carry out his task.[116]

It is then up to the reader to look beyond Hata's gestures and interpret his carefully constructed, often unconscious testimony, putting together the fragments of a story he resists remembering. The reader also bears witness to the silenced voices of those not present, such as K and other comfort women, acknowledging the stories that have been historically wrapped in silence. As Laub notes above, this act of witnessing requires respect and self-awareness, avoiding the imposition of personal emotions onto the testimony.

Understanding Hata's trauma requires situating his personal struggles within the larger structures of Japanese colonial oppression that shaped his identity. His life is deeply marked by the ideologies of imperialism and colonial domination that defined Korea's experience under Japanese rule. Stef Craps emphasizes that the dominant definition of trauma as an individual phenomenon neglects the larger social context. Trauma must be analyzed in relation to the circumstances that prompted the traumatic maltreatment, such as political oppression, racism, or economic dominance. Craps then elaborates that the effects of colonialism and racism cannot be considered through these simplistic notions, as "racism is historically specific; yet, unlike

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[115] Alexis Motuz, "Before Speech: An Interrogation of Trauma in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 43, no. 3 (2013): 412.
[116] Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–8.

historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present."[117]

Historical accounts further reinforce this context. Huffman describes Japan's annexation of Korea as a moment of profound suffering for Koreans, viewed by the Western powers as routine imperialism, but unprecedented in its brutality for the colonized. What Huffman emphasizes is the Japanese administration's heavy-handed attitude toward Koreans, as even teachers carried swords and policemen wielded whips ready to punish anyone acting out of the order set by the Japanese.[118] This harsh practice, as Jinwung Kim observes, had been unprecedented in colonial history. Kim stresses that although Koreans were legally considered subjects of the Japanese emperor, they were regarded as "inferior and conquered people."[119] Kim stresses that the Japanese assimilationist policies forbade the use of the Korean language and writing, compelling Koreans to adopt Japanese names. Ultimately, Kim reckons that "Korea was forced to completely serve the Japanese war effort" by the late 1930s, erasing Korean autonomy both culturally and economically.[120]

The psychological consequences of such colonial oppression are further articulated by Albert Memmi, who claims that colonialism operates by constructing degrading images of the colonized, often ascribing them the humbling traits of laziness, weakness, wickedness, and backward thinking. Thus, these portrayals are not only insults but ideological tools design to justify the oppression of the colonized, as the colonizers must protect and handle the responsibility of guiding the colonized.[121] Over time, as Memmi emphasizes, these imposed and degrading portrayals seep into the self-perception of the colonized, becoming a central source of their internal conflict. This internalization of colonial ideology helps sustain the colonial system.[122] However, internalizing the colonial system leads to a considerable loss of individual identity. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in Hata's character, who erases his Korean identity in favor of Japanese ideals to such an extent that fully embodies the colonizer's values. By incorporating the negative attitudes towards the colonized in his consciousness, Hata experiences internalized oppression as he is forced to assimilate into the dominant culture and

[117] Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 31–2.
[118] Huffman, *Japan and Imperialism*, 32–6.
[119] Kim, *A History of Korea*, 322–3.
[120] Kim, *A History of Korea*, 348–50.
[121] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 123.
[122] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 131–2.

mimic their behavior, so he would not despise himself. This experience is ultimately traumatic as it deepens his desire for belonging, but the belonging remains unachievable.

Hata's personal history during World War II further exposes the complexity of his position within this colonial structure. Serving as a military medic in the Japanese army despite being Korean, Hata occupies the ironic role of the colonized working in the service of the very empire that oppresses him. His passive complicity in K's suffering mirrors the way colonial subjects can be both victims and instruments of empire. Hata's suppression of his emotions functions as a protective strategy, enabling him to maintain a sense of security. This emotional restraint simultaneously serves as a performative act, allowing him to conform to the identity imposed upon him by external social expectations, ultimately operating as a mechanism of survival.

The enforced assimilation is further illustrated by Hata's adoption of the Japanese name Jiro Kurohata, under which the protagonist conducts himself during his stay in Japan and while serving in the army. This renaming reflects the broader colonial policy of forcing Koreans to adopt Japanese identities, erasing traces of their original heritage. Hata remarks that Kurohata is "the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within. It is the signal of spreading death."[123] According to Keith A. Russel, Hata's name outwardly positions him as a symbolic representative of Japan. However, the name's deeper connotations suggest something far more ambivalent. The imagery of contagion casts Hata as a tainted or contaminating presence within the imperial system itself. This dual symbolism mirrors Hata's internal conflict: he becomes both a servant of the empire and a site of resistance. Russel further claims that this contradiction corresponds with Hata's connection to Kkutaeh, which portrays a quiet disloyalty to the very imperial structure he outwardly appears to uphold.[124]

This symbolic tension extends further through the issue of naming, as Russell specifies that both K and Hata "are renamed by agents of the Japanese Empire."[125] In Rusell's view, Kkutaeh's name also carries layered linguistic and symbolic significance. As the youngest of four daughters, her name can be translated as "bottom, or last,"[126] which is shared in the novel by Hata. Russell argues that this reflects her familial and social positioning within a patriarchal context that devalues female children, a norm prevalent in Korea and other cultures.

[123] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 224.
[124] "Colonial Naming and Renaming in *A Gesture Life* by Chang-rae Lee," The Free Library, last modified September 1, 2006.
[125] The Free Library, "Colonial Naming and Renaming."
[126] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 173.

Phonetically resembling the Korean pronoun *kudaeh*, which can be translated as you, her name also functions allegorically, positioning her as an everywoman figure. Thus, Kkutaeh embodies not only the collective trauma of comfort women but also the broader plight of women subjected to colonial and gendered oppression. Furthermore, Rusell highlights that Hata's reduction of Kkutaeh's name to K deepens her symbolic role as a colonial subject.[127] While Hata claims to use "simply K"[128] out of familiarity, the Russel stresses that the act echoes imperial practices of erasure, notably Japan's enforced renaming of Koreans during the colonial rule. The letter K may stand for Korea itself, transforming Kkutaeh into a metonym for the colonized nation. Through this renaming, Hata, an agent of Imperial Japan, implicitly enacts the same power dynamics of appropriation and domination that defined Korea's subjugation, further aligning Kkutaeh's personal struggle with the broader narrative of colonial oppression.[129]

This enforced assimilation and the accompanying loss of identity are further contextualized by Hata's recollections of his early life. Hata describes that he lived among other ethnic Koreans, referring to their neighborhood as "ghetto of hide tanners and renderers."[130] This suggests that Hata and his family lived in relative poverty. Under the Japanese rule, this meant that they were likely subjected to unfavorable treatment and discrimination. Hata later explains that they "spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight."[131] Hata alludes to the state of uncertainty or confusion that they felt, suggesting a persistent state of ambiguity regarding their cultural and national belonging. Despite their efforts to assimilate, their Korean heritage remained an obstacle to full acceptance. Hata's reflection that "[n]o one of [his] family's circumstance could expect to change his station, at least without a lifetime of struggle,"[132] underlines the social and racial hierarchies imposed by Japanese imperialism, which kept Koreans trapped in positions of subjugation and rendered true belonging unattainable for Koreans, regardless of their outward conformity.

Hata's internal struggle with his identity surfaces most clearly in his unconscious use of the Korean language, further exposing the fragility of his carefully maintained Japanese persona. One significant moment occurs when K directly questions Hata's nationality before concluding that he is Korean. Hata strongly denies, but answers in Korean, thus the language

[127] The Free Library, "Colonial Naming and Renaming."
[128] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 222.
[129] The Free Library, "Colonial Naming and Renaming."
[130] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.
[131] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.
[132] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 72.

of the colonized. This is not the first time something like this happened to Hata. However, in the first occurrence of Hata speaking Korean, he did so unconsciously, trying to stop one of the Korean girls from leaving the comfort house, telling her that "[t]here is no place to go" and that "[she] must stay in the house."[133] The girl, Hata explains "looked surprised at [his] words, staring at [him] as if [he was] someone she knew."[134] The girl's bewilderment and familiarity suggest that Hata answered her in Korean, which is something she did not expect from a Japanese soldier, as speaking in Korean does not comply with Japanese colonial ideology. He is overheard by one of the captains who thought that Hata spoke to the comfort woman "in her tongue,"[135] but since Hata appears concerned, the captain does not push this matter further. Hata does not discusses this situation further but upon analyzing the reactions of the captain and the comfort woman, it is clear that Hata let down his carefully crafted Japanese identity and answered on instinct in his mother tongue. Therefore, this puts Hata in a vulnerable position to reveal his secret of speaking Korean to not only one but two comfort women, risking being heard by other members of the army. These slips illustrate the fragility of Hata's assimilation, as his origins inevitably resurface despite his rigorous efforts to suppress them.

Hata's own reflections on speaking Korean with K further reveal the profound emotional tension underlying his fractured identity. Hata acknowledges that he found himself "amazed and strangely intimidated."[136] This reflects the tension in Hata's sense of belonging, the struggle between his native and adopted identity. Hearing K speaking Korean stirs an emotional connection in Hata that he cannot easily supress. The language triggers a sense of nostalgia for his roots. Hata even admits that "[i]t was almost pleasing to her the words."[137] Hata's use of words suggest amazement but at the same time intimidation. This moment is thus both emotional and unsettling for him, as he desires and at the same time fears this reconnection. Hata later confesses that "[he] found [him]self listening to [K] closely, for it was some time since [he] had heard so much of the language, the steady, rolling tone of it like ours and not theirs."[138] This moment portrays a significant identification with K and Korea since the use of collective pronoun places Hata in solidarity with K and their shared Korean heritage. It portrays a reconnection with his native country that Hata forsook a long time ago. For a brief moment,

[133] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 111.
[134] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 112.
[135] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 112.
[136] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 234.
[137] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 235.
[138] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 235.

Hata's internal allegiance shifts, as he unconsciously identifies himself with the Korean language and culture, contrasting it against theirs, referring to the Japanese.

However, this reconnection is immediately undercut by Hata's reassertion of his role as a medical officer of the Imperial Army, returning to his adopted national identity. This highlights his ongoing conflict of belonging. While his emotional response to the Korean language reveals that part of him still identifies with his origins, he quickly masks this vulnerability with the authority of his Japanese position. Hata's experience illustrates the complexity of belonging for someone who has assimilated into another culture. Belonging, as is portrayed, is not stable or singular, it is fragmented, shaped by history, language, and the need to assert control over one's narrative. Ultimately, belonging is not merely a matter of nationality or language, but a deeper, often conflicted, negotiation between who one is, who one was, and who one pretends to be.

This sense of fragmentation extends beyond language into Hata's personal relationships, particularly when K asks him about his family. K further inquiries about his adoptive and biological parents and his feelings about them. Although Hata claims that he had a strong bond with his adoptive family, he also admits that when he left for war, he "had not felt moved enough to cry, […] even at the sight of [his] mother weeping fitfully into a kerchief. This is not so awful a farewell, was [his] thought, even if [he is] to die." This moment further emphasizes Hata's complicated and fragmented sense of belonging, particularly in terms of personal connections to his family. On the surface, Hata affirms that he had a strong bond with his adopted family, but his emotional detachment reveals a disconnection and no genuine emotional attachment. This suggest that this relationship might be more obligatory as a result of filial piety, which is one of the most important Confucian values and, therefore, part of the Japanese ideology. Hata respects his adoptive family out of duty, fulfilling societal expectations rather than responding to personal emotional connection.

This emotional detachment highlights the fact that Hata's sense of belonging is shaped by performance rather than true connection. He has assimilated into Japanese society and internalized its cultural expectations but sacrificed personal authenticity. Moreover, the absence of real emotional attachment to his adoptive family hints at his unresolved feelings about his biological origins, marking it as a traumatic subject. His detachment from both his Korean heritage and his Japanese adoptive life reveals that he does not fully belong to neither, as he is caught between a past that feels distant and an adopted identity that feels performative.

This detachment not only reflects his personal disconnection but also complements Hata's broader efforts to erase his Korean identity. According to Klinke, the story he tells appears to be fabricated to remove himself from his Korean origins.[139] This is a strategy rooted in deep insecurity about his place of birth and national belonging. Thus, Hata's emotional estrangement from his adoptive family mirrors his psychological estrangement from his cultural roots. Hata's insecurity about his place of origin and his Koreanness remain very strong, causing the character to repress this part of his identity and replace it with an asserted Japanese identity to fit in with his surroundings. As Anne Anlin Cheng comments, Hata's standing in the Japanese Imperial Army as an ethnic Korean puts him in an oppressed position, while he also simultaneously must maintain the oppressor relationship with the other Korean comfort women. Cheng thus proposes that "his relationship to the women is in fact more similar than dissimilar" due to their common ancestry.[140]

However, Hata's attempts to distance himself from his Korean identity and the atrocities of the comfort women begin to collapse, as Hata's narration becomes seemingly more emotive. After getting closer to K, he pays more attention to the way the soldiers talk about the comfort women. His gradually elicited emotional response reveals cracks in his carefully constructed identity. One of the corporals, although described as a decent young man by Hata, "crudely referred to the comfort as chosen-pi, a base anatomical slur which also denoted her Koreanness." Hata confesses that "there was a casualness to his usage, as if he were speaking of any animal in a pen, which stopped me cold for a moment."[141] In this occurrence, a slight change in Hata's character and his regard for the women can be observed. Julie Klinke comments that there is an undeniable presence of emotions in Hata's utterance. The word *crudely* is used as "a subjective adjective that reveals Hata's anger at its use."[142] The term is particularly underlined as derogatory toward his ethnicity, so the question of his origin and national identity arises again. It is clear that despite Hata's repression of his Korean identity, negative remarks still affect him, marking his origin as a traumatic subject.

It is only by getting closer to K, another Korean person, that Hata realizes that he might no longer feel lost, fixing his problem of identity and origin. Hata reminisces that "he felt himself drawn to her. […] He did not yet know it, but he hoped that if he could simply be near

[139] Julia Klinke, "*A Gesture Life* as Traumatic Heteroglossia," *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, no. 3 (August 2018): 32.
[140] Cheng, "Passing, Natural Selection," 560.
[141] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 250–1
[142] Klinke, "*A Gesture Life* as Traumatic Heteroglossia," 33.

to her, […] he might somehow be found."[143] This passage reflects Hata's deep longing for belonging and emotional connection. It signifies more than a simple attraction but the yearning to be acknowledged by someone. By wanting to be found, Hata admits feeling lost and invisible due to his position as the other and the ongoing alienation he experiences. Hata feels like proximity to another person, a genuine human connection, could provide him with a sense of purpose and belonging.

This yearning, however, is not only personal but symbolic of a larger search for cultural and national belonging. As Patricia Chu proposes, "Asian women often represent the ancestral homeland and are managed by the authorial imagination as tropes for that homeland."[144] K therefore functions as a symbolic representation of Hata's homeland, with Hata projecting onto her the possibility of reconnecting with his Korean roots. In Klinke's words, it is through K that Hata was seeking his Korean identity.[145] Hamilton Carroll agrees, sharing that Hata believes that "they will be able to marry after the war and that [he] will be able to complete the production of himself as wholly Japanese through the construction of a family."[146] Hata also imagines that this relationship could serve a dual purpose – both recovering his lost heritage and securing his assimilation into Japanese society through marriage and family. Therefore, K serves as both a way for him to connect with his Korean roots and a tool for preserving and reinforcing his Japanese identity through successful assimilation. However, with the knowledge of K's refusal of Hata's advances and her death, this attempt is ultimately doomed to fail. Thus, what begins as a symbolic effort for Hata to reclaim his fragmented sense of belonging through K ends in unspeakable violence.

This traumatic interruption aligns with Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as an overwhelming event. Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in trauma studies, defines trauma as "response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena."[147] Furthermore, Caruth suggests that there is an undeniable paradox that comes with "the most direct seeing of a violent event," resulting in "an absolute inability to know

[143] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 240.
[144] Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 52.
[145] Klinke, "*A Gesture Life* as Traumatic Heteroglossia," 33.
[146] Carroll, "Traumatic Patriarchy," 601.
[147] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 91.

it."[148] Such a phenomenon can be observed in the novel when the most violent event of the story occurred. After refusing or rather not being able to fulfil K's wishes for merciful death executed by Hata, the turn of events unfold in a way that leads to K's horrible death. Hata finds her dismembered body, along with her unborn baby, after she was raped and then brutally murdered by his fellow Japanese soldiers. Hata recalls the incident as follows:

> I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part.[149]

Despite voicing his inability to grasp the reality of what was happening, Hata still managed to present the memory in meticulous detail. Moreover, he could remember the number and appearance of the soldiers as he passed them, getting to the clearing where it happened. Hata remarks that:

> [i]t was the men. Twenty-five of them, thirty of them. […] Some were half-dressed, shirtless, trouserless, half-hoping to pull on boots. They were generally quiet. The quiet after great celebration. They were flecked with blood, and muddy dirt, some more than others. One with his hands and forearms as if dipped in crimson. Another's face smudged with it, the color strange in his hair. One of them was completely clean, only his boots soiled; he was vomiting as he walked.[150]

When coming closer to the scene, Hata recognized that "the air was cooler there, the treetops shading the falling sun."[151] Anne Whitehead declares that although the traumatic re-enactments are unsettlingly realistic and vivid, they mostly remain inaccessible to conscious recollection and control. Whitehead notes that "there is simultaneously too little and too much memory of the event."[152] As can be observed, Hata's memory of K's death is painfully vivid in his memory. Hata as a bystander can see what happened but his insistence on not smelling, hearing or seeing proves that the nature of this experience is traumatic because, as previously stated by Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead, it is an experience of an overwhelming event that remains totally incomprehensible. Hata's response is rather suppressed, reflecting his habit of repressing difficult emotions and maintaining his carefully performed composure, accompanied by cautious gestures, even in the face of a traumatic event.

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[148] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 91–2.
[149] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 305.
[150] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 304–5.
[151] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 305.
[152] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 140.

However, as Alexis Motuz claims, the fact that the opening and ending chapters focus on Hata's assimilation story rather than his life during the war shows that the traumatic incident of K's death is not an isolated cause of his psychological turmoil and thus may not explain Hata's social behaviors. Hata was influenced by the socio-historical context of his upbringing which provides an explanation for his "urgent desire to belong."[153] Motuz argues that "Hata's traumatization results, at least in part, from the racism that he faced in childhood and that continues to pervade his life through processes of assimilation."[154]

Indeed Hata confesses that "[he] had certainly despised others before, particularly the boys in the school [he] attended after being adopted by the Kurohatas, boys who treated [him] with disdain most of the time and at worst like a stray dog."[155] This quote reveals a foundational layer of Hata's internalized shame and social alienation, rooted in his early experiences of exclusion and humiliation. The treatment he received from his schoolmates signals the formative impact of being othered. Hata's choice of words regarding his treatment as a stray dog illustrates not only his rejection by others but also his lack of belonging as an orphan. It can be argued that this early experience of marginalization influences Hata's later behavior, especially his need for belonging and adherence to the performance of propriety.

This experience of early marginalization is further complicated by the psychological challenges of Hata's adoption, as the uncertainty of his origins adds another layer to his fragmented sense of self. As Margaret Homans argues, accounts of adopted individuals are often marked by complexity, as there is the added difficulty of lack of knowledge of the birth parents, date, or place of birth. She connects narrative theory with trauma and adoption theories because of their similarities. Homans acknowledges that adoption narratives, like trauma narratives, tend to focus on an unrecoverable past, leading to the formation of believable but unverifiable stories. Moreover, Homans suggests that narratives of trauma and adoption are best considered as the creation of something new, rather than uncovering the past.[156]

Reading the novel as an adoption narrative and a trauma narrative is plausible, since the main character was adopted in his childhood by a Japanese family. This view would also allow an interpretation of Hata's fictional narrative as an attempt to create and hold onto his origin story, providing his character with a sense of belonging and satisfaction. Julie Klinke also

[153] Motuz, "Before Speech," 418–21.
[154] Motuz, "Before Speech," 413.
[155] Lee, *A Gesture Life,* 262–3.
[156] Margaret Homans, "Adoption Narratives, Trauma and Origins," *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (2006): 4–7.

suggests that Hata's "evasive voice and involuntary intrusion of his past" represent both adoption and trauma theory, as Klinke believes that Hata's lack of a clear place of origin also contributed to his trauma.[157]

This insecurity surrounding Hata's origins connects directly to his strong identification with the Japanese nation, as previously discussed. Assimilating into Japanese society provides Hata with a possible means of overcoming his anxieties about belonging. Young-Oak Lee reinforces this view, asserting that Hata's feeling of deep appreciation and diligence to live up to the Japanese models of behavior as best as he could stem from the extreme consciousness of establishing himself as a Japanese citizen due to his insecurity of being an adoptee.[158] The aspiration for the idealized Japanese identity, however, does not erase his insecurity as is evident in Hata's narration.

Hata still finds himself wondering "if training or rearing tells more than the simple earth and ash and blood from which we come, or whether these social inurements eventually fall away, like the moldering garments of the dead, to reveal the underlying bones."[159] This quote indicates that under all his eagerness and performativity of the ideal national identity still remains his insecurity about his origin. He contemplates if, despite all his efforts to learn how to be Japanese, his origin – his inferior Korean ethnicity, is still affecting him. Hata ponders whether the way people are raised or taught to be has a greater impact on the individual or whether their biology is more influential and remains unchanged. He ponders the stability of his Japanese identity and whether it is possible for all the social conditioning to eventually fade and expose his core. Therefore, Hata, despite his efforts, presents the internal struggle connected to his belonging and self-determination to be Japanese.

Hata's internal struggle concerning his personal identity and belonging is thus inseparable from the broader context of Japanese imperialism and colonial domination. Memmi highlights that the colonizer deprives the colonized of one of the most fundamental human rights – freedom. The living conditions enforced by colonial rule completely disregards this right. The colonized has no autonomy in determining whether to live under colonization as they are offered no legitimate means of escape.[160] In the Japanese context, the colonized were offered a means to escape their colonized position by becoming Japanese and serving the nation and

[157] Klinke, "*A Gesture Life* as Traumatic Heteroglossia," 32.
[158] Lee, "Transcending Ethnicity," 69.
[159] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 120.
[160] Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 129–30.

the emperor. However, this did not ensure fair treatment or liberty by any means as it subjected the colonized women to become comfort women and the colonized men to become soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army. Even then, they were not viewed as equal or regarding soldiers qualified to occupy such position as can be demonstrated by the treatment of Hata by fellow officers in the army, especially his superior Captain Ono. Hata confesses that:

> the war, oddly enough, was not so awful; that a young man uncertain of himself could find meaning amidst the camaraderie of his fellows working in such shared purpose, and that in fact there was no truer proving time for which he could hope. And yet it seemed everything fell away whenever Captain Ono addressed me, all my carefully built-up perception of things, and in the sorry depletion, I could feel the searing, rising surges of what must be pure enmity.[161]

The context of this utterance is during the beginning of the Pacific war, before the situation grew worse for Japan and the true fighting began. Although recollection of war should suggest at least some negative feelings, the opposite can be observed in Hata as he feels like the war and the shared goal of Japan gives his life a purpose. He is surrounded by men dealing with similar issues as him which is assuring. Thus, the common purpose and the camaraderie found in the army provides Hata with a sense of belonging and helps him construct his identity despite his insecurity which is always present in the background of his mind. Jiameng Xu highlights that Hata is "is deeply immersed in the sense of complacency that he can be accepted by his comrades, a feeling that he has rarely experienced during childhood."[162] His time spent in the army emphasized his desire for validation of his self-worth. Yet when Hata is faced with Captain Ono, an authoritative figure, the fragility of Hata's identity, even though carefully constructed, becomes visible as Hata feels psychologically disarmed by Ono. Naturally, Hata feels great shame and anger as his persona collapses. Hata confesses that:

> [Captain Ono's] sometimes searing criticisms in this very room (and in front of others), which were aimed not at my specific conduct but at the legacies of my "training" and "background" – the ultimate question being of my ethos, as it were, a term (from his brief university schooling in England) that he seemed to employ often, for my edification.[163]

Ono's remarks go beyond him criticizing Hata's work as his superordinate, they are personal attacks aimed at undermining Hata's legitimacy within the imperial system. By employing vocabulary such as ethos to assert dominance, masking racialized prejudice under the guise of philosophical critique. Captain Ono reaffirms the rigid boundaries of who gets to belong under

[161] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 224.
[162] Jiameng Xu, "The Mobility of Identity: The Cosmopolitan Vision in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life,*" *Humanities* 13, no. 4 (August 2024): 5.
[163] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 232.

the Japanese imperial order. By undermining Hata's ethos, Ono is attempting to deny him full participation in that order, reinforcing Hata's internalized shame and fractured sense of self. Furthermore, Ono criticizes Hata by stating that "what appears to elude [him] is the application of principle. It is never how one acts or reacts. It is never simply efficiency. The true officer understands this. It is the keeping to certain standards which is the only guide."[164] Captain Ono's disappointment in Hata is not rooted in his medical performance but in lack of moral or ideological integrity, as Hata does not embody the characteristics expected of a true imperial officer. Ono signals that Hata's competence is insufficient, as what truly matters is unwavering adherence to the standards of the empire.

These personal attacks culminate in symbolic gestures meant to publicly shame Hata, most notably through the recurrent use of the black flag. It was first used by Captain Ono to summon Hata to prepare K for the Captain's visit. Hata notes that Captain Ono's choice of black flag is "intentionally belittling"[165] With the knowledge of Captain Ono's attitude towards Hata and of the meaning of the black flag as contamination, it can be interpreted as a reminder for Hata that he himself is tainted due to his Korean origin. The symbol undermines Hata's authority and dignity, becoming a visual sign of his marginalization reinforcing his internal conflict and identity struggles. Furthermore, the black flag is connected to K's passing in Hata's memory since it unfolded the turn of events that lead to K's death. Russel is in agreement with this statement as he argues that the repetitive appearance of the symbol of the black flag signifies not only Hata's enduring grief and guilt over Kkutaeh's death but also the fractured and conflicted state of his national identity.[166]

This external humiliation mirrors Hata's internal refusal to fully confront the truth of his actions during the war, particularly regarding K. As Klinke observes, Hata's narration becomes a combination of confession and concealment.[167] Despite his efforts to suppress these memories, the unresolved trauma repeatedly surfaces through fragmented narration and conflicting desires for belonging. These unresolved conflicts shape Hata's life beyond the war, following him to the United States, where new forms of assimilation offer the promise of belonging. As Lee puts it:

> Hata mourns the untimely death of K, an unfortunate girl victimized under patriarchal colonialism, in which he was also complicit. Mourning the death of his national self and

[164] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 184–5.
[165] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 225.
[166] The Free Library, "Colonial Naming and Renaming."
[167] Klinke, "*A Gesture Life* as Traumatic Heteroglossia," 33.

> the death of humanity, he cannot construct his identity in a nation that condones brutality more than it serves as the "moral conscience" of its citizens.[168]

This ideological disillusionment becomes the decisive factor in his emigration to the United States. Lee argues that even though there was no political oppression that would influence his decision, Hata was ideologically and socially driven to exile.[169] As Lee further explains, Hata "thought that national identity was of utmost importance. Consequently, he gave priority to national identity over issues of colonialism and gender. The ideologies that plagued Hata now lose their significance, as he seeks not belonging but freedom."[170] Yet despite Hata's relocation, the trauma of his past clings to him, revealing that neither national identity nor migration can resolve his fractured sense of self.

[168] Lee, "Gender, Race, and the Nation," 152.
[169] Lee, "Transcending Ethnicity," 70.
[170] Lee, "Gender, Race, and the Nation," 158.

# 3 Franklin Hata as the Number One Citizen

The novel opens with the statement, "People know me here,"[171] voiced by Hata or good Doc Hata, as he is affectionately nicknamed by his fellow residents of the suburban town of Bedley Run. This seemingly confident assertion introduces Hata's narrative of successful immigration from Japan and assimilation into American society. However, as established in the previous chapter, this narrative is repeatedly undermined by Hata's inner turmoil, contradictions, and profound self-deception rooted in his suppressed trauma. Moreover, the reactions and dialogues of other characters further expose the inconsistency between Hata's self-presentation and the reality of his experiences. This chapter examines Hata's character through the scope of the racial melancholia and racial dissociation theory, with particular emphasis on his immigration and assimilation process.

This section introduces the theories of racial melancholia and racial dissociation, a key framework for analyzing the protagonist of *A Gesture Life*. The theories were developed by David L. Eng, a second-generation Chinese American humanities professor, and Shinhee Han, a Korean American psychotherapist. The theories are defined in their book 2019 book *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. To understand the theory's significance and value properly, the events surrounding its emergence must be described as well. The concepts emerged from their collaboration at Columbia University, where they were brought together by the collective grief over the suicides and murders of several Asian American students. Motivated by the lack of recognition of the psychological impact of racism on Asian American communities, Eng and Han sought to address how social violence often goes unnoticed and unacknowledged in both public discourse and psychoanalytic practice. Their study is concerned with how Asian Americans handle the conflicting experiences of immigration, diaspora, racism, exclusion, loss, and grief.[172]

Eng and Han reframe psychoanalytic theory by situating it within specific historical and political contexts to explore the formation of racialized subjectivity alongside broader processes of racialization. While psychoanalysis offers insight into the shaping of racial identities, it overlooks the influence of social, political, and historical structures like racism and colonialism by focusing narrowly on family history. Conversely, critical race theory has addressed race

[171] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1.

[172] David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–4.

primarily in legal and material terms but has often neglected the psychic processes of racial experience. Since the experiences of loss and grief stem from long-standing legal and political structures, particularly the history of Asian American immigration and exclusion, critical race theory becomes essential for uncovering the systemic racism, legal discrimination, and social violence that underlie these psychological struggles. Eng and Han argue that integrating these two frameworks is essential for understanding how racism operates both socially and psychologically. By bringing together personal psychology and collective history, Eng and Han offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding racial identity and belonging.[173] This framework is particularly relevant to *A Gesture Life*, as Hata's psychological struggles cannot be fully understood without considering the historical and racial contexts that shape his identity.

According to Eng and Han, race and racism are deeply connected to social and cultural norms. The history of racism not only shapes how individuals see themselves but is also influenced by their personal experiences and choices.[174] For Eng and Han, race is not an unchanging biological trait. Instead, they define race as a relation – an ongoing historical relationship between people, shaped by social and legal systems that determine who is included or excluded from society. Race involves both physical features, like skin color, and a wide range of social and emotional experiences such as feelings of "segregation and assimilation, absence and belonging, integration and dissociation, inclusion and exclusion."[175]

Building on this, Sze Wei Ang further proposes that race is a global, socially constructed concept influenced by local histories as well as transnational events. It reflects deep inequalities and tensions across the world, despite local cultural and political differences. Racism works through common racial tropes, which are recurring stereotypes such as the yellow peril, model minority, or terrorist that appear globally. These tropes influence not only how racial groups are perceived and treated but also justify the legitimize the authority of the state to determine who gets to belong or is excluded within a nation-state. The nation-state, therefore, plays a central role in organizing a racial thought to maintain political control and authority.[176] Hata's performance of assimilation and belonging reflects the influence of both local and transnational racial tropes. His conflict mirrors the pressures imposed by these racial tropes, revealing how personal trauma is inseparable from the global and historical structures of racialization.

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[173] Eng and Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 4–7.
[174] Eng and Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 7.
[175] Eng and Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 9.
[176] Sze Wei Ang, *The State of Race: Asian/American Fiction after World War II* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2019), 1–2.

The authors first explored the theory of racial melancholia in an earlier essay, drawing on their combined expertise in clinical practice and literary theory to address concerning patterns of depression among an increasing number of Asian American students. They developed their framework by building upon Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia.[177] The following section outlines Freud's fundamental ideas before analyzing the way Eng and Han apply his findings to the unique context of Asian American subjectivity.

Sigmund Freud defines mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on."[178] Freud continues that the loss is acknowledged in the ego and can be overcome gradually after a certain period of mourning after which "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."[179] Thus, mourning leads to an eventual recovery after the grief is processed and resolved. This is not the case for the state of melancholia. As stated by Freud, melancholia is an unrecognized loss since "one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost."[180] A further distinctive feature of melancholia is that whereas in the state of mourning "it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego", which demonstrates an extraordinary decline in self-esteem and overall impoverishment.[181] Freud further remarks that:

> the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. […] In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss.[182]

Melancholia is thus an unconscious loss that remains unresolved. As a result, the person experiencing melancholia unconsciously starts to identify with what they lost. This means that losing the object feels like losing a part of themselves.

Eng and Han recognize that although Sigmund Freud typically characterizes melancholia as pathological, their approach is to examine this psychic condition as a depathologized structure of feeling. From this perspective, melancholia helps explain the everyday conflicts and struggles related to immigration, assimilation, and racialization. While melancholia is often seen as a response to an individual loss, Eng and Han emphasize its role

[177] David L. Eng, and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 669.
[178] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XIV), ed. James Stachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 243.
[179] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244–5.
[180] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
[181] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 246.
[182] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249.

in the formation of collective or group identities. They further argue that immigration, assimilation, and racialization are not fixed processes but involve an ongoing, dynamic negotiation between mourning and melancholia.[183]

Eng and Han then propose that melancholia might also manifest in "the psychical erasure of one's identity – a self-imposed exile and exclusion. The effacing of a particular racial, sexual, or gender identity marks the emergence of a precarious social and psychic life."[184] This is especially important since the character of Franklin Hata is constantly negotiating and suppressing aspects of his identity. Hata's life is marked by a persistent effort to assimilate into dominant cultures – first it was the Japanese imperial ideology, then American assimilationist ideals. In both contexts, his desire to belong is marked by a compulsive erasure of his ethnic origin. Hata's erasure of self becomes a survival strategy in a world that demands assimilation but denies full acceptance. Furthermore, Hata confesses that he wants "an erasure reaching back, a pre-beginning, and if [he] could trade all [his] years to be at some early moment and never go forward again, [he] would do so without question or any dread."[185] This quote captures his melancholic desire to erase his traumatic past as well as his marginalization in society. Hata experiences an ongoing loss, not of a specific object or person, but rather of belonging.

While Hata's melancholia stems from his internal negotiations with his identity, such psychic struggles are shaped by external forces of exclusion. As Eng and Han emphasize, racial melancholia is not only a personal affliction but a consequence of broader histories of racial exclusion that shape the lives of Asian Americans. Indeed, this exclusion does not have to be ordered by the self but by external forces as well. In the Asian American context, it is particularly "the long history of legalized exclusion of Asian American immigrants and citizens alike."[186] These structural exclusions illuminate why individuals like Hata find belonging suspended, regardless of their efforts to assimilate.

This systemic exclusion is embedded not only in immigration laws but also in a part of the American national identity. According to Lisa Lowe, citizenship in the US is not only a legal status but also a cultural and political identity shaped by national narratives, symbols, and collective memory. While the law defines citizenship in abstract, supposedly equal terms, it often conceals real differences of race, class, and origin. National culture plays a crucial role in

[183] Eng, and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," 667–9.
[184] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 38.
[185] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 290.
[186] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 39.

forging a unified sense of belonging, encouraging individuals to see themselves as part of the American nation. Through cultural symbols like the Statue of Liberty and stories of self-reliance, progress, and heroism, individuals come to understand themselves as American citizens. However, this cultural formation also hides the unequal, marginalized histories of those excluded from this national identity. Culture, then, is both the space where individuals form their national identity and a space where struggles over memory, identity, and community occur.[187]

The historical marginalization of Asian Americans, particularly their simultaneous inclusion as laborers and exclusion as citizens, is a manifestation of this dynamic. Lowe highlights that for over 150 years, Asian immigrants in the US have been positioned as both potential members of the nation and as perpetual outsiders. Asian countries and immigrants have been racialized as exotic, inferior, and threatening, especially during times of US economic crisis or military conflict in Asia. This anxiety gave rise to orientalist depictions of Asians as fundamentally different from whites and unsuitable for American citizenship.[188] These exclusionary practices were underpinned by broader orientalist views, as described by Edward Said' *Orientalism* where the ideas about the East and West, or in other words, Orient and the Occident are fundamentally based on power and control, with the Orient being defined by Western interests rather than by its own reality. Said argues that "Orientalism depends for its strategy in this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."[189] This is relevant for the analysis of Hata, whose assimilation is ultimately impossible.

Building on Said's critique of the Western domination, Lisa Lowe provides a concrete historical account of how this dynamic has shaped Asian American immigration policy. Lowe observes that the history of Asian American immigration has been shaped by a series of exclusion acts that limited both their ability of Asians to settle in the US and their cultural expression. Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it was soon followed by the exclusion of Asian Indians in 1917, Koreans and Japanese in 1924, and Filipino immigrants in 1934. This history also includes the Asian exclusion repeal acts passed between 1943 and 1952, which transformed Asians' legal status from aliens ineligible to citizenship to full citizens. Another turning point came with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended

[187] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 2–3.
[188] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4–5.
[189] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2–7.

the discriminatory national-origin quotas, leading to a significant expansion in the meaning and scope of the term Asian American. Lowe notes that these laws were paired with anti-Asian rhetoric, portraying Asian immigrants as threats to white labor, American institutions, and national identity. Even though Asians have been essential to the development of the US, the idea of America as a homogeneous, white nation has required framing Asian immigrants as eternally foreign, regardless of how many generations they have lived in the country. This national memory continues to mark Asian Americans as perpetual outsiders, long after the repeal of exclusion laws.[190]

This history provides an essential context for understanding Japanese immigration to the United States, which has particular significance for the character of Hata. Although ethnically Korean, Hata identifies primarily with Japanese national identity and emigrates from Japan to the US. According to Uma Segal, Japan enforced a strict isolation policy from 1639 until 1853.[191] Despite this, Ronald Takaki informs that some Japanese laborers secretly left for Hawaii and California before official restrictions were lifted. The 1884 lifting of the emigration ban triggered large waves of emigration, especially to Hawaiian plantations, motivated by Japan's modernization efforts in response to Western imperialism. High domestic taxes forced many impoverished farmers to seek work abroad.[192] Segal continues that many of these emigrants were younger sons tasked with earning money to support their families, as inheritance laws favored the eldest sons. Japan also regulated who could emigrate, only permitting those individuals who would positively represent the nation. To address concerns about bachelor societies, the picture bride system was established in the early 20th century, encouraged by both the Japanese and US governments. However, this practice was restricted by the 1921 Ladies' Agreement, banning the emigration of picture brides. Japanese immigration declined sharply after the 1924 Immigration Act, which imposed severe quotas on Asian migrants. Following World War II, the War Brides Act enabled a new wave of Japanese women to immigration to the US, often through marriages to American GIs.[193] As Wenying Xu concludes, "significant Japanese immigration did not occur again until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended forty years of bans against emigration from Asia."[194] This shift in immigration policy

[190] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4–7.
[191] Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 49.
[192] Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 43.
[193] Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 50–3.
[194] Wenying Xu, *Historical Dictionary of Asian American Literature and Theater* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 6.

allowed for greater movement from Japan to the United States, forming part of the broader historical context surrounding Asian immigration.

Beyond these legal and historical frameworks, it is also crucial for this thesis to consider the psychological dimensions of immigration, particularly the personal and emotional impact of leaving one's homeland and adapting to a new cultural environment. Regarding immigration and racial melancholia Eng and Han note that:

> The experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning. When one leaves one's country of origin – voluntarily or involuntarily – one must mourn a host of losses both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, status in community – the list goes on. In Freud's theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure to these losses by investing in new objects – in the American dream, for example.[195]

Franklin Hata' experience of immigration reflects this dynamic, albeit in a more complex way. Hata first migrates from Korea to Japan when he is adopted into Japanese family. This move is not his decision but rather one made for him, so it can be said that it was involuntary. However, Hata never addresses this move in terms of loss or mourning. Instead, he frames it as a new beginning, embracing Japanese society for its sense of purpose and order. Japan offers new opportunities to him that would not have been available to him as the son of a poor Korean family. Nonetheless, examined in the discussion of Hata's national identity, his assimilation is not without conflict. Beneath his admiration for Japan lies deep-seated insecurity about his Korean ethnicity and his status as an adoptee. In this case, it is therefore appropriate to claim that Hata does not necessarily mourn his homeland and Korean identity that has been erased upon living in Japan, but rather he mourns the fact that he is not able to live up to the Japanese ideals and does not belong seamlessly into the Japanese society. The fact that Hata never manages to resolve this loss and grief of not belonging, combined with the loss of K, loss of the Japan he once idealized alongside the loss of his national identity due to the harmful Japanese idealized colonial and gender ideologies he once honored, places him within the context of negotiation between mourning and melancholia as defined by Eng and Han. According to Freud, grief can be resolved by redirecting emotional investment toward new objects or attachments. In line with this idea, Hata chooses to move to the United States in an attempt to start anew. While Hata seeks a new beginning, his move is also motivated by an attempt to escape the traumatic events of his past marked by loss, guilt, and failure.

[195] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial* Dissociation, 48.

However, Hata's arrival in the US during the 1960s, a period shaped by the very Immigration and Nationality Act that symbolized greater inclusion for Asian immigrants, does not resolve his alienation. Legal permission did not equate to genuine acceptance, as Hata's arrival did not result in a warm welcome or a true sense of community. Significantly, Hata decided to settle in Bedley Run because he "felt strangely drawn to the town, in part because of the peaceful pace of life […], the simple tranquility of the older, village section that made [him] think of the small city where [he] lived [his] youth, on the southwestern coast of Japan."[196] This nostalgia reveals a critical shift in Hata's character: whereas his earlier migrations were framed as new beginnings, his later years reveal an emerging sense of mourning for the home he never truly possessed. The delayed recognition of loss indicates Hata's prolonged reckoning with displacement and identity fragmentation – a process Eng and Han describe as melancholia rather than successful mourning.

Regarding his arrival to the US, Hata confesses that "it's hard for others to know how consuming one's arrival in a new land can be, how it will take up every last resource of spirit, which too often can lead to the detriment of most everything else."[197] His words capture the emotional exhaustion that accompanies immigration, especially for someone burdened with unresolved grief and fractured identity. Hata shares his feelings of absolute exhaustion, pointing to the fact that his assimilation into the American society is not as seamless as he presents it to be in the opening of the novel. Beneath the surface of his carefully constructed narrative lies an unresolved psychological struggle, shaped by both his personal losses and the structural barriers facing Asian immigrants in the US.

This personal account of exhaustion aligns with what Eng and Han describe as the melancholic nature of Asian American assimilation. According to the authors, assimilation for Asian Americans (and ultimately for other people of color) is frequently hindered by the unattainable ideal of whiteness. This ideal is connected to "a set of dominant norms and ideals – whiteness, heteronormativity, middle-class family values, and Judeo-Christian religious traditions."[198] Eng and Han propose that the individual's exclusion from this ideal and their inability to resolve this process successfully positions assimilation within the melancholic schema. Rather than representing true incorporation into the so-called American melting pot, assimilation remains an illusion or lost ideal, always just out of reach. This dynamic creates a

[196] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 3.
[197] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 48–9.
[198] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 35.

constant tension between the unachievable ideal of whiteness and the lived experience of Asian Americans.[199]

The impossibility of assimilation is further reinforced by deeply ingrained cultural perceptions of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Eng and Han note that:

> US mainstream society typically perceives Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners largely based on physiognomy – on skin color and physical markings. Despite the fact that they may be native-born, or however long they may have resided in the country, or whatever their official legal status, Asian Americans are continually viewed as eccentric to the nation. Whether depicted as menacing yellow peril or applauded as model minorities, Asian Americans are cast as an economic threat and hyperproductive automatons and hence pathological to the US nation-state.[200]

The setting of the United States for immigrants therefore can be summarized by echoing Andrew Schenck's words as "'the land of opportunity' for some, and 'the land of exclusion' for others."[201]

This contradiction between national ideals and historical reality has been further explored by literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng, who proposes that the racial dynamic in the US is fundamentally melancholic. Cheng argues that "[t]he history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection. While one of the American founding principles is that 'all mean are created equal,'" its history shows behavior contradictory to this ideal.[202] For Cheng, this contradiction is especially difficult because it undermines the very concepts of liberty and equality on which the national identity was supposedly built.[203]

Tying these insights together, Eng and Han conclude that "[r]acial melancholia can be seen as one profound psychic effect marking these histories of legal exclusion from the nation-state and prohibitions from national belonging."[204] For individuals like Hata, the psychic burden of unresolved loss is not merely personal but structural, shaped by long histories of exclusion, displacement, and broken promises of inclusion. Adding yet another layer to this analysis, Eng and Han stress that Asian Americans often feel pressured to, borrowing Homi Bhabha's term,

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[199] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 35–6.
[200] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 37.
[201] Andrew Schenck, "Decoding the Immigrant Novel: Using an Age-Graded Psychosocial Approach to Interpret Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *The New Studies of English Language & Literature*, no. 77 (November 2020): 249.
[202] Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.
[203] Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 10.
[204] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 40.

mimic the model minority stereotype just to gain visibility in mainstream society. However, this imitation comes at a cost. As they observe, the performance of this ideal distances individuals from both mainstream culture and their own histories and cultural origins, the process itself becomes ultimately melancholic.[205] In attempting to assimilate, Asian Americans are caught in a cycle of loss – not only of their original cultural identity, but also of the unattainable ideal they are urged to embody.

This national melancholic bind forms the backdrop for the model minority myth – a racial stereotype often applied to Asian Americans. The definition of model minority available in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature* states that:

> Model Minority is a label mainly attached to Asian Americans in contemporary America. It refers to the successful achievements of Asian Americans in especially socioeconomic status and education, despite their history of hardship and racial discrimination since the early nineteenth century.[206]

The notion of the model minority relies heavily on the perceived success and high achievement of the Asian American community, often emphasizing educational and economic accomplishments. However, this characterization is deeply problematic, as it offers a limiting and idealized image that obscures the diverse realities and struggles faced by Asian Americans. By failing to acknowledge systemic inequalities, personal hardships, and historical trauma, the model minority myth marginalizes the suffering within the community.

To contextualize this critique, it is important to consider how the concept of the model minority emerged and evolved within American discourse. Eng and Han trace its origins to the postwar period, particularly following the lifting of legalized exclusion and amidst the broader socio-political shifts of the Cold War, civil rights movements, and the reform of immigration laws through Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.[207] During this time, as Jonathan Freedman notes, Asians, primarily Chinese, as well as Jews were perceived in remarkably similar ways – as economically driven outsiders, deviating from dominant Anglo-Saxon ideals of masculinity. According to Freedman, over time, this initially stigmatizing image shifted toward a more positive stereotype, portraying these groups as economically self-sufficient and intellectually capable.[208] However, as Bok-Lim C. Kim argues, this shift obscured the real socio-economic challenges faced by Asian American communities. Due to the absence of

[205] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 45.
[206] Sooyoung Kang, "Model Minority," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 702.
[207] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 40.
[208] Bok-Lim C. Kim, "Asian Americans: No Model Minority," *Social Work* 18, no. 3 (May 1973): 69.

formal documentation of their struggles prior to the year 1970, Asian Americans were excluded from social welfare programs and public discourse, reinforcing the myth of their stability and success as there were no formal records of their issues. This neglect deprived these communities of a way to get help managing various problems such as dealing with racism, housing situations, or poverty. Therefore, Kim emphasizes that the concept of model minority is a myth, a distortion that erases a long history of discrimination and structural marginalization, that fails to acknowledge the challenges these diverse communities are met with.[209] Eng and Han also agree by asserting that the model minority myth functions as a national tool that reframes Asian American success as a proof of equal opportunity rather than as something achieved despite systemic exclusion. By homogenizing diverse communities and disregarding their struggles, the model minority narrative continues to obscure the complex realities of Asian American life.[210]

These pressures of assimilation, idealization, and erasure are intimately tied to the experience of what Stanley Sue and Derald Wing Sue describe as the Marginal Man. According to Stanley and Derald Sue, the Marginal Man is caught between two cultures, struggling with identity, belonging, and cultural loyalty. Frequently, the Marginal Man over-assimilates to Western norms in an effort to achieve acceptance and recognition. However, this pursuit is often met with both individual and institutional racism from the dominant group. To cope with this rejection, the Marginal Man may downplay or deny the significance of the racism's impact, since acknowledging it would mean facing the painful contradiction between his desire to belong and the reality of societal prejudice. The psychological toll of this position is profound, as the individual is constantly suspended between cultures, never fully accepted by either.[211]

While this chapter focuses primarily on Hata's experiences in the United States, it is essential to recognize that his position as a Marginal Man is not a condition that began solely with his immigration. Rather, as analyzed in the previous chapter, Hata's marginality extends back to his early life in Japan, particularly during his service in the Imperial Army. This earlier form of marginalization is visible in Hata's eagerness to demonstrate obedience and propriety during his military service. Yet, despite these efforts, Hata was met with subtle discrimination, particularly from Captain Ono. Hata's refusal to confront this treatment, or even to fully acknowledge it in his narrative, reflects precisely what the Sues describe: the psychological

[209] Jonathan Freedman, "Transgressions of a Model Minority," *Shofar* 23, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 44.
[210] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 41.
[211] Stanley Sue and Derald W. Sue, "Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health," in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent Ono (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 22–5.

defense mechanism of denying racism's significance to avoid confronting the painful reality that, no matter how diligently he performed loyalty and conformity, he remained an outsider.

This earlier pattern of marginalization in Japan seamlessly transitions into Hata's immigrant experience in the United States. There, the psychological toll of marginality intensifies. Hata performs the model minority ideal, hoping to finally secure belonging through success, respectability, and assimilation. His public image of assimilation is a performance of the model minority myth while his private narrative shows the melancholic failures of that performance.

One of Hata's clearest attempts to assimilate is marked by his renaming as Franklin Hata – a name, as Russel notes, "evocative of Benjamin Franklin, an embodiment of the American Dream."[212] Through this act, Hata symbolically aligns himself with American values of self-making, industriousness, and upward mobility. In Bedley Run, Hata cultivates an image of an ideal, assimilated citizen. He presents himself as a respectable and valued member of the suburban community. Undeniably, Hata is under the impression of the American Dream, and it became an inspiration for him to seemingly pass into the American society. His life revolves around the values of quiet diligence, social conformity and economic achievement, symbolized by his grand Tudor-style house and successful medical store. Hata proudly describes his house:

> one of the special properties in the area. It seems it's every other week now that I receive a card or note from a realtor, asking if I might consider putting it up for sale. […] I'm retired and live alone in this large house, with its impressive flower and herb garden, and flagstone swimming pool, and leaded glass and wrought-iron conservatory.[213]

Yet beneath this meticulous construction of Hata's respectable life lies a profound emotional repression and unresolved trauma of his past, as explored in the previous chapter. Hata's adherence to the ideals of the model minority functions as a coping mechanism through which he attempts to manage his guilt and longing for belonging. His performance of Americanness, just like his earlier performance of Japanese identity is compensatory, driven by a persistent sense of loss and alienation.

Hata claims that in Bedley Run "everyone here knows perfectly who [he is],"[214] and that he enjoys what he calls "almost Oriental veneration."[215] He attributes this acceptance to his long residence in the town and because his "name, after all, is Japanese, a fact that seems both

[212] The Free Library, "Colonial Naming and Renaming."
[213] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 16.
[214] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1.
[215] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1.

odd and delightful to people, as well as somehow town-affirming."[216] To the townspeople, Hata's name is exotic yet harmless and so is his persona due to him being an ideal citizen. Hata subtly recognizes that this acceptance is conditional, as it serves the town's self-image of inclusivity. Despite his assertions that everyone knows perfectly who he is, Hata admits that he is not "a physician of any kind" as he only owns a medical supply store – a fact that seems to elude most of the townspeople. Hata acknowledges that in his encounters "[t]here's no longer a lingering or vacant stare."[217] Yet he admits that what drew him towards a relationship with Mary Burns, a woman from his small town, is the fact that:

> she seemed so perfectly at ease with me, as if our meeting was the most ordinary thing. And I the most ordinary man. She didn't seem to speak more slowly or loudly than she might otherwise, she didn't gaze at me too attentively, but paid as much attention as she appropriately should, all of which, at least for me, was the most unlikely kind of flattery.[218]

This suggests that even though Hata claims that people in Bedley Run no longer stare at him with suspicion or unfamiliarity, he still feels othered. The fact that he finds her behavior towards him so flattering shows that being treated as ordinary is still an unusual experience for Hata. Despite outward assimilation, Hata remains hyper-aware of his racial and cultural differences.

Yet even in these seemingly ordinary relationships, Hata constructs protective layers of omission and denial. When Mary Burns asks him whether he is married, Hata notes that "[he] did remark to her on once having a wife, this many years in the past, but [he] made clear by [his] tone that it wasn't a subject that was very pleasing to [him].[219] Whether Hata is outright lying or omitting parts of his past, the result reinforces his position as an unreliable narrator and underscores the constructed, fragile nature of his identity. This defensive strategy suggests his desire to present an idealized version of himself, fitting the image of the successful, middle-class family described by Eng and Han's critique of assimilation and racial melancholia. This is further reinforced by Hata's adoption of Sunny, in hope that they would be recognized as the "well reputed and happily known, the Hatas of Bedley Run."[220]

However, due to Sunny's mixed background, as seen in her "thick, wavy black hair and dark-hued skin,"[221] they do not have the "natural affinity"[222] Hata wished for. He unconsciously

[216] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 2.
[217] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1.
[218] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 49.
[219] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 49.
[220] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 204.
[221] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 204.
[222] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 204.

resents Sunny since her appearance undermines his vision of the ideal family life. This further set Hata out of reach from the ideal of whiteness and deepens his racial melancholia. As Young-Oak Lee highlights, Hata considers "Sunny's blackness as a serious impediment in his design to integrate into mainstream society," a perception that fosters emotional distance between them and deeply wounds Sunny, "making her become a severe critic of his behavior and his life."[223] Sunny accuses Hata of striving to be "the number-one citizen."[224] Sunny uncovers the true nature of Hata's gestures. She criticizes Hata, her words uncovering Hata's fixation on performing his identity and belonging, as he internalizes the model minority stereotype.

> But all I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You're always having to be the ideal partner and colleague.[225]

Hata does not see anything wrong with his behavior and proclaims that is because he is Japanese. Thus, he associates his gestures of politeness, diligence and propriety with the Japanese national ideal. His internalization of both Japanese cultural norms and American racial expectations highlights the transnational dimension of his identity crisis. Sunny retorts that the townspeople call him "a 'good Charlie'"[226] behind his back, seeing him only as a servile figure in their community. Through this confrontation, the fragile architecture of Hata's assimilation is exposed, along with the melancholia, denial, and unresolved grief underlying his life. It also aligns with the concept of the marginal man, who over-assimilates in an attempt to gain social acceptance.

The evident incompleteness of Hata's integration into the local community becomes evident upon analyzing his gestures. Per Phenix Kim words, "Hata's assimilation is an orchestration of calculated gestures (hence the title of the novel) as he performs the role of the Model Minority citizen."[227] Hata notes that "on the whole an unwritten covenant of conduct governs us, a signet of cordiality and decorum, in whose ethic, if it can be called such a thing, the worst wrong is to be drawn forth and disturbed."[228] This view of his can be observed when Hata first moves into his house and is welcomed by his neighbors. He remembers that "when

[223] Lee, "Transcending Ethnicity," 76–7.
[224] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 95.
[225] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 95.
[226] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 95.
[227] "Come almost home": Deconstructing the Asian American Model Minority Myth in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," U.S. Studies Online, last modified March 31, 2021, https://usso.uk/research/come-almost-home-deconstructing-the-asian-american-model-minority-myth-in-chang-rae-lees-a-gesture-life/.
[228] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 44.

[he] received welcome cards and sweets backets from [his] immediate neighbors, [he] judged the exact scale of what an appropriate response should be, that to reply with anything but the quiet simplicity of a gracious note would be to ruin the delicate and fragile balance."[229] Hata is acutely aware of the social conduct that is expected from him, so he is constantly self-monitoring himself to remain agreeable and non-confrontational. Even a simple gesture of gratitude is carefully calculated to maintain social harmony, suggesting that his interactions are more calculated and performative rather than sincere.

This performance serves as a survival strategy in a society that offers conditional acceptance based on conformity to the model minority stereotype. Hata considers his social standing as something that constantly needs careful maintenance, a need that is directly linked to racial melancholia. Caught in a state of mourning for full inclusion and belonging that is never realized, Hata internalizes the pressure of assimilation not only in his outward behavior but within his very sense of self. Kim states that Hata feels compelled to work diligently to maintain the delicate social harmony, knowing that any disruption might threaten his acceptance.[230] Hata himself articulates this anxiety when he reflects:

> For I feared, simply enough, to be marked by a failure [..] not one of ego or self but of an obligation public and total – and one resulting in the burdening of the entire society of his peers. I have feared this throughout my life, from the day I was adopted by the family Kurohata to my induction into the Imperial Army to even the grand opening of Sunny Medical Supply, through the initial hours of which I was nearly paralyzed with the dread of dishonoring my fellow merchants, none of whom had yet approached me, or would for several weeks. It must be the question of genuine sponsorship that has worried me most, and the associations following, whose bonds have always held value for me, if not so much human comfort or warmth.[231]

This passage reveals that Hata is haunted by becoming a source of dishonor and shame that might reflect poorly on the collective group he seeks to be part of. This fear has been accompanying him throughout his whole life – from his adoption in Japan, to his military service, and into his career in the US. This demonstrates that Hata's identity has always been constructed by performance to meet the expectations of others. Furthermore, the passage also highlights the emotional cost of this performative identity. Hata experiences emotional detachment and lack of genuine connection as the bonds do not bring him value but not comfort.

[229] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 44.
[230] U.S. Studies Online, "Come almost home."
[231] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 229.

Ultimately, the quote demonstrates the tension between Hata's public image and his private self.

Hata's obsessive fear of dishonoring his peers, combined with his emotional detachment, reflects the deeper psychological toll of trying to assimilate into a society that ultimately may never fully accept him. Despite his efforts to project an ideal image through business ownership, social conformity, and diligence, Hata remains deeply aware of his status as an outsider. This echoes the central feature of racial melancholia – the ongoing grief of being excluded from full belonging, despite the appearance of assimilation. His fixation on avoiding failure is driven by social obligation, which reveals a suppression of individual identity in favor of a socially acceptable mask. In racial melancholia, individuals often attempt to overwrite their own identity (cultural, racial, emotional) in exchange for societal validation, but the loss of authenticity becomes a source of unacknowledged mourning.

Hata's racial melancholia stems from his unresolved experience of loss – his failure to fully assimilate, his persistent sense of unbelonging, and his unacknowledged wartime trauma. This melancholia, marked by emotional detachment and disconnection from others, is not openly expressed but instead masked by what Eng and Han define as racial dissociation. Eng and Han describe racial dissociation as a psychic condition in which individuals lose touch with an authentic sense of self and meaningful attachments to others, often as a response to overwhelming social pressures.[232] In Hata's case, this dissociation takes the form of his adoption of the model minority persona – a false self that operates as a protective camouflage. By performing the ideals of respectability, diligence, and propriety, Hata attempts to manage his internal grief while conforming to external social expectations. However, this psychic strategy comes at a cost: while it shields him from the threat of social rejection, it deepens his emotional numbness, perpetuating the very melancholia it seeks to conceal. Hata's life, therefore, becomes a performance of belonging, haunted by losses that remain unspoken and unresolved.

Hata's anxiety and struggle to create meaningful connection appear in his narration when he meets another Japanese man, who was born in the US, with a similar living situation like him. Hata remarks that:

> there was an unexpected awkwardness. […] [Their] conversation was oddly halting and strained. There was a very difficult moment, on being introduced to each other, when it was unclear whether [they] would shake hands or bow. Neither of [them] wished to offend

[232] Eng and Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 27.

> the other, and being peers, it was especially difficult for one man to assume a posture of natural authority, or acquiescence.[233]

Even in familiar situations, small interactions (like deciding whether to bow or shake hands) expose Hata's uncertainty about how to behave, undermining his narration of successful assimilation. The hesitation over gestures and the strained conversation show that Hata's assimilation feels like a performance rather than something natural or authentic. The situation is awkward because neither man knows which role to play, whether Japanese or American. Hata continues that maybe if their meeting happened without any onlookers, they might have been able to connect naturally and become friends. Hata further confesses that:

> [he] sensed that [the Japanese man] was immediately unsettled by [his] accent (which was much stronger twenty years ago than it is now), for he seemed to speak with increasing softness, as if to diminish his perfect American-sounding voice. [Hata] first wondered if [the man] felt he wasn't Japanese enough for [him] or whether [Hata] thought [himself] not American enough for [the man]. But later on, after returning home, [Hata] thought perhaps it was that [they] felt different from everyone by virtue of being together (these two Japanese in a convention crowd), and that it was this fact that made [them] realize, for a moment, [their] sudden and unmistakable sense of not fitting in.[234]

This moment shows Hata's complicated relationship with identity and belonging. Even when he meets someone who seems like he should be a natural friend of his due to their shared age, ethnicity, and occupation, he cannot fully or naturally form a genuine connection. The awkwardness highlights that being Japanese in the US is not simple for Hata as there is always tension between being not Japanese enough or not American enough. Paradoxically, meeting another person with common roots makes Hata more aware of their differences and their outsider status in such a setting. Hata cannot present himself as fully American because of his accent, his origins, and his inner turmoil. At the same time, he feels disconnected to the Japanese American, who has a different experience of identity as he is American-born, and more culturally blended in the American society. Due to his status, Hata does not fully belong in either group. Moments like this in the novel show that assimilation does not give Hata a genuine sense of belonging or comfort. On the contrary, it highlights themes of alienation, identity conflict, and the difficulty of belonging. This sense of alienation is captured in Hata's own words when he confesses:

> There is something exemplary to the sensation of near-perfect lightness, of being in a place and not being there, which seems of course a chronic condition of my life but then, too, its everyday unction, the trouble finding a remedy but not a cure, so that the problem

[233] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 20.
[234] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 20.

> naturally proliferates until it has become you through and through. Such is the cast of my belonging, molding to whatever is at hand.[235]

In this quote, Hata notes that there is no remedy that would cure his melancholia, marking his belonging as an unresolved loss. His melancholia stems from never fully belonging and at the same time internalizing logics, such as the Japanese ideology and American assimilationist ideas, that tell him he never truly will. Hata suggests that although he physically occupies space in American society, he is invisible, socially absent from it. He is the marginal man who does not fully belong to anywhere. He is a man whose identity is built on erasure, performance, and displacement. Towards the end of the novel, Hata acknowledges the status of his belonging and identity is ultimately performative, shifting as it molds to whatever possibility that was presented to him.

At the end of *A Gesture Life*, Hata's decision to sell his house, a long-standing symbol of his assimilation and the American Dream, marks a significant shift in his relationship to belonging and identity. The house, once an artificial symbol of success, becomes something he willingly leaves behind, signaling his rejection of the false ideals he once clung to. He decides to leave and is hopeful that "[w]ith the misery that has come, there is some fortune. Perhaps even for me."[236] Regarding his journey, Hata notes that:

> it won't be any kind of pilgrimage. [he] won't be seeking out my destiny or fate. [He] won't attempt to find comfort in the visage of a creator or the forgiving dead. [He will] simply bear [his] flesh, and blood, and bones. [He] will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, [he] will be outside looking in. [He] will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. [He] will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home.[237]

Hata ends the novel by recognizing the harmful ideologies he internalized that alienated him from himself and others, abandoning them. Instead, he affirms that he will not seek any external markers but rather bring his authentic self on a journey, not to find belonging but accepting that he does not belong anywhere. By the novel's close, Hata rejects the pursuit of a fixed identity, embracing instead the ongoing process of living with fragmentation – a subtle but significant resistance to the performance of assimilation and belonging that shaped much of his life.

[235] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 289–90.
[236] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 337.
[237] Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 356.

# 4 Conclusion

This thesis, through the analysis of Franklin Hata in *A Gesture Life*, has demonstrated that belonging is not a stable condition, but a fragile, performative process shaped by history, power, and trauma. Hata's life consists of carefully constructed performances designed to meet the expectations of whichever national or cultural framework he inhabits. His constant suppression of parts of himself highlights how belonging is not just an emotional need but also a social achievement – one that is deeply shaped by systems of oppression and exclusion such as those of nationalism and imperialism. Throughout the novel, Hata performs gestures of assimilation, first as a colonial subject within Japanese imperialism, and later as an immigrant in suburban America. As explored in this thesis, unresolved trauma and inner conflict continually undermine his performances of stable identity and belonging. Hata's search for belonging is driven by the very systems, such as colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, and racial ideology, that ultimately exclude and alienate him, exposing the contradiction of his supposedly successful assimilation.

Drawing on theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and trauma studies, this thesis has shown how Hata's story reflects the broader dynamics of how belonging is both constructed and denied. The novel's exploration of identity is inseparable from its portrayal of historical violence and racialized ideologies, demonstrating for those positioned at the margins, the desire to belong often coexists with the recognition that true belonging may remain out of reach.

Each chapter of this thesis explored a different aspect of Hata's fractured identity and struggle to belong. The first chapter established the historical context of Hata's early life, positioning him as a colonizer within the context of Japanese imperial system. In pursuit of belonging, Hata enlisted to the Japanese Imperial Army and served as a medical officer for the comfort women, reflecting his internalization of imperialist and patriarchal ideologies. His failure to intervene in K's suffering, despite his affection for her, revealed the tension between personal desires and loyalty to these oppressive systems. Unable to confront the truth of his complicity, Hata rewrote his own past to preserve a fragile sense of self.

The second chapter shifted to the literary context of the novel, analyzing how Hata's fragmented narration exposes the psychological impact of unresolved trauma. As an unreliable narrator, Hata deceives both himself and the reader, who becomes a witness to his conflicted recounting of the past. His migration to the United States was not motivated by necessity but by ideological disillusionment. The chapter discussed how the early loss of cultural authenticity

influenced by Japanese imperialism's forced suppression of Korean identity, laid the foundation for Hata's lifelong ambivalence about identity and belonging. Migration does not grant Hata freedom from his past, it simply relocates his alienation to a new cultural context.

The third chapter examined Hata's life in the United States through the frameworks of racial melancholia and racial dissociation, showing how assimilation itself is marked by unresolved loss. Hata performs racial dissociation, masking his internal grief by embracing the ideals of assimilation. In Japan, this meant adopting Japanese imperial ideology; in the United States, it took the form of fulfilling the expectations of the model minority myth. The thesis argued that Hata embodies the figure of a Marginal Man, who is caught between cultures yet belonging to neither. These performances deepen his alienation rather than resolve it. In this way, Hata's life exemplifies the critique of the model minority myth, which erases historical trauma and ongoing struggles of Asian Americans by portraying them as seamlessly assimilated. Hata embodies the internal contradictions of this discourse, as he fulfills the expectations of the ideal immigrant on the outside, but his identity is fractured by the unresolved traumatic legacies of colonialism, war, and racial melancholia.

Finally, the thesis focused on Hata's parting gesture – his decision to sell his house. Once a symbol of the American Dream and assimilation, Hata portrays the rejection of the false ideals that have governed his whole life. By abandoning this outward marker of success, Hata acknowledges that the ideologies he followed only intensified his alienation from both society and himself. Rather than continuing his performance of belonging, Hata embraces the uncertainty by going on a journey, accepting his status as someone who does not fully belong. This marks a subtle but powerful refusal of the performances that once defined him.

# Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá problematikou sounáležitosti v románu *A Gesture Life* amerického spisovatele korejského původu Chang-rae Leeho. Prostřednictvím analýzy hlavní postavy románu se práce snaží odpovědět na otázku, jak je proces sounáležitosti formován historickými, mocenskými a traumatickými strukturami a jak tyto procesy ovlivňují utváření identity jednotlivce. Práce se soustředí na Franklina Hatu, Korejce adoptovaného japonskou rodinou v období Japonské kolonizace Koreji. Hata se po druhé světové válce přistěhuje do Spojených států do městečka Bedley Run, kde se snaží vybudovat pověst úspěšného a asimilovaného občana. Pod touto zdánlivě solidní a pečlivě udržovanou fasádou se však skrývá nevyřešené trauma a vnitřní spor, pramenící především z jeho minulosti jako vojenského lékaře v japonské císařské armádě v období druhé světové války. Děj románu sleduje, jak se tato minulost neustále promítá do narativu protagonisty a ovlivňuje jak jeho identitu, tak i snahu o pocit sounáležitost. Hatova snaha o pocit sounáležitosti je tedy neustále narušována vnějšími i vnitřními konflikty.

Tato diplomová práce propojuje literární analýzu s teoretickými poznatky postkoloniálních studií, feminismu, psychoanalýzy, kritické teorie rasy a studií trauma. Práce definuje, že sounáležitost a identita nejsou pevně dané, ale jsou výsledkem složitých procesů formovaných historickými událostmi, mocenskými strukturami a psychologickými vlastnostmi. Příběh Franklina Haty odhaluje konflikt mezi vnitřní touhou po přijetí a realitou sociálního vyloučení způsobeného například Japonskou ideologií v období kolonizace Koreji či americkými ideály asijské asimilace známé také jako mýtus modelové menšiny. *A Gesture Life* tak poskytuje nejen portrét jednotlivce, ale i obraz širších historických a společenských procesů, které definují, kdo smí patřit do širších okruhů společnosti a za jakých podmínek.

Základní východisko této práce spočívá v chápání sounáležitosti nikoli jako stabilního, vrozeného stavu, ale jako nestálého a performativního procesu. Sounáležitost je v tomto pojetí výsledkem opakovaných gest a rituálů, jimiž se jedinec snaží být přijat do určité komunity či společnosti. Jak argumentuje například Elspeth Probyn, touha po sounáležitosti často přesahuje konkrétní potřeby a odráží hlubší existenciální touhu po uznání. Vikki Bell a Nira Yuval-Davis tuto myšlenku dále rozvíjejí, když zdůrazňují, že sounáležitost se odehrává na několika rovinách a v kontextu konkrétních kulturních a historických rámců. Z tohoto hlediska sounáležitost úzce souvisí s konstrukcí identity, která je rovněž výsledkem performativních aktů a sociálních interakcí, jak tvrdí například Stuart Hall.

Román *A Gesture Life* tematizuje právě tuto performativní stránku identity a příslušnosti. Již samotný název v překladu odkazuje na život postavený na gestech – na povrchních rituálech, které mají navodit iluzi stability, úspěchu a přijetí. Avšak ani tyto gesta nedokáží překonat a vyřešit hluboce zakořeněné vnitřní rozpory a traumata hlavní postavy. Franklin Hata v průběhu svého života své chování znatelně přizpůsobuje požadavkům dominantních kultur. Tato skutečnost je znázorněna nejprve když se mladý Hata snaží o přijetí do japonské společnosti i přes svou korejskou národnost, a později kdy Hata usiluje o naplnění svého amerického snu jako asijský imigrant. V obou případech je však naplnění jeho pocitu sounáležitosti pouze zdánlivé, i když jej prezentuje jako zdařilé. Hatova sounáležitost je pouhým výsledkem jeho gest, a jeho vnitřní touha po přijetí zůstává nenaplněna. Hatovo postavení ve společnosti je komplikováno historickými mocenskými strukturami, zejména kolonialismem, imperialismem a nacionalismem, které nejen utvářejí a ovlivňují jeho identitu, ale zároveň jej trvale marginalizují.

První kapitola této diplomové práce se věnuje Hatově minulosti v Japonsku a jeho působení v japonské císařské armádě. Hata zde vystupuje v ambivalentní roli kolonizátora, přičemž jako Korejec zaujímá paradoxní postavení uvnitř japonského imperialistického systému. V touze po uznání se Hata podřizuje japonské ideologii a ztotožňuje se s mocenskými strukturami, které jej samy o sobě nikdy plně nepřijmou. Hatův konflikt mezi osobním svědomím a věrností represivnímu režimu je nejvíce znatelný v jeho chování ke Kkutaeh, která je v jeho narativu zmiňována pouze zkráceně jako K. K byla takzvaná žena pro útěchu, oběť násilného systému utěšitelek, který byl zaveden japonským císařstvím v období druhé světové války pro uspokojení potřeb vojáků a zahrnoval znásilňování dívek a žen pocházejících z různých částí Asie. Hatova neschopnost zasáhnout ve prospěch K, přestože k ní chová citové pouto, odhaluje hluboký vliv japonské ideologie na charakter Haty. Po tragické smrti K se u Haty projeví neschopnost postavit se pravdě, což ho vede k přepsání své minulosti, které mu pomáhá udržet alespoň zdání psychické rovnováhy.

Druhá kapitola se soustředí na literární rovinu románu, a to zejména korejsko-americkou literaturu v širším okruhu asijsko-americké literatury. Kapitola analyzuje Hatovo vyprávění jako na příklad nespolehlivého vypravěče. Román je napsán první osobou, tudíž je příběh prezentován subjektivním pohledem Haty, který svým vyprávěním neklame pouze ostatní, ale i sám sebe. Tato kapitola dále zkoumá, jak raná ztráta kulturní autentické kulturní a vlastenecké identity způsobené japonským imperialismem vytváří Hatovo celoživotní vnitřní rozpolcení. Jeho migrace do USA je snahou uniknout ideologiím, které zapříčili smrt K, a

aktivně bránily jeho přijetí do společnosti. Přesun do nového prostředí však nevyřeší Hatův vnitřní konflikt, ale pouze jej přenáší do jiného kulturního rámce. Trauma a pocit odcizení přetrvávají a projevují se ve všech aspektech jeho života.

Ve třetí kapitole se práce zaměřuje na Hatovo působení ve Spojených státech a propojuje jej s teoriemi rasové melancholie a rasové disociace. Tyto koncepty odhalují, že procesy asimilace často vedou k potlačení zármutku z neúspěšné asimilace a nenaplněného přijmutí do společnosti. Hata se snaží potlačit svou melancholií přijetím ideálu modelového menšiny, což je stereotyp úspěšného asijského imigranta, který však ve skutečnosti maskuje historická traumata a strukturální diskriminaci. Franklin Hata se tak stává marginálním mužem, který nepatří ani do jedné z kultur, ať už korejské, japonské nebo americké, jež utvářejí jeho život. Přestože navenek naplňuje představy o úspěšném přistěhovalci, jeho identita je roztříštěná traumaty z období kolonialismu a války.

Závěrečná část práce pojednává o Hatově rozhodnutí prodat svůj dům, který je pro něj symbol dosažení amerického snu. Tento krok představuje nejen fyzické opuštění jeho domu, ale především odmítnutí falešných ideálů, na kterých dosud stavěl svou identitu. Hata prodejem svého domu, na kterém tak lpěl a pracoval, symbolicky završuje svou snahu o povrchovou sounáležitost a přijímá svou existenci „na okraji“ společnosti. Toto rozhodnutí lze chápat jako formu tichého odporu vůči očekáváním, která na něj společnost kladla, a zároveň jako první krok k autentickému přijetí sebe sama – byť v nejistotě a bez pevného zakotvení.

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Statement: During the preparation of this thesis, I used QuillBot’s paraphrasing tool, particularly for refining the theoretical sections to improve their academic tone. Furthermore, I used ChatGPT 4 to enhance the readability and cohesiveness of the overall text. In the first and second chapters, I used it to summarize the content of the chapters dedicated to the portrayal of colonizer and colonized in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* by Albert Memmi. In the third chapter, ChatGPT was further used to summarize the content of the first ten pages of *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* by Lisa Lowe. Additionally, ChatGPT was consulted regarding the structure of the conclusion and resumé. All content was reviewed and edited as needed. I take full responsibility for the content of the thesis.