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Utopian Moments in the Novels of Chang-rae Lee

Abstract: Utopias in the traditional sense are hard to find in contemporary literature. Still we do find utopian moments in many of the representations of a flawed world. In Chang-rae Lee’s three novels *Native Speaker*, *A Gesture Life*, and *Aloft* utopian aspects mainly manifest themselves in the private realm; there mutual understanding is possible because the generation of new intended meanings is possible. An expansion of such discursive regeneration as a Christian model of mutual support, however, remains difficult in the wider society because minorities (in his case mainly Korean Americans) remain excluded from the public realm of a policing syntax that imposes petrified old patterns of binary competition upon them. Nevertheless, there are incidents of modest progress, i.e., there is a pragmatist vision of survival and even optimism in Lee’s work that focuses, particularly in his last novel, on the family as the American nucleus of development and agency, combining both traditional ‘family values’ and Asian notions of filiality. Thus ultimately Lee’s vision of a good future remains a quintessentially American one.

... *family* is the ‘it’ […] the all-purpose F-word for our times, *really all we got*, … *(Aloft* 307, original italics)

1. Introduction

There are no more classical utopias, only stories about a better life. If we look at the literature of the twentieth century, we may find dystopias, to be sure, but no longer the visionary constructions influenced by political science that have defined the genre in the past, from its origin in Thomas More up to the late nineteenth century work of Edward Bellamy, William Dean Howells and William Morris.1 Aspects of utopia can still be found in social experience as it is presented in different media that tell stories about groups. These do, however, consistently take place in a context of postmodern distancing. Thus we have Bill Cosby’s wonderful TV family, groups of friends in *Seinfeld, Friends*, and other High School soap operas. We also find tales about successful teams in sports, platoon solidarity, and often detectives who succeed at finding the guilty criminal in *C.S.I.*-type series (*Crime Scene Investigation*). The solidarity in the latter examples is, however, often achieved at the cost of oppositionalism, i.e., of a ‘we’

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1 An exception may be found in the realm of feminist utopias, as Dunja Mohr’s contribution to this volume convincingly suggests.
set against a criminalized ‘other.’ It is a utopia of justice against evil based on scapegoating and smacks of religious notions of retribution.

A further site of utopia can still be found in the sentimental innocence of children’s books: but the farms they portray no longer exist – these petting zoo-like environments have long yielded to industrial agrobusiness. Youngsters also indulge in fantasy communities about dinosaurs and dragons and enjoy the new kind of medievalism of Dinotopia or Eragon. Again, however, the pastoral moments are interlaced with antagonism as a major ingredient; there is an emphasis on threat and fighting. Particularly in the United States, religion might also be considered a major vehicle of utopian thought for the people concerned. For them, this isn’t merely a matter of ‘fiction,’ however, but one of ‘revelation’ – and therefore not really a place to look for an ‘as if’ exploration of alternatives by means of a Burkean mode of language as ‘symbolic action.’ In a sense, all representation (and especially fiction) has utopian qualities. But religion is a realm of possibility that sees itself in terms of an ontology of ‘truth’ and is therefore radically opposed to novelistic explorations and hence, in crucial ways, gospel writing is a radically different ‘genre.’ Moreover, the apocalyptic experience of the twentieth century has made straightforward utopia impossible. After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, serious utopia will sound naïve.

What is left, though, are utopian moments that interlace many tales, even those that are often far from optimistic. Such positive moments can only exist as part of a mixed genre that has lost its innocence, not unlike tragicomedy. Hence in this paper I want to find utopian situations in the work of Chang-rae Lee and try to figure out how we can put them in certain meaningful categories. I will first present examples from his three novels and then discuss them in an attempt at evaluation.

2. Native Speaker

At first sight Native Speaker seems to ignore even the utopian elements mentioned above. It is an Oedipal detective story about ethnic betrayal, paralleled by the marriage crisis of a Korean-WASP couple. Henry Park, a typical member of model minority, spies on other Asian Americans for a private investigation organization called Glimmer & Company: “Each of us engaged our own kind, more or less. Foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans” (16). We have here the rather anti-utopian element of betrayal. Moreover, the motivation of this enterprise is difficult to characterize: “We pledged allegiance to no government. We weren’t ourselves political creatures. We weren’t patriots. Even less,  

2 Reinhard Bonnek’s Florida-based ministry Christ for All Nations may serve as one example among many of such inspirational texts that involve healing, miracles, and even, literally, salvation.

3 This author has been struck by the fact that Swiss and German TV stations broadcast Lord of the Rings on Easter (2006) – it is difficult to figure out what to think of the cultural significance of this mixing of genres.
heroes. We systematically overassessed risk, made it a bad word. Guns spooked us” (15). It is hard to pin down the source of agency behind this group.

The focus of Lee’s narrative is on American language and pinpoints the public discourse of assimilation, of worn-out configurations: “It’s still a black-and-white world,” observes Henry (181). And his interlocutor, John Kwang, calls “minority politics [...] an old syntax” (183). This public discourse sets the patterns of conflict that appropriate people’s behavior: “They are every shape and color but they still share this talk, and this is the other tongue they have learned, this must be the special language” (316). The crowd is controlled by a grammar of division and spite.

Surprisingly, we do find two major utopian strands within this framework of scapegoating: The first strand involves John Kwang, a young and dynamic Korean councilman from Queens who wants to become mayor of New York City. He stands for hope, for the possibility of a new multiethnic redeemer and is modeled on both John Kennedy and Jesus Christ. Like Kennedy, he is young, dynamic, a media darling with a vision, and a womanizer. We find him in a bathrobe monogrammed “JK” (276). He has a son called “John Jr.” (34). Later his boys “stand like soldiers before him” (252) – a pose reminding us of the famous photo of John Kennedy Jr. at the president’s funeral.

Moreover, we read about “the kind of light that emanated from him” (125). The “subtle pressure of his grip [...] meant that you were the faintest brother to him” (129). These are elements of a Christ-like characterization: “The mood in the office was messianic” (133). Kwang is a Messiah with a tragic flaw. Because of his hubris he falls, is rejected by the mass and has to run the gauntlet of the mob in a veritable via dolorosa scene: “They are calling him every ugly Asian name I have ever heard.” We read that “[h]e is already in another world. [...] He is willing to suffer” (317). And later: “People are grabbing his shoulders, his hair. His bandage is torn from his head. Everyone is shouting” (318). This is the fate of a Christian martyr.

At the same time he is a genuine Asian. Henry notices “Kwang’s Confucian training at work, his secular religion of pure hierarchy, his belief that everyone is at once a noble and a servant and then just a man” (137). This means that “you simply bow down before those who would honor you. You honor them back” (138). The Korean candidate stands for values of patriarchal responsibility; the notion of taking care of the family is associated with a political program: “But can you really make a family of thousands? One that will last? [...] you make them into a part of you. You remember every one of their names” (302). Asian memorization is crucial in this effort to turn society into a family and give its discourse a center; it is a strategy against the American tendency to forget and end up in the same old worn-out patterns (“syntax”): “John Kwang was a devotee of memory,” which is for him “like a serious craft or martial art” (165). Thus he insists: “In past times, a person’s education was a matter of what he could remember. It still is in Korea and Japan. [...] Americans like to believe this is a great failing of Asia” (166). Not only does Kwang keep an electronic data bank
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of his campaign donors, he also memorizes their names! He combines traditional patriarchy with Christian caring.

Knowing whom you owe is connected with a traditional Korean institution, the *ggeh*: “He models our program on the *ggeh*. A Korean money club” (260). This is his ethnic minority’s banking system: “Everything is in private, we deal like family” (261). We read that “the *ggeh* was his one enduring vanity, a system paternal” (310). It translates Kwang’s ethics into economics. His Asian Christianity stands for a new kind of solidarity and a new way of redistributing wealth. This system is holistic and inclusive rather than divisive and competitive. It foregrounds a sociology of family that rivals the predominant one of capitalism.

A second strand of utopian imagery in *Native Speaker* is associated with Mitt, the son of Henry and his white wife Lelia (a language therapist). Mitt adjusts to his multicultural environment like a glove. He feels comfortable everywhere and speaks all the accents – we read about Mitt’s “wholly untroubled” speech: “Mitt was beginning to appreciate the differences in the three of us; he could mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean, those notes [...] rich with disparate melodies” (223). The young boy provides a third step of cultural encounter and stands for a possible cultural synthesis, for a utopian new generation. The narrator writes about his “hope that he would grow up with a singular sense of his world, a life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not” (249). Mitt quickly befriends the other boys in the suburban white neighborhood: “By the last summer Mitt was thick with them all” (97). But things get too “thick” when he is killed playing dog-pile and literally choked to death underneath the big Caucasian neighborhood boys. This is a highly symbolic act in which they take away his breath, the source of his speech.4 The pressure of the mass, of the majority, takes the wind out of his voice.

The failures of both strands, Kwang and Mitt, indicate that we get only utopian moments, only flashes of Christian kinship, of society as an extended family, and of the natural multilingualism of youth in *Native Speaker*. Yet the book ends on a reconciliation between husband and wife, which is initialized by their eating “lamb stew.” Significantly, the “rich, pungent meat of the lamb was an offering passing between us. Somehow the tastes held an inner logic” (199). The novel ends in Lelia’s speech studio, where they teach EFL to Laotian boys. Ouboume and Bouhaume are compared to Romulus and Remus: “Ancient Rome was the first true Babel. New York City must be the second” (220). Henry becomes his wife’s assistant, playing his “role as the Speech Monster. I play it well” (323).5 Rather than teaching a common language, Lelia “wants to

4 I owe this observation to my Mulhouse graduate student Lei Stark.
5 In a book riddled with intertextuality, this statement can be read as a commentary on the last sentence in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* about the “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”: “It translated well” (209). Lee opts for pragmatic communication skills instead of translation.
offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show them it’s fine to mess it all up” (324). Thus she encourages them:

Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen. She will say the name, quickly write on the sticker, and then have me press it to each of their chests as they leave. It is a line of quiet faces. I take them down in my head. Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are. (324)

This is a very rich quote: we find political implications in which she tries to give the children – all of whom about the age and weight of their son Mitt – self-confidence and recognition (‘good citizens’); at the same time it is an adamic scene (naming) of a new world-making on a personal level. Yet Lee’s ‘each one teach one’-model is not one of grammatical imposition but rather implies an inversion of roles between white teacher and immigrant students in which Lelia learns how to pronounce the “difficult names” of “a dozen lovely and native languages.”6 This ‘native speaker’ model of language originates in the individual. Rather than fusion or linguistic appropriation, this is a mode of dialogue and human interaction beyond the discourse of public ideology.

3. A Gesture Life

Lee’s second book is the story of a retired Japanese American good neighbor, the neo-American Franklin Hata. We enter an uneasy suburban pastoral with a dragging, slow beginning – the reading is almost boring. ‘Doc’ Hata is a man of conformity who always wants to do the proper thing, but problems soon catch up with him: we learn that his adopted Korean daughter has left him and that the nice people to whom he sold his medical supply store are going bankrupt. But this is trivial compared to the shocking flashbacks to the Pacific war, when Hata still was Jiro Kurohata, a medical aid in the Imperial Army responsible for the Korean ‘comfort women’ in a military camp. Obviously, there is a skeleton in the closet of this ‘badly run’ suburban affluence in Bedley Run. Moreover, we learn that our Japanese I-narrator is himself an adopted child of Korean ancestry.

Most surprisingly, we do find utopian moments in this very unlikely environment. First, there is Hata’s love affair with one of the Korean girls in the camp. K, or Kkutaeh (183), is a well-educated young woman who was sent into prostitution by her father to protect her younger brother from Japanese conscription. Born “in a noble, scholarly house,” she is the young Jiro’s superior (257). We find scenes of intimacy between them which range from their sharing rice balls with sesame seeds sprinkled over them (242) to having intercourse in the examination room.

Their secret communion takes place in a Romeo & Juliet-type of context; the public incompatibility of prisoner and warden is overcome in darkness:

6 … possibly an oblique reference to “the dozens,” the highly pragmatic discourse of the black ghetto named after the rejects of the auction block.
But it was really only toward dusk and evening that first day, when she was willing to talk to me, that I lost myself. I brought her some rice and after finishing she didn’t simply turn away and dwell in a corner until it was time for me to go. The daylight grew weak and dim and was almost gone, the exam room we were in becoming nearly dark. (243)

In the “warm cast” of the “oil lamp” they create their own private reality: “I felt suddenly illicit in her presence, as though we’d slipped out of sight of our chaperons and found ourselves in a darkened, private park somewhere” (246). The hermetic darkness makes a new language possible:

Earlier she had wanted to speak in the darkness, [...] every part of us in the shadows. I could finally understand what she was wishing for. I believe it was so she couldn’t see my uniform or the shine of my boots or even my face; I realized that she was trying to pretend we were other people, somewhere else, with the most ordinary reasons for keeping such furtive company, just our whispering voices apparent to the night air. (252)

When sight is turned off, she can’t see his military boots and they can play normalcy in the examination room.

Curiously, at the center of Japanese war crimes we find references to Western culture when he tells her that he has “enjoyed some modern novels, too, especially several French and German, which I have found to be passionate and distinctly dark, in turn” (248). The two lovers have illusive dreams of reading *Madame Bovary* together, “the figure of a woman in a small French provincial town that was her world, and prison” (249). K argues: “Since I was a little girl, I always wanted to live a completely different life, even if it might be a hard one. I was sure I wasn’t meant to belong to mine. Maybe you can describe the stories to me …” (249). In short, their escapism consists of “our pretending to be other people, like figures in a Western novel” (263). These references already seem to prefigure Hata’s later move to the United States.

The status of their discourse in the camp is of course highly ambivalent. He has more illusions about it than she does: “We were just talking, I know, but sometimes that’s enough to make everything seem real” (256). Even though Kkutaeh lets him make love to her, she is realistic about their hopeless situation: “You’re a decent man, Jiro, more decent than you even know, so please. You can pretend, if you wish, and I’ll pretend with you, as much as I am able. But I ask you please no more than that” (258). Their “untoward region of stasis” (293) is a hermetic locus amoenus all the time surrounded by “the surrealistically distant war” (295), by rape, executions, war atrocities. Their private utopia is doomed because they are feeding themselves “to the all-consuming engine of war” (299).

A second utopian incident can be found in Franklin Hata’s later affair with a neighborhood widow in the United States. Like Lelia in *Native Speaker*, Mary

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7 In this imagery we can find more allusions to Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, e.g., to the scene when, hiding with the quiet girl in the school basement, little Maxine discovers her own brutality (172-81).
Burns stands for the good white woman. When she leads him to a kind of love bower in the underbrush near the cemetery where her husband is buried, the imagery echoes his first affair. They walk on a path “no wider than a deer trail, the ever-thickening underbrush tugging at our trouser cuffs” (311) and enter a “small opening within a thicket” (314). Again there is a hermetic secrecy about their behavior: “It would have been scandalous in town had someone caught us” (314). The contrast of private intimacy vs. public law is transferred from the Pacific war to the affluent US neighborhood. Unfortunately, she gets a nosebleed at the crucial moment (312) and their affair is never consummated: “I am almost sure she wanted me to make love to her” (315). The blood, which may stand for the violence of real penetration somehow interferes. It marks a phallic inversion that scares Hata. The Christian blood (agape?) cancels the ‘nose’ of the semen (eros?). Ultimately they go different ways and Hata only learns about Mary’s death years later, from the newspaper. Lee’s hesitant protagonist is a master of the ‘perhaps’ whose life of gestures stands for Prufrockian (“trouser cuffs”) missed opportunities.

A tentative commitment may be provided in a third, possibly utopian moment, which is less passionate and concerns the reconciliation of the old Hata with his adopted daughter Sunny and her little black-Korean son Thomas, who have moved back to the less affluent neighboring town called Ebbington. Unlike Mitt, this young boy survives: Hata later saves Thomas from drowning (323). Still the name signifies doubt rather than optimism. Moreover, Sunny’s new family cooperation is beyond illusions: “We’re here, aren’t we? Whatever has happened” (336). Their new relationship is not based on ideals but on the pragmatic reality of facts as the only possible starting point for the future.

4. Aloft

Lee’s most recent novel describes the decline of an affluent entrepreneurial Italian American family from the perspective of the former head of the company, now in early retirement. His account is interlaced with a hilarious use of post-structuralist terminology he has picked up from his daughter who is a university professor. As always, Lee provides some hefty sex to counteract stereotypes and prove that Asian Americans got balls (the Italian American narrator has a Korean American wife). But at the center of the novel is the bankruptcy of the family business of the Bataglias, significantly renamed “Battle Brothers” in America.

In this tale, utopian moments may be experienced on long vacations, which Jerome Battle nowadays organizes, working part-time for a travel agency, or when he is “aloft,” flying his plane Donnie along the American East Coast. There is an autistic element about these moments of happiness when you keep at distance

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8 There may again be Christian imagery involved in this naming – the ultimate female and holy fire.
9 I find here clear allusions to T.S. Eliot (religion, sex, sense of indecision).
from the world. This is implied when he later describes the new selfishness as typified by “A Solo Flyer,” and his son-in-law Paul, another Asian American supporting character in the book, comments on this imagery as follows: “They think they can go anywhere and do anything, as if none of their actions had any bearing except on themselves, like they are in their own mini-biosphere, all needs self-providing, everything self-contained, setting it up like God would do himself” (281). This is an argument against solipsism and implies a criticism of hermetic visions of human happiness as such. Moreover, what goes up must come down – you cannot withdraw from reality. Significantly, Jerome Battle gets into a storm with his pregnant daughter and realizes in a big landing scene that, yes, reality is on the ground. This is “the moment of payback for my years of exclusively fair-weather flying” (327). He has learned his lesson: “I’ll go solo no more, no more” (328). Following this logic, the last chapter starts with the statement “Life stays thick and busy on the ground” (330). Clearly, this incident involves reorientation – no man is an island.

The utopia they are heading to after the bankruptcy is that Battle’s son and daughter and their respective families move in – they even rescue the grandfather from his exile in the nursing home and bring him back. Chang-rae Lee plays it Italian and interbreeds the la famiglia culture of the more established European immigrants with Asian filiality. We get a kind of fusion of Eastern and Western American immigration culture – one character calls family “the all-purpose F-word for our times, really all we got …” (307). They all bunk up in Jerome’s old house, even live in the basement:

You could say we’ve all had to come around in the last few weeks, dealing with one another’s daily (and especially nightly) functions and manners and habits and quirks, which in themselves, of course, are thoroughly inconsequential, and one hopes not half as telling of our characters as our capacities for tolerance and change. (331)

As always, utopia is a bit soppy and sentimental, but there is a consistency in the sense that, as in Lee’s other novels, change for the good can only originate in the private realm.

5. Discussion

If we look at Chang-rae Lee as a successful author who is fairly representative of contemporary literature in the United States, what are we to think of his treatment of utopian issues? In a forthcoming article on private and public negotiations in *Native Speaker* I emphasize the cognitive dimension in Lee’s vision: the only way to understand the reality we experience is through language and the only way to change our understanding of reality and our roles in it is through language renewal, through a changing of the terms. This is why the helper (and loving wife) is a language therapist – her race is secondary. The new language to be created will, hopefully, start new kinds of relationships in the private realm that
can later permeate society at large and contribute to a Whitmanesque “Brooklyn Ferry”-type of utopia. I claim in my article that language renewal is a cognitive issue because the bottleneck of information processing is in the individual mind, where we find the only possible origin of intentional change.

Such a contrast of a hostile public environment and a hidden private utopia can also be found in Lee’s second novel A Gesture Life, in the two private love bowers, one with K, the Korean comfort woman in the medical station of the Imperial Army, and the other in Hata’s excursion from the graveyard with Mary Burns. In a writer whose prose thrives on intertextual allusions, these scenes must be seen as, consciously or unconsciously, modeled on Hawthorne’s famous forest scene in The Scarlet Letter. Such a reference is also implied in Hata’s identification with a black flag: “Hata is, literally, ‘flag,’ and a ‘black flag,’ or kurohata, is the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within” (224). The flag is the token of the outcast. Instead of the adultery of the woman of the scarlet letter we have the couple of the black flag. At one point Franklin Hata even has a vision of K “loosely enrobed in a black silken flag,” as a “spectral body or ghost” (286). What are we to think of this spectral evidence?

The problem with such a reading is that it puts us back on square one – the utopian moment in Lee turns into a mere echo confirming the well-known pattern of a repressive Puritan society and its means of enforcing conformity, a bulwark of conceptual and military force that crushes the utopian love passion cropping up in hidden places. We have a repetition of Hawthorne, who has already found out that the public discursive hegemony crushes human beings and turns them into merely gesturing allegorical types (Chillingworth turns from a healer into a Faustian devil; Hester into a hermeneutic riddle). And Hata becomes what Eliot would call a “hollow man.”

Lelia’s analysis in Native Speaker actually makes a very similar point, when the white wife gives her Korean American husband a list with all the racist stereotypes into which he has grown: “The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was” (1). This identity on paper comprises “illegal alien,” “emotional alien,” “Yellow peril: neo-American,” “stranger,” “follower,” “traitor,” “spy,” and finally, “False speaker of language” (5). Henry understands that the list is not “a cheap parting shot” but provides the parts of “terse communiqués from her moments of despair” (5). It initializes his search for a truer identity. The danger signaled here is that we internalize the hegemonic public discourse and become a part of it, thus practically giving up our humanity, our cognitive privilege of private reality construction.

An important aspect of these configurations is, of course, the issue of power, i.e., the limitation of private speech acts. As J.L. Austin convincingly argues, certain things we can only ‘do’ with words if we are authorized to do them. Lee’s insistence on the private-public distinction and his consistent placing of utopian
moments in a private realm that is surrounded by a hostile public realm connects the language issue with concerns about power. The result of these juxtapositions is a vague analysis that language is a crucial issue in the negotiation of change; it puts speech act theory in a specific cultural context. Lee definitely acknowledges the hegemony of a dominant public discourse: the postmodern forces are recognized, but they are not presented as ontological. Power is, significantly, not treated within an absolute and determinist top-down framework. Lee’s approach is a realist one based on a cognitive epistemology rooted in history and behavior rather than in semiology and language grammatology.

In that sense, his utopian dimension is a pragmatist one motivated by the recognition that, ultimately, you cannot and must not give in to defeat. In order to assert your humanity you have to believe in a positive outcome of your actions and ‘keep on keeping on’ as the proverb goes. As Jenny Thomas observes, “pragmatists are accused of viewing the world through rose-coloured glasses” (1995 178). I think that the best way to understand this optimism and the utopian/pragmatist connection is to refer to America’s first cognitive psychologist, William James, the inventor of American pragmatism, and his famous concept of the ‘will to believe,’ also title of an eponymous essay and his second book on pragmatism. James’s ‘will’ to believe is actually a ‘necessity’ to believe, or rather, an argument that if we make an effort, we will maybe fail, but if we do not make an effort (because we believe in determinism), we will certainly fail: “Indeed we may wait if we will, – I hope you do not think that I am denying that, – but if we do so we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case, we act, taking our life in our hands” (30, original italics). James’s biographer Ralph Barton Perry quotes James’s diary entry after his personal crisis in 1870, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will,” emphasizing its epistemological significance: “James felt his old doubts to be dispelled by a new and revolutionary insight” (1996 121). What James did was to “believe by an act of will in the efficacy of will” (1996 122, original italics). Utopia, seen from this angle, is a pragmatist imperative rather than a flirt with illusionism; as a function of the future it is an integral aspect of human cognitive operations.

The preferred locus of agency in Lee seems to be the ‘family,’ which is his third utopian key word after ‘language’ and ‘privacy.’ Thus what is left in Aloft is the family: the Italian famiglia of the Battaglias fuses with Korean filiality in the new multicultural American family of close blood relations (remember that John Kwang’s public family project in Native Speaker failed). This is a crucial development: once Lee moves from the Asian family model to the Italian American one, he somehow gets in-step with the whole much-quoted bag of conservative to reactionary American ‘family values’ – and thus may ultimately endorse the status quo of American social organization rather than challenge it.

Such an emphasis on the nuclear family is somehow not a force of dissent; it is not subversive but affirms preexisting American public beliefs. Part of this notion of American ‘family values’ is of course that you are not a socialist follower of the group but buy into Protestant individualism and Republican
capitalism. You choose to build your own dynasty of grandchildren with Roman numerals after their names (at least for the boys), who follow their private utopias, go to private schools, choose their private and voluntary affiliations and houses of worship, have their private businesses, use private banking, and so on …

All of this is very far from the construction of a utopian society in the comprehensive sense or even a new form of the state (political utopia) – as we had it in the classical nineteenth-century reform movements, Progressivism, the New Deal, or visions of a Great Society. Lee’s utopian moments give us a troubled sense of American multiculturalism. They privatize the hope for a better life, thus turning him into a very American writer. Still, the question remains at what price this integration is achieved.

Works Cited


