

A Gesture *Life as* Traumatic Heteroglossia

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Literature in English 3:

Voices, Conflicts and Identities



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ABSTRACT

Traumatic narratives differ from traditional ones by defying chronological structure. Often, victims of trauma are unable to recall their trauma, and it is then present in their narratives only symptomatically. This article argues that the structure of *A Gesture Life* lends itself to an interpretation based on trauma theory. The narrator, Hata, is revealed as traumatized through an analysis of his evasive voice, the counter-narratives presented by other characters, and the novel's disjointed chronology. It is concluded that like victims of trauma, Hata creates a fictional narrative to make up for the absence of the events that caused him to become traumatized. However, through the intrusion of his trauma and through the voices of K and Sunny, who both oppose the narrative he attempts to confine them in, his narrative is ultimately revealed as a method of repression to both himself and the reader.

Keywords: trauma; adoption; heteroglossia; unreliable narrator; Chang-rae Lee; fiction; *A*

Gesture Life

Introduction

While most stories can be told chronologically, trauma defies the confinement of typical narratives. Since victims of trauma may be unable to address or even grasp the nature of their trauma, their autobiographical accounts are often disjointed or even fictional, reflecting the victim's attempt to subconsciously avoid what lies beyond their ability to address. *A Gesture Life* is a literary representation of such accounts. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Franklin Hata, alludes to, describes, and represses various traumatic events in his life to present a narrative of successful assimilation that through the voices of others is revealed to be deceiving. This article argues that Hata's self-deception is symptomatic of suppressed trauma. His evasive voice is an attempt to narrate himself into the reputable identity he desires, but his emerging remembrance of his own trauma and the voices of K and Sunny create conflicting heteroglossia that ultimately forces him to realize the fictional nature of his assimilation.

A Gesture Life as Traumatic Heteroglossia

"Trauma has the capacity to forever haunt its victims and render them mute," Workman writes (255). According to him, trauma victims' narratives will typically be attempted accounts of a past event, but traumatic events are "so powerful as to overwhelm the capacity for comprehension of those who live through them" and are therefore "repressed ... and thus transformed into an absence ... reasserting itself in distressingly symptomatic ways" (255). Therefore, trauma victims' narratives will often be marked by the intrusion of an underlying traumatic event that appears only symptomatically and indirectly. Often, victims of trauma will move "retrospectively but not necessarily linearly from some current state of unease and blindness back toward some prior revelatory moment in which what was revealed was too heinous or ugly or frightening to give subsequent recognition to" (256). In conversations with trauma victims as well as in literature, one is then left with a disjointed attempt to access what cannot be accessed, and the victim's account is likely to be fragmented or difficult to follow due to the absences of memory that are caused by repression.

Homans uses Workman's theories to link adoption narratives to trauma narratives. Since adoption is "an unremembered yet life-altering event," and "origins are felt to be 'obscured,' not absent," and furthermore is considered a trauma in itself by several adoption theorists, Homans argues that Workman's text is an apt guide to understanding adoption narratives, since they may take the same shape (7). She claims that "adoption narratives are often obsessively oriented towards an irretrievable past, and like (or as) trauma, adoption compels the creation of plausible if not verifiable narratives" (7). Both adopted narrators as well as traumatized ones may then be likely to create a story that will satisfy their need for an origin story and fill in the inaccessible memory that Workman refers to. However, since the memory of the traumatic event lies beyond the adoptee's grasp, the narrative

that emerges may be an illusion created by the narrator for his own emotional satisfaction: in Homans' words, a "model for adoption narratives emerges ... in which claims to reveal the truth of the past are replaced by the narration of an emotionally satisfying but probably fictional story about the present" (9).

Caruth provides an addition to the understanding of trauma narratives. Building off Freud's theories, she points out that a victim of a traumatic event is "never fully conscious during the accident itself," so "[t]he experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself" (17). This is similar to Workman's point that trauma is repressed, and it is only after the event that the effects can be seen on the victim, who by then is unable to access the symptoms' origin. In other words, trauma could be considered a suppressed event that the narrator must gain access to in order to understand why he remains trapped in the past. In fact, Caruth writes that "the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning" (59). A further cause of disjointedness in trauma narratives, then, may be that they lack the meaning of traditional narratives, and their narrators are forced to circle around the event, unable to describe it or give it meaning, until they perhaps, like Homans suggests, finally create a fictional narrative that offers the comfort of psychic meaning but is ultimately a means to avoid the underlying trauma.

The protagonist of *A Gesture Life* is the self-proclaimed Japanese immigrant Franklin Hata, born in Korea and now living a seemingly fulfilled life in America. Through Hata's evasive voice and involuntary intrusion of his past, his narrative becomes a structural representation of both adoption and trauma theory. While one of his most obviously traumatizing memories is the death of K, a comfort woman he knew during the war, there is reason to believe that his lack of clear origins has traumatized him before the chronological beginning of the novel. Throughout the novel, he frequently refers to himself as Japanese, but when K asks for his Korean name, he mentions in the narration how he "had one at birth, naturally, but it was never used by anyone, including my real parents, who ... wished as much as I that I become wholly and thoroughly Japanese" (Lee 235). However, in the same paragraph, he remembers how "the day the administrator came for me was the last time I heard their ... birth-name for me" (236). This implication that it was used despite his claims creates a dissonance in the narrative. The indication that his birth-parents' wish is no more than a story he has created to distance himself from his Korean birth undeniably reflects Homans' theory of satisfying but self-deceiving narratives and reveals Hata as an unreliable narrator. This becomes characteristic for Hata's voice throughout the novel.

The same dissonance occurs whenever Hata is forced to consider his origins. For most of the novel, Hata's voice is uncannily distant: for instance, after a comfort woman commits suicide, he narrates the happenings around him as if he had no presence himself. Even things that should rightly

elicit a reaction pass by unremarked, such as a man “complaining that the wait would be longer, as now there was one fewer than before” (109). However, in the military camp, a corporal “crudely referred to the comfort girl as *chosen-pi*, a base anatomical slur which also denoted her Koreanness,” and Hata describes how “there was a casualness to his usage ... which stopped me cold” (250-251). The word choice here is subtly but undeniably marked by a presence of emotions that is otherwise lacking in much of Hata’s narration: “crudely” is a subjective adjective that reveals Hata’s anger at its use, and the slur is particularly emphasized as racist towards his origins. Since he admits on the same page that he does not care for the other comfort girls, towards whom it was addressed, the issue of nationality is likely to have caused his reaction. It is also particularly relevant when considering Cheng’s argument that while “Hata clearly occupies an oppressor relationship to the Comfort Women ... as a ‘hidden’ Korean in a heavily anti-Korean militia, his relationship to the women is in fact more similar than dissimilar” (Cheng 560). In relation to this, Motuz points out that Hata’s “behavior in these instances cause us to ask, Where and when does Hata first become traumatized” (419). Following both these arguments, Hata in the Japanese army is himself an oppressed object while simultaneously being the oppressive subject, and what results is the curious dissonance in his narrative where his voice attempts to conform to the latter identity without managing to suppress the former. The conflicted ambiguity of his voice, then, is not born solely from the traumatic events the reader gets to see in his narrative, but also caused by his equally traumatic origin. However much he attempts to separate himself from his status as an adoptee, it is thus an unavoidable presence in his voice.

This conflict comes to affect his relationship with K. Most notably, Hata says retrospectively, in reference to himself in K’s presence: “[I]f I can speak for that young man now ... He did not know it, but he hoped that if he could simply be near to her ... he might somehow be found” (Lee 240). This is a rare admission from him that he, at least as young, felt lost, and it is significant that it is in the presence of a Korean he hopes to find a sense of belonging. It is even more significant when considering Chu’s point that “Asian women often represent the ancestral homeland” (Chu 52), which corroborates the interpretation that Hata was seeking his Korean identity through K. However, despite the admission, his use of linguistic features undermines its potential for realization: by switching from first to third person pronouns, not only does he try “to deflect his own responsibility for those actions [K’s death] by constituting himself as the venerable elder he believes he has become in America” (Carroll 605), he is also distancing himself from the feelings he only implies. Even retrospectively, he cannot accept neither his Korean roots nor the actions he performed as a Japanese soldier, and his evasive voice thus becomes an attempt at self-deception. Through his narrative, he seeks to conceal for himself how fragmented his identity is, but his subconsciousness does not fully believe it, and the result is confession merging with concealment.

This self-deception becomes particularly problematic in his encounters with K. Not only does he attempt to narrate an identity as a reputable Japanese for himself, he also creates narratives for the people closest to him, primarily Sunny and K, whom he tries to force into roles to support his own narrative. The tragedy, then, occurs in the clash between Hata's fictional story and the real world. From the beginning, there is a conflict between the way K and Hata see each other: while K "calls him 'brother,'" (Cheng 560), Hata describes K the following way upon first seeing her: "she was suddenly present but not present, and would hardly be a person at all were it not for her seemingly insoluble beauty" (Lee 231). From the beginning, K is presented as a non-person, closer to an object of desire than a subject. The scene establishes Hata's subsequent inability to perceive her as someone other than the person he has created in his mind. Carroll writes that "Hata believes that if K just makes it through whatever ordeals Ono has in store for her, they will be able to marry after the war and Hata will be able to complete the production of himself as wholly Japanese through the construction of the family" (601). K, then, is not only a means for him to access his Korean roots, she also becomes a device to ensure the future of his identity narrative. She is less a person than a panacea to his fragmented identity.

However, K defies the narrative he attempts to trap her in. "I think you are not like everyone else," she insists during their first meeting (Lee 235), thereby opposing his narrative of successful assimilation into Japanese identity. Eventually, however, he narrates himself into the role of her rescuer. In Carroll's words, he "falls in love with ... the idea of her chastity and purity as something he alone can protect" (Carroll 601). This grants him the subjectivity in their relationship, reducing K once again to a way of supporting his own identity. K, however, tells him that she does not want his help, denying the role he has created for her a second time. "[R]eally you are not any different from the rest," she tells Hata (Lee 300). Compared to the previous quote, this shows that while Hata has tricked himself into believing they have grown closer, in fact his narrative has pushed her from him. Where he once wanted to be merely one Japanese enlisted among many, she separated him from them; when he narrates himself into a fantasy in which he alone can protect her from them, she reveals him as being one of them. K's story thus becomes a counternarrative to his, establishing her as a subject with her own voice even though Hata presents her as an object. Like Hata's Korean origins, this creates another intruding voice in his narrative.

Another traumatic aspect, then, is in how Hata represses K's story in favor of a narrative meant to emphasize his own postulated success. Carroll writes that K and Sunny "have been rendered mute, denied agency, by Hata's abjection of them" (607). Carroll does not refer to Workman here, but it is worth noting how "rendered mute" echoes Workman's description of the effect of trauma on the victims. Hata is not only rendering K mute, she is rendered mute by his trauma. Her story is too heinous for him to address, and as a result, both Hata and K are rendered mute through Hata's fictional narrative. Furthermore, while Hata's dissociated narration of the past events is an attempt to distance

himself from this very abjection, it is clear he still does so in the present. In a present-time dissociated sequence, he admits that he sometimes thinks that “K has finally come back for me. It is the moment I think I feel at home” (Lee 286). Even in the present, he considers K his only connection to an origin he cannot access. However, the K of his imagination is the K of his self-deceiving narrative instead of the one the reader encounters in his flashbacks: “‘Lieutenant,’ she asked *demurely*, her voice *full of penitence*. ‘Did you sleep peacefully last night? *I hope you’ll forgive me* if I say you look somewhat weary this morning’” (286, emphasis added). As can be seen from the italicized parts, K is continuously rendered mute by Hata even after her death. The K he creates is the perfect wife, chaste, submissive, and servile, apologizing for every imposition and only concerned with Hata’s well-being. This K is a diametral opposite to the woman who demanded Hata kill her. This way, Hata forces her memory to serve the function that the real K could not, using her to solidify his fictional narrative. Yet it is clear that the trauma of K’s death still underlies the narrative. “I cannot die here. And sometimes, sir, I so wish to,” the fictional K insists (287), implying that Hata cannot escape his traumatized past as long as he holds onto his fictional narrative, which keeps him from addressing his real past.

These involuntary instances of remembrance continuously interrupt Hata’s fictional narrative to create an unchronological structure in which Hata’s past gradually becomes dominant despite his best attempts to avoid addressing it. According to Workman, such “intrusion of past into present results in the conflation of time that is so characteristic of trauma, with the consequence that its victims are arrested in some gossamer-like but nevertheless inescapable web, thereby inhibited from any movement into the future” (258). Motuz writes that “[t]his physical merging of paragraphs reflects Hata’s conflating of past and present”, and since he “cannot take hold of his memories in order to make sense of them” but is “confronted with their re-emergence,” it “causes him to become possessed by his trauma” (414-415). While Hata wishes to let the memory of K die, letting go of it becomes impossible because that would require addressing the trauma of his responsibility for her death, which would unravel his fictional narrative. Hata, unable to give memory of K psychic meaning, is caught between his two opposing narratives, clinging to the one he presents in the text with the unaddressed one inevitably intruding. That K’s death is the sort of traumatic event “too heinous ... to give subsequent recognition to” that Workman describes (256) is evident in Hata’s non-descriptions of it. Reading this as a trauma narrative, Hata is revealed as too traumatized to properly recognize his own trauma: he “*could not* smell or hear ... *could not* ... sense that other, tiny, elfin form ... and [he] *could not know* what [he] was doing, *or remember any part*” (Lee 305, emphasis added). The significance of the word choice, “could” instead of “did,” supports the reading of this as a semi-repressed, semi-emerging traumatic event: Hata admits an inability to properly grasp the memory that leaves him barely able to access it. Like Caruth describes, the experience becomes almost dormant in his mind, leaving it ever-present but beyond Hata’s conscious control. The result

is the entrapment Workman describes. Unable to confront his past but equally unable to ignore it, Hata's story becomes heteroglossia consisting of Hata's self-deception, K's suppressed narrative, and the trauma that underlies it. Thereby, it becomes the narrative described by Workman in the beginning: the trauma of Hata's responsibility for K's death, much like his Korean roots discussed previously, is "inaccessible yet ever-present" (Workman 255). Hata's narrative thus becomes as fragmented and incomprehensibly conflicted as his identity.

Finally, Hata's entrapment in the failed narrative of K becomes evident in his interactions with his adopted daughter, Sunny, whom he tries to narrate into the role that K was to fill. As K was meant to aid him obtain his identity as a successful Japanese through the creation of a family, so was Sunny intended to "recuperate Hata by replacing his failure with Kkutaeh with a story of success" and become the solution to "Hata's desire to rewrite his past and his need to constitute himself as an American citizen" (Caroll 609). Sunny, then, becomes a way for him to replace K's traumatic end in Hata's story: she becomes "a chance to begin anew and to right past wrongs" (Motuz 417). By overwriting K's traumatic voice, Hata would be removing one of the conflicting voices in his narrative, thereby promoting the presence of his fictional narrative of success. The similarity of K's and Sunny's functions is also revealed in Hata's conversation about Sunny with Mary Burns, who tells Hata: "[I]t's as if she's a woman to whom you're beholden ... as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes" (Lee 60). The last part is particularly noteworthy: K died precisely because Hata did not adhere to her demand that he kill her, yet "[w]hat seems troubling about Hata's choice not to act is ... that he never seemed to acknowledge the implications of what his choice meant" (Cheng 562). While Hata cannot admit to himself his lack of agency and his responsibility for K's death, it comes out subconsciously through his reactions to Sunny. He is "obliged to do whatever she wishes" because doing so would have kept K from being raped and dismembered. Thus, even though he cannot admit it to himself, Sunny is to become his chance to make up for not having "relented just once when it mattered" (Lee 321). This way, Sunny is an attempt for Hata to address his past in a way sufficiently roundabout to circumvent his trauma. However, repetition of the past is another way trauma victims remain trapped in their trauma (Caruth 109). Thus, it fails precisely because Hata is caught in Workman's inescapable web of the past, and rather than mending the traumatic narrative of K, he reinforces it by reliving the same arc. The abortion he forces Sunny to undergo, the description of which "mirrors, and replays, his earlier account of K's traumatic murder" (Motuz 427), becomes a linguistic sign of Workman's entrapment as well as another involuntary repetition of his past. In the end, Hata's failed relationship with Sunny becomes a testament to his inability to move on rather than the intended symbol of progression.

Furthermore, like K, Sunny rejects the narrative Hata attempts to write her into. Much like K actively speaks against his narrative, Sunny says: "I never needed you ... but you needed me" (Lee 96). Her voice actively opposes Hata's, complicating the heteroglossia, and Hata's role as protector

and patriarch is revealed as no more than an attempt at self-deception to keep him from having to address his role in K's death. Her actions, too, create a different narrative in which Sunny becomes a sexual subject rather than a chaste, idealized object. Hata's insistence on her abortion is a final attempt to force her back into a role supporting his fictional identity, a role that is dependent on her chastity but also "the racial makeup of her future progeny" because racial purity is "central to his success" (Carroll 610). Unlike the inaccessible guilt of K's death, however, Hata does in fact realize the consequences of his actions towards Sunny and shows signs of remorse: "Sunny says softly, 'You ... always knew I felt this way, didn't you?' I nod, even though I'm unsure whether I did or not, whether I ever understood at all how deeply that time might have affected her" (Lee 283). Unlike the situation with K, Hata admits a lack of understanding. He states directly, as a contrast to his normal evasive voice, that he did not have access to Sunny's thoughts. In his encounter with an adult Sunny who is no longer part of his narrative, he is forced to perceive her as a subject and thereby permits her voice to enter his narrative. For a moment, this allows him to rise above his fictional story. However, immediately after, he thinks that "none of it would have worked had she not *been plain scared inside, a frightened girl* ... no matter how sure of herself she was, or *believed she was*" (283, emphasis added). Here, Hata not only narrates Sunny's feelings, he also questions her ability to know her own mind. He is almost at the verge of realization, yet at the last moment he draws back before he can fully acknowledge his responsibility for the consequences of his actions. This merging of acceptance and denial, guilt and self-righteousness is what leads to his disjointed narrative voice that in the end encompasses four different voices: the voice of Hata as a traumatized narrator; the self-deceiving narrative he intends to present; and the voices of K and Sunny that "effectively trump the successful resolution of Hata's assimilationist narrative" (Carroll 613).

This growing realization of responsibility culminates in the final paragraph of the novel, in which Hata states in a manner so lyrical as to be almost fully metaphorical that he will leave Bedley Run to find a place that will be "almost home" (Lee 356). Due to the passage's abstractness, critics have interpreted it in multiple ways. Motuz argues that Hata "mourn[s] his loss of 'self' and his damaged relationship with his daughter," which according to her has been the result of trying to assimilate at the cost of his values and sense of self (430). To her, then, the ending is about realizing the trauma of assimilation. Carroll reads it similarly, claiming that "Hata's opening claim that 'people know me here' ... has been replaced by an acknowledgement of his status as a displaced and marginalized figure" (613). Cheng states that "rather than seeking forgiveness or redemption, the final ethical position that Hata can assume after a life of unseen but visceral moral failures involves relinquishing the fantasy of redemption through some form of intersubjective recognition" (571). All these interpretations revolve around realization and largely assume a negative interpretation in which it is uncertain whether Hata is moving towards something, but certain he now possesses clarity of his own actions. Cheng's reading is particularly relevant to trauma theory, but all these interpretations

support the one this article has presented: throughout the novel, Hata has presented a story of successful assimilation, which rightly should have granted him the identity first as Japanese in the army, later as an American. However, his narrative has been continuously undermined by the voices of K and Sunny, who have both opposed his self-deception and made impossible the appearance of success and even more impossible the obtainment of it. Thus, in the end, Hata realizes his narrative has ruptured. The satisfying story of origins and belonging has been revealed as fiction, and his rootlessness is particularly evident in the final words “almost home” (Lee 356). However, while he has finally addressed the trauma of K’s death and Sunny’s abortion that have both underlain his narrative, what is left is not necessarily a grand turning point. Hata’s voice is no less evasive, and in fact, the abstraction appears as only another layer of concealment meant to protect himself from reality. Hata has not recovered from his trauma; rather, he has merely acknowledged its presence and his own responsibility, as can be seen from his decision to “fly a flag” (356), the symbol of contagion. Thus, the ending is no less traumatized than the rest of the novel; the only conflict that has been truly addressed is that of his two contradictory narratives, with the traumatic one now present in his evasive voice rather than fully suppressed. His voice remains as evasive and traumatized and his identity as fragmented as before.

Conclusion

As a literary representation of trauma theory, *A Gesture Life* is a testament to the challenge of unraveling a trauma narrative. Throughout the novel, Hata presents a front of successful assimilation, but his disjointed narration remains incomprehensible until the reader understands his underlying trauma. As Hata is an adoptee who has been forced to assimilate at the cost of his self not once, but twice, and been complicit in the violent claiming of two women’s bodies and voices, his trauma is multifaceted and postpones the reader’s, and his own, understanding until the end of the novel. The novel thus offers an insight into a traumatized mind in which the literary structure itself becomes the dominant key to understanding. By mirroring the accounts of real victims, which conflate past and present and center around events that cannot be told, the novel forces the reader to consider the challenges accounts of trauma pose to both victims and those who attempt to listen.

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