

Decoding the Immigrant Novel: Using an Age-Graded Psychosocial Approach to Interpret Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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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* 77 (2020): 247-269. Traditional depictions of the immigrant novel portray a migrant who is eager to move to a new land and forget the old. In the novel called *A Gesture Life*, however, the situation of the narrator, a Japanese immigrant named Doc Hata, is much more complex. Through analysis of this narrator via Erikson's model of psychosocial development, originally enigmatic behaviors become both rational and predictable. Hata's reluctance to form intimate attachments, his reliance on the state, and his resistance to change are all explained as logical reactions to developmental trauma. Moreover, distinct changes in behavior at the end of the novel are revealed to be a process of identity formation, which is reliant on the complex interaction of psychology, biology (age), and the environment. Such analysis presents a holistic view of the immigrant experience, thereby clarifying the concept of transnationalism. The analysis also provides a new perspective to interpret the immigrant novel, which is based upon a migrant's individual development in today's complex and interconnected global environment. (Incheon National University)

Key words: Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, Erikson, immigration, identity

I

The seminal work entitled, "The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus, embeds a message which is often cited to combat racist political tendencies in the United States. In the poem, she writes:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,

With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles (1-6).

This excerpt denotes a mighty New World, a “Mother of Exiles” that is ready to light the way to a better life. Whereas this mother is strong, welcoming, and protective, immigrants are depicted as “wretched refuse” (12), unwanted beings in need of salvation. Lazarus continues to describe these newcomers by writing, “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (13). According to this notion, immigrants who are unhappy with a meager existence in their homeland can seek out the warmth, light, and love of a new land like the United States. This conception of the New World as a land of promise has often been used to define the canon of prose referred to as immigrant literature. In the article, “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” by William Q. Boelhower, a positive conception of the New World is bestowed upon the immigrant protagonist, who is depicted as eager to seek out a new life. The protagonist’s idealized view is thought to be slowly eclipsed by a negative one, as the realities of a harsh unfamiliar environment are accepted. Because the immigrant inevitably faces hardships, he or she is hypothesized to be in a state of refection, whereby preconceived notions of the New World are replaced with more idealized versions of the homeland (Boelhower 3).

A positive view of the New World, coupled with a desire to leave behind life in the Old World, may accurately depict the majority of Europeans fleeing poverty during the 17th and 18th centuries, yet this “deliberate erasure” of the homeland is far from accurate in depicting

all types of immigration to the United States (Mukherjee 681). The conception of the United States as a pure and accepting figure for all people is essentially flawed, as evinced by political actions of the period in which the "The New Colossus" was written. Concerning this issue, we can learn that:

The year before Lazarus's poem was read at the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund Art Loan Exhibition in New York, in 1883, the Chinese Exclusion Act became the first federal law that limited immigration from a particular group. Though set to last for 10 years, various extensions and additions made the law permanent until 1943 (Hunter para. 5).

From this excerpt, it is clear that idealized perspectives of life in the New World cannot accurately explain the immigrant experience, nor can they be used as a model for immigrant literature. When examining stylized depictions of the New World, it also becomes apparent that "the aesthetic result often remains intimately linked to the social and political structures of the host region/city/town" (Van Liew 2). It is this link between the New World aesthetic and sociopolitical structures that shapes characterizations of the United States, making it "the land of opportunity" for some, and "the land of exclusion" for others. Like idealized images that empower immigrants who come to a new land, implicit social, political, and economic bias simultaneously hinder those who are deemed undesirable.

Unlike "The Immigrant Novel as Genre," which focuses on the New World, "Imaginary Homelands," by Salman Rushdie, describes the immigrant novel through an idealized lens of the Old World. In the article, the author outlines a personal struggle to understand his homeland and define identity. Rushdie begins by explaining a black and white photo of his ancestral home, which is an idealized and

monochromatic image of his birthplace. Through this image, we can understand that an immigrant's understanding of the ancestral homeland is merely an illusion. Rushdie further explains that "physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions" (Rushdie 10). As this statement illustrates, the idealized nature of the Old World is not only illusive and separate from reality, it is transient. In one way, this stylized view of the Old World is reminiscent of Boelhower's idealized views. The similarity is only superficial, however. Unlike standardized conceptions of the immigrant experience, Rushdie's perspective depicts an individualized reality, which is uniquely shaped through experiences that are both diverse and novel. Rushdie further explains this view by saying "my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (10). According to this statement, it is not the whole, but the fragmented understanding that makes an immigrant novel so interesting. Like archaeology, fragmentation of trivial things can lead to mystery, wonder, and a fresh new perspective (Rushdie 12).

While Boelhower's framework for describing an immigrant novel is largely based upon relocation, Rushdie's view of the genre involves an internal cognitive construction of memory. In reality, each conception is needed. The immigrant novel cannot be accurately understood without considering both external and internal processes of immigration. This view is illustrated through an examination of *A Gesture Life*, by Chang-rae Lee, where interaction between location and internal psychological processes culminates in the formation of a new identity. In the novel, the protagonist and narrator, Doc Hata, moves to the United States, yet continues to reflect on past experiences as an ethnic Korean soldier in a Japanese colonial army during World War

II. Through his life in America, which is juxtaposed with memories of a wartime comfort woman named K and an adopted daughter Sunny, Doc Hata is forced to reflect upon his experience and identity, which ultimately prompts him to sell his American home to “walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away” (Lee 356). About this trajectory of development, Julie Klinke asserts that the narrator suffers from traumatic heteroglossia, which appears only symptomatically in depictions of wartime experiences; she writes that “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” (30). Concerning this trauma, Matthew Miller asserts that the novel highlights “recuperation” through moving “back into his past to grow forward in self” (1). As the reader learns about Doc Hata’s multiple levels of Otherness as “a transplanted Korean identifying himself as Japanese transplanted in America” (Miller 2), the struggle to resolve past atrocities and issues of identity becomes more salient.

Aspects of trauma do indeed explain the narrator’s thoughts later in the novel, as Doc Hata states, “if I’ve seen what no decent being should ever look upon and have to hold in close remembrance, perhaps it means I should be left to the cold device of history” (Lee 345). As he acknowledges that “nearly every soul” around him has come to a tragic end, he also realizes a persistence with “warmth and privilege accruing to me unabated” (Lee 346). This realization implies that the narrator is in a state of psychological conflict as he examines his survival alongside the tragedy of others around him. While there is indeed a conflict that appears in the novel, the narrator’s behavior in response to this conflict is enigmatic and difficult to understand. Unlike someone who avoids trauma, Hata appears to embrace and enjoy seemingly

revolting situations. This perspective is exemplified as he recounts a letter written by his wartime friend Fujimori. The letter describes the horrible death of a friend Enchi, whose entrails had blown up into the trees, where birds “happily” picked “at the leaves and branches” (Lee 127-128). Concerning this letter, Hata writes “I still have the letter and read it sometimes for no burning reason” (Lee 127). The reader may be puzzled, as Hata reveals no emotion, nor has any tendency to avoid the death he sees around him. This apathy is also evident when examining the body of a comfort woman who had jumps to her death during World War II. As his friend, Enchi, nervously smokes, Hata examines her physical features, commenting that she is “neither homely nor pretty” (Lee 108). Later, he examines another comfort woman who has been murdered using the same dispassionate tone. He calmly describes her “coal-dark” eyes that are “still bright and glassy” with some strange sense of fascination (Lee 188). Instead of recognizing the ugliness and cruelty of the situation, he comments “I appreciated what she truly looked like, the simple cast of her young girl’s face” (188). Rather than revealing any clear emotional trauma to such events, Hata exhibits a kind of morbid curiosity.

In addition to Hata’s captivation with death and destruction, he also displays hypervigilance in his adherence to the Japanese colonial system, which is ultimately designed to suppress members of his own ethnic background. He blindly follows the commands of Captain Ono, who belittles him due to his Korean “parentage” (Lee 266). Although Hata later tries to save K, a comfort woman with whom he has developed an attachment, he inevitably fails to take any significant action to free her from a Lieutenant, who eventually orchestrates her gang rape and murder. Again, Hata views the remains in a cold, emotionless state, gathering the bloody body parts only to recognize a tiny “elfin” form, the remains of a fetus (Lee 305). Just as Hata reveals a cold and firm

connection to the colonizing culture of Japan, he shows an equally strong resolve to obey sociocultural mandates dictated by an American state. This is revealed when he receives welcome cards and baskets in the new town of Bedley Run; he judges “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” (Lee 44). Whereas this statement reveals a strong need to obey the rules of society, Hata does not establish intimate relationships with members of the community. He avoids attachment to a local widow, Mary Burns, who eagerly seeks out a romantic relationship. Essentially, Hata is a kind of flaneur, a man who strolls about, evaluating his environment as a member of society, without being in society itself (Tester 3). There is a clear emotional disconnect that gives him a public social role without any of the personal connections that accompany such positions.

A final inconsistency in Hata's behavior appears to center around his adopted daughter, Sunny. As with other members of society, Hata fails to make a close connection with his own daughter, growing “too accustomed” to the distance between them (Lee 30). He boasts about the fact that “Japanese fathers are famously overgenerous to their children ... and so it was quite normal that I should be as well” (Lee 71). Although Hata superficially provides the food and education that Sunny needs, he fails to engage meaningfully through dialogue. He also refuses to punish Sunny, saying that “I've always wanted to do that, and yet never have” (Lee 86). In addition to his failure to establish a relationship with his daughter, he seems equally ambivalent to her ethnicity and race, which appears more prominently at the end of the novel. His stalwart dedication to his Japanese heritage would suggest that Korean ethnicity and Sunny's African-American heritage would be a subject of concern. Although Jeehyun Lim suggests this racial

depiction of Sunny shows “how blackness becomes a reminder of Korean abjection in the formation of the Korean American subject” (5), we learn little about race until the end of the novel, suggesting that this issue was not central to the narrator’s psychological conflict. Any type of diversity is ignored, which seems to run contrary to Hata’s ultra-nationalistic beliefs.

II

Hata is a trauma victim who appreciates trauma, a social person who avoids social relationships, a doting father who ignores his daughter, and a nationalist who accepts diversity. His behavior is clearly enigmatic and difficult to interpret, even if the story is examined through the lens of trauma theory. Hamilton Carroll argues that “Through its presentation of a traumatic narrative that consistently displaces and undercuts Hata’s narrative voice, Lee’s novel argues for a more coherent understanding of the complex conditions that produce Asian American identity in the contemporary United States” (596). The novel does indeed seem to argue for a more holistic view of identity, yet research has failed to identify how complex conditions influence the seemingly enigmatic behavior of Doc Hata.

Mark Jerng elaborates upon the complex factors of identity formation in *A Gesture Life*, asserting that the novel delineates a “problem of how to make sense of transracial adoptees as they emerge within intersecting processes of racialization, naturalization, and nationalization” (42). Once again, insight about the novel identifies problems of identity formation without concretely establishing the effects of such influences on Doc Hata’s behavior. Such analysis limits our understanding of the immigrant experience, since we cannot clearly comprehend the actual impact of various transnational factors on the individual.

To truly understand how inconsistencies in Doc Hata's behavior are linked to trauma, the interaction between identity and environment must be more fully understood. Ultimately, behaviors are the manifestation of internal psychological processes that develop in response to an unpredictable external world. According to the *Hierarchy of Prominence*, this internal process of development is governed by the three following characteristics:

1. The degree of support that self is receiving from others to shape identity.
2. The degree of self's commitment to the identity that he or she accepts and was given by society.
3. The degree of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards that he or she is given by the society that is supreme (Cinoğlu and Arıkan 1119).

As the *Hierarchy of Prominence* suggests, Hata's behavior is a reflection of the interplay between internal and external forces that shape identity. In accordance with this theory, more support and reinforcement received from one's superiors can lead to a more prominent identity. This perspective may explain Hata's zeal for nationalist behavior, which is reinforced through educational achievement, adoption by Japanese parents, and promotion to the level of officer during World War II. At the same time, racial slurs or discrimination due to Korean heritage would seem an adequate impetus for abandonment of nationalist tendencies, yet Doc Hata shows little change in his behavior. Although he eventually challenges Captain Ono with concern to K, he ultimately continues to follow the social structure of the state, whether it be in Japan or the United States. As pointed out by Cinoğlu and Arıkan, this style of strict obedience is normally cultivated through the imposed isolation of oppressors. Terrorist bombers, for example, are placed in strict seclusion to prevent the development of socially acceptable

identities, so that these individuals become compliant and submissive underlings (1121). Although Hata is partially isolated in the Japanese camp, he is presented with numerous opportunities during his life to develop close social relationships and new identities through figures like K, Sunny, and Mary Burns. Despite such opportunities, he chooses to maintain a highly nationalist fervor and strict adherence to social rules.

In part, theories of psychology appear to explain the mysterious actions of Doc Hata, who struggles to maintain his identity through strict adherence to social or political mandates. Yet his apathy and lack of response to substantial stressors in the environment appears to conflict with traditional theories of identity, which suggest that some type of emotional or behavioral change would occur (Cinoğlu and Arıkan 1123). In the case of Doc Hata, we see little alteration in either belief or action as each new challenge is encountered. He is apathetic, revealing a morbid fascination in ruminating about the death of friends, fellow soldiers, and comfort women. He also reveals problems with intimacy, as he is unable to cultivate close relationships with any women in his life. Such cold and unemotional behavior leads the reader to wonder if the narrator is actually a sociopath. His actions appear counterintuitive to normal behavior, since events leading to death or intimacy normally have some kind of perceivable impact. Perhaps there is indeed a psychological effect exerted by notable stressors. Seemingly enigmatic actions of the narrator appear more rational when examined as the product of the intersection between age, biology, and psychology. Researchers like Erikson have used these factors to explain various aspects of psychosocial behavior. Through using such a fresh interpretive framework for the analysis of Doc Hata, mysteries of the narrator may finally become rational and transparent.

At early stages of Erikson's theory, from 12 months to 6 years, children require trust, autonomy, and initiative. These needs are

generally provided for via the attention of caregivers, who allow toddlers to act out and initiate activities through social interaction and play. If parents fail to give proper care, children may grow to mistrust all people. They may also feel a sense of guilt or shame if not allowed to act out or initiate interaction (“Erikson’s 8 Stages” 4, 5, 6). Although Doc Hata’s life at a very young age is not clearly illustrated, we glean valuable insights from his indirect allusions to early childhood. Within the novel, initial psychosocial stages that require trust, autonomy, and initiative appear to be adversely affected by the narrator’s upbringing. Hata writes “I too had been a difficult child. For me, it was the heady time of adolescence that unmasked and clarified my sense of obligations, so much so that I now view that period as the true beginning of ‘my life.’” (72). From this statement, we learn that Hata carries both guilt and shame in regard to his early childhood. Because he was not allowed to behave freely, he was unable to build a sense of self-worth. Only after leaving his Korean family, which occurs sometime before the beginning of elementary school, does he begin to build a sense of pride. After adolescence, Hata begins to adhere to social norms, which serve to oppress a natural tendency to act out. By marking adolescence as “the true beginning” of life, the narrator shows a desire to suppress memory of younger years, exposing a problem in psychosocial development.

Guilt and shame concerning early childhood is further exemplified by a description of life with a Japanese couple. Hata states “This was when I first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relation between self and his society. There is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating. For me, it was readily leaving the narrow existence of my ghetto of hide tanners and renderers” (72). From this statement, we can perceive a sense of shame concerning Hata’s Korean birth parents. Due to his humble origins in a ghetto, family members may not have

been able to facilitate Hata's autonomy and initiative, exacerbating psychological distress. The text also reveals direct evidence that Hata's parents openly suppressed his behavior. He states "it [birth name] was never used by anyone, including my real parents, who, it must be said, wished as much as I that I become wholly and thoroughly Japanese" (235). In being deprived of his true behavior and identity as a Korean child, Hata appears deeply scarred. It is this troubled upbringing which leads him to mistrust everyone in society.

While depiction of life with Japanese parents appears superficially positive, deeper analysis suggests that the experience was also emotionally traumatic. Hata describes his Japanese adoptive parents by saying "I lived with a well-to-do childless couple, a gear factory owner and his wife, who treated me as well as a son, providing me with every material need and advantage. I remember being accompanied by them on the first day of school, in my new serge uniform with brass buttons that they had fitted just for me, and how the other boys had let us pass without even a murmur, this prominent family Kurohata" (72). In providing for "every material need and advantage," the parents clearly neglect Hata's emotional needs. Surprise at safely passing by the other school children also suggests that bullying may have been a problem. At the same time, Hata appears to get a sense, as evinced by the uniform, that position is the only way to stop abuse. In this way, the uniform becomes a symbol of stability in lieu of parents. This assertion is proven when Hata says "I think of them (Kurohata parents) most warmly, as I do my natural parents, but to neither would I ascribe the business of having reared me, for it seems clear that it was the purposeful society that did so, and really nothing and no one else. I was more than grateful. And I knew even then as a boy of twelve how I should always give myself over to its vigilance, entrusting to its care everything I could know or ever hope for" (72). Essentially, mistrust

of caregivers has made society the only "parent" that Hata may rely on. It is at this point that he becomes hyper-vigilant in obeying the state, which is sublimation resulting from mistrust and repression at a young age. He carries this sense of social stability into his years as a soldier where he states "In this schema the commander had his level, the officers had theirs, the enlisted men and others yet another, and so on and so forth, until it came to the girls, who had their own. All this was inviolable, like any set of natural laws" (227). He sees society as a stable and inviolable parent that can give him the psycho-social stability he needs.

Although a negative sense of guilt and shame emerges in the early years, a positive sense of industry appears while Hata attends school and lives with the Kurohata family. The narrator's desire for industry coincides with the next stage of Erikson's psychosocial development, which usually lasts from the age of 6 to 12. During this stage, children seek out achievement, which is compared to that of peers to build a sense of industry ("Erikson's 8 Stages" 7). It is around this time period that Hata begins to excel in his studies; with his new parent, the state or society that rules his life, he begins to develop. This growth in self-worth is revealed in the statement, "I was fortunate to score exceptionally high on several achievement tests, and was one of a few boys of my kind to be identified and enrolled in a special school in the nearby large city." (72). The nature of his upbringing and society drive him toward a social, cultural, or political outlet for his sense of isolation and neglect. He is industrious, leading to the economic prosperity and advancement outlined in the novel. Although he identifies with the state, he shows a disconnect with its citizens. This perspective is supported by Hata's own self designation as a "boy of my kind." The sense of otherness reveals a distance between the narrator and other Japanese citizens, further exemplifying the mistrust, guilt, and

shame received from earlier years.

In the next stage, which lasts from the ages of 12 to 18, individuals are thought to develop a sense of identity, which defines the role of self. Those who have a strong sense of identity can adhere to beliefs and values in the face of problems, whereas those who are pressured to conform may have a weak sense of self (“Erikson’s 8 Stages” 8). Because Hata does not gain a sense of trust from any caregivers, he becomes a “ward of the state,” serving to glorify Japan. Furthermore, his foster parents and the state both dictate what he is to do, giving him a weak sense of self. This explains a fascination with identity around this time, coupled with an inability or reluctance to rebel against authority, both of which reflect a weakened self-image. During Hata’s young age as a soldier, he sees a deceased Korean comfort woman and states, “The girl was the first dead person I had ever seen. She was neither homely nor pretty. She was just a girl, otherwise unremarkable, perhaps fifteen or so. I kept thinking she looked to be Korean, with her broad, square face” (108). By noticing her Korean features, Hata is examining his own identity. He realizes that Korean features may be the reason for death, thereby strengthening a resolve to follow the Japanese order. On some level, the worthless nature in which the comfort woman is treated acts as a stressor. This view is supported by the statement “I kept thinking about them [the comfort women] looking over the edge of the sill, how they’d gazed transfixedly at the body.” (109). Hata’s fixation shows an emotional conflict. Nevertheless, he tries to reject his identity as a Korean and moves closer to isolation and association with the state. There is evidence that Hata himself realizes the age-graded impact of psychosocial development, commenting that “I was youthful and naïve enough that I possessed much more of a kind of hard focusing than any circumspection, which one may agree has remained with me for my whole life” (239). Without

a consistent identity, he struggles to break away from what parents, peers, or society expect from him. He does not possess the ability to change his actions, due to age-related variables and concomitant influences from environmental factors.

According to Erikson, individuals in their 20s to 40s focus more on intimacy, establishing close social relationships with others. If prior stages are not resolved, however, the individual may not be able to establish close relationships, resulting in loneliness ("Erikson's 8 Stages" 9). We see the latter, maladaptive reaction to intimacy during this stage. Hata fails to form close relationships with parents, choosing to remain distant through identification with the state, which ultimately hampers Hata's ability to cultivate intimate relationships with others. He continues with the idea that "conservational laws apply to human beings and their endeavors" (127), suggesting that science and systems provide the only solace. During his period as a soldier, he sees the death of comfort women, as well as his friend Enchi, further supporting the conclusion that relationships are unstable. His sense of mistrust is further expounded by the statement "It is the vulnerability of people that has long haunted me" (220). He expresses a clear psychological stress regarding relationships, which is further explained by his realization that "a tent or a house (or a body) can take on super-reality, in the acknowledgement that they can be blown literally into nothingness, instantly pass from this state to the next" (240). Because people in life may disappear at any minute, Hata is not able to trust that any relationship can be permanently maintained. From this perspective, his seemingly obsessive need and appreciation of death seems logical. The ephemerality of relationships serves as a stressor.

From the 40s to the 60s, individuals often want to become generative, working and contributing to "the development of others through activities such as volunteering, mentoring, and raising children"

("Erikson's 8 Stages" 10). At the age of 40, Hata moves into this new stage. While sublimating a need for relationships and intimacy through adherence to political and social mandates, he desires to leave a legacy through parenting and mentorship. Without an ability to establish close relationships, however, raising Sunny is doomed from the start. Hata's adoption was not done out of a traditional desire to love. Rather, it was a need to become productive. Because Hata views people as merely fulfilling a social role, he thinks of Sunny as a mere "cog" in the machine. Thus, her race is immaterial. At this stage, considering her diversity and individual feelings would require an intimate relationship that Hata is still unable to provide.

In the final stage, which lasts from the mid 60s until death, an individual reflects on his or her life to either feel a sense of integrity or regret. During this stage, individuals may focus on the "would have" or "should have." ("Erikson's 8 Stages" 11). In Hata's later years as an octogenarian, careful circumspection is clearly evident in his rumination of changes in the small town of Bedley Run. He initially attempts to ignore the transformation of his town, refusing to go to the local smoke shop because men are "preoccupied with perceived 'changes' in the character of the town and area" (133). Despite a reluctance to question a preconceived notion of society, which serves as an unchanging and stable "parent," Hata cannot ignore logical flaws of instability, which serve as a stressor. When Hata burns his house, he recognizes that his only parent, the town of Bedley Run, is not something he can rely on. Ultimately, Hata is no longer able to cope with social instability that he views around him, evinced by the statement "I've found the collective memory here to be shorter than I wished to believe, and getting shorter still. I've gone from being good Doc Hata to the nice old fellow to whoever that ancient Oriental is" (200). Because Hata realizes his reliance on society as a "parent" is unstable, he seeks to

reconcile failures of the past. It is at this time that he seeks out a relationship with Sunny, as well as her son. Additionally, personal information about Sunny's interracial heritage and abandonment at a Christian orphanage becomes evident (335) during this period, reflecting a change in beliefs. After realizing that his house is a "forgery" (352), he also learns the importance of intimate relationships, which is expressed through the selling of his house, buying out of the mortgage for his old medical supply store for Sunny, and paying for a sick man's hospital bills (355).

Through analysis of Doc Hata via Erikson's model of psychosocial development, originally enigmatic behaviors become both rational and predictable. Hata's reluctance to form intimate attachments, a reliance on the state, and a resistance to change are all logical reactions to developmental trauma. Moreover, as the narrator ages, the reader can identify a distinct change in behavior that reflects identity formation according to the complex interaction of psychology, biology (age), and the environment. It is an understanding of the interaction of multiple factors in *A Gesture Life* which allows for the decipherment of a NOT-so-mysterious Doc Hata.

III

While research revealing the existence of trauma in *A Gesture Life* helps us to understand the complexities of one individual's psychosocial development, it also expands our understanding of the immigrant experience, further defining what it means to be transnational. Concerning the global environment which helps define this term, De Fina and Perrino write:

To observers of modernity, globalization centrally involves unprecedented flows of people, goods, money, but also discourses,

images and all kinds of symbols throughout the globe, and profound changes in communication technologies. For this reason, metaphors of movement and flow are becoming prevailing frames to understand these new realities (509).

Within the excerpt, the fluidity of economic, political, and social concepts reveals a breakdown of traditional boundaries. This breakdown serves to deconstruct binary frameworks such as those of Boelhower, which stereotypically explain immigrant identity as a discreet distinction between the New and the Old. The term “metaphors of movement” is used to explain the immigrant’s connection to a larger global community, which embodies the modern concept of transnationalism. In *A Gesture Life*, the author carefully deconstructs and describes notions of the immigrant in much the same way. Doc Hata initially serves as a trope of the immigrant experience envisioned by Boelhower; he is a Japanese migrant who gives up the Old World in search of the American dream. Throughout the novel, however, the author deconstructs this trope, allowing us to understand that Korean ethnic background, new Japanese parents and friends, and members of the local American community comprise several connective layers, all of which have an effect on Hata’s development. The novel leaves the reader with a more highly complex conception of what it means to be an immigrant in today’s global context.

As exemplified by Doc Hata, transnationalism is not a one-way process in which the migrant adopts a new identity. Each immigrant retains affiliations with different social, political, and economic groups that span the globe. Through such complex relationships with various groups, an immigrant maintains links to both global and local communities. In the case of Doc Hata, he reveals local links to his American community of Bedley Run, while maintaining global connections to both Korea and Japan. The coexistence of local and

global processes is also reflected in the real world today, which mirrors the novel. Speakers of the Veneto dialect, for example, maintain local communal links to one Italian region by emphasizing “their regional belonging rather than their national one by promoting dialect over Standard Italian”; at the same time, these speakers maintain connections to a larger global context through constructing “a transnational identity as Veneti nel mondo (‘Veneto people in the world’)—reaching out especially to Veneto speakers in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and the USA” (Perrino 574). Like Doc Hata, modern-day immigrants negotiate a complex system of regional and cultural boundaries in the modern age. In this way, the traditional and stereotypical notion of the immigrant as “wretched refuse” that yearns for a new home becomes clearly flawed, explaining deconstruction in Chang-rae Lee’s novel.

Although conceptions of affiliation and migration are examined, the novel goes further to explore individual development of a transnational immigrant, revealing biological influences based on age-graded psychosocial development. Multiple ethnic and national affiliations cannot accurately define the immigrant experience if individual consideration of psychology and biology is ignored. This perspective is exemplified in the novel, where Doc Hata’s seemingly enigmatic behaviors only become rational when standard stages of psychological development are applied. A fascination with death becomes clear when a psycho-social stressor is identified, whereby the narrator is unable to trust anyone intimately. A mistrust of parents, as well as the effects of war, have developed a sense that no life will last, illuminating Hata’s cold and detached fascination with the deceased. This stressor also explains his reliance on the state, which serves as a new parent. Concerning the objectification of Sunny, Hata’s desire to be a productive member of society appears to be the driving factor.

Motivation for productivity, not intimacy, explains emotional detachment concerning Sunny's racial or personal characteristics. Finally, Hata's obsession with reflection at an old age is explained by the final stage of psychosocial development. It is at this time that he becomes aware of the impermanence of society itself, as well as the joy that individual relationships can bring. On the whole, application of Erikson's psychosocial stages to the interpretation of the novel helps to reveal the true motivations of a highly enigmatic narrator. It also exemplifies the need to look at how environmental factors interact with individual characteristics of biology and psychology to impact the immigrant experience.

As this study suggests, it is impossible to accurately define transnationalism and the immigrant experience without understanding the intersection of psychology, biology, and the environment, all of which create a situational context that dynamically shapes individual identity (Kim and Choe 79). Hata's behaviors do indeed reflect a constant process of development, not just a sudden epiphany that occurs at the end of life. In some small way, the narrator may reflect the author himself, Chang-rae Lee. The author was relocated to the United States as a toddler (3 years old), where he was compelled to assimilate by his mother, who "would only speak to him in Korean at home so that he would learn English without a Korean accent" ("Chang-rae Lee Biography" para. 6). The mother's desire to make young Chang-rae Lee achieve seems strangely reminiscent of the young Doc Hata, who is forced to use the language and customs of a colonial power.

The view that an age-graded psychosocial system of development is tied to both narrator and author has the potential to heighten understanding of other immigrant novels, such as *Nowhere Man* by Aleksandar Hemon. In this story, a narrator constantly changes, providing a different social perspective in each chapter. The constant

shifting of relationships between the narrator and other characters in the story reveals a preoccupation with social interaction. The narrator also focuses deeply on intimate relationships, reflecting a clear sense of self and desire for intimacy. In one scenario, a homosexual narrator imagines putting his tongue in the mouth of a Bosnian protagonist named Pronek (Hemon 123). The clear fascination with social interaction and intimacy evident within the novel may be explained through psychosocial analysis of Hemon, who moved to the United States at the age of 27. Leaving his native country at precisely the time when psychological desires move toward intimacy, he may have felt subconsciously compelled to explore such issues (Ward 185). As in the case of *A Gesture Life*, analysis of *Nowhere Man* reveals that immigrant novels cannot be properly understood without investigating the age-graded foundations of individual development and their impact on the immigrant's experience.

In conclusion, psychosocial analysis of the novel, *A Gesture Life*, has furthered our understanding of the complexities that define an immigrant's experience, whereby social, political, and economic interdependence is the norm. Chang-rae Lee uses the narrator, Doc Hata, to reveal global interdependence by first deconstructing notions of national, cultural, and communal identity, thereby blurring traditional boundaries. As in Junior's "Merican" identity in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*, which denotes "peoples of Mexican descent living in the United States who identify strongly with both nations" (Szeghi 162), past notions of one national identity are deliberately obfuscated in the novel, revealing the transcendent conception of transnationalism. Next, the novel provides a holistic view of an individual's interaction according to biological, social, and psychological perspectives, allowing the reader to redefine what it means to be an immigrant. Through an examination of Doc Hata's unique circumstance, "we are pushed to

dislodge ourselves from positions of comfort and certainty,” so that we may “understand the world through the eyes of others” (Hill 955). In this way, a new appreciation of the immigrant novel emerges, as the reader is led to reflect on and appreciate complex environmental and psychosocial struggles of migrants in today’s global community.

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