

# Challenging the Color-Blind American Dream: Transnational Adoption in *A Gesture Life*, *The Love Wife*, and *Digging to America*

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**Abstract:** In historical terms the culture-specific notion of “the American Dream” has excluded racialized groups of people. However, the rise of postethnic and color-blind thinking in the past few decades implies that ethnic and racial equality has already been realized in the United States where people are free to choose their ethnic identities. Adoption as a literary trope is regarded as important because it allows authors to speak of broader questions about identity and belonging. This study focuses on transnational and transracial adoption in three novels: Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999), Gish Jen’s *The Love Wife* (2004), and Ann Tyler’s *Digging to America* (2006). These novels link adoption to the realization of one of the updated versions of the American Dream. I call it the Color-Blind American Dream, because it is pursued through denial of racial difference. As the adopting families in the three novels differ from one another, I examine the depth of their faithfulness to notions of race transcendence—and if the novels in question ultimately challenge the Color-Blind American Dream. In a white-dominated society, Asian immigrants and adoptees of Asian descent are socialized to identify with idealized whiteness, but experiences of racism inescapably draw attention to their visible difference. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a shift in Asian American studies to transnationalism and diasporic identity constructions as well as psychoanalytic criticism. In my essay, I apply the psychoanalytic concepts of “racial melancholia” and “racial reparation,” which have been developed by Asian American scholars. Since the three novels, which all tackle transnational and transracial adoption, invest in the Color-Blind American Dream, these theoretical concepts are helpful in questioning what is being repressed in adhering to a postethnic and color-blind refusal to engage history and how this affects identity and sense of national belonging.

**Keywords:** Transnational adoption—American Dream—national belonging—racialization—racial melancholia —loss—repression—racial reparation—American literature—Asian American literature

In “What is an American,” the third widely reprinted letter in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), James, the narrator, answers a question he poses to himself. He refers to the American as “this new man” and continues: “He is either an European, or the descendant of an European” (Crèvecoeur n. pag.). This conflation of American identity and white masculinity established a template for many generations of Americans. The sunny optimism of the letter describes the ample rewards America has to offer to its new citizens and can be associated with the culture-specific notion of “the American Dream.” The American Dream is frequently linked with discourses of American exceptionalism, and has a number of definitions, which are related to the idea of the nation and the uniqueness of the American experience. The ideology of the American Dream is described by Jennifer L. Hochschild as the promises “that everyone, regardless of ascription or background, may reasonably seek success through actions and traits under their own control” (4). Expounded by the dominant white culture, the American Dream has historically excluded racialized groups of people. Indeed, it has been claimed that the narrative of the American Dream ultimately unifies European American ethnicity: a group “of people who came with little, faced discrimination, and finally ‘made it’” (Koshy 188). While the attainment of the American Dream used to be conditioned by the immigrants’ successful “melting pot” assimilation into the dominant white society, the rise of postethnic or color-blind multiculturalisms in recent decades favors superficial ethnic differentiation. It also implies that ethnic and racial equality has already been realized in the United States where people are free to choose their ethnic identities.

The history of multiculturalism is rooted in the American civil rights movement, but the term did not emerge until the 1970s (Chae 1). Color-blindness was one of the major goals of the civil rights movement, but the meaning of the word has since changed. Multicultural conservatives deny the reality of “race,” racialization and the mechanisms of racial oppression in the United States, and as the authors of *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* point out “voluntary individual choice is crucial to today’s color-blind worldview” (Brown et al. 11). While critics view the

postethnic and color-blind versions of conservative multiculturalisms as falling short of the ideals of the civil rights movement, the notion of a color-blind society not only appeals to upper- and middle-class ethnic and racial minorities, who identify with whiteness through their class aspirations, but also to incoming new non-white immigrants (Koshy 186). Thus, the recent discourse of the American Dream also includes what has been called the transnational American Dream, or what Susan Koshy calls—with special reference to certain well-to-do Asian Americans and wealthy middle-class immigrants from Asia—an updated or “refurbished American Dream” (165, 183). In my essay, I will refer to the new American Dream, linked to the new, putatively color-blind and postethnic multiculturalisms, as the Color-Blind American Dream in distinction to the other current mutations of the traditional American Dream. In the three novels I discuss in the following pages the Color-Blind American Dream interpolates the fictional characters to pursue this updated American Dream through denial of racial difference.

In general, the American Dream is individualistic, but it is not merely materialistic as it involves the fulfillment garnered by a happy family life.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the changes in the conventional structures of the family, most Americans still believe in the traditional ideal of the nuclear family, that is, of two parents and children (“Transnational Adoption” 8). International adoption has become an important possibility of parenting since World War II, and this is reflected in contemporary American literature. Significantly, the first post-World War II transnational adoptees from Europe to the United States were followed by orphans from South Korea in the wake of the armistice ending the Korean War in 1953. Subsequently, interest in transnational adoptions grew in Western countries prior to the arrival of different forms of reproductive technologies. This was due to a domestic shortage of adoptable white children as a result of declining birth rates. Transnational or transracial adoptions from South Korea have been followed by similar initiatives from other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and China (“Transnational Adoption” 10).

The three novels on which I will concentrate are, in order of appearance, Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999), Gish Jen’s *The Love Wife* (2004), and Anne Tyler’s *Digging to America* (2006). These three novels link adoption to the realization of the American Dream and its Color-Blind version. On the surface, they appear to espouse color-blindness as a posi-

1 See, for instance, Zao 123, 125.

tive paradigm for thought and action. The three novels depict four different privileged families, but only the parents of the Donaldson family in *Digging to America* can be labeled a WASP couple. As the American families of Asian orphans differ from one another, my aim here is to examine how deeply they remain faithful to the notions of race transcendence, or if all or some of the novels ultimately challenge the Color-Blind American Dream.

Adoption embodies exceptions to the rules of blood kinship in establishing parenthood through contract. It has not only been a much debated real-life practice but has also been, as Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley claim, a notable trope or narrative event, in major American literary landmarks (3, 4). As Cynthia Callahan maintains, adoption, as a literary trope, “allows authors to speak of broader questions about identity and belonging” (2). The principle of the so called “clean break” from the past prevailed in the adoption discourse of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Homans 186). According to Margaret Homans, this required forgetting a child’s past and her full assimilation into the new country. This also meant that within this discourse transnational adoptees’ return trips to their countries of origin were unimaginable (186). However, scholars claim that contemporary “adoption stories emerge in the 1970s as part of the adoption rights movement,” with its demand for the adoptees’ “right to know their identity” (*Claiming Others* 170, 128). Historically, Western representations of transnational and transracial adoption have been associated with acts of Christian charity and humanitarian good works, but, as Mark C. Jerng points out, contemporary adoption stories contest “the grand sentimental narrative of salvation” (*Claiming Others* 128). In addition to fiction, the forms of adoption writing include a growing literature of anthologies, memories, and documentaries (*Claiming Others* 170). Moreover, different kinds of return narratives have become predominant in adoption stories to the extent that “[a]doptee memoirs have disproportionately focused on individuals on a search and reunion plot” (225). However, the novels I will focus on in this essay do not center on a search or reunion plot. Rather they either delve into the memories of traumatic histories before adoption in the adoptees’ birth country and in the United States, or they refer to the significance of these social contexts.

Transnational and transracial adoption has not only been topical in Asian American literature, but also in Asian American literary studies during the past decade. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a discernible shift in Asian American studies from nationalism to transnationalism and diasporic identity constructions as well as psychoanalytic criticism (Li 613).

Significantly, studies of transnational, transracial adoption emerged in this context. In his work on transnational adoption from Asia, literary scholar David L. Eng argues that transnational adoption is “one of the most privileged forms of contemporary immigration,” but he also points out that “it is largely devoid of emotional agency for the adoptee” (“Transnational Adoption” 1, 10, 22). In white and white-identified families Asian adoptees are socialized to identify with idealized whiteness. Yet, racism and racialization undermine the contemporary image of the United States as a country that supports multiculturalism as an official discourse bolstering ethnic and racial diversity. Thus experiences of racism inescapably draw the transracial adoptees’ attention to their visible difference.

Anne Anlin Cheng was the pioneering scholar to draw attention to race as a melancholic construction in the American context. Eng offers a psychoanalytic theory of what he also calls “racial melancholia.” He describes it as an unconscious “psychic process by which vexed identification and affiliations with lost objects, places and ideals of both Asianness *and* whiteness remain estranged and unresolved” (“Transnational Adoption” 17; emphasis in the original). Eng has usefully analyzed Deann Borshay Liem’s documentary film entitled *First Person Plural* (2000), which deals with the filmmaker’s own story as an adoptee from South Korea, in light of racial melancholia. He has also elaborated on the same theoretical framework together with Shinhee Han, a New York-based psychotherapist. Utilizing Melanie Klein’s extension of Freud’s theory on mourning and her psychoanalytic work on the earliest infantile development, Eng and Han characterize the Asian adoptees’ identity processes as ambivalent because of their traumatic early separation from their birth mothers and the birth nations in which they were born, and their subsequent integration into white-dominated nations where their unresolved and hidden grief is not acknowledged (“A Dialogue” 350, 359; “Desegregating” 183). They conclude that it is possible for a transnational adoptee to repair her racial melancholia, but Eng emphasizes that it “can be worked through only with the greatest of considerable pain and difficulty” (“Transnational Adoption” 16). The Asian American protagonist of *A Gesture Life* conforms to the assimilationist expectations of his white surroundings by repressing his traumatic past in Asia. My investigation of Lee’s representation of racial melancholia looks at the painful memories that return to haunt the protagonist after the departure of his adoptive daughter from South Korea. I will use Eng and Han’s theoretical insights to explore whether the protagonist’s brutal excavation of his past will help

him find a reparative position for race. Instances of racial melancholia can also be detected in the behavior of the fictional adoptees of Asian descent, who learn to idealize whiteness in a white-dominated society in the novels penned by Jen and Tyler. I will apply Eng and Han's theory of two mothers to my reading of these two novels.

## I

The psychoanalytic approach adopted by Asian American scholars has provided valuable insights for my discussion of *A Gesture Life*. This novel is the Korean-born author's second book. Lee emigrated to the United States with his family at the age of three, and his fiction features immigrant experiences of Korean Americans. The novel's protagonist and narrator is an elderly Asian American man who calls himself Frank Hata and is a retired owner of a medical home supply business. Hata is the son of working-class ethnic Koreans living in Japan, who was adopted by a wealthy Japanese couple and is described as having moved to the United States after World War II. Ostensibly, his story as an upwardly mobile, self-made man unites the traditional and Color-Blind American Dreams. Importantly, even his new first name, Franklin, "evocative of Benjamin Franklin, an embodiment of the American Dream" (Russell n. pag.), signifies his urge to assimilate into the U.S. mainstream as a Japanese American.

Eng and Han stress that like transnational adoption immigration involves a host of losses, which, according to Freud's theory of mourning, can be worked through by investing in new objects, such as the American Dream ("A Dialogue" 352). The most stereotypical version of the American dream is configured as material success. Not surprisingly, then, according to Jim Cullen, "the most widely realized" variety of the American Dream has been linked to suburban home ownership (9). This has also been recognized as America's ideal of national belonging. No wonder, then, that the house plays a prominent role in the life of the wealthy immigrant-protagonist. Hata describes it as a distinctive two-story mock Tudor house, located in the most desirable area of a prosperous East Coast suburban community called Bedley Run. The beautiful house also boasts of an "impressive flower and herb garden, and flagstone swimming pool" (GL 16).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, seem-

2 Here and subsequently "GL" denotes *A Gesture Life*.

ingly satisfied with his life, the narrator recounts in the first paragraph of the novel how well-adjusted he is in the predominantly white Bedley Run where he has won everybody's respect:

[L]iving thirty-odd years in the same place begins to show on a man. In the course of such time, without even realizing it, one takes on the characteristics of the locality, the color and the stamp of the prevailing dress and gait, and even speech . . . . And in kind there is a gradual and accruing recognition of one's face, of being as far as anyone can recall, from around here . . . . In my case, everyone here knows perfectly who I am. It's a simple determination. Whenever I step into a shop in the main part of the village, invariably someone will say, "Hey, it's good Doc Hata." (GL 1)

This quotation demonstrates how Hata emulates his white neighbors in his performative construction of his American identity. It also reveals that he has internalized the promises of the Color-Blind American Dream over the course of years in spite of the racial differences between him and his neighbors. The quotation also epitomizes how he—as other scholars have also contended—conforms to the ostensibly positive model minority myth (Lowe 234; Ang 120). Applied to upwardly mobile Asian Americans, the model minority myth, invented by white Caucasians, refers to this ethnic group's economic, political and cultural success, which conditions their national belonging. Japanese Americans were interned and relocated during World War II, when Japanese and Japanese Americans were regarded as "enemy aliens" in the United States. But as a result of "the US Cold War projects of liberal democracy and capitalism" Japanese citizens were transformed into a junior ally in Asia during the Cold War, and Japanese Americans were rehabilitated and interpolated into a model minority (Kim 99). Seen in such a light, the narrator of *A Gesture Life* subtly hints that Hata's masquerading as a Japanese postwar immigrant is a carefully calculated choice. Youngsuk Chae underscores the irony that many Asian immigrants have taken the middle-class model minority myth as a compliment when trying to "whiten" themselves through economic success. In doing so, however, they do not acknowledge how the label helps to sustain social stability (Chae 128). Many critics of the Asian American model minority construct argue that it works as a buffer between American whites and blacks.<sup>3</sup> In Lee's novel, the nearby working-class suburb of Ebbington serves as a foil to Bedley Run. While Hata reports that "colored people were a rare sight in

3 See, for instance, Nguyen 146.

Bedley Run" (GL 101), Ebbington is described as the "home of those who would never get to live in my respectable town" (GL 84). Unlike Hata's affluent home town, Ebbington signifies a home of losers for him.

In contrast to Ebbington, the conventional post-war structures of family and kinship are of great concern in the fictional Bedley Run. Like other single-family houses, Hata's spacious residence can also be regarded as a symbol of reproductive society. Referring to the United States, Eng claims that "the possession of a child, whether biological or adopted, has today become a sign of guarantee not only for family but also full and robust citizenship" ("Transnational Adoption" 7-8). Hata is a single man, but he starts a family by adopting an orphaned South Korean girl, whom he names Sunny. Far from intending to establish an alternative "post-nuclear family" he toys with the idea of attracting a suitable woman to take over the traditional role of a mother in his family.

Asian American scholars emphasize that the model minority construct is crucial in the process of Asian American subject formation. In conformity with their notions, Lee's novel reveals that identification with mainstream notions of promised abstract equality is likely to result in repression or erasure of a traumatic past. As the narrative unfolds, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the fact that in spite of being called Frank—short for Franklin—Hata is an unreliable narrator. For instance, he explains to a woman he dates that he was married many years previously (GL 49). In the same way in which the American Dream is intertwined with Hata's version of the Color-Blind American Dream, the return of the repressed slowly intertwines Sunny with a traumatic train of events during Hata's service as a Japanese medic in World War II.

Throughout the remainder of the novel, Hata's inability to relate to Sunny as a loving parent is juxtaposed with his experience as a Japanese soldier in occupied rural Burma in 1944. This is achieved through a series of abrupt flashbacks, which reveal the traumatic narrative trajectory of the plot. As Lisa Lowe notes, the traumatic experience is inassimilable and inaccessible in its own time (235), and that is why Hata seizes it belatedly as the two intertwined stories undercut his narrative of his harmonious assimilation into white America. Although Hata raises Sunny to be a model child, their adopter-adoptee relationship in many ways hinges on the former depicting himself as "a hopeful father of like-enough race" (GL 73). His intention in adopting Sunny is not only to show his moral goodness (Ang 130), but also to demonstrate that together they will become "well reputed and happily



known, the Hatas of Bedley Run” (GL 204). Ironically, the condition for future bliss rests on the facts that the Americans Hata associates with would easily accept that he and his Korean-born adopted daughter were of “single kind and blood” (GL 204). The early postwar adoptees from South Korea were mixed-race children—the offspring of American soldiers and Korean women—who were stigmatized by the patriarchal values of Korean society. Expecting Sunny to be a child of an impoverished Korean family, Hata immediately notices that “some other color (or colors) ran deep within her” (GL 204) and surmises that she is “the product of ... a night’s encounter between a GI and a local bar girl” (GL 204). The disclosure that Sunny is possibly of African American descent not only challenges Hata’s Color-Blind American Dream, but also reveals his instability as a model minority, whose Asian American identity ultimately “vacillates, or is in transit, between whiteness and color” (121). As Hata’s identifications with ideals of whiteness prove to be increasingly elusive and unattainable, the melancholic framework of his repressed traumatic past begins to emerge in the novel.

Mimicry provides a potent means for emulating the model minority construct,<sup>4</sup> but, as I have already mentioned, the model minority myth has been heavily criticized in Asian American studies for its racist assumptions and racial stereotyping (Ang 121; Palumbo-Liu 172). Apparently the protagonist of *A Gesture Life* intuitively realizes that—to quote Young Oak Lee—his adoptive daughter’s skin color and kinky hair constitute “a serious impediment in his design to integrate into the mainstream society” (76). Inevitably, Sunny also senses Hata’s hesitation in accepting her as his daughter, and later on it influences her explicit racial identification as not “white.” In a heated row with Hata, the teen-age Sunny accuses him of making “a whole life out of gestures and politeness” (GL 95). In a withering attack, she condemns Hata’s life of smug model minority respectability by indicting him as Bedley Run’s “good Charlie: a nice sweet man who’s given when he didn’t have to or want to but did it anyway” (GL 95). Even though Sunny ruthlessly exposes his hypocrisy, Hata clings to his precarious national belonging as a model minority.

The emergence of the highly disturbing wartime story in *A Gesture Life* links Hata’s own adoption to that of Sunny. Eng argues that “[p]ublic histories of war, imperialism, domestic conflict, and poverty in Korea can-

4 For more on mimicry and the model minority stereotype, see, for instance, “A Dialogue” 349-350 and Kim 99.

not easily be connected to the private sphere of the prosperous American family” (“Transnational Adoption” 14). It is no coincidence, then, that the memory of Hata’s first encounter with Korean women who were enslaved by Japanese soldiers is triggered when he spies on Sunny in a shabby house that borders the vilified neighborhood of Ebbington. Inescapably, the lives of Hata, Sunny and a young Korean woman he calls K intersect through the histories of Japanese-Korean colonization (“Recognizing” 59). K is one of the Korean-born victims of forced military prostitution, who were euphemistically called “comfort women.” Not too subtly, perhaps, the initial K evokes her symbolic textual role as Korea in the novel (Kong 3; Carroll 604). As Belinda Kong indicates, the 1990s was the decade when “the comfort woman issue erupted as one of international political significance for the first time” (9). The publication of Lee’s fictional rendering of the gruesome lives of military sexual slaves in *A Gesture Life* was preceded by two other fictional accounts of their predicament by Asian American authors: Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and Therese Park’s *A Gift of the Emperor* from 1997. While Keller and Parks employ female narrators, K’s story is filtered through Hata’s male point of view.

The manner in which Hata is able to pass himself off as Japanese is endangered when he works as a “hidden Korean” in a heavily anti-Korean Japanese militia (Cheng 560). He has been assigned to guard K for the company captain’s private access, but he befriends her, and she detects their shared ethnicity and language. In his imagination, Hata as the young lieutenant who is called Jiro Kurohata by his Japanese name, even fabricates a mutual love story between K and himself. While the reader has no direct access to K’s thoughts, Hata’s ambiguous and intermittently sentimental narration about the repressed past reveals that, despite his promises to protect her, he not only thinks of his yearnings as “a complete and utter fraudulence” (GL 295), but also participates in K’s sexual exploitation. Moreover, Hata even records K’s bluntly accusing words: “You think you love me but what you really want you don’t yet know because you are young and decent. But I will tell you now, it is my sex. The thing of my sex” (GL 300). In spite of constantly being drawn to K and to the country she represents, Hata ultimately remains loyal to Japan: his failure to help K leads to her suffering a horrific serial rape and dismemberment at the hands of Hata’s fellow soldiers.

Eng and Han pay attention to the fact that both the ideals of whiteness and the ideals of Asianness may be lost and unresolved for the Asian Ameri-

can subject ("Dialogue" 357). As far as Hata is concerned, not only his ideals of Japaneseness, but also those of whiteness are compromised by his sinister and repressed complicity in K's and Sunny's gendered misfortunes. If Hata resented that Sunny was not the pure Asian adoptee, who would have helped to guarantee his national belonging, his lunch meeting with her about fourteen years after she has left Bedley Run inescapably brings back a potentially even more unsettling repressed memory. Towards the very end of the novel, Hata retrospectively rehearses the events surrounding an illegal abortion he arranges for the barely eighteen-year old Sunny, believing that her African American boyfriend is the father-to-be. Although Hata criticizes his younger self, from the vantage point of the narrative present, he recalls how his fury with her makes him think of causing "an end to us, inglorious and swift" (GL 340), as he drives Sunny home from the station.

Having internalized the white-dominated American racial hierarchy, Hata's racial melancholia persists as long as he ruthlessly pursues his Color-Blind American Dream. In spite of the doctor's warnings about her being "quite near full-term" and Sunny being unsure about her decision, he offers to assist in the operation as a nurse. The prospect of the baby frightens him as "the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about our house like banners of our mutual failure" (GL 340). At the same time, K's and Sunny's twinned histories keep haunting Hata unconsciously as unresolved traumas in the psychic realm. Throughout their writings, Eng and Han stress the importance of negotiating losses in the process of working through and moving forward. Facing his guilt regarding the victimization of K and Sunny, Hata ultimately begins to address and repair his racial melancholia.

Some critics and scholars have regarded the conclusion of Lee's novel as ambivalent or unresolved ("Recognizing" 62; Ang 136). It is true that Hata makes a number of decisions, which indicate that he is no longer anxiously seeking national belonging but is willing to move on in his life by selling the house that he comes to refer to as "a lovely, standing forgery" (GL 352). Hata also casts off his racial prejudice as he shows his love for Sunny's little son, with his "tightly curled, near-Afro" hair, as his grandson (GL 208) and compensates for his complicity in Sunny's past misfortunes by leaving his store to her. If these acts can be seen as "some form of closure in the adoptive family romance," as Jerng proposes ("Recognizing" 62), the final ending resists narrative closure. Having successfully managed to work through his racial melancholia, Hata is able to relinquish his American Dream and

the Color-Blind American Dream. This is why the last lines of the novel suggest that Hata's formerly fixed self transforms into a complex, probing self and his supposedly rigid identity turns into a tentative, searching identity in the process.

## II

In her discussion of Gish Jen's *The Love Wife* and Anne Tyler's *Digging to America*, Cynthia Callahan concludes that the novels represent "a new literary turn," because they "illustrate a new awareness of adoption that corresponds to its recent prominence in public consciousness" (158). Like Lee, Jen and Tyler are contemporary American writers. Jen is a second-generation Chinese American author, whereas Tyler hails from the South. Their previous fiction has focused on families, and their respective novels from the early twenty-first century deal with transnational adoption in the context of nuclear American families. Due to the many similarities between Jen's and Tyler's adoption novels, I will look at them together. Like Lee's novel, Jen's *The Love Wife* and Tyler's *Digging to America* are set around the turn of the millennium. Moreover, as in Lee's work, the topical issue of transnational adoption of Asian children is linked with the American Dream and aspects of neoliberal American multiculturalism. Jen's forte is humorous satire, while Tyler uses irony. Since Jen's and Tyler's modes of narration differ from Lee's more somber register, it is worth studying how their adoption novels relate to the American Dream and the Color-Blind American Dream in comparison to Lee's indictment of his protagonist's absorption in their promise of national belonging across ethno-racial lines. Recognizing that cultural identity is a product of the complex intersections of various axes, such as gender and class, I will mainly focus on the construction of the adoptees' cultural identity in relation to race and ethnicity in my reading of these two novels.

The main characters in *The Love Wife* are Janie and Carnegie Wong, a middle-aged, double-income couple, with their two adopted daughters, Lizzy and Wendy, and their biological baby son Bailey. Carnegie is a second-generation Chinese American, or so-called ABC, and Janie is a white American woman. The Wongs constitute a racially mixed family or the "*new American family*" as they are called by one of their suburban neighbors. Tyler's novel foregrounds two families: the white upper-class Donaldsons and the Iranian American Yazdans with their Asian-born adoptive daughters.

Like Bedley Run, the suburbs where the Wongs, the Donaldsons and the Yazdans live match “the classic setting of international transracial adoption—the predominantly white, upper-class suburb” (“Recognizing” 51). The flowering park-like setting of the Wongs’ old farmhouse commands “its little knoll” outside of Boston. In keeping with this suburban ideal, the Donaldsons’ house and the symbol of their national belonging is “a worn white clapboard Colonial,” fittingly located in Mount Washington near Baltimore, whereas the younger Yazdans live in a new house, where only “the wedding gifts in the dining room cabinet” testify that the occupants might be of Iranian descent. In an interview about *The Love Wife*, Jen states that the Wong family should be read as a “metaphor for the nation” (*Claiming Others* 231). Similarly, the intertwining of the two families in *Digging to America* is also suggestive of contemporary America’s multiracial character.

While Hata has not only cut himself off from his own parents, but also from his Japanese adoptive parents, adoptive grandparents play an important role in each of the three families. Jen likes to play with stereotypes. Mama Wong, Carnegie’s mother, is reputed to have swum from mainland China to Hong Kong before the Cultural Revolution. In Jen’s eyes, she is the embodiment of the materialistic American Dream, but with a significant twist, as she rises “from rags to riches” by becoming a successful real estate magnate in the urban enclave of Chinatown. Mama Wong’s choice for her son’s name is consonant with her version of the American Dream: Carnegie is named after the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, one of the most successful immigrants, who personified American upward mobility. Janie’s ancestors, the Baileys, hail from Ireland, Scotland and Germany. For generations the Baileys have been involved in advancing social equality, but ironically Janie’s generation, according to her “felt ourselves to be votive lights at best, if compared with the original bonfires” (LW 75).<sup>5</sup> In *Digging to America*, the extended Donaldson family includes two sets of in-laws and Sami Yazdan’s Iranian-born mother, Maryam Yazdan.

Jen uses an innovative narrative form: in addition to Carnegie and Janie, their adopted daughters and their Chinese nanny act as the five first-person narrators of *The Love Wife*.<sup>6</sup> By giving access to the thoughts of the main

5 Here and subsequently LW denotes *The Love Wife*.

6 Gish Jen said that only the Socratic dialogue comes to her mind as a possible predecessor of her technique but nevertheless found it too far-fetched (Conversation with Gish Jen, May 2009). The narrative technique brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of dialogism in Dostoyevsky’s works. Callahan refers to “the poly-

characters, it also represents the interactions of the family on the psychic level.<sup>7</sup> The older daughter, Lizzy, has been adopted by Carnegie after she was found abandoned on the steps of a church in the Midwest. She is assumed to be Asian on the basis of her features, but is probably mixed-race. The younger daughter, Wendy, is adopted from China. As if echoing the emphasis placed by neoliberal color-blind multiculturalism on ethnic identity as a matter of free, individual choice, the Wongs stress that their racially mixed family “was simply something we made. ... Something we chose” (LW 3).<sup>8</sup> Janie supposes that her liberal open-mindedness to other cultures would be bolstered by having studied Chinese in college and having made “a most original marriage” with Carnegie. Erasing her racial difference, she believes that she is fit for mothering a multicultural family. Carnegie marries Janie in spite of Mama Wong’s objections. When Mama Wong derogatively dubs her “Blondie” on the basis of her prominently white looks, Janie goes as far as to stress that the nickname was her choice and that it also demonstrates her flexible personality. In contrast to Blondie’s interest in Chinese language and culture, the American-born Carnegie initially defines himself in opposition to the Chineseness of Mama Wong’s immigrant generation and identifies with mainstream white culture. It is not in vain that the tune of the week on his cell phone is “America the Beautiful” in the opening chapter of the novel. Indeed, it is as if the manner in which Lizzy—just like her adoptive mother—sports short blond hair in the beginning of the book encapsulates the entire family’s white-identification.

Nevertheless, referring to the time prior to the opening of the novel, Blondie sighs—ironically echoing Tolstoy’s famous lines in *Anna Karenina*: “Every happy family has its innocence.... looking back, this was ours” (LW 4). Blondie’s and Carnegie’s innocence is predicated on their mutual faith in the Color-Blind American Dream and the possibility of a “color-blind” family. Yet, racial prejudices lurk beneath the veneer of their

phonic nature of the text” (149). In *Claiming Others*, Jerng calls the formal structure of the novel “dialogic” (234).

7 Cf. *Claiming Others* 234.

8 It is worth noting that when emphasizing the postethnic preference for choice, David A. Hollinger writes: “The adopting of a child from a different ‘race’ than oneself is a very postethnic act” (117). Chen expands on the fictional couple’s freedom of choice: “Blondie’s freedom of choice comes from the fact that she has the quintessential features of the white race—fair skin, blue-eyes, and blonde-hair. Carnegie’s inferior racial status, on the other hand, is made up by his class position as a well-educated, upper middle class professional” (10-11).

well-protected lives, even though, as Lizzie puts it, one does not “like to talk about [them] in our comfortable suburb” (LW 277).

Significantly, the first chapters of *The Love Wife* and *Digging to America* include a scene at an international airport, a transitional zone, where the families welcome travelers from Asia. This enhances the themes of globalization, migration and transnational movement in the novels. When Mama Wong dies, she bequeaths her traditional Chinese family book to Wendy, because she regards her as a real Chinese, but stipulates that this happens on the condition that the children be brought up by one of her relatives from China. This relative is Lan, whose family had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Her arrival from China challenges the Wong family’s entire way of life. As I have claimed, happy family life through transnational adoption is also linked to the realization of the American Dream and the Color-Blind American Dream in Tyler’s novel. The two adoptive families in *Digging to America* meet for the first time at the Baltimore Airport where they are awaiting the arrival of their baby girls from South Korea. In an ironic tone, Tyler’s omniscient narrator describes how the entire arrivals hall takes on the guise of “a gigantic baby shower,” as the Donaldson family, hangs “on to flotillas of silvery balloons printed with IT’S A GIRL! and trailing spirals of pink ribbons” (DA 4).<sup>9</sup> As if this were not enough, at least half a dozen people wield video cameras as if they had come to witness an actual birth.

In a similar manner to Eng, Ann Anagnost contends that “the position of parent, for white middle class subjects, has become increasingly marked as a measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship” and claims that this fuels the desire for adoption (392). No wonder, then, that the members of the extended Donaldson family wear buttons that signal their gendered and generational relationship to the adoptee: “And not only were there MOM and DAD; there were GRANDMA and GRANDPA, twice over—two complete sets” (DA 4). The more reserved Yazdans are described as “three people no one had noticed before” (DA 8). Yet, the narrator directs attention to their ethnic difference by describing Sami and Ziba, the adoptive parents, as “a youngish couple, foreign-looking, olive skinned and attractive” (DA 8). As the transfer of the abandoned babies to their adoptive parents takes place at the airport, they are officially transformed into American children. In Tyler’s novel, this highly important transaction of the two members of

9 Here and subsequently “DA” denotes *Digging to America*.

what Anagnost calls the “diaper diaspora” only happens by referring in an off-hand manner to how the Asian escort women prove “to be sticklers for detail” (DA 9).

Since the 1980s, theorists of ethnicity and of American ethnic minority literatures have claimed that ethnicity is a social and cultural construction. Like the white adoptive parents studied by Eng and Han, Hata in *A Gesture Life* expects Sunny to assimilate as completely as possible. In Jen’s and Tyler’s novels the parents seek out ways in which they can help their children to construct a bi-cultural identity that would also include elements from the culture of their countries of descent. This would thus facilitate their dealing with their cultural difference in the United States. To a certain extent their efforts seem to conform to the conventions of contemporary adoption discourse, which puts an emphasis on the transnational adoptees’ “right to origin” and “birth culture.”

In a sense, adoption assumes that the child changes identity: “they will take on a new name, become part of a new family and sometimes a new country” (*Claiming Others* vii-viii). As Anagnost points out, “the transnationally adopted Asian-born child’s name raises a problem about anchoring the child’s identity, its ties to its place of origin, and its difference” (408). This issue is not highlighted in the novels by Lee and Jen, but the adoptive families’ differing attitudes toward their children are reflected in their choice of names in *Digging to America*. The six-month-old babies are called Jin-Ho and Sooki upon their arrival from South Korea. While the Donaldsons choose to use their daughter’s Korean name, the Yazdans, an assimilated professional couple, give their adopted daughter the English name of Susan. The difficult pronunciation of an Asian adoptee’s proper name often results in the parents deciding to change their baby’s name.<sup>10</sup> The Yazdans’ decision is motivated by the fact that their parents have immigrated to the United States and that Susan is “comfortable for Iranians to pronounce.” Ultimately, it is the patronizing Bitsy, “a born leader,” who instills her version of Koreanness in Susan.

In *The Love Wife* and *Digging to America*, ethnically marked consumption is related to the parent figures’ efforts to expose their adopted children to their “birth culture.” In Jen’s novel, Blondie’s depiction of Wendy’s bedroom, after Lizzy has donated her all her chinoiserie to her younger sister,

10 Cf. Anagnost 407-408.



serves as a good example of the parent figures' efforts to inspire their children's Chinese identity with the help of material goods:

We sat in her bedroom surrounded by Chinese slippers, Chinese papercuts, Chinese dolls, Chinese brush paintings. She had a Chinese birdcage and a Chinese cricket cage. She had a Chinese silk quilt embroidered with bats. (LW 206)

The novel also provides glimpses of the Wongs' family life, which show that the daughters are aware that Blondie and Carnegie are trying to raise them according to adoption books. In the middle of an argument, Lizzy retorts to Blondie: "You're just saying what it says in the adoption books you should say" (LW 212). In *Digging to America*, Bitsy, Jin-Ho's adoptive mother suggests that it is important for the displaced adoptees to know each other because of their shared birth country. Indeed, since the daughters' early childhood the two families stay in close contact. While the Yazdans dress Susan in Western outfits, the Donaldsons transform Jin-Ho into an exotic spectacle. As a baby she wears a Korean multicolored, quilted top "with striped sleeves and a black silk sash," and a little later she attends Susan's first birthday party in "full Korean costume." Furthermore, the Donaldsons read Korean folktales to the infant Jin-Ho, and recommend soya milk as "more culturally appropriate" to the two little adoptees. The creation of cultural identity is an ongoing process throughout the two novels. In various ways, it not only involves the adoptees, but also all the other family members, who gradually bare their deepest ethnic and racial assumptions and potentially challenge them.

### III

The rituals of the Americanization of immigrants have taken many different forms in the United States. Among them, the Ford Motor Company English School Melting Pot rituals of 1916, in which the foreign-born employees underwent a ritualistic rebirth into new Americans, is a pertinent example.<sup>11</sup> With the intention of inventing Korean American ethnicity Bitsy gets the idea of the little Korean-born girls' Arrival Party in *Digging to America*. At the party the toddlers appear hand-in-hand dressed in traditional Korean outfits "just like arriving all over again" (DA 63) and enter, as Sami puts it,

11 See, for instance Sollors 89-91.

“the Promised Land. The pinnacle of all glories” (DA 104). The supreme irony of the parties is that when Jin-Ho and Susan enter they will be singing “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain,” a children’s song, which is based on an old African American spiritual and which was later sung by railroad work gangs. While the foreign-born Ford employees emerged from the “Melting Pot” dressed in American clothes, an annual Arrival Party is repeated several times in Tyler’s novel, as if the girls’ transracial Asian American identity needed to be constantly reinvigorated before they can claim a piece of the American Arrival sheet cake “with a huge Stars and Stripes.” Couched in the context of the entire novel, the Donaldsons’ Arrival Party epitomizes their Color-Blind American Dream, and the guests at least pretend to agree with them.

Eng and Han assert that “[t]ransnational adoption involves the intersection of two very powerful origin myths—the return to mother and to motherland” (“Desegregating” 142). In *The Love Wife*, there is no access to Lizzy’s past history, which she resents throughout the novel. Yet, Blondie ignores this fact and thinks that it is “nice to have the children match.” The parents take Lizzy to China with them when they adopt for the second time obviously with the purpose to give her a positive sense of her origin (Jerng 2010, 234). The trip proves very traumatic for Lizzy and suggests that she is suffering from racial melancholia as a consequence of repressing her racial difference. The adopted daughters often discuss their adoptions in the novel, which suggests that they are mourning their affective problems. As a teen-ager Lizzy is envious of Wendy because she knows where she has been adopted from, whereas Lizzy can only dream of going “back to wherever and find my real mom.” However, Wendy’s answer reveals that she similarly mourns the loss of her birth mother: “They don’t even know my foster mother’s name, forget about my real mother” (LW 54). Drawing upon D.W. Winnicott’s concepts of the “transitional object” and “good-enough mother,” Eng and Han claim that “psychic health for the transnational adoptee involves creating space in her psyche for two ‘good-enough mothers’—the birth mother and the adoptive mother” (“Desegregating” 143). Although the two adoptive sisters are disconnected from an Asian past, Jen’s narrative hints that they eventually recognize their shared racial difference with Lan, who ultimately becomes a Winnicottian racial “transitional object” and an Asian mother figure for them.

Lan wins over the children as soon as they meet at the airport, but she forces the parents to come to grips with their investment in the Color-Blind

American Dream. The reader learns only at the end of the novel that Carnegie is an adopted son. Nevertheless, following Eng's theorization, it is possible to surmise that he also suffers from a form of unconscious racial melancholia. Identifying with the model minority construct, Carnegie represses both Chinese Americans' complex history of racialization in the United States and the past in China. The action mainly takes place after Mama Wong's death, but she plays an important role in re-ethnicizing and re-racializing the Wong family through Lan. Gradually a kind of Chinese identity movement begins in the Wong household: Mandarin and Chinese culture are being promoted mainly under Lan's influence. Not only does Lizzy dye her hair black in order to look like Lan, but Carnegie also takes an interest in his family history. Moreover, Lan and Blondie start buying groceries in Chinatown in order to prepare Chinese meals and dinner conversations are held in Chinese.

Blondie and Lan's relationship is strained from the very start. Blondie suspects that Lan is a "love wife" or a mistress that Mama Wong has deliberately asked to be sent from China in order to alienate Carnegie from his wife. Lan resents that Blondie does not treat her as a relative but as a servant, who is not given a room in the house but has to live in an apartment above the garage. As Jeanne Sokolowski points out, Blondie asserts her power over Lan, but Lan also undermines Blondie's faith in the possibility of a happy "color-blind" family (6, 7). As Lan's influence grows in the family, Blondie feels marginalized and redundant in her home. She e-mails the following note to a friend: "The girls are no longer quite mine" (LW 202) and also tells her that "Lizzy says she honestly would not be surprised to find out that Lan was her real mother" (LW 202). One day when returning home, Blondie sees Carnegie, Lan, and the children around the dining table and gathers racial sameness to be the definition of family unity (*Claiming Others* 241):

How much more natural this scene than the one that included me ... They were eating little snacks, in bowls. No one was eating out of bag—even Carnegie was eating Chee-tos out of a pair of blue-and-white rice bowls. Carnegie and Lizzy and Wendy had in front of them lidded cups, such as I'd seen in China and Chinatown; Bailey had his sippy cup, which I saw now was also a lidded cup. Everybody was wearing slippers. (LW 257-258)

In many ways, Blondie reminds the reader of Bitsy in *Digging to America*. However, unlike Bitsy, who remains confident of her white privilege, Blondie is depicted as a more complex character (Callahan 152). Feeling

excluded from the rest of the family that is infused by “purer” Chinese ethnicity, Blondie is forced to think critically of her white privilege and to admit that race also shapes her life.<sup>12</sup>

The dominant position of the white extended Donaldson family is never seriously questioned in Tyler’s novel. In spite of the efforts of Bitsy and Brad, her husband, to instill stereotypical aspects of Koreanness into Jin-Ho and Susan in *Digging to America*, their past in South Korea is negated and they cannot properly mourn their earliest affective losses. Callahan notes that Tyler’s narrative choices reveal her lack of attention to the adoptees’ points of view (140), but there are a few examples in the novel, which indicate how Susan and Jin-Ho grow to idealize whiteness. One variety of the American Dream that Cullen discusses in his eponymous book is the American Dream of Upward Mobility (59-102). The achievement of a class ideal is likely to entail assimilation into mainstream society (Chen 22). Susan’s family ascends on the social ladder when they move to a new house, which is “just three blocks from Brad and Bitsy’s” and which Ziba plans to outfit “entirely in American Colonial” to boot. Even though her family keeps Christmas exactly like every other family in the symbolic neighborhood of Mount Washington, Susan wishes that they would celebrate it “the way other people do” and claims: “I do not want to be different” (DA 214). This resonates with Homi K. Bhabha’s oft-quoted phrase “white but not quite” in his discussion of colonial mimicry (89). Jin-Ho begins to hate Arrival Parties and “those costumes with the stiff, sharp seams.” She asks to be called Jo and yearns for an archetypal American Girl doll, complete with what she calls “accessories.” Ironically, it is Tyler’s satirically depicted Bitsy, who begins to fantasize about the Korean birth mothers of the two adoptees. The fact that Jin-Ho is captivated by whiteness and could not be more uninterested in the possibility of meeting her birth mother may imply a psychic process of splitting, a symptom of racial melancholia—if I am not reading too much into the text.

On the surface, the adult Donaldsons and Yazdans appear to be on amiable terms. However, by constantly emphasizing their own Americanness and thus how they represent the dominant culture the Donaldsons cannot help but remind the Yazdans of their foreignness, thereby throwing doubt on their true national belonging. Maryam and her son in turn criticize the

12 Cf. Sokolowski 4, 7; cf. Chen 10.

Donaldsons' Americanness. Although Maryam reminds Sami that he was "more American than the Americans" when he was growing up, Sami enjoys riffing on white Americans' ignorance about the rest of the world. Significantly, Susan wears "a T-shirt as big as a dress with FOREIGNER printed across it" (DA 200) at a dinner with the Donaldsons, and Maryam explains that Sami had it printed as joke when she got her citizenship. Consequently, the Yazdans' sense of foreignness leads them to strengthen the Iranian components of their identity. As far as the never-ending annual Arrival Parties are concerned, this happens through the sumptuous Iranian meals served in their respective homes.

As in Jen's novel, ethnic foods are also depicted as expressions of aspects of ethnic identity in *Digging to America*, where they also evoke the Color-Blind American Dream. Even in terms of their culinary choices the Donaldsons seem to support the cheerful "salad bowl" variety of color-blind multiculturalism in which ingredients from diverse cultures mingle but do not mix. They find the Yazdans' Iranian menus at the annual Arrival Parties so delicious that on one occasion Ziba placed tiny American flags on baklava instead of the normal Stars and Stripes cake. If sampling Iranian delicacies can be perceived as a means of buttressing the social bonds between the two families, their consumption hides the inequality in their power relations in the novel. Yet, they are epitomized by small gestures, such as Bitsy talking in a louder voice to Ziba's less assimilated relatives. Ultimately, foods, such as Bitsy's Cuban dish and the sushi in the menu of the last Arrival Party, demonstrate that within the narrative of the novel the ethnic and national differences figured by ethnic foods are detached from the local ethnic minority communities and effaced into exoticized sameness.

Until recently, Tyler's writing has been criticized for its absence of a clear world view (Allardice 1). However, as a reviewer states, "not even she [Tyler] has been completely immune to the events of" the years preceeding the publication of the novel (Allardice 1). In *Digging to America*, the only character who feels that she is a perennial stranger in the United States is Maryam, who at the beginning of the book has lived there for thirty-nine years. Although Maryam suspects that her son and his wife are copying the ultra-American Donaldsons, Ziba grows tired of Bitsy's exoticizing her, and 9/11 finally makes the American-born Sami deeply aware of his foreignness.

Otherizing and racialization are deep-seated social problems, which also have an impact on transracial adoption. In their analysis of Mina's case his-

tory, Eng and Han observe that the figure of the lost birth mother “is felt to be in crisis, if not entirely irrecoverable under the idealized palimpsest of the good white mother” (“Desegregating” 161). According to them, Mina is able to use Han as the racial transitional object in therapy, and thereby she manages “to resignify her vexed racial identifications with the lost Korean birth mother” (“Desegregating” 166). In this process, Han, the Korean American therapist, “becomes the good-enough Korean mother” (“Desegregating” 166). In their different ways, Jen’s and Tyler’s novels postulate the need for two “good enough” mothers for racialized transnational adoptees. In *Digging to America*, Maryam feels an instant bond with the infant Susan, who is thought to be homesick for her foster family in South Korea. Moreover, Ji-Ho loves Maryam. Indeed, there are hints throughout the novel that Maryam is unconsciously the lost maternal figure in the psychic configuration of the little transnational and transracial adoptees. Like Lan in *The Love Wife*, she holds the promise that as a diasporic immigrant she will be able to facilitate the adoptees’ relationship to their Asianness and thereby help them to work towards racial reparation. The novel’s conclusion intimates the achievement of the Color-Blind American Dream, complete with an inter-ethnic marriage. Indeed, David Palumbo-Liu’s words in his analysis of Lee’s *Native Speaker* seem more than pertinent here: “The nonpathologized, fluent and happy mixedness is ... not for the world at present” (320). Due to the underlying ethnic and racial tensions this post-ethnic narrative solution stretches the limits of the reader’s credulity.

Jen plays with the family dynamics throughout *The Love Wife*. Blondie moves out, but the thrust of the novel is not towards Carnegie’s and Lan’s union. Mama Wong’s family book reveals Lan to be her real daughter and Carnegie to be her adopted son. The shock of Carnegie’s discovery of his own adoption causes his heart attack. Critical of color-blindness, Jen’s novel is not entirely pessimistic. In one of his dreams in the hospital, Carnegie reassures Mama Wong that “I love Blondie ... I married the love wife” (LW 376). For transnational and transracial adoptees, the task of racial reparation begins when they are able to negotiate the possibility of two good racialized mothers (“Desegregating” 33). Narrating the last scene which takes place in the symbolic waiting room of the hospital, Wendy happily observes how Lan and Blondie grasp each others’ hands. This suggests that the two mother figures that represent the Wongs’ dual racial and cultural heritage can be accommodated in one family and one nation.

## Conclusion

In dealing with the topic of transnational and transracial adoption the three novels under discussion not only test the traditional American Dream, but also the neoliberal Color-Blind American Dream. Lee's novel critically examines the Korean-born protagonist's postethnic imaginary assimilation as a model minority into the dominant white culture. *A Gesture Life* seriously challenges the Color-Blind American Dream by delving into how this can only be achieved at the cost of suppressing feelings and repressing a painful historical past. Tyler's novel ends up by celebrating the happy blend of postethnic and color-blind American diversity, which characterizes conservative multiculturalism and the Color-Blind American Dream. However, as if inadvertently, *Digging to America* reveals that the conditions of consumption-based minority assimilation are set up by representatives of the dominant white society. By using a narrative technique that presents the family members in a kind of dialogue with one another Jen's novel not only exposes their naïve trust in the Color-Blind American Dream, but also enhances the importance of negotiating differences and creating empathetic, historically based cross-cultural and interracial ties as a means of survival in the contemporary United States and in our increasingly globalizing world.

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