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Becoming a Korean American cowgirl: Performing ethnicity in “The Lone Night Cantina” from Don Lee’s *Yellow: Stories* (2001)

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Abstract: Don Lee’s short story collection *Yellow: Stories* (2001) is set in a contemporary, post-immigrant US. In Lee’s ostensibly post-racial settings, race and racialization remain salient factors in defining the Asian American identities of his characters even as their agency and self-determination are acknowledged. The dialectic negotiation of ethnic identities is especially evident in “The Lone Night Cantina,” which presents a more complicated and protean portrait of gendered ethnicity that remains as yet unexplored. Coupling performance theory with Tina Chen’s politics of impersonation, we argue that Annie Yung’s impersonation of a cowgirl simultaneously lays claim to her identity as an American citizen while challenging the notion of an authentic American identity. After a brief overview of the theoretical framework we use to address the issues of race and ethnicity, we discuss Annie’s engagement with ethnic stereotypes—both Asian and American—to highlight the exclusionary impetus of US nationhood and the continuing struggle to assert a coherent identity. Finally, we comment on the limitations of the story’s postmodern approach to identity by considering Annie’s inability to find a satisfactory resolution to her identity crisis.

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This article consolidates their respective interest in and engagement with issues of race, gender, and identity in a contemporary postmodern world through the study of a Korean American short story cycle that remains largely unexplored.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Race emerges at the forefront of social issues confronting the contemporary US. This is perhaps curious given that the rise of multiculturalism led some experts to believe that the US is becoming “post-ethnic” or “post-racial.” Don Lee’s critically and commercially acclaimed short story collection, *Yellow: Stories* (2001), explores the struggle to assert a coherent identity amid the confusion caused by the sometimes conflicting ethnic roles Asian Americans are assigned. This is especially evident in “The Lone Night Cantina,” where the Korean American protagonist, Annie Yung, suddenly decides to impersonate a blond cowgirl. Examining Asian stereotypical roles that Annie previously adopted and abandoned, we argue that her sudden impersonation of a cowgirl, which is critiqued as absurd, amounts to a political act that simultaneously lays claim to her identity as an American citizen while challenging the notion of an authentic American identity.

Subjects: Literature; Post-Colonial Studies; Postmodernism Literature; Feminist Literature & Theory; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Literature & Culture; Literature & Gender Studies; Literature & Race

Keywords: Don Lee; *Yellow: Stories*; Asian American identity; ethnicity; performance

1. Introduction

In an interview about his short story collection, *Yellow: Stories* (2001, henceforth referred to as *Yellow*), Don Lee, a third generation Korean American,¹ stated: “I don’t go around every minute of the day thinking I am Asian, and neither do the characters in the book” (Q & A). In Lee’s contemporary, post-immigrant US, his characters are fully assimilated in California and are hardly FOBs, immigrants fresh off the boat. In such a state as California where Latinos now officially outnumber whites, the very notion of race and ethnicity begins to appear rather outdated (Panzar, 2015). At first glance, *Yellow* adopts this postmodern and post-racial perspective as Lee’s eclectic group of Asian American characters lead ordinary lives as suburban Californians. In contrast to early Asian American fiction that emerged in the 1970s, which often explicitly dealt with issues of race, such as immigrants struggling to assimilate into mainstream American society, ancestry is but one facet that defines the Asian American protagonists of more recent works, like Lee’s. Race, in *Yellow*, is also presented as something incidental compared to the characters’ careers or romantic relationships as the protagonists deal with recognizable fears that transcend a particular ethnic group. As the title suggests, though, race endures as a consistent theme across all eight stories. The racial implications of the title complicate the portrait of the US as a post-racial society, for while “post” as a temporal marker means after, it does not signify an end to racial prejudice but a condition in which the past persistently spills over into the present.

In fact, race and racialization remain salient factors in defining the Asian American identities of Lee’s characters even as their agency and self-determination are acknowledged. Kun Jong Lee examines the composition process of the collection to argue that Lee’s work represents an “Asian American short-story cycle par excellence” which highlights the post-immigrant experiences of Asian Americans (2015, p. 596). It is especially revealing that Lee originally conceived of some of his characters as Caucasian, but later switched their ethnicity to Asian American (Lee, 2015, p. 593). This revision also affected “The Lone Night Cantina,” where the protagonist Annie Yung was initially written into the original magazine story published in 1987 as Annie Wells (Lee, 2015, p. 604). The plot of this story, which is spatially at the heart of the cycle, follows Annie Yung, a middle-aged Korean American database programmer, as she suddenly decides to dress and act like a blond cowgirl.

Taking Lee’s revision of ethnicities and the implications of the crucial transformation from an unmarked, white character to a racialized minority as our point of departure, we focus on Annie’s attempt to negotiate her own ethnic identity by impersonating the all American cowgirl. By referencing Asian stereotypes of femininity as well as the gendered, almost clichéd, emblem of the American Western spirit, “The Lone Night Cantina” presents a complicated and protean portrait of gendered ethnicity that merits greater attention. Coupling performance theory with Tina Chen’s politics of impersonation, we argue that Annie Yung’s impersonation of a cowgirl simultaneously lays claim to her identity as an American citizen while challenging the notion of an authentic American identity.

To that effect, we begin with an introduction to the theoretical framework that we will use to address the issues of race and ethnicity in an allegedly post-racial US. We then discuss Annie’s engagement with gendered Asian stereotypes, and the attendant tension and dis-ease that mark her life because of the roles she is expected to play. Next, we explore Annie’s reaction to these social pressures by transforming herself into a blond cowgirl, highlighting the reason behind as well as the implications of such a strategic performance in light of the symbolic status of the myth of the West. These two parts conjointly demonstrate how ethnic identities are continually negotiated through the dialectic engagement with the larger social context, whether by asserting or challenging certain racial assignments. Finally, we comment on the limitations of the story’s postmodern approach to identity by considering the story’s open-ending and Annie’s inability to find a satisfactory resolution to her identity crisis and the concomitant psychic agony.

Most scholars grappling with ethnicity accept the view that race and ethnicity are social constructions that lack an objective or biological basis.² If race and ethnicity are not primordial and biologically predetermined, the logical inference is that these concepts are flexible and open to individual agency. Postmodern debates focused on the decentered subject prioritize “the themes of assertion and choice” (Song, 2003, p. 17) over the static and essentialist stresses on heredity and lineage. The framing of ethnic identity as a choice means that identities are relative and mutable across different sociopolitical contexts that may require people to stress or downplay their ethnic affiliations. The ability to adopt an identity is an attractive proposition because it reflects the contemporary reality of multiple identities and shifting group boundaries. Thus, historian David A. Hollinger posits that diversity in the US needs to be reconfigured through a “post-ethnic” perspective that denies the claim that “history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make” (1995, p. 13). The suggestion here is that it is now possible to reconsider issues of race, and indeed, in the 1990s, some ethnicity scholars theorized that ethnicity will eventually pale into insignificance as the American society grows even more multicultural.

Yet, race still emerges at the forefront of social issues confronting the US in the twenty-first century. The recognition of ethnicity and race as social and arbitrary constructs does not amount to their elimination in daily life. The conception of a post-racial or post-ethnic US and its concomitant celebration of multiculturalism risks obscuring the fact that exercising ethnic options remains a privilege that is often beyond the reach of minorities. As Mary Waters encapsulates: “all ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary” (1990, p. 160). Even with the current and progressive celebration of cultural and ethnic hybridity, racial consciousness remains difficult to subdue. Vilna Bashi observes the enduring primacy of race in defining identity among non-white minorities in the US: “Racial identities are obtained not because one is unaware of the choice of ethnic labels with which to call oneself, but because one is not allowed to be without a race in a racialized society” (1998, p. 966). Race is embedded into the socioeconomic fabric of the nation, as many minorities are constantly reminded of their ancestry in the most routine activities, such as filling out government forms where they are required to identify themselves according to set racial categories.

This is not to claim that ethnic options are a non-existent ideal. While white Americans ostensibly enjoy a wider array of ethnic options, racialized minority groups and individuals also “negotiate and work at asserting their desired ethnic identities” (Song, 2003, p. 15). Miri Song posits that ethnic identities should be conceived dialectically as an interaction between “micro-level and macro-level processes” (2003, p. 19); the former includes an individual’s agency, action, and choice while the latter includes structures that impose constraints and assignments. The central concepts are interaction and changeability, supporting Stuart Hall’s understanding of identity as a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (1990, p. 225). If ethnic identity is framed in the present progressive of becoming, it opposes fixity and is in relative flux across time, contexts, and spaces. The study of any ethnic identity that Annie assumes, therefore, sheds light on that ongoing negotiation process, in which her own desires echo or challenge the already established structures that inevitably influence her sense of selfhood as a Korean American woman.

2. Engaging with gendered Asian stereotypes

Stereotypes exemplify the influence of external determinants in constructing selfhood. A host of state and public apparatuses contribute to the creation of ethnic categories and stereotypes that are often reflective of a particular sociopolitical moment. One of them, namely, the model minority discourse, emerged in the 1960s when “the popular press and media” touted Asian Americans as successful minorities who experienced “increasing wealth, upward social mobility, freedom from crime and mental health problems,” and academic excellence (Wong & Halgin, 2006, p. 38). This pigeonholed Asian American students as science and math prodigies. According to various studies, such dominant group images “can be internalized by [the individuals in the] groups themselves” to serve as “behavioral scripts” that are sometimes realized as “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Song, 2003,

pp. 20–21). Indeed, in Silicon Valley—the so-called seed of innovation—Asian Americans have recently been hypervisible as they comprise the majority of the high-tech workforce (Nakaso, 2012).

As a Korean American with a strong education in computer science and a stable profession, the 38-year-old Annie Yung appears to conform to the “model minority” label. Born and raised in California, she was educated at Caltech “and had worked for a series of software companies in the Silicon Valley. Now, like everyone else, she was on the Internet bandwagon” (Lee, 2001, p. 113). Despite her success in aligning herself with “everyone else” and the lauded model minority, Annie declares that her life as a database programmer is “fairly dull. Strikingly normal, actually” (2001, p. 113). Although Lee’s short story does not explicitly mention that Annie was pushed into the high-tech industry because of “behavioral scripts” she internalized as an Asian American or even external pressures, it is clearly stated that she is dissatisfied with her profession. “[Being a database programmer] is not as glamorous as you might think ... I’m going blind, looking at all those lines of code,” she remarks (2001, p. 113). The pressure to conform and join the safe masses comes at a price.

The consistent, but tedious, routine of Annie’s quotidian working life belies her personal struggles, which have the potential of interfering with her public success. By narrating her struggles on the personal level, Annie exposes society’s blindness toward personal, emotional, and mental health issues that afflict the seemingly exemplary model minority and reveals the interconnection between the personal and the public. Among the most problematic elements of Annie’s personal struggles is her love life. Her claim to a “strikingly normal” life masks the reality of her tumultuous relationships that resulted in two divorces (2001, p. 113).

Phillip Han [her first husband] had been her roommate’s brother, and he was like no other Korean she had ever met. He taught hapkido, wore a ponytail, rode a Harley, and wanted to be a movie star, the next Bruce Lee. He was wild, fun, and very, very cool. He was also terrible with money, squandering all of hers since he didn’t make any, and he was an inveterate philanderer ... Her second husband, Nils Sigridsson, was a middle-aged Swedish architect with a gorgeous house in Sunnyvale. He had impeccable taste and manners ... All was perfect, until he became impotent. (2001, pp. 113–114)

Though the two husbands are very different in style, neither marriage works. Perhaps attracted to her first husband because he is everything she cannot be as a model minority and to her second because he is so unlike her first, both husbands find her to be the wrong type of person. Phillip, on the one hand, derides her as a “drag” for refusing to conform to his sexually libertarian lifestyle (2001, p. 113). He even calls her a “fat cow” because her physique with her “wide face, her plentiful behind, her breasts so full she was often mistaken for fat when her waist had never been larger than twenty-six inches” does not conform to the female Asian beauty canon (2001, p. 113, 106). On the other hand, Nils finds her to be the wrong sex entirely as he leaves her for another man, “a lapsed Mormon podiatrist” they met while in couples therapy (2001, p. 114).

Her painful experience with men extends to her dating life. As she recounts:

[A] lot of [her bad dates] were with white men afflicted with A. H. F., Asian Hottie Fetish, wanting her to titter with high-cheeked China-doll timidity, or vamp it up as a wanton Suzie Wong, a dirty little yum-yum girl. (2001, p. 114)

Here gendered racialization is paramount. These men expect her to assume certain personas to suit her ostensible Asianness and, specifically, their preconceived notions of what it means to be an Asian woman. Annie thereby becomes the target of racial framing as the men seek to impose what Patricia Hill Collins terms “controlling images” (2000, p. 69). According to Hill Collins, controlling images confine Black womanhood to stereotypical figures such as mammies and welfare recipients in order to justify and naturalize racism and other forms of social injustice (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 69). Perpetuated by mainstream institutions of power such as the media and government agencies,

these externally defined stereotypical images constitute a process of othering whereby women of color are objectified and read against normative white women.

Asian women are treated in the same vein as that outlined in Hill Collins' theory about black female identity constructions. However, in contrast to the aggressive and hypermasculine image of black women, they are depicted as hyperfeminine and hypersexual. Compared to the golden mean of white normative womanhood, black women are not feminine enough while Asian women are too feminine in the American imaginary. Celine Parreñas Shimizu asserts that such representations of Asian women as embodiments of "excessive and perverse sexuality" become a form of bondage that obstructs the process of self-definition (2007, p. 15). Asian American women are thereby "tied" to this tradition of hypersexuality in a "bind of representation" (Shimizu, 2007, p. 16).

Predictably, Annie plays the part of the "dirty little yum-yum girl" during her marriage to Nils (whether this is a result of her suggestion or that of Nils is unknown) as their attempts to overcome his impotence escalate to "rape fantasies, anal sex, and bondage" (Lee, 2001, p. 114). She engages in risqué behavior possibly due to the emotional abuse of her first marriage which ended when her husband abandoned her for being sexually uptight. What is important is that she boldly becomes a different woman in order to meet the needs of the man she loves. Postmodern theories of identity position individuals as actors who articulate choices about their ethnic identity in response to multiple variants. In other words, the exercising of ethnic options represents a performative act that shapes and presents a chosen identity. Anthony Giddens writes that faced with the plurality of choices in today's order of late modernity, "self identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavor" (1991, p. 5). In effect, Giddens continues, "[w]e are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (1991, p. 65). The body becomes crucial here because it is "not just a physical entity which we 'possess,' it is an action-system, a mode of praxis" (Giddens, 1991, p. 99). The body, then, serves as a potentially liberating vehicle in the dynamic process of articulating an ethnic identity. Its deliberately executed actions and adopted styles create and project one's chosen self-image. Annie's sense of self-identity and sexuality is not unchanging; her ability to play different parts at different moments in her life is a testament to her attempt to engage with racialized gender stereotypes and ethnic options.

But such postmodern approaches overlook the complexities of embodiment in the racialized body. The body remains an obstacle, indeed, even a burden, for minority individuals who seek to somehow reinvent themselves and assume a self-identity that deviates from social expectations. Performance "implies constant witness, an audience always already waiting to 'see the show'" (Chen, 2005, p. 5). As both "a discursive and kinesthetic strategy," performance illuminates "the omnipresence of the gaze" (Chen, 2005, p. 5). The mainstream American audience expects a show in which racial stereotypes match the racialized protagonist. Thus, according to the dominant script Annie is supposed to play the China Doll or Suzie Wong, even though her purported Asianness is highly dubious as an American citizen who grew up in the US. In other words, there is a conflation of race and ethnicity. Shimizu's framework of bondage may register as quite extreme, but it does evince how racialized stereotypes remain an everyday reality for numerous Asian Americans such as Annie. She transforms herself into the sexually submissive Suzie Wong because she believes that this is what her husband desires, only to be rejected and, again, left heartbroken. Conflating stereotype with reality, Annie relinquishes her right to create her own (sexual) identity to external determinations.

This is not to suggest that stereotypes are wholly responsible for dissolving Annie's second marriage or her unsuccessful dating life. Her frequent confrontations with racist stereotypes, however, gesture toward the larger theme of the desire and struggle to articulate a coherent subjecthood against the threat of controlling images. This problematic endeavor is further complicated when the subjecthood in question is that of a Korean American, or more broadly, Asian American. Both terms represent an ambiguous identity that invokes the complex workings of nationality and ethnic heritage. Whereas the use of the hyphen tends to foreground the foreignness of Asian American identity, David Palumbo-Liu proposes the more fluid construct of "Asian/American" as an alternative. Analogous to "the construction 'and/or' ... the solidus at once instantiates a choice between two

terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability” (Palumbo-Liu, 1999, p. 1). The slash, then, denotes not an absolute split but a porous border that reflects the shifting alignment between the “Asian” and the “American,” reconfigurations that are complementary at times and contradictory at others. If Annie’s failed marriages and bad dates seek to privilege the Asianness of her identity at the cost of obscuring her American side, she can challenge their myopia by choosing to highlight her Americanness. This is why she chooses to play the cowgirl, a part that is normally available to Anglo-American women, exclusively. This performance, consequently, resists the equation of skin color, phenotype, and culture to a particular nationality. What transpires instead is an interaction between racial assignment and assertion as Annie subverts stereotypes by utilizing their performative and visual natures for her own ends.

3. Performing the Asian American cowgirl

The postmodern view of fluid identities holds the positive potential of expanding personal freedoms that depart from sociocultural mores. This possibility of “self-fulfillment” and “self-creation” is granted through consumerism and the marketplace of goods (Dunn, 1998, p. 68). While Annie already physically embodies feminized Asian stereotypes, she can also transform into a cowgirl by furnishing herself with the appropriate commodities. Here was a woman:

[W]ho had never been anywhere near a dude ranch, yet who was wearing shiny gray buckskin cowboy boots and a red-sateen, western-cut shirt tucked into tight Levi’s, who was talking like a she-hick buckaroo, and who was sporting a bleached-blond hairdo that looked for all the world like a plastic stalagmite. (Lee, 2001, p. 105)

She is dressed perfectly for the Lone Night Cantina, a bar that she describes as having just “the right feel” (Lee, 2001, p. 102). It becomes her new favorite place in Rosarita Bay because “at least for a few hours,” it made her believe that “she was where she thought she belonged” (Lee, 2001, p. 102). This sense of belonging provides a temporary remedy for her recent heartbreak after ending her secure relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Bobby Cho. Yet, Annie’s younger sister Evelyn grows increasingly concerned about her older sister’s infatuation with the “lonesome cowboy thing,” which she dismisses as “all a myth, ... something straight out of the movies” (Lee, 2001, p. 102). The intelligent Annie, too, is acutely aware that she is participating in an illusion; notwithstanding, she cannot help but be enthralled by the likes of Patsy Cline, whose “mawkish and melodramatic” lyrics about “dreaming, hurting, leaving ... loving, and crying” strike her with a purity like “religion” (Lee, 2001, p. 107). She admits (trying to appear flippant) that assuming an alien identity is a means to cope with her “everyday nervous breakdown” (Lee, 2001, p. 115). The question that emerges, then, is why, of all possibilities, she chose the cowgirl as a source of solace.

Lee’s protagonist willingly buys into a brand of Americana by performing the figure of the cowgirl who exists in classical Western films before the mid-1950s. The Western, whose birth coincides with the closing of the frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century, is often regarded as the most American of genres. John Belton notes how “the Western began to replace the West, continuing, albeit in a purely mythic way, to shape American character” (2012, p. 245). Besides bringing Stetsons, jeans, and cowboy boots into vogue, the West supposedly cultivated the seeds of American democracy. In *The Frontier in American History* (first published in 1893), historian Frederick Jackson Turner proclaims that

American democracy was born of no theorist’s dream; it was not carried in the *Susan Constant* to Virginia, nor in the *Mayflower* to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier. Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America for three centuries while it occupied its empire. (2011, p. 226)

Literary and cinematic reproductions of the West draw on Turner’s highly influential “frontier thesis” in which the West is seen as the primordial source of American democracy. Fictional imaginings of the West assuaged the fear that a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing American society in the late

nineteenth century was losing touch with its pastoral roots, perpetuating the myth of the West as a “touchstone of national identity” symbolizing “democracy and individualism” (O’Connor & Rollins, 2009, p. 2).

The brave and enterprising American frontiersman, played by “the great Western stars of the postwar era, such as Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea, and John Wayne” (Belton, 2012, p. 244), moved outward from the European metropolis and headed for primitive, virgin lands which he conquered and tamed. Richard Slotkin notes that in the American imaginary, “the processes of American development in the colonies were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune” (1992, p. 11). The developmental trajectory of Westerns envisions the path to progress in decidedly restrictive terms that privilege white male heroes. Cowboy culture quickly turned into an instrument of white supremacy that was sanctioned by the philosophy of Manifest Destiny and its systemic violence committed against Native Americans.

Ironically, cowboy culture, the emblem of Americanness, has its roots in “Moorish and Islamic horsemanship” (Evans, 2006, p. 231), and was transferred to the Spanish West, from there to Mexico, and later to the US after the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). The icon of the West was thereafter strategically deployed as a founding myth (Slotkin, 1992, p. 10), providing all immigrants with a model to emulate (Nicholas, 2006, p. 34). The West was originally an avenue for socially and racially disenfranchised groups—from African, Native American, Mexican, Cajun, and Asian origins—to make a living (García, 2013, p. 601; Martin, 2007, p. 114). But the movement westward, which became a quest to refashion “the self into something purer and more authentic” (Schlatter, 2006, p. 3), had little room in its cultural and cinematic representations for gender and ethnic diversity, except in the form of the odd foil for the purely white male American frontiersman. Westerns, therefore, often contradicted the original egalitarian message, as they were notorious for their crude depiction of minorities and women. Westerns prior to the 1950s almost universally depicted Native Americans as vicious savages that needed to be eradicated while Asian immigrants were rendered invisible even though Chinese laborers (mostly railroad and agricultural workers) played a crucial role in shaping modern California. Minority women, then, are doubly disenfranchised in the cinematic history of Westerns.

Annie articulates two political statements by adopting the figure of the cowgirl. She defies the exclusionary policies of the US’s nation-building and stakes a claim in that process by literally inserting herself into the picture. Asian Americans are often perceived as perpetual foreigners who are “somehow never ... ‘American’ enough” (Chen, 2005, p. 18). The US’s anxiety surrounding the “‘foreign within’ manifests in such figures as the model minority,” figures who are marginal, never fully included nor excluded (Chuh, 2003, p. 12). Read in terms of identity denial in social psychological terms, this positioning marks a social acceptance threat wherein Annie as “an individual is not recognized as a member of an important in-group [i.e. mainstream white Americans]” (Cheryan & Monin, 2005, p. 717). Her response is to counter this challenge through identity assertion, “a process by which one proves to others that one belongs in the in-group ... by engaging in prototypical behavior” (Cheryan & Monin, 2005, p. 718). The blond cowgirl, who is indisputably American and likely to be welcomed as a member of the in-group, provides Annie with the perfect persona to embody. Due to its public nature, her performance is not only directed toward herself but to the larger American society as a self-validating act to prove her right to belong, to be included, and specifically, to be desirable.

Annie’s chosen prototype, through and against which she constructs her Asian American identity, embodies dominant norms and conventions. The cowgirl, like her male counterpart, is the unambiguously American figure who conjures the key ideologies that have shaped American nationhood, namely, the West, the frontier, and the pioneering spirit. Annie Oakley (1860–1926), a famous sharpshooter and performer who joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in 1885, is regarded as the inaugural figure who helped to “create a genre of western women called the cowgirl” (Riley, 2003, p. xix). It

seems to be no accident that Lee's protagonist shares the same name as Oakley. In the spirit of an "authentic" cowboy/-girl, Annie moves from the metropolis to the "pastoral and beautiful" Rosarita Bay (Lee, 2001, p. 195),³ starting her own cycle of "separation and regression," and leaving behind established society before she enters the Lone Night Cantina. By evoking the West, Annie participates in the national myth embodied by her namesake. She establishes her claim to its promise of unbridled freedom, which extends into the American Dream of an "endlessly mutable identity" (Leong, 2003, p. 184). Glenda Riley notes that cowgirls were considered as "wild women ... who deviated from their culture's and their era's expectations of a 'proper' woman" (2003, p. xi). Their "lives encompassed unusual escapades and often involved quests for freedom, notoriety, or wealth" (Riley, 2003, p. xi). The frontier spirit with its utopian vision of freedom and self-determination was thus even more pronounced among cowgirls than cowboys.

Annie follows in these women's footsteps to shape her own destiny and realize her dream of becoming "[c]olorless" (Lee, 2001, p. 233).⁴ To be colorless is, essentially, to be white. Unlike all other colors associated with different races and ethnicities, whiteness is invisible, normative, neutral, and, above all, unmarked. Whiteness is a given, the benchmark against which all other forms of being are measured. Richard Dyer refers to this as a "non-raced" status wherein "white people are just people ... whereas other colors are something else" (1997, p. 2). The cowgirl is an appropriate figure through which Annie performs whiteness because she is taken for granted as a signifier of Americanness. Performing the cowgirl is thus Annie's attempt to transition from a marked fetishized body to a normative unmarked one. A seamless transition is impossible, though, not only because Annie is Asian, but because whiteness itself is already an imaginary construct. As Gwendolyn Audrey Foster adds, postmodern approaches have "[exposed] cracks and fissures in whiteness and white performativity" (1997, pp. 2–3) in order to make "whiteness strange" (Dyer, 1997, p. 4). Because it is not a biological fact, "whiteness lacks an original" and can be understood as what Jean Baudrillard refers to as a "simulacrum" (Foster, 2003, p. 2). Despite lacking an original copy, whiteness is naturalized through the reproduction of images such as ethnic stereotypes that depict non-white people as somehow deviating from normalcy.

It is similarly difficult to trace the original cowboy or cowgirl, if one ever even existed. The invention of the cowboy tradition with the "lanky, tall Aryan" as its archetype is generally regarded as descending from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which began in North Platte, Nebraska, in 1882 (Hobsbawm, 2013). Buffalo Bill's show involved what Belton describes as the "transformation of history into theater and of actuality into myth" (2012, p. 246). It romanticized and fictionalized the West (Bakken, 2008, p. 212), drawing on the audience's desires for a Western hero and his conquests (Bakken, 2008, p. 220). To that end, Buffalo Bill frequently took liberties with his accounts (Bakken, 2008, p. 31, 34). He also routinely staged Indian attacks when he worked as a guide and buffalo hunter (Bakken, 2008, p. 35) to add excitement to his tours and cater to the desires of non-Westerners wishing for a raw and authentic Western experience (Bakken, 2008, p. 34). Oakley, whose fame in the 1890s made her the model for future cowgirls, was introduced to the show to counter the general erasure of women's roles in the West in dominant narratives; her apparent naturalness belies the reality of the cowgirl as a discursively produced image, though. Commercialized and marketed as an exceptional woman, Oakley still perpetuated patriarchal and Victorian norms by using the sidesaddle and wearing dresses—as befits a lady—and featuring her family in her shows to emphasize the value of family and trust (Bakken, 2008, p. 211, 220, 223). The subversive edge of the cowgirl as a "wild woman" was thereby dulled to fit into this imperial and patriarchal narrative. Oakley, who was of English descent, participated in the promotion of the myth of the West including its white supremacist messages, becoming an icon herself, even though she neither hailed from nor performed in the West (Bakken, 2008, p. 210).

Buffalo Bill's skillful and seamless transformation of actuality into myth disguises the highly performative and spectacle-oriented roots of the cowboy and cowgirl. In other words, these apparently natural figures are a product of an imposture that "depends upon a particular belief in the power of the authentic" (Chen, 2005, p. 7). Annie disrupts this seamless performance that reflects the

apparent coherence of the US body politic by bringing back the theatricality in assuming the cowgirl persona. As Chen clarifies, impersonation is distinguished from imposture because the former is not premised on deception in which the “object is to fool others” (2005, p. 7). Annie is fooling no one. Despite having the right look and attitude, her bleached-blond hair is “like a plastic stalagmite” and her Southern accent is “about as real as [Joe’s fake] Rolex” (Lee, 2001, p. 105, 111). She attempts to gain legitimacy by “[using] the language of white culture,” but she “[resists] complete normativization by white culture” due to the utter transparency of her faux identity (Chow, 1998, p. 12). She furnishes herself with all the necessary goods to ‘pass’ as a blond cowgirl, but the artificial yellow of her dyed hair creates a jarring contradiction between the persona and the performer.

The artificiality of Annie’s act is key to denaturalizing the cowgirl figure, and relates to what Judith Butler perceives as the subversive potential of parodic performances such as drag and role-playing. The disjuncture between the body of the male performer and the female gender he performs illuminates the constructedness of gender: “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (Butler, 1999, p. 137, emphasis in original). A similar argument could be made about Annie’s ethnic role-playing, as race is another regulatory regime shaping subjecthood. The absurdity of a Korean American cowgirl exposes the myth of the West—supposedly a symbol of American individualism and democracy—to be a sham. The reality that Annie is still designated as an alien critiques the discourse of fake and real identities and the contingent notion of an authentic and original American identity. Annie’s experimentation with Asian stereotypes, even though neither persona reflected her own inclinations, passes muster under the American gaze (and is even encouraged) because both options match Annie’s clearly visible otherness. As a cowgirl, however, Annie is described by Joe as talking like a “yahoo” (Lee, 2001, p. 111) and wearing a “honky-tonk outfit” (Lee, 2001, p. 115), comments that, besides being disparaging, illustrate that ethnic options for racialized minorities are only ever available if they maintain current structures and dynamics, keeping ethnic others apart.

However, Annie is no less American than Rob Wilson, the owner of the Lone Night Cantina who is a former cowboy and rodeo performer. Lee, after all, proclaims the dubious Americanness of the bar from the onset as his story opens with the line: “the Lone Night Cantina was not a real cowboy bar” (Lee, 2001, p. 101). The bar is almost a postmodern pastiche of what a real cowboy bar would be like with its sign “in red neon tubes designed to look like ropes” (Lee, 2001, p. 107). Much like Annie’s appropriation of the cowgirl persona, the bar’s image of authenticity is bought through a display of products that supposedly conjure the American West: “[t]he bridles and ropes hanging from the walls, the jukebox stacked with the best of the country and western standards, [and] the long oak bar counter” (Lee, 2001, p. 102). Richard A. Peterson, in his analysis of the creation of country music as a viable industry within American popular culture, refers to the process of “fabricating authenticity.” Building on Maurice Halbwachs’ work on collective memory, Peterson points out that “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered” (1997, p. 3). The mawkish songs of Patsy Cline that captivate Annie and the singer’s “pure, deep-voiced insistence of truth” (Lee, 2001, p. 107) evoke a romanticized past that never existed and a shallow “truth” that leaves much untold.

Annie’s feeling of comfort in the Lone Night Cantina is therefore ephemeral, since the apparent authenticity of the place that drew her in turns out to be an empty signifier. “She *thought* she belonged” (emphasis added), but as the narrator states, this is merely an “impression” (Lee, 2001, p. 102). Initially, the fictional and limboesque Rosarita Bay serves as the ideal place to escape to as it is described as “a place of exile”: a “no-man’s land” cloaked by “the gray air of anonymity” (Lee, 2001, p. 23).⁵ Despite the brief reprieve, Annie’s cowgirl fantasy is ultimately shattered during her failed dalliance with Joe. According to her imagined script, Joe is supposed to be the “lonesome stranger,” the “exotic and adventuresome” maritime man who “had found the frontier exhausted but had kept going west” (Lee, 2001, p. 108, 111). Through him, she seeks the opposite of “the [harmless] roly-poly Bobby,” who is perhaps the quintessential model minority (Lee, 2001, p. 115). Yet, Joe’s maritime escapades, his adventures as a “pirate on the high seas” (Lee, 2001, p. 112), yield

nothing but containers full of Cocoa Puffs; Annie's wistful hope for a stoic cowboy—"a living testament to when men were men" (Lee, 2001, p. 108)—is further crushed when instead of "[getting] lucky" and "hook[ing herself] a sailor" (Lee, 2001, p. 116), she ends up with an emotionally scarred man whose unexpected vulnerability awakens and amplifies her own fears.

The color yellow takes on a new significance beyond race as it can be seen as a symbol of Annie's cowardice or her attempts to "proceed with caution." Now that her performance failed she needs to face the consequences of her earlier decisions. She retrospectively realizes that "she had been hiding" and that she was only involved with Bobby because "she had been afraid of getting hurt, and he had been safe" (Lee, 2001, p. 121). Her cowgirl persona most likely represents a rare act of stepping out of the comfort zone, of detaching herself completely from her dull, sedentary life style as a computer programmer, and provides Annie with the thrill of living outside of her own racialized body, consequently allowing her to temporarily forget herself as a woman who has been rejected too many times. The fact that this cowgirl act, her second gendered ethnic performance, also ends in failure exposes a drawback of the postmodern approach to a fluid identity. The multiple processes of identification, underlying this final performance, illuminate a history of resistance, indeterminacy, and dis-ease.

4. The limitations of the postmodern approach to identity formation

An impersonation is a performance predicated on pretending to be somebody other than oneself. Thus, it is a momentary and unsustainable state of being. After being rejected by Joe, Annie enters the bathroom and sees her reflection in the mirror: "She looked a mess. Black roots were showing at the part on her hair, her makeup was smudged, there were bags under her eyes" (Lee, 2001, p. 116). Joe tries to comfort the speechless Annie, explaining that his rejection "had nothing to do with [her]," that she is "a pretty woman" (Lee, 2001, p. 119). But his words offer no reassurance. Realizing that she cannot escape her own skin and keep up the performance, she purchases a box of hair dye closest to her original color from the drugstore. This does not, however, represent a triumphant ending in which she accepts her Korean heritage. By giving up the roles of Suzie Wong and the American cowgirl Annie signals that her quest to assert a coherent ethnic identity is still ongoing and will likely involve her active experimentation with further prescribed and restrictive roles.

Annie's experience gains added depth when compared with Danny Kim's story in Lee's titular piece "Yellow." Both Korean American protagonists struggle with their race, but Danny ultimately looks back to the past as a source of identity. Initially, Danny rejects his Asian ancestry—refusing to speak Korean and eat *kimchi* (a staple in Korean diets)—so he can be "exemplary, unquestionably American" (Lee, 2001, p. 201). The handsome Danny achieves professional success, but his realization that "he would never get past his ethnicity" (Lee, 2001, pp. 233–234) causes paranoid anxieties where he constantly perceives himself as a victim of racial discrimination. Ultimately, however, he comes to embrace his Korean identity and the story concludes with his suggestion of a family trip-cum-roots pilgrimage to Korea. He is at last able to marvel in the "pure joy of seeing his son's face," which he previously dismissed as "a dull physiognomy, characteristic of Orientals," becoming "remarkably like his own" (Lee, 2001, p. 239, 255). This rather tidy ending forecloses a deeper exploration of Danny's lifelong struggle against his Asianness into the form of a coming-of-age narrative where maturation inevitably involves an acceptance of oneself. "The Lone Night Cantina" resists this move of re-ethnicization, which risks a return to an essentialization based on descent. Annie's position remains ambiguous and ambivalent even after she has attempted to live as both a Korean and an American.

Postmodern and poststructuralist theories of identity recognize the body as the locus where various apparatuses of power intersect. Kandice Chuh, for instance, proposes "subjectlessness as a discursive ground for Asian American studies" (2003, p. 11). This conception brings into perspective the multiple processes of subjectification that oppose an overreliance on the body and ancestry. Annie can be said to execute this destabilizing approach. Giddens writes that in late modernity, "the body

itself has become emancipated—the condition for its reflexive restructuring” (1991, p. 218). No longer “a ‘given’ ... the body, like the self, becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation” (Giddens, 1991, p. 218). The body is open to molding by various regimes of high modernity such as “health, diet, appearance, [and] exercise” (Giddens, 1991, p. 218). “What are you?” is the question frequently posed to Danny by Americans uncertain about his ethnic background (Lee, 2001, p. 198). Giddens seems to suggest that in the contemporary world, the answer would be, “Whatever you want to be.” Indeed, Danny spends years meticulously cultivating “each nuance of his personality” and “shaping his physique” until he is deemed “lucky” by one of his lovers for looking relatively un-Asian (Lee, 2001, p. 199). His body, nonetheless, remains marked, and he is forced to confront this uncomfortable truth when a blond woman rejects him for not being white.

Annie’s protean and unstable identity as a Korean American woman offers the critical advantage of challenging dominant structures by revealing them as socially constructed, but this fluidity also results in the everyday dis-ease of living in her own skin. The body operates at the discursive level, but as feminist theories of embodied subjectivity remind us, it is, first and foremost, material. The fact that Annie dyes her hair blond or changes her physique to better resemble an Anglo-American woman cannot change the reality of her yellow skin. The shortcomings of postmodern approaches that dismiss subjecthood as fictitious also recall some critiques leveled against Butler’s gender performance theory. Sheila Jeffreys points out that the possibility for effecting change becomes restricted if gender is perceived as an “endless play” (1996, p. 359). She argues that gender is “depoliticized,” thereby obscuring the material conditions of women’s oppression (Jeffreys, 1996, p. 359). Yet, by performing the cowgirl Annie clearly demonstrates that impersonation is not as apolitical as one might think; by tapping into American mythology, Lee and his protagonist challenge and deconstruct a systematized history of exclusions by giving the American emblem a racially mismatched face of the wrong gender. The performance does not generate a solution but it manages to raise a host of politicized questions.

The ongoing struggle of race as an everyday burden for some Asian Americans reveals the limitations of postmodern theory. As Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman note, theorizing identity in the postmodern era is a twofold task that must address “identity as central to personal and group formation while avoiding essentialism” as well as “articulate identity so that it can be understood in relation to sociohistorical dynamics” (1995, p. 21). The idea of a fluid and dynamic identity may appear attractive theoretically, but to actually live in a constant state of becoming denies the benefits of belonging and inclusion granted by the state of being. A return to a more essentialist mode of identity as chosen by Danny may not be the answer, but “The Lone Night Cantina” forces one to consider the psychic agony caused by the uncertainty about identity as Annie remains afraid and estranged from all her relationships at the end of the story.

The subversive potential of Annie’s performance is ultimately contained by the pessimistic ending where she is no better off than at the beginning of the story. Most Westerns end with the hero romantically riding off into the sunset. In contrast, Annie’s story ends with her driving off aimlessly amid the pouring rain as she listens to Emmylou Harris’s “A River for Him” (Lee, 2001, p. 121). The everyday responsibilities of returning to work and buying new furniture begin to dawn on her, but she “wished she could keep driving ... forever” (Lee, 2001, p. 121). Harris’s first stanza illuminates her desire for escape and erasure:

I crossed on the river / There’ll be no returning / I crossed all the bridges / I watched them all
burning / And now I’m a stranger / To a strange land I’m driven / Where all is forgotten / And
nothing’s forgiven.

It also serves to comment on Annie’s postmodern multifaceted identity which lies beyond the Asian stereotype imposed upon her and the now almost stereotypical cowgirl identity, which she voluntarily adopts. Preferring to dye her hair back to its natural color yet emulating the lone cowboy in her quasi-nomadic aimless driving, Annie draws on both the “yellow” and American in her. The darkness around

her and the unidentified destination, “the strange land,” emblemize her protean identity that renders her a stranger even to herself, and capture the sense of dis-ease that comes with such fluidity, even as the fact that she is the one at the wheel stresses her agency in choosing which roles to act out next.

5. Conclusion

Like many Asian American writers, Lee expresses uneasiness in being pigeonholed as an ethnic writer who primarily focuses on issues of race and ethnicity. This is perhaps curious given the title of his work, which seems to invite reductive labels. Yet, cultural productions such as literature cannot but address race and ethnicity because these notions continue to inform and shape the American landscape. Due to the prevalence of discourses on multiculturalism and globalization, it is no longer controversial to claim that race and ethnicity are social constructs. They are theoretically understood to be fluid and mutable, but in the everyday realm of private and public institutions the languages of race and ethnicity are spoken as if they were coherent and static. The task of critical scholarship is not to dismiss these concepts as outdated but to “denaturalize the process of racialization and make transparent the power structures that underlie racial classification” (Ho, 2015, p. 5). Through the related theories of performance and impersonation, we sought to illuminate how ethnicity is performed in “The Lone Night Cantina.” The protagonist Annie Yung’s impersonation of a cowgirl makes manifest the mutability and instability of ethnicity as she traverses both sides of her Korean American identity. By revealing that the cowgirl is no more an ‘authentic’ American than a Korean American database programmer, the story critiques the US body politic that designates her Asian American body as alien. Annie’s performance exposes the inequity of US nationhood, but Lee’s story denies an easy solution because she does not come to embrace either her American or Korean identity. Instead, the short story ends on a chasmic note of agency and indeterminacy that is reflective of the fragmented and uncertain postmodern identity.

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Notes

1. We chose not to use hyphens/ slashes in the context of hybrid identities to avoid the negative connotations attending the usage of the term “hyphenated identity,” which separates foreign-born Americans from Anglo-Americans, as well as the split between what is American and what is foreign. In her novel *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (1989, pp. 5–6) As the author brilliantly notes, it is not easy to separate different parts of one’s identity and to decipher what is American and what is not, what is due to circumstance and what is not. We therefore prefer not to separate the two parts through further punctuation marks, particularly not in this article

in which the central concern is a postmodern exploration of identity negotiation.

2. The distinction between race and ethnicity remains the subject of an ongoing debate. In order to prevent a facile conflation of the two terms, we borrow from Martin Bulmer’s definition that “‘ethnicity’ is a more inclusive term than ‘race’ because while race is predicated (however spuriously) on biological membership of a particular group, ethnic groups are generally seen as having more fluid and blurred boundaries” (Song, 2003, p. 10). As Chris Weedon clarifies, ethnicity as used here is understood to include the interrelated questions of identity, language, and culture and does not necessarily concern phenotypes.
3. This description is found in Lee’s seventh story in the collection, “Domo Arigato.”
4. This term actually appears in the story “Yellow,” but it seems applicable to “The Lone Night Cantina” as well.
5. This description is found in Lee’s first story in the collection, “The Price of Eggs in China.”

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