Chang-rae Lee's Literary Palimpsests in *Aloft*

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Introduction

Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee's third novel *Aloft*, published in 2004, is considered by many to be an anomaly. Compared to his previous two novels, which delved deep into Asian and Asian American history and identity, *Aloft* is set in the suburbs of New York, on Long Island, and the protagonist is a sixty-year-old Italian American named Jerry Battle. Granted, his life is falling apart: his hospitalized father is on the loose, his girlfriend for the last couple of decades leaves him, his daughter falls ill with cancer but refuses to be treated for it because she is pregnant, and his son is running the family landscaping business into the ground. And on top of that we learn that not only was his brother killed in Vietnam but also his wife, the mother of his two children, died by drowning in the family pool when the children were young. Strangely enough, the positive reviews for this book hail it as a successor to novels that chronicle the suburban condition, while the negative reviews of *Aloft* see this inheritance as a defect, rendering this a typical suburban male mid-life crisis novel, formulaic and clichéd.

Aloft goes beyond the simply formulaic: Lee takes advantage of the form of the suburban novel to engage in conversations with previous literary works to respond to issues of representation and to reimagine those works in the twenty-first century. This essay explores how those conversations change how we view

both *Aloft* and its predecessors as Lee maps his literary heritage by creating palimpsests in his novel that in turn serve as a part of a palimpsest in a larger literary context.

Of Palimpsests and Suburbs

The term palimpsest has been appropriated by literary scholars to describe a certain kind of intertextual relationship. The term originally comes from paleography and refers to the layers of writing that could still be seen after a piece of vellum was scraped clean for reuse. In those pre-paper days, vellum, made from animal skins, was a rare commodity that was often recycled. Those faint traces of previous writing constitute a palimpsest. One is made aware, by looking at such a manuscript page, that something had come previously, and one becomes conscious of the layers of writing, and in turn, layers of meaning, contained in the same piece of vellum.

There are a great many palimpsests visible to those who are looking for them in *Aloft*. Not only is there a palimpsest of suburban novels, but the novel itself is obsessed with layers, both physical and psychological. I find it no coincidence that Jerry Battle made his living in the landscaping business, where he was constantly working with the ground, erasing what existed to make way for new lawns and gardens as well as uncovering artifacts that suggested traces of previous owners or long-ago attempts at home improvements. In other words, the terrain was his vellum, and even in his narrative, though he manages to obliterate certain episodes in his life, his thoughts resurrect the past, and we are invited to read into them. As Kathy Knapp argues in her essay about forgetting in *Aloft*, "each principal of Battle Bros. Inc. has learned at his father's knee how to profitably cultivate a landscape designed to promote numbing forgetfulness" (209). This novel, then,

becomes an exercise in relearning how to remember.

In the larger context, the most obvious palimpsests are the ones that the reviewers write about: the connections to the suburban novel and previous writers who wrote such works. Many reviewers have noted that the protagonist of *Aloft*, Jerry Battle, is a descendant of other middle-aged denizens of literary suburbia. For instance, in her *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani calls Jerry "a spiritual relative of . . . John Updike's Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom" and describes Jerry's terrain as "a small patch of Long Island somewhere between Cheever country and Gatsby's vanished green Eden." Lev Grossman, writing for *Time*, notes, "Lee isn't the first to point out that the suburbs hide uncharted depths of misery and discontentment — Updike, Rick Moody and John Cheever, among many others, have been here before."

In the twenty-four reviews from magazines and newspapers that are excerpted and featured in the first few unpaginated pages of the paperback edition of *Aloft* that I have, eight writers' names appear: Rick Moody, Walker Percy, Richard Yates, and Louis Begley are mentioned once each, Richard Russo is mentioned three times, and Richard Ford, John Updike, and John Cheever are mentioned four, five, and six times. Clearly, this comparison serves as a kind of shorthand that validates not only the form of the novel but also the quality of it. Mark C. Jerng notes that there is a "disruption in expectations caused by Lee's decision to create a white male as his main character (Jerry Battle) in *Aloft*" and articulates the contortions reviewers undergo to make sense out of the disjunction between the author's race and the protagonists: "[E]ach of them corrects this disruption by producing a realignment between author and textual content that fits more familiar norms" (189). In short, they either compare Jerry to Lee's other Asian American protagonists to flatten out the differences or they have him stand

for universal values because he is white. The end result is that the critics are almost unanimous in praising Lee for writing a suburban novel with a protagonist they think they understand and like.

The suburban novel does not come into existence until the suburbs do, in that great post-World War II frenzy in building, a national exercise in homemaking. In a National Public Radio interview for *Aloft*, Chang-rae Lee talks about how he saw Jerry Battle inhabit this landscape and no other, calling it "the landscape of . . . one acre lots, [with] very modest houses . . . [for] solid middle-moving-to-upper-class folks." Indeed, Jerry certainly fits the demographic of those post-war baby boomers living the American dream in new housing developments. And his life is supposedly contemporaneous to Cheever's and Updike's characters, living similar lives in suburban areas.

Though A. O Scott, writing for the *New York Times*, declares, ". . . the most impressive thing about 'Aloft' is Lee's determination to resist the clichés of suburban dysfunction," the similarities to other suburban novels are exactly why some critics dismiss this novel. They don't hate it; they say it does not engage them. For instance, *The New Yorker's* James Wood evaluates it in the following way:

> 'Aloft' (2004), seems feebler, a thematic poor cousin. Again, a male narrator, Jerry Battle, gradually discloses a world of turmoil and abandonment . . . Jerry Battle, an Italian-American, is not as complexly bound up as Henry Park and Doc Hata [protagonists from previous novels] in the making of an immigrant's life of successful gestures. Without that productive social anxiety, the novel relaxes too easily into suburban familiarity, and the plot stresses . . . quickly become clichéd and histrionic.

Min Song, writing for *The LA Review of Books* makes his disappointment

clear:

> Still, as flawless as its technical execution is and as intriguing as its ideas are, I found myself unable to care about any of the characters. The suburban world it depicts was devoid of urgent narrative matter, the kind that can pull me into a story and leave me lingering in deep thought about its details. Even the choice to cross the color line by telling the story from a white man's perspective doesn't feel especially interesting, Jerry Battle being already such a familiar character. Readers are used to seeing the world through his eyes.

And John Homans's review for *New York Magazine* is blithely damning: "There's an airy lightness and inconsequentiality about *Aloft* (think: Zoloft [a widely available and popular antidepressant]) that's both charming and cloying. It never quite gets back to earth."

Lee spent many years during his childhood in the suburbs of New York City and as an adult, he has lived in various New Jersey suburbs with his own family, so his knowledge of and connection to the suburbs are not inconsequential, abstract or imagined. He emigrated to the United States with his family in 1968, and lived in New Rochelle, New York, outside of the city until he went away to boarding school, Philips Exeter Academy. He went to Yale University for his undergraduate studies and then to the University of Oregon for his MFA. He chronicles his life growing up in the suburbs in numerous lovely essays about his family so his is a lived attachment to place. In the interview with National Public Radio, Lee remarks, "In some ways, Jerry's story is closest to my daily real life: my daily rhythms, the kinds of things that I deal with, the kinds of challenges we have in our family. It's probably more my voice and follows the character of my thoughts closer than my other books. . . ." His model for Jerry, he discloses, is his father-in-

law who is Italian American and lives on Long Island and flies a small plane.

Writing and Unwhitening

On one hand, his firsthand lived experiences in suburbia gives Lee fodder for writing and insights into the psyche of a sixty-year-old Italian American; on the other hand, living in suburbia as a recent immigrant gives Lee ways to write a novel that is not just an exercise in mimesis. Keith Wilhite states, "Lee offers a glimpse at what it might mean to take a more multifaceted and affirmative approach to our suburban nation, especially the country's older suburbs . . . [and] achieves this effect . . . through its attention to suburbia's evolving ethnic composition" (632).

Because the narrator seems to be a white guy in the midst of a long mid-life crisis, our minds immediately settle on that category and often refuse to budge; yet the novel is filled with people of color, from the elderly African American, married to a white woman, who used to own Jerry's plane, to Jerry's long-deceased Korean wife Daisy, to his Puerto Rican ex-girlfriend Rita, to his biracial children, his Korean-American son-in-law, and his multiracial grandchildren. Even Jerry Battle, whose name seems very Anglo, turns out to be Jerry Battaglia. Jerry narrates:

> The family name was originally Battaglia, but my father and uncles decided early on to change their name to Battle for the usual reasons immigrants and others like them will do, for the sake of familiarity and ease of use and to herald a new and optimistic beginning, which is anyone's God-given right, whether warranted or not.
>
> Battle, too, is a nice name for a business, because it's simple and memorable, ethnically indistinct, and then squarely patriotic, though in

a subtle sort of way. (24-25)

Jerry is oblivious to the erasures that occur when the family name is changed. Though he rationalizes it happily because it is "a nice name for a business" and subtly patriotic, he does not seem to equate "ethnically indistinct" with his father and uncles deliberately whitewashing their Italian heritage. In the palimpsest that is Jerry's life, then, his ethnicity can be read, despite the transformation of the family name.

Caroline Rody, in her book, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, notes that this novel does not quite fit the genre of the "white life novel," a kind of novel that African American writers wrote with white protagonists in the post-World War II era (42). Lee has better access to "white life" because of his life in the suburbs, and Rody goes on to declare, "The writing of *Aloft* thus affords Lee an interstitial cultural position, a fluid imaginative mobility in which he feels a cross-ethnic empathy with the stereotyped, even while granting himself an imaginative range and freedom not unlike the 'liberty' possessed by that average white guy, Jerry Battle" (44). Rody charts what she calls the "unwhitening," the gradual shading of the assumed whiteness by "ethnic differences and attachments" of those around him (44). She concludes, "Lee's 'white' novel gives us a man who comes to welcome the unwhitening of his life, or the dethroning of the meaning of that whiteness, who willingly gives up his privileged position '*aloft*' for a 'life [that] stays thick and busy, on the ground'"(46).

I would like to take this idea of unwhitening and connect it to the layers, the palimpsests connected to this novel. Those other texts that we see beneath Lee's novel, the suburban novels that keep on inviting comparison, both good and bad, are deliberately being written over by Lee, the paper/vellum being unwhitened,

not only by ink but also by race and ethnicity. In addition, Lee reminds us of two things: the first, that the suburbs were not always "white" since the definition of whiteness has changed over the course of the last century, and the second, that the complicated and often obscured race relations in his novel are constantly being whitewashed, forgotten, only to become legible as they rise to the surface again. It was not that long ago that "ethnic" meant the Catholics and the Jewish, and that the Italians and the Irish were considered people of color. Jerry's family history of changing his name in order to fit in speaks to this. So sometimes the unwhitening that we observe on the top layer of a palimpsest may alert us to unwhitening readings of texts underneath.

The following section of this paper excavates the layers of overwritten texts further back in time, to earlier writers who predate the post-World War II surge in suburban growth in the United States to the 1920s and the 1870s. That Jerry's long-deceased Korean wife is named Daisy immediately conjures up images of Daisy Buchanan from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as well as the protagonist of Henry James's "Daisy Miller" (1878). In *Aloft*, Jerry's ex-girfriend Rita points out how central Jerry's Daisy is to his existence: "But everything you do — or don't want to do, more like — has an origin in what happened to Daisy, which at this point is really what happened to *you*" (273). Daisy Miller and Daisy Buchanan are also women who are central to the existence of many of the men in their narratives and who are a source of fascination for them. *Aloft*'s Daisy eerily follows the trajectory of those previous Daisys who were tragic and unreadable objects of desire. I read Daisy, Jerry's dead wife, against those other Daisys in order to explore not only how they inform Daisy Battle, but also how Lee's representation of his Daisy alters how we see the previous Daisys.

A Tale of Three Daisys

Daisy, Jerry's dead Korean wife, is the focus of the fourth chapter of the book, which was published as a short story in *The New Yorker* shortly before the book was published. In it, Jerry narrates the course of their courtship and marriage as well as Daisy's increasingly erratic behavior. An immigrant from Korea, she's a shopgirl at Gimbels department store where Jerry meets her, is smitten by her, and marries her. Jerry says:

> [T]he fact is I found her desirable precisely because she was put together differently from what I was used to, as it were, totally unlike the wide-hipped Italian or leggy Irish girls or the broad-bottomed Polish chicks from Our Lady of Wherever I was raised on from youth, who compared to Daisy seemed pretty dreadful contraptions. (113)

They have two children, Theresa and Jack, but gradually, Daisy's behavior becomes irritable, unfathomable, and erratic. When she charges 7000 dollars' worth of furniture and furs, Jerry tries to follow his father's advice and grounds her, taking away her credit cards and not allowing her to go out. She bears this but stops communicating with her husband, stops sleeping, and starts drinking. A young police officer delivers her home late one night because she was wandering around naked in an elementary school playground. Later, she is almost successful in slicing her husband's neck open with a knife (she misses him and stabs the refrigerator instead).

Jerry turns to his family physician who prescribes for Daisy Valium, a medication used to treat anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks, and muscle spasms. But she dies, after ingesting drugs and alcohol, by drowning, naked, in their backyard pool. As Jerry recounts this decades later, he remembers how much at a loss he was in trying to deal with a wife who was crazy, but decades later he understands

she might have had a bipolar disorder or manic depression, and sees that no one at that time around him knew how to treat that condition. Daisy Battle's story is decidedly grim but with a name like Daisy, there was no way she was going to be happy in life since her two predecessors certainly were not.

"Daisy Miller: A Study," published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1878, was the work that made Henry James famous and triggered a controversy about the representation of American women. Annie P. Miller, or Daisy, as she is called by her family, is traveling in Europe with her mother and brother (her father is at home in Schnectady, NY, working). They are traveling because it is the thing to do, but as part of the *nouveau riche*, they are not that knowledgeable about European life, so they find it boring, especially since they do not know how to behave and mingle with other expatriate families, who are mostly old money. Daisy catches the eye of the young American expatriate Frederick Winterbourne and it is mostly through his eyes that we see her as he tries to make sense of his young countrywoman and fails. She constantly does things that are taboo or unladylike, causing Winterbourne's aunt and her cronies to dismiss her. Winterbourne does too, when he finds her wandering among the ruins of the Roman Colosseum with an male Italian friend, Giovanelli. Shortly thereafter, Daisy dies of malaria contracted at the Colosseum and Winterbourne tries to revise his opinion of her. He understands that he may have been misreading her but she is dead so he has no way of telling her so.

The problem with interpreting Daisy Miller for readers in 1878 was that they could not decide whether she was worthy of representing young American womanhood: many thought her behavior was outrageous and condemned her; others were enchanted by the freshness and innocence and welcomed her with open arms — except she was, of course, dead, by the end of the story. Legibility

in "Daisy Miller" or the lack thereof is due to James' crafting his narrative without providing access to Daisy's point of view. There is a sense in reading this narrative that James could not imagine a world that would embrace Daisy, or a Daisy that might be able to acculturate into society, so he killed her off.

When Chang-rae Lee recasts this story with a Korean immigrant woman set almost a hundred years later in the role of the all-American girl, the similarities between the two Daisys highlight how much more we are likely to understand Daisy Battle's struggle than Daisy Miller's. Because *Aloft* is written from the point of view of Jerry Battle, we are not able to access Daisy Battle's consciousness; like Winterbourne, Jerry watches and does not understand his Daisy's motives, attempts at communication, and her despair. Like her nineteenth-century counterpart, Daisy Battle is misunderstood and rendered a cipher. Where is her family? What is her back story? Yet, unlike Winterbourne, Jerry understands his primal attraction to his Daisy and acts upon it by marrying her. But as she strives to be a perfect suburban wife, we sense the difficulties she must face as outsider, as racial and cultural other, in fulfilling that role. Jerry is dimly aware of this, but does not have the means to help her. As her mental illness spirals out of control, both Jerry and Daisy know that their world cannot accommodate her and so she dies, in what looks like an accident in their pool.

Unlike Daisy Miller and Daisy Battle, Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* does not die; instead, she (and her husband Tom) are responsible for the deaths of Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress who is run over by a car Daisy drives; Jay Gatsby who is enamored of Daisy; and Myrtle's husband George, who kills himself after shooting Gatsby because Tom tells him that Gatsby was driving the car that hit his wife. Daisy does, however, exit the novel abruptly, leaving East Egg with her husband before Gatsby is killed, and does not reappear. The narrator, Nick

Carraway, later observes that the Buchanans were careless people who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . ." (179). Daisy Battle inherits her namesake's recklessness while sharing Gatsby's end.

Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanan's wild girl ways and resignation about how women are treated are echoed in Daisy Battle, whose wildness manifests itself in many ways, including spending sprees, alcohol, and midnight strolls in the neighborhood. Daisy Buchanan's wish for her daughter to be a fool — "that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (17) reflects her jaded view of gender relations and the need for women to conform. Daisy Battle's parading in new outfits for her father-in-law and acting like a happy suburban housewife (121) echoes Daisy Buchanan's outlook.

And the destruction the Daisy Buchanan wreaks by killing her husband's mistress while driving a car transmogrifies decades later into Daisy Battle's self-destructive ways. By the end of the novel, we learn that this Daisy, in addition to drinking, most probably had a number of affairs and had a death wish, since she was found in the family pool which was devoid of all the flotation devices she usually used because she could not swim (340). Curiously, Daisy's death echoes that of Jay Gatsby who dies in his pool but on a "pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests during the summer" (161). Gatsby is Daisy's predecessor in self-invention. His unpremeditated death is in contrast to Daisy's deliberate demise and highlights how she was tragically unsuccessful in reinventing herself.

The fates of Daisy Miller and Daisy Buchanan lurk under the surface of *Aloft* but reading Daisy Battle against them unwhitens them. Daisy Miller, despite her Anglo-sounding name, is treated like an immigrant within expatriate circles, not

only because she is *nouveau riche* but because she has an Italian suitor who people like Winterbourne consider unsuitable. Though he represents the threat of miscegenation, it is to Giovanelli that Winterbourne turns for answers about Daisy. At her grave, Giovanelli tells Winterbourne, "She was the most beautiful young lady I ever saw, and the most amiable . . . And she was the most innocent" (294). Winterbourne is incredulous but Giovanelli tells him:

> ". . . If she had lived, I should have got nothing. She would never have married me, I am sure."
>
> "She would never have married you?"
>
> "For a moment I hoped so. But no. I am sure." (295)

Giovanelli, the Italian who is looked down upon by the expatriate community in Rome, proves the better reader of this unwhitened Daisy.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the threat of racial contamination is made explicit by Daisy's husband Tom who laments the downfall of the white race and recommends a book to Nick:

> " Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard? . . . Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved." (12-13)

Though Daisy is complicit in enjoying the white privilege that both her family and her husband confer to her, she does not take him seriously, winking at Nick. However, her connection to Gatsby, and his to Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby's Jewish connection to organized crime, suggest her "unwhitening," an ironic contrast to her husband's preoccupation with the possible downfall of white culture.

Conclusion

Lee's tale of three Daisys invites the readers to simultaneously reassess these palimpsestic sisters so the arc goes forward and backward in time: the most recent Daisy also affects the Daisys underneath. But at the same time, Lee makes sure that by the end, the characters within his novel are ready to read or reread those past erased texts concerning Daisy Battle. So even though Min Song, in his *LA Review of Books* essay, was not very happy about the Korean wife who didn't even make it to the first page of the novel alive, Daisy Battle makes the attempted reading of the palimpsests possible and hence becomes more legible herself.

In an interview with Lee, Sarah Anne Johnson commented on how *Aloft* ends, with Jerry's father, his ex-girlfriend, his son and his family, and his daughter's bereaved fiancé underneath one roof, saying that it could be every person's nightmare, Lee agrees and says "I wanted it to be Jerry's nightmare. I wanted Jerry to be uncomfortable at the end, along with everyone else in his family. Like a lot of family stories, everyone gets together in the end, but I wanted a different feel to the gathering — that it was difficult and uncomfortable but still somehow endurable." (Lee, "The the Drama of Consciousness" 119). In the beginning of the narrative, Jerry is very nonchalant about identity and humors his English prof daughter Theresa and her Asian American writer fiancé Paul by changing how he refers to them:

> I'm to say 'Asian-American,' partly because they always do, and not only because my usage of the old standby of 'Oriental' offends them on many personal and theoretical levels, but also because I should begin to reenvision myself as a multicultural being, as my long-deceased wife, Daisy, was Asian herself and my children are of mixed blood, even though I have never thought of them that way. I must admit that I don't

> quite yet appreciate what all the fuss is about, but I've realized that words matter inordinately to Theresa and Paul, and far beyond any point I wish to take a stand on. (30)

By the end of the novel, what Rody calls "unwhitening" has become a *fait accompli* for the Battle household and even though he still may not appreciate what all the fuss is about, Jerry lives within that fuss.

Various layers of the past are revealed in the end when Jerry's son decides to excavate the pool that was filled in after Daisy dies. They uncover old toys, rotted sneakers, and bits and pieces of the old decorative tiles and Jerry likens it to some ghostly ruin of Pompeii (364) but enjoys going down into that hole because the smell is "loamy and fat and sweetly vernal, not at all of extinction" (364). By accepting the "unwhitening" and his multiracial family, Jerry is ready to engage with all those ghostly vestiges of narratives past, those palimpsests.

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