Henry Park, the viewpoint character of *Native Speaker*, begins his story like one of the many walking wounded of contemporary American literature. Exhibiting the inward illness of repressed anger and despondency, Henry’s pain derives from a largely unarticulated awareness that the deepest philosophical questions, those having to do with the seemingly arbitrary nature of experience, are burdened by confusion, incoherence, and simulation. These ontological and epistemological uncertainties turn into a physical injury when, in a supreme moment of incomprehensible injustice, his only son dies in an accident. Because the world—unfairly imperfect—allowed his son to die in a foolish schoolyard catastrophe, Henry feels life has little meaning or joy. This bitterness of being unjustly singled out by fate is further compounded both by misrepresentations related to his ethnicity and the duplicity associated with his job. That is, Henry lives an unrecognized, uncertain American life in at least three distinct ways: the world refuses to recognize him, he works as a spy, and he is Asian. Serving as a type of psychological paralysis, such a triple whammy produces in him a sorrowful desire for authenticity and acceptance.

And that desire does bear fruit; as his story unfolds, this ethnic outsider becomes healthy. He learns how tolerance, defined here as an openness to unintelligibility and difference, arises necessarily and unwilled. Stated differently, Henry heals himself when he discovers that a tolerant acceptance of an impure knowing leads to self-forgiveness, a compassionate response that arises as a necessary consequence of that very imperfect world that had earlier troubled him. The novel, after all, is an effort at
finding truth as self-forgiveness through confession. Henry states early on: “I lied to Lelia. For as long as I could I lied. I will speak the evidence now” (6). Henry’s eventual realization of tolerance enables him to acknowledge this “lying” self and the arbitrary consequences of an unfair world. This approving partnership of self and world forms a phenomenon I call “romantic negative tolerance.” I enlist the term “romantic” in the William Blake or Walt Whitman sense of an embracing of contradictions, uncertainties, and confusions. Whitman’s ranging recognition that opposites form dialectical relationships, reason fails to fully explain experience, and personal authenticity arrives through an acceptance of global differences, all of this—the spirit of romanticism—underlies Henry’s eventual ability to gain self-understanding. Specifically, my Whitmanesque point is that because experience is ultimately unknowable, one must accept the various forms of diversity and uncertainty that compose the phenomenon of knowledge and truth in an unfair world. Since this is a generalized principle, not dependent on individual will or agency, I label it as a negative force. Through this romantic interpretation, Native Speaker offers tolerance as an inherent, universal quality of consciousness, one based on what we do not know rather than what we do know. It arises as a radical principle of doubt to liberate Henry toward a full reception of his actions in a seemingly uncaring world. Such tolerance grows into a bridge toward others as it reminds Henry of how difference and unknowing can combine to create an introductory, open acceptance of blind experience. How does this occur? I begin with the specifics of Henry’s ailment and later locate the insights that prepare him for possible healing through this negative romantic tolerance.

On the very first page Lee reveals Henry as a character seeking but unable to find his authentic voice; Henry wants to be a “native speaker” of his real self but continually stumbles, as the opening episode regarding the “list” suggests. The first sentence of the novel states: “The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was.” Will the list provide the necessary ingredients of who Henry is? Such an inventory no doubt contains valuable information, yet the reader is denied immediate access to it. Lee defers revealing the items on the list for several pages. In fact, before presenting this initial information to the reader, Henry tells us that he threw away the original and only kept photocopies; hence, when the reader eventually does hear of the particulars, they come from a copy not an original. Henry does, in fact, directly refer to this list in a general fashion: he comments on it and even anticipates its possibilities, but he does not actually report on the contents until page five. The repeated references to the note, but not the actual information, create other “copies” that continue the occurrences of postponement and deferral rather than what one