

Exploding Stereotypes Inside and Out:  
The Theatre of Young Jean Lee and Issues of Gender and Racial Identity

Thesis

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By

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## Abstract

Young Jean Lee is a playwright and director who has worked in New York City since 2002. She founded the Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company in 2003 where she produced a number of her own plays. She can be classified as a "1.5 generation" Asian American playwright who has added her particular voice about diasporic Asian woman's issues to American theatre. Her creative and artistic interests were not limited to academic reading and writing, but expanded to live theatre and performance. Her works thematically involve the daily issues and interaction among contemporary American people. In her theatrical works, Young Jean Lee challenges the audience to rethink the nature of race or gender stereotypes in the USA through her trajectory of reconsidering these stereotypes.

This thesis focuses on two of her most recent and controversial works, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) and *The Shipment* (2008). Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of Asian American theatre history and specifically situates Lee's work within a context of Korean American playwrights since 1990s where they appeared for the first time in any significant number. The next two chapters analyze Lee's multiple narratives of race, culture, and diaspora, and her attempt to deconstruct and explode ever present and recycled stereotypes of Asian Americans and African Americans. Chapter 2 focuses on *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and explores Lee's representation of Asian and Asian American women. Chapter 3 considers *The Shipment* and analyzes Lee's experimental, racial cross-dressing as a strategic interpellation against widespread stereotypes of African Americans.

Chapter 4 concludes the thesis with some brief considerations of her next work.

The thesis considers the theatre critics discussions on her work noting that she has been referred to as the "Queen of Unease" and that her plays veer dramatically from comedy, to exaggerated violence, to subtle irony, moments that are unsettling and often difficult for an audience. Lee has developed her own notion of playwriting, which she calls her concept of 'the last' play. Whenever she makes a decision to write a play, she asks herself what is the 'last play' in the world she would want to write? For her the last play is the most difficult, the one that will give her the most difficult challenges. Once she answers that question she decides that is the play she will tackle. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* she focused on her own Asian American identity by staging her own recorded voice and filmic image. In *The Shipment* she bravely takes on African American stereotypes. During the rehearsal process she relied on continual feedback from the black cast to develop the script. Her works provide a vacillating uneasiness that establishes a critical distance for the audience to rethink the arbitrary connections between the constructed stereotypes of people and the actual people.

## Dedication

Dedicated to my father and mother

## Acknowledgments

There have been a number of people without whom this thesis could not have been completed. My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Lesley Ferris. Lesley has tolerated an incalculable number of questions from me and has lighted that darkness brightly. She has helped me to develop a deep interest in the research process and has mentored me attentively. I deeply appreciate her for her helpful and productive feedback and for enriching my understanding of this body literature. I also would like to thank my committee member, Dr. Chan Park, for her flexibility with me, her perceptive comments, and her ongoing efforts to help me be a better writer.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction:

#### The Context of Early Asian American Theatre

### **1.1 A Brief History of Asian Immigration to America**

#### **1.1.1 Early Chinese immigration in the Nineteenth Century**

Between the 1850s and the 1930s, many Chinese workers came to the United States, the land of opportunity, to seek a better life or to find a better job to support their families in China. These newcomers were regarded as *Others* because of their strange, unfamiliar looks. Some of the Caucasians even hated the Chinese workers because they thought the foreign workers earned money in the United States in order to send it to their families in China. Disgruntled Caucasian workers complained that the Chinese workers stole money out of the pockets of the United States. In the public space of theatre, moreover, Caucasian workers shared this prejudice or stereotyped view of Chinese workers. In this context, the Chinese negatively represented all Asians because they were widely spread among the labor markets around Caucasian communities in the late nineteenth century. Their negative view of Chinese workers became a general perspective toward all Asians later on in terms of stereotypes. Therefore, it is fundamental to study the history of Chinese migration in order to understand the origins of Asian stereotypes.

Asian immigrants left their own countries to come to America for various reasons—political, social, and economic. Compared to the number of Euro-

American immigrants, that of Asian immigrants was not large. During the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century, almost one million Asians came from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and India to the US, while approximately thirty-five million Caucasians came from Europe and Russia during the same period (Esther Lee 10). Asian-American immigrants were initially welcomed as laborers into US society, but their small numbers put them in a socially marginal position. While only 325 Chinese immigrants arrived to California in 1849 and 450 in 1850, a rapid increase occurred in subsequent years: 2,761 Chinese immigrants entered in 1851, and 20,026 in 1853, with figures reaching a total of 63,000 by 1870.<sup>1</sup> Nearly all of them, seventy-seven percent, remained in California, where they comprised twenty-five percent of the entire work force.<sup>2</sup> During the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the Central Pacific Railroad depended almost entirely on Chinese labor sources; approximately ninety percent of its 10,000 workers were Chinese, showing that the Chinese workers were a crucial source of labor (Takaki 2000: 230).

### **1.1.2 Racism and Asian Stereotypes during the Early Immigration Era**

In the construction of the intercontinental railroad, Euro-American laborers competed with Chinese workers for jobs. Such competition increased the white working class's antipathy towards the Chinese, and the tension reached a peak when the railroad was completed. Unemployed workers then went to large cities, such as San Francisco, New York, and Boston, where they had better chances of finding work. But work was scarce due to a poor economic situation, which worsened anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to the population figures in Mary Roberts Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909), 498.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the population figures in Ronald Takaki's "Gam Saan Haak: The Chinese in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Penguin Books, 1990), 79-131.

Chinese/Asian sentiment because many Chinese workers obtained the upper hand over Caucasian workers by offering hard work and cheaper wages. Chinese workers even sent money back to China or returned to their homes. To many white Americans, this frugal behavior looked like stealing. In his book *Iron Cages*, Ronald Takaki explains this anti-Chinese sentiment:

In the imagination of anti-Chinese exclusionists, however, the "race" from the Far East posed a greater threat to white America than did blacks and Indians. Intelligent and competitive, Chinese men could easily eliminate the need for white labor and force white workers into poverty and idleness. Moreover, since they were coming only to make money and return to China, they could drain America of her wealth and energies. (220-21)

From the white Americans' perspective, the Chinese laborers threatened their survival and their jobs.

Anti-Chinese sentiment was furthered by a variety of white writers. Two key examples are Bret Harte and Henry Grimm. Harte wrote a poem, "Plain Language from Truthful James" or "The Heathen Chinees":

The heathen Chinees is peculiar,  
Which the same I would rise to explain.

Ah Sin was his name;  
And I shall not deny,  
In regard to the same,  
What that name might imply..." (287-88)

Harte's poem describes Chinese workers negatively and this strongly influenced an already negative attitude towards the "Heathen Chinees" in theatre productions, where Chinese people were often given the immoral name, 'Ah Sin.' Playwright Henry Grimm criticizes the Chinese workers in his 1879 play, *The Chinese Must Go* (1879). For example, a Caucasian working-class character, Frank Blaine, accuses the Chinese workers of being bloodsuckers when speaking to a friend: "And suppose those

Chinese parasites should suck as much blood out of every State in the Union, destroying Uncle Sam's sinews and muscles, how many years do you think it would take to put him in his grave?" (Grimm 19). Furthermore, this hate against Chinese workers became a part of anti-Chinese slogans in the end of the nineteenth century, and politicians quoted from poetry and plays filled with racial discrimination, as they argued for the exclusion and discrimination of the Chinese (Takaki 2000:223).

Later, the title of Grimm's play became Denis Kearney's political slogan in the late nineteenth century. Kearney was a founder of the workingmen's party and insisted on the need for protecting the white working class in California. His political slogan, "Chinese Must Go!," was sensational, provocative and powerful on the political stage, and it led to draconian legal action. For instance, San Francisco's 1873 Queue Ordinance prohibited Chinese men from wearing the queue, a traditional Chinese hairstyle, in which the hair on the front of the head is shaved off and the hair of the back of the head is braided into a long ponytail. Other damaging legislation included the Page Law of 1875, which legally established connections among Chinese immigrants, labor, and prostitution, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which made Chinese immigration illegal (Metzger 633-34).

Even though a small group of public opinion was in favor of a Chinese labor source, the public failed to defend the immigrants. For instance, some capitalists, such as Calvin T. Sampson and Charles Crocker, attempted to support Chinese workers. They insisted that Chinese workers were good "cheap" labor and able to work machines, so that whites could be the directors of both "Asiatic muscle" and American machinery (Takaki 2000: 238). However, because anti-Chinese sentiment was so prevalent, they were not able to prevent the workers from being discriminated against politically. This sentiment even led to illegalize the position of a large

number of Asian workers. In addition to these legal actions, racial violence was prevalent. In 1871 an angry white mob in Los Angeles killed twenty-one Chinese immigrants and looted the Chinese living quarters.

Violence escalated even further when in 1885 in Rock Springs, Wyoming, whites who refused to work in the same mine with Chinese laborers armed themselves with rifles and revolvers and invaded the Chinese section of town, shooting Chinese workers and burning their buildings. Fifteen Chinese were wounded and twenty-eight murdered during the attack (Takaki 2000: 248).

Attacks against the Chinese even began to appear in the press. In an article in *Century Magazine* in 1884, Henry Burden McDowell reported that the Chinese had a "peculiar difference of manners, feeling, and national history which seems to keep the Chinese people apart from the rest of the civilized world" (McDowell 31).

According to this statement, the Chinese were uncivilized because of their strange culture and history. McDowell's article presents a Chinese stereotype based on an image of the barbaric and uncivilized Oriental. Homi Bhabha, a leading theorist of post-colonialism, explains the nature of "stereotype":

As a form of splitting and multiple belief, the "stereotype" requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. The process by which the metaphoric "masking" is inscribed on a lack which must then be concealed gives the stereotype both its fixity and its phantasmatic quality—the *same old* stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time. (110-11)

According to Bhabha, the stereotype is a discourse which depends on created illusions and shared prejudices through the continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. From the social subjects' view, the social Others seemingly share the same story of inferior or immoral characteristics. In the ideological construction of Otherness, the

stereotypes appear repeatedly with unpleasant images. Repeated stories formed a metaphoric "masking," which covers real Chinese identity and fixes it in Chinese stereotypes. Josephine Lee remarks that "[s]tereotypes in popular culture and art enact a violent dismemberment that focuses attention on particular body parts and features such as Asian comers relatively small eyes, shorter height, and yellow skin by highlighting or visually severing them from the rest of the body" (89). This dismemberment reflects the social dominants' fantasy. They typecast the Others using stereotypes that are developed from a certain part of the body.

It is against this backdrop of racial discrimination and injurious political legislation that American theatre incorporated and embraced Asian stereotypes on its public stages. During the 1870s, the white actor Charles Parsloe was famous for his yellow-faced performances. He won great acclaim and popularity in 1876 for his performance of a stock Chinese character in Bret Harte's *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876). Following his success in Harte's play, Parsloe further developed his yellowface performances as "Chinamen."<sup>3</sup> Sean Metzger explains Parsloe's performance: "As a popular performer, Parsloe's embodiment of the Chinaman both depends on and informs hegemonic constructions of "Chineseness" [and Asianness]"(Metzger 628). Without real Asian actors or an authentic Asian body, the yellow-faced and other actors and the audiences shared jokes and stereotypes about Asians in theatres. The yellow-faced whites represented the negative stereotypes of Asians on stage to make harsh and biased jokes, while not allowing any authentic Asians to have a chance to speak and perform on stage (Esther Lee 13).

In her book *A History of Asian American Theatre*, Esther Kim Lee searches

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Metzger, 627-51. Parsloe played the roles of "Chinamen" in several plays. Metzger uses the term "Chinamen" to invoke self-consciously as a counterpoint to the lived experience of Chinese men.



for the real representation of "Asianness" on stage. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US government tried to exclude Asians from citizenship, and established a number of unfair laws, while simultaneously, stereotypes of Asians were being displayed on stage, reinforcing prejudices. Lee claims that authentic Asian actors did not appear on stage, and that they faced stereotyping and racism.<sup>4</sup> Before 1965, the "oriental" characters were performed by yellow-faced white actors, presenting stereotypes of Asian people such as submissive women (the way the West wanted to see Asia) or powerful, evil, and threatening persons (representative of the way Asia was viewed during the Yellow Peril) (Esther Lee 13). In other words, while non-Asian actors were repetitively representing negative stereotypes of Asians, real and authentic Asian actors were denied the opportunity to advocate for their positions on stage and in the public sphere. Therefore, early theatre productions with Asian characters maintained a series of derogatory stereotypes and most Asian roles were played by white actors in yellow-face, dehumanizing Asians and reinforcing discriminatory actions. The repetitive representation of such prejudiced perceptions reinforced the stereotypes so that they eventually became deeply rooted and institutionalized.

It was hard for social minorities, including Asians, to expect equal job opportunities and equal civil rights until the late-1960s' civil rights movement, which was triggered by African-Americans and later spread out to other minorities. In their book, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe the racial barriers experienced by African-Americans after the Civil War and that lasted until the mid-1960s:

After the Civil War there was the brief egalitarian experiment of Reconstruction which terminated ignominiously in 1877. In its wake

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to the experiences of three actors in Esther Lee's book: Sessue Hayakawa (14-5), Anna May Wong (15-6), and Peter Hyun (16-19).

followed almost a century of legally sanctioned segregation and denial of the vote, nearly absolute in the South and much of the Southwest, less effective in the North and far West, but formidable in any case. These barriers fell only in the mid-1960s, a mere quarter-century ago. (66)

The racially biased policies persisted in America and the civil rights movement helped to dissolve the ignorance of systemized discrimination, and changed the definition of American citizens to include broader ethnic groups. Before the social movements of the 60s, minorities were legally discriminated against in a series of instances, such as the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. According to Omi and Winant,

The centuries of racial dictatorship have had three very large consequences: first, they defined "American" identity as white, as the negation of racialized "otherness"—at first largely African and indigenous, later Latin American and Asian as well. This negation took shape in both law and custom, in public institutions and in forms of cultural representation...Second, racial dictatorship organized (albeit sometimes in an incoherent and contradictory fashion) the "color line" rendering it the fundamental division in U.S. society...Third, racial dictatorship consolidated the oppositional racial consciousness and organization originally framed by marronage.<sup>5</sup> (Omi and Winant 66)

As Omi and Winant indicate, Asians were not legal American citizens equal to whites. The Asian people did not fit in with this limited ideology among white American society. Therefore, the early republican government felt the need to put this group into a position of marginalization, or "otherness". Based on that marginalization, the early republicans could justify their discriminatory actions. However, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement challenged these pre-accepted norms that rendered these others illegal and immoral. Although the movement was originally triggered by African-Americans, the movement, quickly expanded to other minority groups:

[In the later 1960s,] [t]he emergence of the slogan "black power" (and soon

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<sup>5</sup> It further refers to "Maroon/Marronage" in *A New Dictionary of Religions* edited by John R. Hinnells. The word 'marronage' means "fugitive," "runaway," and "survival." It is a postcolonial term referring to runaway slaves in Central, South, and North America and the West Indies who came to gather and created 'outlaw' communities for survival.

after, of "brown power," "red power," and "yellow power"), the wave of riots that swept the urban ghettos from 1964 to 1968, and the founding of radical movement organizations of nationalist and Marxist orientation, coincided with the recognitions that racial inequality and injustice had much deeper roots...Discrimination, far from manifesting itself only (or even principally) through individual actions or conscious policies, was a structural feature of U.S. society, the product of centuries of systematic exclusion, exploitation, and disregard of racially defined minorities. It was this combination of relationships—prejudice, discrimination, and institutional inequality—which defined the concept of racism at the end of the 1960s. (69)

Challenging racism, as defined by this triumvirate of prejudice, discrimination, and institutional inequality, became an important factor in theatre productions in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **1.2 Early Asian American Theatre**

During the 1930s, Asian-American actors wanted to be able to stand on stage and be recognized, but they knew that limited opportunities and their misunderstood ethnicities stood in their way. Therefore, they "accepted the conflation of specific ethnicities for the purpose of gaining advantage in employment and popularity" (Esther Lee 21-22). In these 30s of San Francisco, most of all the Asian performers marketed themselves as 'Chinese' regardless of their diverse ethnicities such as Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans (Esther Lee 21-22). In the 1930s, all of the performers at Forbidden City in San Francisco marketed themselves as 'Chinese' when in fact many were Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans. By advertising themselves as a well recognized ethnicity, "Chinese," the Asian American actors intended to take roles in plays and find their way into this different job market.

This strategic penetration into the theatre market – claiming a different Asian identity to gain employment – paved the way for Asian-American theatre in the 60s

and 70s: "With the label 'oriental' actors, Asian American actors of all ethnic backgrounds found the artistic solidarity and political empowerment that became the foundation of Asian American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s" (Esther Lee 21-22). Based on this foundation, Asian American theatre gradually grew, thanks partly to increased demand. According to US census surveys, the population of Asian Americans was 6.9 million in 1990 and 11.9 million in 2000 [which was 4.2 percent of the total US population] (Esther Lee 201). This continued increase in the Asian population may possibly have been a cause for the increase in consumers for the Asian-American theatre markets that led dramatists to write Asian American theatre pieces to satisfy the consumers' demands.

### **1.2.1 The First Wave**

The "first wave" of writers and theatre artists who began to address the absence of Asian-Americans in American theatre, which Esther Lee identifies as taking place in the 1960's and 1970's, developed through the necessity for "artistic solidarity," a sense that Asian artists wanted to be recognized in their new country. In particular, Asian-American actors were dissatisfied with the limited opportunities offered by the Hollywood motion picture and television industry, which served as a catalyst for an Asian-American theatre in the mid-1970s (Uno 5). Lee uses the audition experiences of Japanese-American actor, Makato Iwamatsu, in the early 1960s to illustrate this dilemma. Iwamatsu auditioned for the role of the Bandit in a TV version of *Rashomon*, but he was rejected with the words: "You gave a great reading, but as a real Japanese, you'd be too conspicuous; All of the other actors are

white made up to look Japanese" (Esther Lee 24)<sup>6</sup> Even though he was suitable for the role and gave a strong audition, he was not cast because his actual Asian appearance would cause the other white actors in yellow-face to be recognized as fake by TV viewers. This casting episode demonstrated not only the expectations of TV viewers but also that the Caucasian group's employment took precedence over that of the Asians.

As a reaction to this restriction, which blocked access to Asian Americans' job opportunities in theatre, Asian theatre artists started what is now recognized as the Asian-American theatre movement in the late 1960s, and founded the first four Asian-American theatre companies (Esther Lee 2006: 25). The first was the East West Players in Los Angeles (EWP), which became a nonprofit cultural company in 1967. This was followed by the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco (AATC), which began with Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* premiere in 1972, the Northwest Asian American Theatre in Seattle (NAAT), which started producing theatre in 1974, and the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre (PART), which started in New York City in 1977. Asian artists struggled to establish a foundation of Asian theatre in an American society which regarded Asians as *others* and marginal residents. These companies aimed to increase the opportunities for Asian American actors (Esther Lee 42).

Playwright Frank Chin joined the AATC in the early 70s. He was influenced by the Black Arts Movement, and he believed there was a need for "a literary and intellectual voice from the Asian American version of cultural nationalism" (Esther

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<sup>6</sup> Esther Kim Lee, 24. Lee explains that early Asian actors' first and toughest battle was the perception of what was considered the "real" Asian in theatre. Almost all the Asian American actors were told by producers and directors that they were not "real" as "Orientals" or Asians. See also Irvin Paik's "The East West Players: The First Ten Years are the Hardest," *Bridge: An Asian American Perspective* 5.2 (1977), 14.

Lee 54-55). The executive director of the East West Players in Los Angeles, Soon-Tek Oh, summarized the activities and purposes of the EWP as of December, 1967 as follows: "the company has been introducing a unique theater to the western world—the amalgamation of East and West in its ultimate form, as well as providing opportunities for Orientals to extend the scope and depth of their theatrical talent" (Esther Lee 45). Stan Asis and Marilyn Tokuda felt the "loneliness of being nonwhite and having to play roles or learn about theatre which did not honor [their] culture" and agreed to found an Asian American drama group on the University of Washington's campus in Seattle, which became NAAT (Esther Lee 74-75).<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the founding artistic director of PART, Tisa Chang, proposed to compete with other professional theatre groups in New York City. She wanted to present a "blend" of Eastern and Western theatre styles and worked towards mainstreaming her version of intercultural theatre (Esther Lee 82-83).

### 1.2.2 The Second Wave Playwrights

While the first wave was crucial in establishing an Asian theatrical voice and introducing Asian theatre and Asian-American social issues, Esther Lee identified a new group of artists who emerged in the 1980s as "the second wave playwrights," who wanted to move towards the center of American mainstream theatre and to have more social power, in contrast to the previous playwrights (Esther Lee 124-54).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the previous wave, this second wave playwrights confronted racial, political, and economic issues in the theatre and in society. They fought

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<sup>7</sup> Lee further refers to *Dreams and Promises: Northwest Asian American Theater 20th Anniversary* (Seattle: Northwest Asian American Theatre Company, 1992), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *In Politics of Life*, Velina Hasu Houston explains the concept of both a first wave and a second wave of Asian American women playwrights (23), and Esther Kim Lee uses the term to describe a newer group of Asian American playwrights in contrast to the previous writers (124-5).

against racism and discrimination based on stereotypes of Asians. One particular stereotype addressed was that of the powerless Asian woman. Often, Asian women have been regarded as submissive and too willing to sacrifice themselves to men, family, and society. For example, in Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Madame Butterfly* (1904), the main Asian female character dies in order to allow her son's and her ex-husband's happiness. Butterfly's only child is taken out of her arms by her ex-lover, and she helplessly commits suicide instead of defending her right to the child. Similarly, in another Puccini opera, *Turandot* (1926), an Asian slave girl, Liu, dies helping a male character, Unknown Prince (Calàf), achieve his goal, marriage to a queen.

This image of the helpless Asian female was addressed in two adaptations of the opera *Madame Butterfly* that appeared the late 1980s. By showing the prejudiced misunderstanding of Asian bodies in *M. Butterfly* (1988), David Henry Hwang strategically asks questions about the stereotype of submissive, weak Asians in *Madame Butterfly*, and how society repetitively reinforces and systemizes this stereotype in theatre. Hwang reveals and calls into question the systemic stereotypes in US society about Asian women as shy and obedient. Also, this work is credited with establishing an Asian-American presence in mainstream theatre and was able to demonstrate that "the future is not in monoethnic theatre" (Shimakawa 2002: 74). Hwang's play presents multi-cultural perspectives in theatre such as Chinese, Caucasian, European, and Japanese Americans in the set of Europe.

The other adaptation of *Madame Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon* (1989), which presents the story very differently, is a proliferation of stereotypes about self-sacrificing and submissive Asian woman on the stage. In contrast to *M. Butterfly* by a Chinese-American, *Miss Saigon* was created by two Caucasian playwrights, Alain

Boublil and Claud-Michel Schönberg, in London at the Theater Royal Drury Lane, and moved to New York two years later. The musical was performed 4092 times at the Broadway Theatre from April 11, 1991 to January 28, 2001, demonstrating its popularity ("Miss Saigon"). Although the adaptation comes almost 100 years after the original, it still features the female lead's sacrificial suicide in a contemporary setting, in which she fulfills the established stereotype.

Furthermore, this production caused a huge protest movement among Asian American actors and playwrights because of the casting of Jonathan Pryce as the Eurasian engineer, played in yellowface, and the protest focused on the issues of "equal economic opportunity" for actors on the American stage rather than those of the musical's stereotypical characters and its celebration of colonialism (Josephine Lee 163). Yet, this does not imply that the stereotype issues are not important. The casting issue was more critical to Asian American actors in terms of a professional market although the production had some issues of Asian stereotypes and colonialism. Finally, the movement ended when the producer, Cameron Mackintosh, threatened to cancel the show entirely and to deprive all the other possible parts for Asian-American actors (Josephine Lee 163). This instance demonstrates that Asian-American actors, including playwrights, needed first of all to occupy the stage, then they could strongly argue their identity matters in the context of stereotypes.

Behind foregrounding the issue of the casting, this musical contains stereotypes of submissive and self-sacrificing Asian women in the plot. Josephine Lee indicates, "[Miss Saigon] might well embody a 'long line of Western misrepresentation of Asians, perpetuating a damaging fantasy of submissive



'Orientals,' self-erasing women, and asexual, contemptible men'" (13).<sup>9</sup> In fact, an Asian woman character in this musical dies under the grand theme of self-sacrificing woman. An American GI, Chris, has a romance with a Vietnamese bargirl, Kim, during the Vietnamese war, in the early 1970s. Later, Kim gives birth to their son while Chris was back in America. However, this romance becomes a tragedy when Chris returns to Kim with his American wife and he asks Kim to give him his son. Kim fulfills the Asian female stereotype and gives her son to the American couple. Then she commits suicide for her son's happiness with his new parents, ignoring her own betrayal.

Besides challenging such stereotypes, many Asian-American playwrights deal with cultural conflicts and issues about the diaspora. Velina Hasu Houston, a multiracial playwright of Japanese, Blackfoot Pikuni Native American, and African-American ancestry, provides an example of this. She depicts her intercultural and racial experiences through Japanese "war brides" who married to American GIs in her trilogy: *Asa Ga Kimashita* (1980), *American Dreams* (1983), and *Tea* (1983). The trilogy portrays the life that Houston, as a daughter of a Japanese "war bride" and an American soldier who was half Native American Indian and half African American, has lived in "the home of the brave and justice for all."<sup>10</sup> Through these autobiographical works, she raises questions about Asian women's experiences of racism, cultural conflicts, and cultural citizenship.

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<sup>9</sup> Josephine Lee supports her claim with quoting Yoko Yoshikawa's argument in page 276 of her article, "The Heat Is on *Miss Saigon* Coalition," *The State of Asian American Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Boston: South End Press, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> It further refers to Miles Xian Liu's *Asian American Playwrights: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2002, 105-7; Roberta Uno, *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, 155; and Velina Houston, playwright's notes for *Tea* from the program for the Manhattan Theatre Club, 6 October 1987.

### **1.2.3 Third Wave Playwrights in the 1990s**

Prior to the 1990s, playwrights frequently located their artistic and cultural identity in their own homeland and far from the United States, and they made an effort to find connections to their ancestry and heritage. In the late 1990s, however, many artists started to feel that they belonged in the US, rather than in the homeland which they had rarely or never visited. Esther Lee describes that the rejection of essentialist identity necessitated the questioning of ancestry and history for many third wave playwrights (204). Also, these Asian-American playwrights reinvented the field of Asian-American theatre in their new homeland (Esther Lee 224) and redefined their identity as multicultural. This redefinition of their identity leads to a dilemma of national identity between the past and the present nations. Homi Bhabha argues that people deal with the dilemma in "in-between" spaces that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself"(2).

In these transitional spaces, individual subjects meet the displacement of domains of different nations and cultures and are able to adjust their national and cultural identities. Through these spaces, individuals can accept new signs of identity in a new society, and they can move from the past to the present. In this process, the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha 2). In her article, "The Place of Metaphor in a Metonymic World: Of Homi Bhabha's De-realizing Politics and Other Academic Events," Paulina Aroch Fugellie cites Bhabha's idea of 'in-between' spaces in his lecture entitled "Democracy De-realized" for the inauguration of Documenta 11, Platform 1 :

The author introduces the concept of "de-realization". He then associates "de-realization" to "translatability", the semantic charge of which is then transferred onto the notion of the "incubational". The idea of in-between-ness posed by the notion of the "incubational" is then transferred onto the spatial dimension to reach the concept of an "intermediate area", the implications of which translate onto "intermediate life", then onto "double horizon", onto "third space" onto "minoritarian presence, as a sign of 'intermediate living' ", and so on and so forth, along a long line of associated concepts that are, nonetheless, handled as distinct, in varying degrees, by the theorist. (Fugellie 349)

The concept of de-realization comes from Brechtian "distantiation," the idea that an object in a context of "de-realization" or distantiation can be translated differently across genre, geopolitics, territory, and temporality (Fugellie 349). This spatial translatability comes into the "incubational" space which produces possibilities of heterogeneous meanings. In these incubational or in-between spaces, a new generation of Asian Americans copes with and embraces their individual dilemmas of being between two worlds.

### **1.3 Korean American Playwrights in the 90s**

The first wave artists established the foundation for performing Asian American theatre, and following this groundwork, the second wave, or the new generational playwrights, began to expand their artistic boundaries, dealing with the border between their Asian cultural heritage and Asian stereotypes in the US. During this period, Korean American playwrights began to incorporate accounts of their unique experiences of being caught between two worlds' values and views. In the early 1990s, only a handful of Korean-American playwrights appeared in theatre, but these experiences and how they related to their Korean American identity was prominent through their works.

One of these was Diana Son, who stepped into the world of theatre with her

works *Stealing Fire* (1992), *2000 Miles* (1993), and *R.A.W* ('Cause I'm a Woman, 1993). Son's work presents how the later generation thought of their identity as vacillating between two nations. Critic Terry Hong notes that "[R.A.W] probed the angry, questioning voices of Asian-American women tired of repelling false stereotypes" (Hong 61).

Another playwright, Sung Rno, spoke of his identity experiences between two cultural worlds in his *Konishiki, Mon Amour* (1993), *Cleveland Raining* (1994), and *Drizzle and Other Stories* (1994). Rno's well-known play, *Cleveland Raining*, centers on a Korean American boy, Jimmy, and his sister, Mari, who are searching for their cultural identity. Their identity-searching journey is triggered by the loss of their parents. They hardly remember their parents and their heritage, and appear to be examples of Bhabha's 'in-between-ness.' They are trapped as Asian-Americans, between the past world of their heritage and the present of American society. Along similar lines, Rob Shin presented *The Art of Waiting* (1993) which is a play, a stand-up comedy, mainly about racism in multicultural society of America. A comedian, Shin, delivers his life experiences and the memories of his youth. Throughout the autobiographical play, he is waiting for something and remembering his life as a Korean-American and an "other."

After these initial works in the 1990s, other young Korean American playwrights joined the movement, forming what now seems to be a new wave moment of Korean American playwrights. Nic Cha Kim presented his first play, *A Taste of Home*, at the Berkeley Community Theatre as part of the 1996 KSA (Korean Student Association) Culture Show, and later he wrote *Trans Sans* (1999).<sup>11</sup> Philip Chung produced *Yellow Face* (1997) and *Home is Where the Han Is* (1998). Euijoon

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<sup>11</sup> I refer to his homepage, *Niche.LA*. 11 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.niche.la/nicchakim.html>>.

Kim composed *My Tired Broke Ass Pointificating Slapstick Funk* (1999) and *Karaoke Stories* (Second Generation Productions, 1999). Edward Bok Lee presented *Athens County* (1997), and Lloyd Suh produced *The Greatest Spectacle in Racing* (1999). The majority of these playwrights voiced Asian Americans' identity issues and concerns over their position of in-between-ness.

These plays are early examples of how Korean American playwriting and theatre can practice and refine "Asian American identity." However, in her *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe stresses that "Asian American identity" is neither fixed nor complete:

Rather than considering "Asian American identity" as a fixed, established "given," perhaps we can consider instead "Asian American cultural practices" that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences. Stuart Hall has written that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'." (64)

As Lowe argues, the identity of the Asian-American is not essential and fixed but constructed and articulated continuously in relation to society. There is no concrete essence of "Asian-American identity" but it is circumstanced and situated in US society. Likewise, Elaine H. Kim adapts the identity dilemma of Korean-Americans to binary social situations between two racial groups in the US: "Korean Americans [are] being positioned on the in-between—on the cusp, at the interstice, in the buffer zone—of Korea and America, between black and white, between mainstreamed and marginalized" (Elaine Kim 69-78). Korean-Americans need a buffer zone to balance the intersecting worlds of Korea and America as a minor ethnic group in America.

While the majority of these playwrights mainly focused on in-between-ness, Chungmi Kim's play reveals a silenced aspect of Korean history. In her play, *Hanako* (1999), Kim challenged the historically and nationally controversial issue of

comfort women, who were sex slaves in Japanese military camps during World War II. In contrast to American-born playwrights, she placed herself differently, and composed displacement stories because she was born in Korea and stayed there until finishing her B.A. at Ewha University. Naturally, she experienced a great deal of Korean culture and had no identity issues of cultural and national in-between-ness. She premiered *Hanako* at East West Players in Los Angeles in 1999, and later developed and revised the play with a new title, *Comfort Women*, in 2004. The play was selected in *New Playwrights: The Best Plays of 2005*, was translated into Korean under the title *Nabi*, and was produced at the Seoul Theater Festival. It also had an extended run at other theaters in Korea, from May to September of 2005, by the Arirang Theater Company, directed by Eunmi Bang (Chungmi Kim 23).

The play tells the moving story of a Korean sex slave, Hanako, in World War II, during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Kim was possibly influenced by Nora Okja Keller's sensational 1998 novel, *Comfort Women*, which was Keller's first novel and won the American Book Award. In the same year as the first performance of Kim's *Hanako*, a Korean-American writer, Chang-Rae Lee, published *Gesture Life*, a novel concerning with Korean comfort women. During the late 1990s, uncovering this hidden chapter in Korean history was one of the major issues among Korean American writers. In an interview, Kim explains her intentions in writing about the topic:

I wanted to show the world how these women survived and suffered. Some of them said dying would be easier than being alive. I believe that. They were living in hell for more than 50 years, at the bottom of society, as if they were guilty. They were not. (Sung "Writer")

As the interview suggests, her play was designed to deliver to audiences the silenced and hidden history of Korean women who survived, despite living and facing trauma

of their sexual exploitation by the Japanese military government. Even after the war, these women continued to experience a sense of shame, because they were not free from the ideological concepts of chastity in Korean society.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, more Korean American dramatists joined the theatre business as professionals. It appears to have been a blooming period for Korean-American theater, in which many playwrights deal with various Asian identity topics and racial issues. To date I have identified over 30 Korean-American playwrights who have written over 110 plays in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While Korean-American artists and performers had done their best to take multiple roles on stage in the period of the first wave of Asian-American playwrights, Korean-American playwrights in 90s expanded their artistic territory to an unprecedented degree. In the following, I will focus on the success of one such playwright.

#### **1.4 Young Jean Lee**

While the theatre career of Young Jean Lee is relatively short, she is prolific and many critics' have been following her work. Lee negotiates between the two cultures of her Asian heritage and her American life. She was born in Korea and moved with her parents to the USA when she was two years old and can thus be classified as a *1.5 generation* Asian-American.<sup>12</sup> Since 2002 when she moved to New York to become a playwright, she has added her particular views on diasporic Asian women's issues to American theatre.

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<sup>12</sup> The term "1.5 generation" refers to people who immigrate to US at an early age and live and become educated in the US as their new homeland. Commonly, this group of people have cultural identity issues between two cultures because their parents tend to adhere to the original culture and the 1.5 generation members tend to feel much closer to the American culture. In addition, "a second-generation" Korean-American refers to a son and a daughter born in the US.

The Asian-American woman's family often keeps the culture of the home country in the second homeland, the USA. In other words, in public settings such as schools, this second generation woman lives as an American and has roots in the American culture. However, in the private sphere she lives as an Asian and remembers her Asian roots, and is often forced to maintain these traditional values by her parents. Between these two worlds, a border line is established, represented by the hyphen in the term "Asian-American"; Asian-Americans have different cultural backgrounds, and the hyphen becomes "the third time-space" which represents a buffer and intercultural space between the two cultures (Lavie 16).<sup>13</sup> In brief, their cultural identity is in conflict in that contested space between two heritages. It can be said that stereotypes of Asian women have been built up from both inside and outside Asian cultures. In order to attempt to break down the stereotypes which emanate from her adopted home, Lee uses an experimental style that employs violence, exaggeration, irony, comedy, and laughter to lead the audience to rethink society beyond the stage.

In Lee's artistic statement (posted on her website), she describes her approach to playwriting as writing the "last play":

When starting a play, I ask myself, "What's the last play in the world I would ever want to write?" Then I force myself to write it. I do this because I've found that the best way to make theater that unsettles and challenges my audience is to do things that make me uncomfortable. I work with stories that I find trite and embarrassing, I keep the development of the text as open and unstable as possible throughout the rehearsal and performance process, and I emphasize rather than hide problems in the text and production. I'm constantly trying to find value in unexpected places. My work is about struggling to achieve something in the face of failure and incompetence and not-knowing. The discomfort and awkwardness involved

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<sup>13</sup> Lavie describes a terrain that is a "borderzone between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture, whose practices challenge the ludic play with essence and conjuncture as yet another set of postmodernist. In his endnote, Lavie adds that the terrain is Homi Bhabha's "third time-space, without the temporal component, as an area for theoretical exploration."



in watching this struggle reflects the truth of my experience. ("Artistic Statement" *Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company*)

As Lee explains, the theme of 'the last play' connects her experiences to her works, and she composes some 'last plays' containing controversial racial and gender issues.

Eliza Bent describes that the idea about writing "the last play" is her unique, efficient method to produce her creative works because she comes from a background in scholarly, literary criticism and her problems are her hyper-criticality and self-awareness about the creative process ("Church"). Also, Bent has written about Lee as a dramatist having a "[j]ittery, jagged body of work that resists pat definition," "a queen of unease," and "a distressingly self-aware writer" ("Church"). Before Lee dropped the academic route and became a dramatist, she was a PhD student in English literature at UC Berkeley. She has said that "in academia, there is so much contempt for those who try to have an artistic side" ("Church"). Her creative and artistic interests were not limited to academic reading and writing, but expanded to live theatre and performance. Her works thematically involve the daily issues and interactions between contemporary Asian and American people.

#### **1.4.1 Lee's Career in Theatre**

In 2002, Lee became a playwright and launched her career in New York City. She wrote and directed her early plays there— *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Ontological-Hysteric Theater, New York, 2003), *The Appeal* (Soho Rep, New York, 2004), *Pullman, Wa* (PS122, New York, 2005), *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (HERE Arts Center, New York, 2006), *Church* (PS122, New York, 2007), *The Shipment* (Wexner Center for Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2008), and *Lear* (Soho Rep, New York, 2010).

Some of her plays have been published in *New Downtown Now* edited by Mac Wellman and Lee; in *Three Plays by Young Jean Lee*, and in *American Theatre* magazine. She received grants from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Rockefeller MAP Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Furthermore, her works tour in venues such as Vienna (Austria), Hannover (Germany), Berlin (Germany), Zurich (Switzerland), Brussels (Belgium), Bergen (Norway), Oslo (Norway), Trondheim (Norway), Rotterdam (The Netherlands), Salamanca (Spain), Toulouse (France) and Portland (OR), Seattle (WA), Philadelphia (PA), Columbus (OH), Pittsburgh (PA), and Minneapolis (MI).<sup>14</sup> Currently, she is the artistic director of Young Jean Lee's Theater Company. In 2007 she received the ZKB Patronage Prize of the Zuercher Theater Spektakel and a 2007 Emerging Playwright OBIE Award.<sup>15</sup>

This thesis will examine Lee's two controversial works, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and *The Shipment*, in terms of the stereotypes that surround and are embedded in race. I have chosen these plays because they examine issues concerned with racism in the USA. But it is also important to consider the historical context of the late 20th century that may have possibly served as a crucible of sorts for the playwright Young Jean Lee. Lee would have been 18 years old in 1992 when the infamous riots took place in Los Angeles. The LA Riots occurred because of the jury's verdict of 'not guilty' for the LA policemen who beat Rodney King following a minor traffic incident. The beating was captured on videotape and demonstrated a horrifying example of brutal institutional racism. When black protesters took to the streets much of their anger was directed at the South Central LA Korean shopkeepers

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to "Bio," *Young Jean Lee's Theater Company* website, 25 November 2008  
<<http://youngjeanlee.org/bio.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> Refer to "Bio," *Young Jean Lee's Theater Company*.

who had historically kept a low profile in this area as small scale business proprietors. Much of the violence and looting was directed at the Koreans and the national news showed blacks beating and attacking Koreans relentlessly and in some cases the Koreans responded and fought back.

In his lecture on October 19, 2009, at the Ohio State University, Edward T Chang explains that these tragic riots opened the eyes of Koreans to the illusion of the American dream and expanded their thoughts on political and cultural matters beyond economic power in the USA. Consequently, Chang claims, the concept of 'Korean American' was born in 1992, the year of the riots. This historical event and its aftermath inspired Anna Deavere Smith to create her second major theatrical work entitled *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1994) where she examined the racial dynamics of South Central Los Angeles and in particular the encounters between Koreans and African Americans.

Both chapter 2 and 3 analyze Lee's multiple narratives of race, culture, and diaspora, and her attempt to deconstruct the reemergence of stereotypes. Chapter 2 focuses on *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and will explore Lee's representation of stereotypes of Asian women. Chapter 3 considers *The Shipment* and analyzes Lee's experimental, racial cross-dressing as a strategic interpellation against widespread stereotypes of African American. In Chapter 4, the concluding chapter, I summarize the key issues underlying her use of stereotypes.

## Chapter 2

### *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

#### 2.1 Production History

In the early stages of writing *Songs*, Lee organized initial workshops at the CUNY Graduate Center's Prelude '05 Festival (New York, NY) in October 2005 and at the HERE Arts Center (New York, NY) in November 2005 and January 2006.

After those workshops, the play had its world premiere at the HERE Arts Center from September 21 to October 20, 2006. It toured nationally and internationally theatres in both 2007 and 2008.<sup>16</sup>

During my 2009 internship at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, I asked the playwright why she titled the play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and what she wanted to portray with it. She answered,

I named the show after 'Yongbee Ochonga,' the great Korean epic that was the first literary text ever written in hangul [Korean]. In translation, the title sounds very stereotypically flowery and 'Asian' the way that Asian artistic works' titles so frequently are. I am very embarrassed by this title, which was why I chose it. It fit[s] in with my 'What's the last play in the world you would ever want to write' theme.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Refer to the show schedule at *Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company* website. <<http://youngjeanlee.org/songs.html>>. The production was scheduled to the following theatres: The Walker Arts Center (Minneapolis, MN) January 18-20, 2007, Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, OH) January 26-28, 2007, Warhol Museum (Pittsburgh, PA) February 10, 2007, Vienna Festival (Vienna, Austria) May 18-21, 2007, Theaterformen (Hannover, Germany) June 14-16, 2007, Zuercher Theaterspektakel (Zurich, Switzerland) August 16-18, 2007, Philadelphia Live Arts Festival (Philadelphia, PA) September 1-3, 2007, PICA (Portland, OR) September 14-16, 2007, Rotterdamse Schouwburg (Rotterdam, The Netherlands) September 20-22, 2007, Hebbel Theater (Berlin, Germany) December 6-8, 2007, Kaaithheater (Brussels, Belgium) January 24-26, 2008, On the Boards (Seattle, WA) March 6-9, 2008, International Arts Festival of Castilla y León (Salamanca, Spain) June 13, 2008, Theatre Garonne (Toulouse, France) June 19-22, 2008, Teater Garasjen (Bergen, Norway) November 22-23, 2008, Black Box (Oslo, Norway) November 18-19, 2008, and Avantgarden (Trondheim, Norway) November 14-15, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Seunghyun Hwang, Internship at Wexner Center for the Arts, 27 October – 2 November 2009.

Lee's designs for the play emphasize her embarrassment about Korean culture and her identity. Indeed, Alexis Soloski's review in *The Village Voice* calls *Songs* "[a] predictable, confessional, Korean American identity play with a flowery Asian-sounding title." This flowery title echoes the play's stereotypical portrayals of shy and submissive Asian women. This chapter analyzes Lee's representation of stereotypes and her efforts to demolish them, and considers both how the play's use of stereotypes (including the flowery title) engages with her "last play theme" and what she wants the audience to experience during the play.

## 2.2 The Multi-Narrative Script

One important characteristic of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is its dual narrative structure, which is divided between Asian and white characters. Among the Asian characters, there are four Asian women, one of whom is specifically Korean-American, and Young Jean Lee herself appears on film in the opening sequence. The two narratives do not seem to fit together.

The play opens with a video clip in which Young Jean Lee's face is slapped, and she weeps audibly. This weeping sound is intermixed with a background love song in Korean. After the video ends, a character named "Korean-American" appears on stage and speaks about racism and minority issues in the US. Next, three Koreans appear, whose character names are Korean 1, 2, and 3, and they punch and kick the Korean-American. The three Koreans tell the story of a school teacher's rape of a school girl with her father's permission, and they also recount episodes of sexual abuse. The Korean-American presents her experience of Korean culture: her

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Interviews with Young Jean Lee during rehearsals.

grandmother's dying wish that Korean women should give up their pride and be obedient to men. Juxtaposed with this Asian group, the white couple appears and quarrels about their ongoing but troubled relationship. Thus the play consists of two major narratives, even though "All the very Best and a Little of the Worst of 2006", *New York* on December 18, 2006, reported the production of the HERE Arts Center billed as "a show about white people in love." However, there is no clear narrative connection between the Asian and white stories. They seem at first out of place, visitors from a different story.

Given the play's title, it seems necessary to examine all the scenes in terms of their structure and organization vis-à-vis the songs. According to the DVD of *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*, produced by Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, the play consists of seventeen scenes. The following table shows its structure, and I provide a short description of each scene.

Table 1: Scene Descriptions of *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*

Scene	Descriptions and Topics	Songs
#1. Prelude	Sound of voices discussing the filming of the following scene	
#2. Hit	Face-slapping video clip with background music	Korean Traditional Song, <i>Pansori</i> : Chung Hyang (Love song)
#3. Monologue	Korean-American's first monologue	
#4. First Dance	Korean Dance or Catfight (Korean-American versus three Koreans)	A Canadian indie pop rock band, The Unicorns' song, "I was born (a Unicorn)"
		Continued

Table1: Continued

#5. On Knees	Sex for money. Prostitute. A ghost man, by a Korean, suggests two other Koreans playing "hookers and johns."	Korean 3's cruel song, which she learned from her grandmother. It is about how to cut herself.
#6. Koreans dance	Three Koreans dance. Later Korean-American joins and imitates Asian stereotypes making exaggerated motions.	A Korean singing group, Cool's song, "Small Wait"
#7. Rape	Korean school-girl story	
#8. Dong Dong	Big party at the Dragon Festival and giving birth to a monster, Korean-American. All the Koreans speak in English. Korean-American's speech about minority rage and white supremacy, and the Koreans' defensive attitude. A scene of a promotional video welcoming foreign tourists to Asia.	
#9. Whites 1	A White Couple discusses Sub-Intelligence and social hierarchy. The white woman complains he is unfairly higher than her in social hierarchy.	
#10. Grandma	Grandmother's dying wish and prayer (Church)	
#11. Whites 2	A White man tells the white woman that he disappears and wants to become her.	
#12. Bible Study	Church scene with the white couple. The two groups interact. White Christianity versus Korean Christianity.	Christian Song (In Korean)
#13. Whites 3	They dispute their sexual relation. The white woman complains that the white man steals her pens.	
#14. Mariah Carey	Asian Women's Suicide Scene.	Mariah Carey's "All I want for Christmas is you"

Continued

Table1: Continued		
#15. Whites 4	They discuss their political situation between them.	
#16. Unison	Four Koreans' final monologue, in which the Korean-American changes her costume to a traditional Korean han-bok.	
#17. Whites 5	They talk about being alcoholic. The white man says that being white is awesome.	

According to the table, the Asian group's scenes number eleven and the white couple has five scenes, plus Young Jean Lee's appearance in "Prelude." The play includes six songs, most of which are about love, including the Christian song in scene twelve. Korean 3's cruel song in scene five is the exception.

As I mentioned before, the narratives of the Asians and the whites do not at first appear to be related to each other. However, the structure suggests strong connections between them. For instance, the couple first appears in scene nine, right after the Koreans shift their language from Korean and Cantonese (which they use for the first half of the play, though the Korean-American always uses English) to English. Likewise, while the first part juxtaposes Young Jean Lee's video clip and the Koreans' stories, the second part juxtaposes the Koreans' stories with the white couple's narrative.

### 2.3 "Queen of Unease": Violence and Love Theme Songs

In this section, I take a closer look at the way Lee presents her confining and conflicted identity issues on stage, and how she struggles with sensitive issues such as Asian identity politics and gender inequality. My point of departure is a passage from Alexis Soloski's review of Lee's play, "Hell is for Bohos" in *The Village Voice*:



"Lee is a queen of unease; chuckles never come unaccompanied by squirms. She's a distressingly self-aware writer who will play with theatrical forms and then have one or two characters speak about how she's playing with theatrical forms and whether that was really such a good idea."

As the review suggests, Lee deliberately provokes the audience to experience a feeling of uneasiness, and watching *Songs* is not a comfortable experience. This discomfort is a useful theatrical device, which allows audiences to maintain their critical distance as the play unfolds. One example of this critical distance takes place near the beginning of *Songs*, when the Korean American character ends her monologue about living in American society with a yell, "Let the Korean dancing begin!" (77). After this, three Korean women join her on stage and dance. Moments later, the dance incorporates erratic movements, and the actors even start pulling each others' hair, making the scene resemble a 'catfight.' The three Korean actors surround the Korean-American, implying that the Korean-American cannot escape from her parents' culture. The following stage direction clarifies the image created by the four actors:

The Koreans begin skipping in circles around Korean-American, swinging their skirts from side to side and getting closer and closer to her until their skirts are assaulting her face. The Koreans scatter and begin slapping each other playfully on the ass and giggling while Korean-American edges uneasily out of the way...Korean 1 smacks Korean-American viciously on the ass, Korean 2 smacks Korean-American viciously on the ass, Korean-American makes "What the fuck?" gesture. (77)

What begins as a playful, comic dance transforms into vengeful butt slapping. As the audience laughs, the 'vicious' slaps force them to reconsider their laughter. This pattern of using abrupt, violent maneuvers continues throughout *Songs*, as we will see.

The audience for *Songs* enters the performance space by passing through a

Korean temple. The stage direction reads, "The outside of the room is an elaborately decorated Korean Buddhist temple with a multi-paneled Korean mural painted on it" (76). This exotic and mysterious entranceway might produce a sense of comfort in the audience, providing an image that might be considered 'authentically' Asian. The audience sees Eric Dyer's set, an Asian-style wooden room lit by fluorescent lights, on stage before the play starts. Theatre critic, David Cote describes the set as "an elegant, ascetic playroom" in his review in *Time Out: New York*. The Asian style of the entrance and the set constructs a spatial, visual image of a Korean temple for meditation. Once the audience is seated, the house goes dark, and the audience hears three male voices intertwined with a woman's voice, talking about the video recording of a slapped face the audience is about to see. The stage direction for this prelude says: "Sudden lights out. We hear the prerecorded sound of the play's writer and director Young Jean Lee and her real-life friends talking and laughing as they begin to make a video of Young Jean getting hit in the face" (76).

After this short conversation and a series of slapping sounds, a video clip is projected on stage. In the video, the audience sees Lee being slapped in the face and weeping. Lee underscores her slapped face with background music, sung by a male singer/narrator. Ironically, the song is called "love song," and comes from the Korean traditional story "Chunhyang" which contains a series of songs including 'love song'. In the story, a wealthy, upper-class man, Monryong Lee, falls in love with a lower-class woman, Chunhyang, and they are secretly married. On their wedding night, the singer narrates a love conversation between the new couple on their honeymoon. Thus, the song features a love theme and has a rapid beat and a generally cheerful mood. The translation of the lyrics of the song, "love song," is as follows:

Come and let's play piggyback riding. Come and let's play piggyback riding.

Love, love, love, my love. It is love, my love.

I~~i~~it is my love. Definitely, my love.

가 ? 가 ?  
What do you want to eat? What do you want to eat?

Cut the upper part of a round, round watermelon, and pour Ganreung Baek-chung honey<sup>18</sup> in it

?  
Do you want to eat seedless, scoop deeply red parts and eat them as half-full, true soup?

No, I don't like it either.

?  
Then what do you want to eat?

가 ?  
"What do you want to eat?

가 ?  
Do you want to eat a sweet melon from a short, elongated single branch?

No, I don't like it either.

?  
Then what do you want to eat?

가 ?  
What do you want to eat?

? ? ?  
Will you have cherry? Grape? Honeyed tangerine in wheat-gluten?

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<sup>18</sup> "Ganreung Baek-chung" honey is a local honey product from Ganreung province in Korea

*Uh-wha-dung-dung, my love.*

Then what do you want to eat?

가 ?  
What do you want to eat?

?

Would you want to impregnate a sour, pucker, wild apricot, small Lee Doryung?

No, I don't like it either.

Uh-wha-dung-dung, my love.

가 . .  
Go over there. Let me see your back.

Come here. Let me see your front.

Walk toddlingly, toddlingly. Let me see you walk.

Show your smile. Let me see your teeth.

Definitely, you are my love.<sup>19</sup>

Against these touching lyrics and sweet music, the video projects a close-up of Young Jean Lee's face being repeatedly slapped. It is unlikely that non-Korean speakers will understand the significance of the lyrics – a kind of private joke between the playwright and Koreans. In spite of this lack of understanding, Lee's slapped face

<sup>19</sup> The translation is mine. In the process of the translation, I interviewed Professor Chan Park, the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the Ohio State University, who is an expert on the *pansori* on 4 November, 2009.

and the cheerful upbeat music create an emotionally off-kilter feeling of uneasiness. This theatrical moment displays Lee's ability to provide a kind of intercultural 'double-speak': the discomfort that comes from experiencing simultaneously the violence of repeated slaps with traditional music. Her weeping sound mixes with the music of *pansori*, which is a genre of Korean traditional singing style and music from 19th century, and which is typically performed and narrated by a male vocalist paring with a double-headed drum player. The word "pansori" combines "pan" (open space) and "sori" (singing or sound) and refers to open venues like public squares and markets.<sup>20</sup>

For the Korean members of the audience, this discomfort in the opening scene may be heightened by their recognition of the ideology of purity in the story titled, "Chunhyang," which is the name of the newly married woman. Chunhyang's job is to be a "gisaeng," a woman who entertains wealthy, upper-class people, mostly men, with dance, music, and song. The job may imply the possibility of sexual intercourse. Joshua D. Pilzer addresses the possibility that the gisaeng had been a kind of sex worker or a prostitute like a Japanese geisha. Other scholars argue that the gisaeng were first and foremost entertainers, forbidden from trading in sexual intercourse, and that they only became involved in sex work under Japanese colonialism (1905-45) (295-311).

While the gisaeng's specific role is beyond the scope and theme of this thesis, I do want to point out the social status quo of the gisaeng as an example of the oppressed woman in traditional Korean society. Pilzer describes it as follows:

In the Goryeo Dynasty (A.D. 918-1392), female entertainers danced and sang in the court and at countrywide festivals. Some gisaeng were

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<sup>20</sup> Further refer to "p'ansori" on the website of *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/441485/pansori>>.

conscripted or sold from poor families, but most were drawn from the hereditary *cheomin* outcaste class. Many inherited their roles from their gisaeng mothers, and most were state slaves. Under Goryeo, gisaeng were often selected as kings' concubines and given noble rank...[During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910)] [r]ecords of illicit intercourse involving the gisaeng were kept in the Joseon court and the gisaeng seem to have engaged in sex work primarily by becoming concubines or mistresses. (296)

Because the gisaeng was virtually a slave of the state, it is highly likely that the women had little power to resist or pursue alternative options in the face of the male ruling class.

Given this context, what is the story of "Chunhyang" about? Even though she is a gisaeng, and she is not the formal wife of Mongryong because the marriage is secret and non-official, she tries hard to keep her chastity when Mongryong leaves the town. She is even ready to sacrifice her life when a newly appointed magistrate attempts to recruit her to be his concubine. The story concludes with a happy ending, edifying women readers and listeners by reassuring them that they can be honored when they keep their chastity for their husbands. The patriarchal ideology of chastity embedded in this song encodes the prevalent and ongoing double standard about the nature of professional women entertainers and women's faithfulness to their husbands.

A second key pansori text that is referenced here is "Song of Ten Strokes" also one of the scenes of *Chunhyang*. In this, Chunhyang aggressively resists the local mayor's demand for sexual intercourse, resulting in her beating:

"Beat her hard!"

"Yes, sir."

At the first stroke the broken pieces of the paddle fly through the air and fall down to the courtyard and Chunhyang faints.

The mayor is furious and says, "Obey my order now."

Chunhyang shouts in desperation. "Are you saying I should give up my faithfulness? I won't do that."

"One day I parted from my love,

But I will remain faithful to one husband,  
With single-hearted devotion,  
I will not change for one moment."

...  
I'll never betray my husband." (Yu 191)

This violent scene describes Chunhyang's strong will to keep her chastity. Moreover, this scene contains a moral lesson for every wife to keep her faithfulness to the husband. Chunhyang's resistance and the violence of the beating in this scene can be linked to those in the slapping scene in *Songs*.

The slapping scene demonstrates staging strategies that Young Jean Lee employs to layer her text with multiple meanings that have the potential to call into question the notion of a single cultural identity. In the scene, the audience sees the slapped face and tears trickling down the character Young Jean's face, while it simultaneously listens to the two sounds of the song and the slap. This synesthetic combination of sound and vision creates an ironic moment. In the video clip, while the traditional male character presents a love theme in an auditory fashion, the woman, who is supposedly in the love relationship, is visually beaten. The sound of Lee's weeping ironically matches the rhythmic beats of the love song.

The slapping sequence in *Songs* can perhaps be interpreted as the result of being caught between two worlds: the world of Korean culture and parentage and the world of contemporary America. This notion of a cultural confrontation between one's past and one's present is a source of concern and a resource for a variety of Asian writers and artists. The Korean American novelist Caroline Hwang, for example, considers this conflict in her novel *In Full Bloom* (2004), which examines an inter-racial marriage. And this is a central concern to Lee's play.

Indeed, Lee continues her examination of her Korean heritage through the Korean American character, her doppelganger, her autobiographical stand-in, during a

monologue in which she describes what it feels like growing up with Korean parents in the United States. The monologue ends with the character describing herself as "slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents" and she continues by describing her parents as "retarded monkeys." Karen Shimakawa interprets this as a "horrific (if hilarious) monologue, filled with self-loathing." This issue of self-loathing continues when Lee introduces another love song, a recording by the American singer Mariah Carey entitled "All I Want for Christmas Is You" which echoes loudly throughout the theatre as three Asian women appear in traditional Korean *han-bok* costume, scuttling like crabs and flapping their skirts. Significantly, the Korean American changes from her casual Western outfit to the han-bok and appears on stage with the other Asian women, and also scuttles and flaps her skirt. All the women dance together in time to Mariah Carey's song.

After a few seconds of dancing, they stand at the upper-left corner of the stage, and then take turns walking to the spotlight center downstage. There, they individually mime eleven suicidal gestures boldly and with exaggeration. While the Asian women perform some of these suicides in traditional methods—hara-kiri, self-immolation, and hanging—they also commit suicide in bizarre, often grotesque, manners—stabbing the vagina with a knife, sticking a chopstick in the eye, cutting fingers and a tongue off with a pair of scissors, and cutting a breast with a knife. Their overblown gestures of such physical violence cause the audience to laugh due to the comic slapstick elements. Possibly, this laugh arises as a result of the audience's discomfort with such strange violence, or possibly just because the scene is funny.

The most important effect of this combination of violence and humor is to open the audience not only to laughter but also to rethink the stereotyped images of Asian women, from a critical distance. The audiences at *Songs* are often mixed in their



reactions to the chorus of the comic suicides—some laugh and smile because of the actors' exaggerated, comic mime of the suicides, while others feel discomfort because of their violence. But this is possibly the reaction that Lee is looking for: a mixed one. In the review of *Songs*, "Cultural Collision," in *Off Off Online* 25 September 2006, Mitch Montgomery comments that "the juxtaposition of culture and identity is so vivid that audiences can't help but laugh." The violence of this scene is designed



Fig 1. Scene 16 Unison. Four Koreans' final monologue, in which the Korean-American changes her costume to a traditional Korean han-bok. From left: Jennifer Lim, Becky Yamamoto, Jun Sky Kim, Haerry Kim. Photo by Carl Skutsch. Copyright Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company

to dramatically realize how the typecasting of the Asian women's self-sacrifice and self-hurt oppresses all Asian women in society.

In historical retrospect, suicide was often the only solution available to certain women in Korea. Upper class women were given a knife called a "silver-decorated

knife" to commit suicide if they lost their chastity or virginity. Young-Hee Shim explains women's suicides in modern Korean society in terms of Confucian discourses:

Though there has been a sweeping change in women's status and role with industrialization, urbanization, and westernization, some of these Confucian discourses and ideologies linger in contemporary Korean society, particularly the double standard of sexuality and the chastity ideology. Most women and men, especially older people, still highly value the chastity of women. When a woman loses her chastity even through no fault of her own, she often blames herself and gives up a normal woman's life. She may even commit suicide. (137)

Asian women could not escape from this rigidly enforced ideology of chastity embedded in Confucian discourse.

Such images of the Asian women's sacrifice and silence appear not only within Korean/Asian society, but are widespread in European/American arts and theatre. For example, Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* presents an Asian woman who commits suicide for the sake of the male character's happiness. In the opera, a US Naval Officer, Pinkerton, meets a Japanese woman, Butterfly, and they later get married. As her name implies, Butterfly is presented as a delicate and fragile character in the opera. In the end, she commits suicide for her son's and white ex-husband's happiness. Such portrayal of self-sacrifice by Asian women dominate much of Asian-American narrative, and reproduce and continue the stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman through its repeated performances.

Lesley Ferris has written about violence against women in an essay entitled "Staging Violence against Women" and she makes a significant point about this notion of theatrical repetition by identifying a:

... paradoxical nature of theatre--that it is ephemeral and fleeting and at the same time immersed in repetition. In the commercial world a play needs to be repeated enough times to make money. The theatrical canon comprises

plays that have been produced throughout decades and centuries. And, finally, theatre is an art form in which, through repetition, the body learns and memorizes gestures, language, and perhaps even emotions, thus ensuring that the live performance can be replayed in the future (remember that the French word for rehearsal is *répétition*). (1999: 32)

Ferris's point about the economic underpinning of theatrical repetition is telling in relation to performance works that are considered mainstream and include significant Asian roles. For example, *Madame Butterfly* ranks first on the list of the twenty most performed operas in North America at Opera America.<sup>21</sup> It became one of the most popular operas in America and continues to reinforce in its audience certain stereotypes of Asian women.

Ferris's second point is that through rehearsal we repeat and play out physical and linguistic violence through the staging of plays. Lee's use of music and songs is another example of this. While as we have seen some musical selections for this production come from pop culture (Mariah Carey) and cultural heritage (pansori), there is another telling song in scene five in which Korean 3 sings a song that she learned from her grandmother:

When you cut her  
Do not cut her with a knife.  
Do not chop her with an axe.  
Do not saw her with a saw.  
(Slowly rising)  
One, two, one, two  
Now you know what you must do.  
Do not cut her with a knife.  
This is how you take her life.  
Put some fishhooks in her hand.  
That is all you need.  
She will put them in her cunt.  
And they will make her bleed. (78)

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<sup>21</sup> I refer to "The Most Frequently Performed Operas," *Cornerstones*, OPERA America, 9 Sept. 2009  
<<http://web.archive.org/web/20080822055658/http://www.operaamerica.org/Content/Audiences/Programs/CornCornerst/index.shtml>>.

The lyrics of this song are horrifying examples of brutal, bloody self-inflicted violence. The song prefigures the suicidal stagings in scene 14. The fact that the grandmother teaches this song to her granddaughter is immensely troubling but recalls a legacy of such familial violence in Asian culture such as the now abandoned 'cultural' practice of binding girls' feet. In the previous section of the "song of ten strokes" in *Chunhyang*, a woman's endurance against physical tortures for her faithfulness to her husband describes another such legacy. This evokes the ways in which one generation passes on to the next generation a maintenance of violence aimed at women to control and manage them.

In addition to the violent lyrics of the grandmother's song, Lee uses two other textual methods to add to audience discomfort. The first is the multi-lingual conversation by the various Asian characters. Lee takes time to describe this in her stage directions:

Korean-American and Koreans 1, 2 and 3 should be played by actresses who are one-hundred percent Korean, Chinese or Japanese (or any mix of the three, for example half Chinese/half Japanese). When speaking English, Koreans 1, 2 and 3 speak with authentic Asian accents and Korean-American speaks with a perfect American accent. When not speaking English, Koreans 1, 2 and 3 speak their native language, whatever that may be. Ideally, one would speak Korean, one would speak Chinese, and one would speak Japanese. In the original production Koreans 1 and 2 spoke Korean and Korean 3 spoke Cantonese [in HERE Arts Center in New York City, 2006]. (76)

Here, while the Korean characters can be Japanese, Korean, Chinese, any other Asians, or Korean-American. Even though the Korean characters' names specify their nationality as Korean, this casting note expands the boundary of the ethnic issues from Koreans to Asian women more generally. This emphasizes Asians' shared experiences beyond their cultural and linguistic differences. For this reason, I frequently refer to the characters of Korean 1, 2, and 3 as Asians.

Once the multiple Asian identities are established Lee erases the linguistic differences in scene 8 where all the Korean characters want to join in a party at the dragon festival of the falling flower. It is in this scene that all the women line up represent a birth canal, and the Korean American character is theatrically 'born' by sliding on the floor through the legs of Korean 3. The Korean American, now referred to as Dong-Dong, emerges wearing a traditional Korean male jacket and groom's hat. The stage direction describes the hat as "a traditional Korean groom's hat with flaps on the sides, which look like Mickey Mouse ears to Westerners" (79). In addition, Lee's script reads, "The Koreans begin speaking English and continue to speak English through the rest of the play" (79). This 'birth' into Korean-American identity is also apparently a marriage of two cultures: American and Korean, as the groom's hat may signify.



Fig 2. Scene 8 Dong-Dong. Staging birth scene. From left: Jun Sky Kim, Jennifer Lim (up), Becky Yamamoto, Haerry Kim. Photo by Carl Skutsch. Copyright Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company



Fig 3. Scene 8 Dong-Dong. Korean-American's speech about minority rage and the Koreans' defensive gestures. From left: Becky Yamamoto, Jun Sky Kim, Haerry Kim, and Jennifer Lim. Photo by Carl

The second linguistic technique expands on the notion of identify that Lee sets up with the birth sequence. Once all the actors start to speak English, Lee instructs them to call themselves by counterfeit names in the following note: "The Koreans address each other by constantly changing fake Asian names" (78). Thus all the Korean characters call each other nonsense names, sounding vaguely Asian, such as Chu-Chu (78), So-So (78-79), and Dong-Dong (79).

This use of fake names remind me of *The Last Performance* (1998) by an avant-garde artist, Jérôme Bel. He was preoccupied with challenging dominant styles of representation "complicit in reinforcing ideological power structures of subjugation and oppression" (Keefe and Murray 88). In *The Last Performance*, four performers continuously changing and exchanging their identities through their characters and names (Keefe and Murray 88). Similarly, the theatrical technique of fake names that Lee uses in *Songs*, provoke the Asian stereotype of sameness. In addition to this naming, the multi-lingual performance is highly likely a theatrical device intended to direct the audience members to become active thinkers and viewers, not passive consumers of and bystanders toward Asians' social issues. In particular, Asians are often totalized, regardless of their individual differences, such as different ethnicities, languages, and national heritages.

#### **2.4 "Minorities have all the power": Lee's Hyperbolic strategy**

An Asian woman in the US has to deal with her national and cultural identity issues, concerning the double standards of ethnicity and gender from Asian culture

and American society. She is easily regarded as an Asian woman rather than an American one. As a member of the minority group, the Asian American woman is not free from social expectations and prejudices. In *Songs*, the character Young Jean voices her feeling of minority rage through a monologue, and she declares the power of minorities:

White people are so alert to any infringement on their rights. It's really funny. And the reason why it's funny is that minorities have all the power. We can take the word "racism" and hurl it at people and demolish them and there's nothing you can do to stop us. I feel so much pity for you right now. You have no idea what's going on. The wiliness of the Korean is beyond anything that you could ever hope to imagine. I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke. (77)

The character starts the opening monologue by mocking white people. She describes metaphorically how white people typecast minority groups with racial views, and insists that Koreans have characteristics of wiliness and that minorities are all powerful. Added to this comment on race, the character makes the outlandish declaration, "we will crush you [Caucasians]. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke" (77). Some of the members of the audience might feel discomfort in hearing such a strong demonstration of minority rage being spoken by an Asian actor, especially since her speech almost sounds like a curse against white people.

However, this opening monologue actually leads to the audience falling over laughing. We can find the reason from the actor's delivery style which is high-pitched and uses exaggerated facial expressions. The actor's performance is reminiscent of the Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho, who also jokes about Asian/Korean people. Both the Korean American character and Cho speak of racial experiences and make fun of current racism, and consequently they make the



audience laugh. Their humor interplays feelings of easiness and uneasiness in racial topics. This coexistence of contrasting un/easiness is a part of Lee's hyperbolic strategy to deconstruct stereotypes.

This strategy becomes more emphatic in the last monologue, when Lee attempts to deconstruct the social context of the stereotypes in the scene where the four Asian characters speak in the same breath. In order to stress this sense of collective power, Lee creates a monologue spoken in unison by the Asian characters:

[All the Koreans (including the Korean-American):]  
I love the white patriarchy with all my heart because I'm ambitious and want power. My whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male. People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really I'm just a fucking white guy.  
And some of you may be thinking, "Oh man, this is a speech about how white people suck. This is a speech about how white people suck. This is so much less complicated and interesting than all the other parts of the show that weren't just about race." But don't worry. If enough white people hate it, I'll cut it.  
I apologize for bringing shame upon my country. (82)

In terms of the play's structure, this group monologue parallels the first solo monologue by the Korean/Asian-American. The final group speech echoes the first monologue in various ways. In both of the monologues, all the actors stand looking straight ahead and do not move. By doing this, they emphasize the content of their speech by limiting their physical motions. Yet, although the style of the performances is similar, the moods of the scenes are different. While in the first scene the actor is making exaggerated facial expressions in bright stage light, in the second scene, the four actors have deadpan faces in dim spotlights, to emphasize their hidden feelings toward white patriarchal society. Likewise, in the first monologue, the Korean-American clarifies the purpose of the play as crushing the white people, but the style of the monologue produces a comic effect. Later, in the final monologue, the four Koreans –including the Korean-American—state that they love white

patriarchy and that they believe themselves to be white (82). In other words, even though the Korean-American says that she "will crush you [white audience]," in the last monologue, all the Korean characters claim that they are "white guys" who have power.

On the surface, these monologues are in contrast with each other, but they both provoke a closer examination of society. In white dominant patriarchal society, people are educated through social systems like educational institutions and mass media. Within such a society, members are strongly influenced by ideology in terms of culture. They are likewise contaminated by some social codes in the name of common sense. It is highly plausible that as long as Asian-American women hold these same educated views of patriarchal society, it will be hard for them to get social power equal to that of white men. Thus, the women cannot help claiming that they are not empowered *Asian women* but white guys, because they are educated in accordance with the white patriarchy and want power in a white patriarchal society.

As I argued in the previous section, the play uses a methodological device of parallel narratives for analyzing and staging stereotypes. Here, I want to suggest another possible interpretation of the two groups (the Asians and the white couple) in the narrative structure, as serving to represent Asian American's double identities separately and equally focused. While the Korean/Asian group represents Asian American woman's ethnic background, the white woman in the relationship with the white man reveals Asian American woman's female identity as separate from her ethnicity. The play attempts to reveal Asian American woman's identity problems as both a Korean/Asian and a woman. In the sense that Asians and women are categorized in biologically binary and prejudiced ways, the Asian American woman cannot be a dominant member in society. As long as such binary views exist, she

has to choose an alternative identity of a white macho man by declaring in the last monologue, "I'm just a fucking white guy" (82). This last word by all the Asian women echoes the line in the first monologue, "I can promise you one thing, which is that *we* will crush you" (77).<sup>22</sup> How she designs to "crush" the audience warrants close examination. The method is her claim, "I'm just a fucking white guy." These words do not sound natural for the Asian American woman actors because they are not white physically and also because the aggressive tone does not seem appropriate for Asian women based on Asian stereotypes.

One further framework of interpreting the binary gaze can be considered: Laura Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In this essay, Mulvey examines selected films using a psychoanalytic approach, and she makes a point that relates to theatre research in terms of the female body and the audience's gaze. Mulvey says:

Sexual instincts and identification processes have a meaning within the symbolic order which articulates desire. Desire, born with language, allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex. (62)

If read through Mulvey's approach, the final monologue represents the stereotypes of submissive and self-sacrificing Korean women as desire and gaze, born in a white dominant and patriarchal society. The last monologue could be interpreted as meaning that the symbolic order restrains the desires of submissive, self-sacrificing women, especially Asians, and how the Asian body is socially castrated and weakened under the socially male dominant gaze.

A Korean American woman is influenced by white patriarchal society in dual ways, as a woman and as a Korean. The dominant social, patriarchal gaze

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<sup>22</sup> *Italics mine.*

continuously weakens her, reducing her to the image of *an Asian woman*. Within such a reiterative system, she cannot be free from the stereotypes and patriarchal compulsion. The Koreans and the Korean-Americans in the play feel the "in-your-face" appropriation of white male power. They are not Asian females in the old system of binary opposition and not the weak opposites of strong, white males. As a member of the later generation of Korean/ Asian immigrants in US, Young Jean Lee has built her own theatre by working to break down cultural clichés of Asian and Asian-American women. Lee's play approaches controversial issues of race and gender by mocking patriarchal men and insisting Asian women are empowered white guys in the parallel narratives. Lee juxtaposes extreme images of self-loathing and self-sacrifice with aggressive Alpha-male behavior of the "white guy." A theatre reviewer, Jeremy McCarter's writing for *New York* comments on the contrasting narratives led by both groups in the play as mockery: "In unison, four Asian-American actresses deliver a speech in the author's voice that rampages through race and gender sensitivities, mocking patriarchal white men, hypocritical white women, angry minorities, and Lee herself." In this scene, the theme of breaking down stereotypes of Asian women reaches its apogee.

Starting in scene nine, the white couple starts to appear on stage parallel to the Asian group. In *The New York Times*, Anita Gates describes the white couple this way: "Now and then a white American couple (Juliana Francis and Brian Bickerstaff) appears, arguing about sex, alcoholism, petty theft and their relationship in general. In the middle of this Mr. Bickerstaff's character proudly announces to the white woman: 'You know what's awesome? Being white'." In response, the white woman says, "I guess never thought of it. And when I do think of it I feel like an asshole" (84).

In this climactic scene of the play, the two narratives are in strong contrast to each other. Following the four Asian women's 'monologue' declaring their love for white patriarchy and power, the white couple ends the play with their strange final conversation. The American white couple is performing a kind of soap opera love story that turns nasty, strange and wacky. In their strange conversation, the woman announces to her boyfriend her intention to move on, because he is lower than her in social hierarchy: "The world is arranged in a hierarchy with people going from the top to the bottom, and you are pretty high up there and so am I, but you are just a little lower than me so that is not going to work out" (79).

At the end of the play, the white couple talks about pens. The white woman insists that her boyfriend "stop stealing [her] pens":

My pens. You have to stop stealing my pens. I like to use these very expensive rollerball pens and you're always stealing them and shoving them in your pockets without the caps and I am very disappointed in this; it drives me crazy. It makes me want to take those pens and jam them into the end of your penis. (81)

According to conventional theatrical metaphors, a pen suggests an idea of power and, in psychoanalysis, the phallus also entails power. The pen, as a phallic symbol, represents a sort of power in the love relationship, and thus the woman's power has been stolen by the man. In this sense, the woman's complaint to her boyfriend about stealing power in their unfair relationship, allegedly in the name of "love" seems correct. In patriarchal society, women's power has frequently been stolen by society and powerful men.

In *Time Out, New York*, David Cote comments on the dual narratives of the play: "Now [Lee] piles her deconstructive scorn upon ethnic stereotypes in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, a sweet-and-sour parade of Asian minstrelsy and race-baiting that culminates in a perverse, soul-baring love scene between two

Caucasians." Alexis Soloski, however, claims in *The Village Voice* that it is more complicated: "But Lee won't content herself with mere parody. Confessions and identity do feature, but they're subsumed by a relationship drama featuring two white people and Lee's relentless self-inquiry." This image of an inward, looking, self-centered relationship strongly contrasts with what can be considered the larger and more pressing concerns of the Asian character dealing with racism and endless stereotypes. In *Downtown Express*, Nicole Davis evaluates the white couple as "seemingly out of place in this twisted minority report, but...the perfect counterpoint to Lee's provocative identity play." This issue of identity is elaborated further by Lee in an interview with Jeffrey M. Jones when she claims that she "tap[s] into that white male mentality to further [her] own nefarious Asian-American ends" (75). As long as such binary views of self and other exist, she has to choose the subversive strategy and an alternative identity, a white macho man.

Accordingly, the narratives of both the Asian group and the white group are designed to develop Young Jean Lee's exploration of identity. Both narratives are connected to each other, to identity, and to the plight of Asian-American women in the USA. The Asian characters' narrative represents various ethnic experiences of self-sacrificing and self-hate in the name of Asian tradition. Furthermore, in the multi-narrative structure, the White characters' narrative is mocked and parodied in the context of unbalanced power issues in the name of love relationship.

## **2.5 Conclusion: Stereotypes of Self-Sacrificing Women from the Inside and the Outside**

Asian stereotypes are a constant presence in contemporary USA media. For example, the American TV drama *Lost* (season 1, 2004) features a Korean couple.

In the early part of the season, the wife, Sun-Hwa Kwon (played by Yunjin Kim) is shy and obeys her husband, Jin-Soo Kwon (played by Daniel Dae Kim). This image of the couple seems to replicate and reproduce the stereotypes of a shy and submissive Asian woman, and to entertain TV viewers rather than to criticize the stereotype. Similarly, Asian airlines use promotional videos to welcome Westerners to Korea, showing obsequious and overly obedient Asian women and identifying them with Asian holiday destinations.

In scene 8 the Korean American shouted against the whites with an overblown moment of 'minority rage' which is similar to her monologue in scene 3. Before she finishes her tirade, the other women standing behind her, look at the audience and gesture 'no', 'this is not true.' The women then move towards the Korean American, who will not stop shouting but the women surround her and roughly block her mouth from speaking further. At this point they dispose of the Korean American, while they 'perform' the roles of a Korean Airlines promotional video that welcomes Westerners to Korea. Korean 1 speaks the following text:

KOREAN 1: I know of a gorgeous island where all anyone ever eats is dukpuki and duk and—which are special rice pastries—and dumplings with hot tea. And then they dress up in dragon costumes and run around in circles!  
*The Koreans form a dragon, with Korean 2 as the head, and run around in a circle. (79)*

This scene encompasses the two ends of the binary position between hate-filled anti-white sentiment and the manufactured commercial 'love' for the West that is part of many campaigns for tourism. The scene ends with the dragon dance, one of the cultural rituals of many Asian cultures. *The Village Voice* called it "a devastating and very funny attack on racism," and Vallejo Gantner, the artistic director of P.S. 122, says that Lee has "the sharpest knife in the business. She cuts right through the bone."

With this keen and sharp knife, she uses typecasting to cut right through controversial racial and gender issues.

The play enacts stereotypes of Asian women in a sensational pattern of struggle and violence. Lee's play illustrates that American society is plagued with biases and prejudices toward the Asian female body. These biases and prejudices originate not only from non-Asians but also from Asians themselves. As a 1.5 generation immigrant, she feels herself trapped between old Asian traditions and contemporary American society. For Lee, the Asian woman's body is fixed in accordance with certain types. Likewise, the play describes that the stereotypes force Asian women to follow and adhere to a fixed position, even though they believe themselves to be an empowered and strong person. However, the social ideology of the Asian woman does not allow her to take on a new powerful identity. Frequently, the stereotypes from social, dominant ideologies prevent her from having political power and a strong voice.

In *Songs*, Lee spotlights the negativity of typecasting Asian women; this is manifest in a series of comic scenes, which overtly make fun of Asian women stereotypes by showing how ridiculous they are. Simultaneously, the production explores various violent maneuvers which are mentioned in the previous subchapter—from a slapped face to comic Asian suicide—by situating them within new modes of comic performance. In *Time Out, New York*, David Cote comments on Lee's self-hate: "Like her avowed idol Andy Kaufman, Lee revels in personality mazes and narcissistic self-abasement."

The issues brought up by Lee's reflections on society through *Songs* also appear in two rewritings of Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904): David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) and Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain



Boublil's *Miss Saigon* (1989). In my opinion, Boublil's *Miss Saigon* reproduces the stereotypes of Asian women in America as submissive and self-sacrificing by romanticizing the American fantasy of Vietnamese women and Vietnam. Despite the historical context of the Vietnam War from 26 September 1959 to 30 April 1975, the romantic story with love songs was designed to move the audience. Furthermore, the fact that the production in America cast non-Asians as main characters in yellow-faced make-up, is an example of the American masculine gaze feminizing Vietnam and the Vietnamese.

David Henry Hwang examines an illusionary vision of the Other or Asian woman which is constructed from the Western male gaze. He theatrically presents this through the central character, Gallimard, whose words in the last scene are:

There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life. (68)

This vision is rooted in a patriarchal, heterosexual fantasy of the Others' body.

Hwang demonstrates that the illusion can be materialized, and simultaneously that the gazed body can become constructed conceptually and detached from the real body.

Stereotypes of Asian women are pervasive, and such stereotypes embrace even Asian men as feminized. Indeed, Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* could be described as a triple encounter of males with the submissive, self-sacrificing, self-negating Asian female. The first encounter is Gallimard's love for the Asian Song Li; the second is the male cross-dresser who performs Song Li as an act of theatrical cross-dressing; and the third encounter is Hwang's with his play's subject matter. Hwang's celebrated play thematically explores the West's encounter with an exotic, feminine Asia, and his focus in on the Western male gaze, a gaze that does not

explode stereotypes of Asian women, but in some ways reinforces them. As David L. Eng explains in his examination of *M. Butterfly*:

I read this final scene of the drama in contrast to the unveiling of opera diva Song Liling's penis at the opening of act III. Gallimard is so committed to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* fantasy of 'the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man' (17) that it is impossible for him to imagine an alternative outcome to this dreary story of heterosexual domination and white supremacy. (138)

While it is not possible for Gallimard to imagine an 'alternative outcome' to this narrative, it is also in some ways unfeasible for Hwang to consider the position of Asian women as anything other than the 'submissive Oriental woman'. Indeed Hwang's retelling of the Madame Butterfly story critiques the Western male gaze, but does little to dismantle the pervasive stereotype of Asian women. In contrast to Hwang, Lee's play presents a radical staging, one that aggressively and with outlandish humor, explores the troubling position of Asian women and she does it not just from a single perspective, but from both inside and outside Korean culture. Perhaps we can think of Lee's work as in a conversation with Hwang, a counter dialogue that is informed by Lee's position as a 1.5 Korean American female.

To conclude this chapter, I want to consider another key element that Lee confronts in her play, that of Christianity and its relationship to Korean American culture. According to Marion Dearman, the majority of Koreans are Christians in USA, and more than 90 percent of Korean churches in Los Angeles belong to fundamentalist, conservative, or evangelical sects (Dearman 165-83). The main reasons that majority of Koreans are Christians in the United States are their necessities for Korean immigrants. Won Moo Hurh explains,

among the majority of Korean Americans, the religious need (meaning), the social need (belonging), and the psychological need (comfort) to attend the Korean church are inseparable from each other: they are functionally intertwined under the complex conditions of uprooting from the ancestral

home, social marginality in a new country, and struggling to reroot in a "promised land. (Hurh 112)

As Hurh describes, Korean churches in the United States support Korean immigrants by presenting Korean circumstances with food, language, and culture. Consequently, these churches function as second home for majority of Korean immigrants. The scene of the grandmother and the scene of the four Koreans' singing an evangelical gospel song in scene 12 reflect the significance of Christianity to Korean culture.

Does Lee articulate an aspect of her relationship to her Christian upbringing in the scene with the grandmother? Korean/Asian Americans deal with the boundary between traditional Korean/Asian heritage *roots* and a contemporary American tangible *home*. Karen Shimakawa explains the identity issues of in-between-ness in the scene of the Korean American's grandmother's story. In scene 10, the grandmother imparts her dying wish to the Korean American, calling her 'Myung Bean.' Her name sounds like Young Jean, the playwright's name. The grandmother, with her Korean accent, even asks Myung Bean, "why you ask your friend hit you in face? And then make video?" (80). This seems to suggest that the Korean American character is Young Jean Lee herself. Therefore the grandmother's dying wish can be interpreted as representing Young Jean Lee's feelings about her Korean heritage and traditional influences. The grandmother says, "[G]ive up your pride, be humble. Jesus will help you. This is my dying wish" (80). Shimakawa claims that the grandmother's story fulfills a readily decipherable function "about" Korean-American female identity: "it [the story] illustrates the traditions and relationships that connect diasporic Asians to their 'home' countries/cultures via familial (and very often gustatory) ties, especially as they bind female progenitors to their culinary inheritors, their Asian (American) daughters and granddaughters" (Shimakawa 90). This bond

frequently forces Asian-American daughters to follow the values of their parents in a way that goes against their own sense of identity and social justice. In an interview Lee describes issues of 'growing up Christian':

YOUNG JEAN LEE My parents were converted to evangelical Christianity when they were living in Korea by an American missionary, and he helped bring them over to the United States. As soon as I was born, they both directed all of their energy into making me a Christian. I converted when I was 5, but by the time I was 8, I sort of didn't believe anymore. I always hated church. I was not a religious person. I resisted and fought through my entire childhood and adolescence. When I went to college, I refused to go to church anymore, and there was a big battle between me and my parents. They realized they had to stop trying to force it on me. (Pierpenbug "Faith")

In conclusion, Lee utilizes the vacillating uneasiness between violent images and comic elements throughout her work in order to call pervasive stereotypes into question. The play encourages a critical distance, allowing the audience to rethink the nature of such Asian 'types' through these alternating experiences of discomfort (the slapped face of Young Jean Lee, the grandmother's plea to believe in Jesus, the suicide mimes) and clowning (the Korean-American's birth with Mickey Mouse ears and the Asian women scuttling across the stage in their han-bok robes). By placing these stereotypes literally on center stage, she brings awareness to and challenges the ways in which they are recycled and replayed. Through these effective and powerful strategies, she forces the audience to rethink the cultural clichés of Asian-American women.

## Chapter 3

### *The Shipment*

#### **3.1 Introduction: Production History and Process**

In the year following the first performance of *The Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* (2006), Young Jean Lee presented *Church*, a play she portrayed as the 'last play' that she would ever want to write. *Church* is about her experiences growing up in an evangelical family, by which she "always felt totally oppressed" (Svich 33). Using this experience of oppression, she presents her story to the audience in a plot that becomes like "a Christianity show that tried to convert the audience to Christianity with total sincerity" (Svich 33).

When she was preparing to leave for college, Lee announced to her parents that she would no longer be going to church. She then became an atheist during her undergraduate studies at Berkeley (Soloski "Hell"). However, she questioned the opinions of her fellow unbelievers: "Their attitude toward Christians seemed very ill-informed...it was like Christians are evil morons who are ruining our country" (Soloski "Hell"). Thus, *Church* represents a different thematic focus, one that is not bound to ethnicity. Following this attempt to examine aspects of Christian faith that Lee no longer follows, she turned her attention again to issues of race and identity politics in America.

Young Jean Lee expanded her idea of the 'last play' to African-American experiences of racism. In 2008, during the initial stages of her new project, Lee offered two workshops for *The Shipment*. The first one was at the Brooklyn Arts

Exchange Workshop (Brooklyn, NY), which ran on April 18 and 19 in 2008 and the second took place on June 7 in 2008 at the Kitchen Workshop (New York, NY).

Young Jean Lee thought the workshops failed because they repeated stereotypes and encouraged the audience to enjoy them, instead of questioning them. In an interview by Leila Brillson in *Interview Magazine*, Lee describes her response to the first two workshops:

My most uncomfortable moment was working on the first two workshops of "THE SHIPMENT," which were a disaster. I was trying, as a Korean-American, to make a Black identity-politics show, and the results were as bad as one would expect. I ended up throwing out my entire script and recasting the show and starting over from scratch...During one of "THE SHIPMENT" workshops, the cast members were ironically doing all of these really stereotypical dances onstage and started encouraging the audience to come up and dance with them. We didn't think anyone would, but all these people jumped onstage and started dancing, thinking it was a genuine moment. I felt bad for everyone involved. (Brillson "Young")

As Lee says, she threw out the script and she reconsidered the casting. Instead of continuing with the dancers she engaged for the initial workshops, she decided to recast all the roles with actors. The one person she kept from the original cast was Mikeah Ernest Jennings who was both an actor and dancer. After these workshops, she was commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts at the Ohio State University (OSU) to stage an actual production of *The Shipment* in October 2008.

Lee's residency at the Wexner Center lasted from October 27 to November 1, 2008, and the show ran from October 30 to November 2, 2008. I had the unique opportunity to observe and become involved in Lee's residency, participating in talkback sessions after each show, and talking with Lee, her staff, and the actors. After her residency, she made further changes in the production of the play and it opened in New York and ran from January 8-31, 2009. I was able to go to New York City and observe the changes, and developments in the production. In a January 22

interview with a New York City web blog, *Gothamist*, Lee admitted that she continued working on shows until the end and that she even continues to revise them when on tour.

The productions at OSU and in New York made the audience rethink the stereotypes of African-Americans. One review in Ohio's *Columbus Dispatch* reports that the play is "Full of recycled African-American stock characters performed with just enough off-kilter subtext to make theatergoers re-examine them..." (Grossberg "Playwright"). On January 13, 2009, *The New York Times* commented, "Combing through the images of African-Americans that dominate the media, Ms. Lee wields sharp, offbeat humor to point out the clichés, distortions and absurdities, turning the wearily familiar — a foul-mouthed stand-up comic, a drug dealer, a would-be rapper — into loopy, arch cartoons" (Isherwood "Off-Center"). As these two reviews point out, Lee's play forces her audience to re-examine stereotypes of African-Americans by offering the same recycled characters but using a bizarre subtext, distortions, and absurdities.

Following its New York productions in 2009 and 2010, the play toured several worldwide venues: KFDD Brussels, Belgium (May 18 - 21, 2009), Zurich Theater Spektakel, Switzerland (August 28 - 30, 2009), PICA TBA Festival, Portland (Sept 4 - 7, 2009), Rotterdam Seschouwburg, The Netherlands (September 12 - 14, 2009), On the Boards, Seattle (October 1 - 4, 2009), Festival d'Automne à Paris, Paris (November 4 - 8, 2009), UNC Chapel Hill, North Carolina (February 11 - 13, 2010), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago (March 25 - 28, 2010), Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (April 9 - 10, 2010), Vienna Festival, Austria (May 29 - June 1,

2010), and Sydney Opera House Vivid Live, Australia ( June 8 - 11, 2010).<sup>23</sup> In addition, *The Shipment* was named as a finalist for the 2010 Blackburn Prize for Women Playwrights, a prestigious international award bestowed every year to a woman playwright who presented a significant new play for English-speaking theatre.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 Staging Race: A Bold and Dangerous Move

It is very unusual for an Asian American artist to dramatize another ethnic group's history of diaspora, because Asian American immigration history still deals with its own diasporic conditions and struggles. There are several reasons for this being an uncommon practice. Few Asian American artists deal with slavery because, as non African Americans, there could be an active mistrust of their authority to write about such experiences and characters. In fact, Lee is aware of the risk involved in doing this in her play. In the interview with John Del Signore in a web blog of New York City, *Gothamist*, she claims: "I think that dealing with race in art is already kind of impossible, and I think that people are already weirder and more defensive about racism against black people than they are about other kinds of racism. I thought it was going to be this huge issue that I wasn't black." Despite this fear, Lee opened the play in 2008 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

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<sup>23</sup> The schedule for productions of *The Shipment* appear on Young Jean Lee's company website. <<http://youngjeanlee.org/shipment.html>>. Refer to information about each performance on the following websites: KFDA Brussels, Belgium <[www.kfda.be](http://www.kfda.be)>, Zurich Theater Spektakel, Switzerland <[www.theaterspektakel.ch](http://www.theaterspektakel.ch)>, PICA TBA Festival, Portland <[www.pica.org](http://www.pica.org)>, Rotterdam Seschouwburg, The Netherlands <[www.rotterdamseschouwburg.nl](http://www.rotterdamseschouwburg.nl)>, On the Boards, Seattle <[www.ontheboards.org](http://www.ontheboards.org)>, Festival d'Automne à Paris, Paris <[www.festival-automne.com](http://www.festival-automne.com)>, UNC Chapel Hill, North Carolina <[www.unc.edu](http://www.unc.edu)>, MCA Chicago, Chicago <<http://www.mcachicago.org>>, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh <<http://www.warhol.org>>, Vienna Festival, Austria <<http://www.festwochen.or.at>>, and Sydney Opera House Vivid Live, Australia <<http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com>>.

<sup>24</sup> For further information, refer to "Finalist Named for 2010 Blackburn Prize for Women Playwrights," Jan 18, 2010. Feb 20, 2010 <[http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Finalists\\_Named\\_For\\_2010\\_Blackburn\\_Prize\\_For\\_Women\\_Playwrights\\_20100118](http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Finalists_Named_For_2010_Blackburn_Prize_For_Women_Playwrights_20100118)>.



During the show nights from October 30 to November 2, 2008, I saw some people leave the audience – presumably in order to avoid the sexual content of the comedian's jokes. Or perhaps, some of them did not like the African American experiences of racism written and directed by an Asian American. Later, Lee told the audience during a talkback session that she expected many audience members would leave during the show because a non-African-American playwright had produced and written a play about African American racial identity.

### **3.2.1 Pre-staging Phrase: Collaborative Playwriting Process**

The program note of the production at the Kitchen in 2009 says, "In collaboration with an all black cast, Lee takes the audience on an awkward and volatile rollercoaster ride through the absurdities and atrocities that arise when trying to discuss the black experience in America. Ludicrous, honest, and devoid of truisms, *The Shipment* dares to ask embarrassing questions and to seek solutions to impossible problems."<sup>25</sup> This process of collaborative writing is central for Young Jean Lee, especially in the case of *The Shipment*. In *Time Out New York*, Lee says, "Writing is always a collaborative process for me; I'm always taking cues from my actors. But this time was different, in that I really had almost nothing to contribute in terms of content. I mean, obviously: I'm not black" (Shaw "Black"). Lee's assertion in some ways seems to echo W. B. Du Bois' claim that African-Americans' stories should be written by and for themselves. He says,

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us*. That is they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and

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<sup>25</sup> Refer to the program note of *The Shipment* from January 8 to 24, 2009 at The Kitchen, New York.

sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (134)

During the period preceding the civil rights movement, African American playwrights presented a strong attempt to take back representations of African Americans by offering their own representations. However, how is it about forty years after the civil rights movement? Are the social conditions totally different in what some consider post-racial, Barack Obama's America?

To return to Lee's statement, even though she suggests that she had almost nothing to contribute to the play in terms of content, it is clear that she makes a contribution as its playwright and its director by creating a space in which to talk about the racial experiences of African Americans in the USA.

As usual, Lee does not follow traditional ways of playwriting in this project. Typically, theater companies only begin to hold auditions and cast actors for the play's roles after a complete or nearly completed version of the play script is available. However, Lee did not follow this traditional process of casting instead choosing a more experimental process, as she intended to cast actors who freely interrupted and spoke their opinions in the process of developing the new play.

In the early stages of the project, during Lee's first two workshops, she originally intended to introduce hip-hop concepts into the play. First, Lee cast an actor and four dancers who could dance hip-hop well and had great voices. However, as I previously mentioned, Lee notes that the two initial workshops— at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange (Brooklyn, NY) from April 18 to 19, 2008 and at The Kitchen (New York, NY) from June 7, 2008—failed because the white audience members enjoyed the stereotypes and even danced and sang in accordance with the stereotypes of

African Americans on the stage at the end of the workshop. Because of this and the fact that many African Americans do indeed dance and sing well, it was hard for audience members to move beyond their typical expectations. Initially, Lee intended to have the audience rethink these stereotypes but, apparently, the patrons were entertained by the cultural prevalence of hip hop and consumed these images without giving them a second thought. The initial workshops were thus never considered successful (Lee "Talkback"). After this, Lee decided to change her approach and to set up theatrical devices to create discomfort in order to give the audience a critical distance from which to consider the message contained in the play. Consequently, she retained only one actor, Mikeah Ernest Jennings, from the original cast, and recast four more actors; Jordan Barbour, Prentice Onayemi, Douglas Scott Streater, and Amelia Workman, for the Wexner Center premiere.

Like Lee's other work, she cast the actors first, and then she let the actors discuss their racial experiences in order to develop the characters. The script for *The Shipment* was based on these discussions and her own research on African American experiences of stereotypes and racism. Lee reminisces about the process in an interview with *Gothamist*,

The way I work on all of my shows is that I cast the show before I have a script, and then I write parts for all the actors...I just write scenes and bring them in, and just bounce the scenes off them, and they'll try them out. My casts always have a lot of freedom of input into what the outcome is, and in this process in particular, the cast had a lot more say in the direction they wanted the show to go in. (Signore "Young Jean Lee")

This freedom of input and outcome continues throughout process. Watching the rehearsals for the play at the Wexner Center for the Arts, I was able to observe the collaborative process that took place in order to stage this work. Young Jean Lee did not hesitate to revise lines, scenes, and plots at any time during the rehearsals. As a

result of this revision, the actors had troubles with memorizing all the revised lines, and Lee asked the stage manager to prompt the actors with their lines. Sometimes, I could hear actors complain about the frequency of line changes during rehearsals. Later, I discovered that further revisions had been made to the play for the New York production which came two months later.

Two examples I witnessed in terms of script development focused on the beginning of the play. The first was the opening in which two actors dance to fast-paced music, in many different ways. In this instance, two dancers moved synchronically on a dark stage, while at another time, they had danced differently in an illuminated stage. The second follows the opening dance sequence. Lee asked an actor, Douglas Scott Streater, to go on a rant about American racism and African Americans' experiences in front of a video camera as long as he could. Later, Lee used some of his rant as jokes in the scene featuring a comedian. Lee took this material and shaped it into the play. The character, Douglas, tells sexual and racial jokes, commenting: "Now, I know some a you out there thinkin', 'Why do black comedians still do those, 'White people are like this, black people are like that' jokes?'"(2). While ranting, Douglas complains about the ridiculous nature of white people's alleged color-blindness:

White people always be wantin' PROOF a racism. And you people who consider yourselves to be "color-blind" are the worst mothafuckin' offenders. What is that shit? Color-blind. That's some bullshit right there. [Holds up his arm.] Does this look like a tan to you, mothafucka? (3)

Douglas' jokes mock racism in the USA. During one of talkback sessions at the Wexner Center, Lee clarified that she believed racism still has a strong presence in the USA. Young Jean Lee's collaborative process was crucial to developing her script. In what follows, I will examine how Lee presents and directs African American

experiences on the stage.

### **3.3 Race and Its Multi-Narrative Presence**

Before I discuss the play's structure, let us consider the title of the play. In the interview with John Del Signore, Young Jean Lee explains the title:

I actually got it from a song by the communist rap group called The Coup. They have a song called "The Shipment." I just thought it was very evocative; it was meant to be about a shipment of drugs, but for me it kind of evokes the idea of the African slave as a shipment in the way a box of books from Amazon is a shipment, and how that's sort of the root of all the problems. (Signore "Young")

As Lee says the play's title has double evocative meanings for her: both are commercial ventures, one delivers illegal drugs and the other traffics in human beings. This doubling connects to the double narrative structure of the play, which Lee calls "Stereotype" and "Naturalistic." If Young Jean Lee's introduction--a direct address to the audience--is counted as a part of the show, it could be said that the play consists of three parts: Prelude, Stereotype, and Naturalistic. I discuss 'Prelude' in a later section, and, here, I focus on providing an overall description of the structure of the two contrasting narratives: Stereotype and Naturalistic.

#### **3.3.1 Stereotype: Confronting the Minstrel Show**

Young Jean Lee describes the first half of the play in an interview with *Gothamist*, "The first half of the show is kind of structured like a minstrel show, and we didn't want anything to resemble anything that would actually be in a real minstrel show" (Signore "Young"). In his review "Shock Theatre," Kai Wright points out that this first half has the formula of nineteenth-century minstrels which include "a dance number, followed by a slapstick comedy bit and then a send-up of a popular drama –

all performed by buffoons wallowing in racist stereotypes." Thus the minstrel show as both a loaded historical touchstone and as a trope for Lee's play comprises the first half of the work.

Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy explain the minstrel show:

The Minstrel Show was divided into two parts. In the first, the performers were arranged in a semicircle, the tambourine player at one end and the "pair of bones" player at the other. These "end" men came to be called Tambo and Bones. The "middle" man, or interlocutor, served as master of ceremonies and exchanged jokes with the end men between musical numbers. The second part, or "olio," consisted of specialty acts and songs. In the Minstrel Show, whites acknowledged and appropriated the potential of African American music and dance, even as they exploited racial stereotypes. (336)

The Stereotype first half follows this historical description to some degree and although there is no 'interlocutor' per se, one can imagine that Young Jean Lee's presence serves this purpose. Music is central to minstrelsy and the first part of Lee's play features two actors who dance on stage to Semisonic's music, "Fascinating New Thing," and their extreme physicality suggests the stereotype of African Americans as excellent dancers.

This is followed by a stand-up comic, which makes the connection to the joke telling of traditional minstrel shows. Here the stand-up is a contemporary man, with a microphone who begins telling some shocking and off-color jokes that often reference black versus white stories. After this is a series of short scenes featuring Omar, a young black teenager who longs to be a rap star. This story leads to the inevitable drug dealing, a shooting, prison, and Omar visiting his grandmother's grave. While this may seem beyond the scope of a minstrel show, the rapid scene shifts, laced with Omar's rap music, and the implied connection between rap and minstrelsy are possible connections. The final part of Stereotype is a song. Here three performers line up at the front of the stage and sing unaccompanied in four-part



Fig 4. Scene 2 Dance. Prentice Onayemi (left) and Mikeah Ernest Jennings. Photo by Sara Krulwich. Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company.

harmony Modest Mouse's "Dark Center of the Universe."

This song references the minstrel tradition of the 'olio' that traditionally initiates the second part of the minstrel show, which, as Brockett describes above, consisted of specialty songs. This a cappella version of Modest Mouse's popular song was certainly a 'specialty' if only in terms of its virtuoso performance by the actors. The song ends the first half of Lee's play. Below I have charted the components of the narrative structure.

Table 2: Scene Descriptions of "Stereotype"

Scene	Descriptions	Songs
#1. Prelude	Young Jean Lee's Introduction: Showing her Asian body as playwright and director	
#2. Dance	Two African-American Actors dance.	Semisonic's "Fascinating New Thing"
#3. Rant	A typical black comedian's standup comedy with white versus black jokes.	
#4. Omar's Home	Mama wants Omar be a doctor, but Omar wants to be a rap star.	
#5. Street	This scene shows stereotypical streets in Black communities.	
#6. Selling Drugs for Money	Omar and Desmond sell drugs for money.	
#7. Selling Drugs	Desmond investigates Crackhead John and why people do not want his drugs.	
#8. Confrontatio n	Desmond and Mama shoot each other and die.	
#9. In Prison	Paul the Extreme's suggestion of rapping about killing white people.	
#10. Omar's Rap	Bill, the record company executive, promises to make Omar a star.	
#11. Video Ho	Omar meets Sashay, who is a homosexual hair stylist, and Video Ho, an African whore.	
#12. Grandma's Grave	At a cemetery, Omar hears his Grandma's voice from Heaven. Grandma's story about the origins of the Earth. Omar's miserable life even after his stardom.	
#13. Three Actors' Song	House Lights on and the three actors gaze toward the audience.	Modest Mouse's "Dark Center of the Universe"



### 3.3.3 Naturalism: Confronting a Genre's Racism

In a post-performance talk with the audience at the Wexner Center for the Arts Young Jean Lee described her rationale for writing the final half of the play. In discussions with the actors, she asked them what kind of play were they interested in performing. When they told her they were tired of only finding roles that were race-specific and they longed to perform a straight-forward naturalistic or realistic play. This led Lee to write the second half of *The Shipment* with this request in mind.

The second half begins with two stage hands who set up what is essentially a detailed living room in an upper middle class home. Here Thomas, the central character, hosts a cocktail party for friends and during the course of this scene we discover that it is his birthday party as well. Thomas and Omar – a new character by the same name as the main character in the previous scene but whose character is performed by a different actor – discuss diet and healthy food. This conversation creates an awkward tension between them because Omar appears to be obsessed with healthy food. When Desmond, Thomas' friend, arrives, Thomas goes upstairs with him to do drugs. In their absence, Thomasina and Michael arrive and meet Omar. They have a short chat with Omar, and then Thomas and Desmond return.

As all the characters gather, Thomas receives his guests with alcoholic drinks. However, a few minutes later, he starts to tease everyone, exposing everyone's – except Michael's who is not familiar to Thomas – nasty secrets and humiliating them. All of the party guests get upset and want to leave. Thomas apologizes to them and makes an excuse, saying that his behavior is due to his traumatic and lingering emotions toward his ex-girlfriend. While Michael goes outside to make some phone calls to get Thomas into a mental hospital, Thomas suggests that the others play the Library game, and everyone begins playing it. The play comes to a sudden end

while they play the game. They start to make some racial jokes about African Americans, and Omar expresses his discomfort against such harsh jokes, and Desmond reveals that they are acting non-African American characters by saying "I guess that would depend on what kind of a black person it was" (62).

Table 3: Scene Descriptions of "Naturalism"

Scene	Descriptions	Songs
#14. Diet	Thomas and Omar discuss about food and alcohol.	
#15. Desmond	Three guests chit-chat, and Thomas and Desmond go upstairs to do coke.	
#16. Thomasina and Michael	Omar and two new party guests, Thomasina and Michael, chit-chat about alcohol.	
#17. Thomas' Strange Actions	Thomas and Desmond come back. Thomas starts teasing everyone and tells them he poisoned them. He exits.	
#18. Thomas' excuse	Thomas says that he was lying about the poison. Omar gets upset and pushes Thomas. Michael goes out to make some phone calls to institutionalize Thomas.	
#19. Library Game	Everyone plays the Library Game. Final Line: "I guess that would depend on what kind of a black person it was" (62).	

With this overview of the play, I will now consider the language, acting styles and staging in *The Shipment*.



Fig 5. Scene Library Game. From left, Amelia Workman, Douglas Scott Streater, Okieriete Onodowan, Mikeah Ernest Jennings and Prentice Onayemi. Photo by Sara Krulwich. Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company.

### 3.4 Staging Race in America: "How Does Blackness Sound?"

Lee's productions often receive critical attention from major newspapers and magazines. With *The Shipment* and its highly charged racial content, Lee's work was reviewed and discussed extensively by a range of reviewers. In the following I will discuss the responses of three critics to the production: Hilton Als in *The New Yorker* ["By the Skin of Our Teeth"], Charles Isherwood ["Off-Center Refractions of African-American Worlds"] and Patrick Healy ["An Evening in Black and White From a Playwright Who is Neither"] in *The New York Times*.

All of these critics have comparable comments about Lee's work. Als describes her as a "provacateur" who does "whatever she can to get under our skin" (76). Isherwood similarly characterizes her work as "subversive, seriously funny"

and "provocative." [Lee's] theatrical provocations are politically charged and the "cultural images of black America are tweaked, pulled and twisted like Silly Putty in "The Shipment," a subversive, seriously funny new theater piece by the adventurous playwright Young Jean Lee at the Kitchen" (Isherwood "Off-Center").

The first part of the play called "Stereotype" is central to the critics' discussion and the section that causes the most print is the stand-up comic scene. Isherwood equates this comedian character, who is "trash-mouthed" to two well-known comedians who are known for their jokes of political satire and transgressive racial epithets, Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle (Isherwood "Off-Center"). Als compares this character, Douglas [Douglas Scott Streater], to Ivan Dixon who became an activist during the Civil Rights Movement and an ex-president of Negro Actors for Action in 1965. Streater's acting style involves "Holding his mike like a billy club, he's a sort of street comedian, or a talkative thug, which, in Lee's hands, comes down to the same thing" (Als 77). Als refers to one particular sequence in Douglas's monologue in which the comedian 'talks shit':

*DOUGLAS: Now, I know some a you thinkin', Why do black comedians still do those "White people are like this, black people are like that" jokes? Well, I'll tell you why. I don't mind to be offensive by sayin' this—but white people be evil. (Gives the audience a deadly serious look.) Naw, I'm just playin' wit' chall. Most white folks ain't evil—they just stupid. . . . You think I ENJOY talkin' 'bout race? I wanna talk about POOP, mothafucka!*

This part of the monologue is one of those squirming, uneasy moments. How can the audience respond? On the nights I saw the play in Columbus, there were multiple responses: some spectators laughed uncomfortably, others were silent, and some audience members turned their heads away from the performance space as if by not looking they would be able to block out the sound of the actor's voice.

Als continues his interpretation of this dramatic moment:

Lee wants to remind us that this is all part of black parlance: *Ain't this some shit?* But, more important, why do we listen? And what do we do with what we hear? Lee makes her audience walk a knife's edge of race and meaning. How does blackness sound? And how have we been conditioned to hear black speech? (Als 77)

Indeed, how does blackness sound? Lee gives us one possible answer in the following sequences, a series of short scenes (Scenes 4-12) that tell the story of Omar, the young boy who wants to grow up to be a hip hop star, but instead becomes a drug dealer. In this section Lee has the actors deliver their lines "as mechanically as possible, perhaps in an effort to separate meaning from content." This directorial tactic highlights these performances as deliberately 'staged' blackness, a strategy that stresses and accents the ways we have been acclimatized to hear black speech (Als 77). Isherwood calls this strategy a "deadpan surrealism" and he characterizes the spoken text as "weirdly innocuous tone, like that of a children's book, [which] is presumably Ms. Lee's mordant commentary on the simplicity of the dominant narratives of black urban dysfunction and/or achievement prevalent in the cultural atmosphere" ("Off-Center"). These stories are recycled and told so often that to speak them is to employ a kind over simple narrative to "the point of absurdity" (Als 77). Indeed Isherwood sees the "would-be rapper" as a kind of "loopy, arch cartoon" and the perpetuation of this image in mass media is mechanically constructed: "The machinery of the entertainment industry keeps performers boxed in categories that challenge neither white nor black audiences" (Isherwood "Off-Center").

Following this the houselights go up and several of the actors step center stage and look directly at the audience. This moment, which lasts for several minutes (but seems longer perhaps) causes discomfort. Lee explains her directorial intentions of the actors' audience directed gaze in an interview: "The audience is

laughing at these stereotypes, and suddenly they see the performers as people, not stereotypes, and the performers are looking at them" ( Signore" *Gothamist*). In other words, watching the stereotypes that the play delivers in the first part, is not the same as watching a fictional television show. This deliberate break with the character clichés abruptly shifts from the silent stare to an a cappella song, Modest Mouse's "Dark Center of the Universe," beautifully sung in multi-part harmony by the actors. Isherwood calls this moment "a palate cleanser" that leads us into the final half of the play: "A somewhat inscrutable song follows, performed a cappella by three of the cast members. But it provides a palate cleanser leading into the last and longest segment, on the surface a straight-up naturalistic comedy set at a cocktail party" ("Off-Center"). Lee explained in a post performance question and answer session with the audience that she used this song "strategically to make the audience pay attention to the play" (Lee "Talkback").

### **3.5 Naturalism as a Guessing Game: In the Library**

When the singing finishes, two white stagehands methodically set up the bare stage, transforming it into an upper middle class living room tastefully furnished. The actors re-enter this scenic space in new and very different stylish contemporary costumes, ready for a cocktail party. The actors begin to speak differently than in the previous scenes; their language is more natural, but also more formal, a great contrast to the off-kilter, 'deadpan', and 'innocuous' caricatured acting style in the earlier scenes. They mainly talk about their higher education at Stanford and Berkeley, their delicate diets and their worldly experiences. At a certain point, Thomasina invites the others at the party to play the Library Game. She describes it as follows:

[S]omeone picks a book off the shelf, shows us the cover, and tells us the

author's name and what kind of book it is – like a biography, a novel, etcetera. Then we each have to make up a sentence that sounds like it would be in that book and write it down. And then we all have to vote on which sentence we think is the actual one from the book. (60)

Following this explanation the guests join in and play the game. It is worth quoting the final lines of the game [and the play] to understand Lee's dramatic coup:

THOMAS

This book is called Black Magic, and it's a non-fiction book by Yvonne Patricia Chireau. There's a chapter in this book called "Negro Superstitions" [everyone reacts] which is made up a list of black superstitions. You guys have to come up with the first superstition in the list. Your sentence should begin, "The negro believes."

...

THOMAS

Is everyone done?

[He reads everyone's slips of paper.]

The negro believes that cod liver oil cures cancer.

[Everyone except OMAR laughs.]

The negro believes.

THOMASINA

Yes?

THOMAS

That's all it says, is "The Negro believes."

Huh.

The negro believes that if you wear a hat on Sunday, you've have no shoes come Tuesday.

The negro believes that a pumpkin in an advanced stage of ripeness has healing properties.

The negro believes that if a pig arrives on your doorstep, you'll be feelin' the haint till sunrise.

OMAR

You know what? I'm sorry, but I have to say that I'm really uncomfortable with all of this. I really don't think any of us would be doing this if there were a black person in the room.

[Pause.]

DESMOND

I guess that would depend on what kind of a black person it was.

The play's concluding line leads the audience to discover its secret, an act of dramatic

color blind casting, or racial cross-dressing. At this moment, the audience realizes that the black actors have been playing whiteness in the concluding 'naturalistic' scene. On the nights I witnessed the play, there were literally gasps amongst the spectators followed by a stunned silence. Hilton Als describes the impact of this final moment:

This is so ingenious a twist, such a radical bit of theatrical smoke and mirrors, that, in rethinking everything that has come before—all that "black" language, all those "black" situations—we are forced to confront our own preconceived notions of race. And to agree with Lee that we may not live long enough to purge ourselves of them. (Als 77)

This final line of *The Shipment* explodes the stereotypes of African Americans and pushes to the forefront the 'machinery of the entertainment industry' and the endless, replicating 'boxed in categories' that often go unquestioned.

### **3.6 Conclusion: "Dark Center of the Universe"**

Young Jean Lee forces us to question; she centers her play with black actors singing the line from Modest Mouse's song "I'm not the dark center of the universe like you thought." Lee describes her intention of this questioning to the audience in the following:

I got an e-mail from someone who basically wrote, 'Now in the age of Obama, do we really need to talk about this "race stuff" anymore?,' and that statement really blew me away," Ms. Lee said. "For centuries, from minstrel shows to stand-up comics, white Americans expected black people to entertain them," Ms. Lee said. But, continuing a little tongue in cheek, she added: "Now that the president is black, are some people thinking in the back of their minds, 'Oh, there's this black guy on television every day, why isn't he singing and dancing for me?'" (Healy "Evening")

She suggests that certain typed expectations to black people still exists and continues in the USA. Charles Isherwood explains that "Ms. Lee sets you thinking about how we unconsciously process experience – at the theater, or in life – through the filter of racial perspective, and how hard it can be to see the world truly in something other



than black and white" (Isherwood "Off-Center").

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

The meaning of race is both defined and contested throughout society, in an ongoing process in which definitions and categories are formed, transformed, demolished, and reformed. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant articulate this process as "both collective action and personal practice" in their groundbreaking book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994):

We define *racial formation* as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. Our attempt to elaborate a theory of racial formation will proceed in two steps. First, we argue that racial formation is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. Next we link racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled. Such an approach, we believe, can facilitate understanding of a whole range of contemporary controversies and dilemmas involving race, including the nature of racism, the relationship of race to other forms of differences, inequalities, and oppression such as sexism and nationalism, and the dilemmas of racial identity today. (55-56)

Young Jean Lee's focus on staging racial identity reflects this notion of 'collective action' as theatre making is a collaborative, collective activity. Her theatrical inventions demonstrate that that racial identity can be easily learned [as we see the African American actors performing whiteness in the final scene of *The Shipment* and the Korean American putting on the *han-bok* and joining her Asian sisters in their comic gestures of suicide]. Identity is also, as Omi and Winant make clear, an ongoing process, not a monolithic stable category. By using the process of theatre, Lee is able to expose that process, question it, and make the audiences who witness her work question themselves through a variety of theatrical strategies that I have

identified in the proceeding chapters.

During Young Jean Lee's residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts, the art center's website posted this statement about Lee's work: "Lee's provocative and hilariously satiric take on hot-button issues such as race and identity instigated spirited debate and established Lee's as a fresh, significant, and original presence."<sup>26</sup> The questions raised in this thesis, questions about Korean American identity and racial stereotypes, are a result of this 'significant and original presence'. Perhaps it is too early to tell or predict the significance of Lee's theatrical legacy, as there is less than a decade of work. Nevertheless, her 'original presence' has already made a considerable impact.

Lee's teacher in MFA program in playwriting at Brooklyn College, Mac Wellman equates contemporary provocateurs such as Susie Lori Parks, Anne Washburn, Sarah Ruhl, and Thomas Bradshaw to Young Jean Lee (Lockwood "Excellent"). All of these writers take a non-traditional approach to writing in which they question a range of topics, such as gender, racial identity, and the ways in which canonical texts can be transformed to make us consider contemporary concerns. It is interesting to note that Bradshaw was a fellow student during Lee's MFA program and he performed the role of Fu Manchu in her play, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, directed by her at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater in 2003. A future research possibility might be to compare Lee's work with Bradshaw's as he also questions racial stereotypes and identities in his works. In particular, Bradshaw creates unusual situations that explore internal racism produced by the ubiquity of whiteness in his play, *Purity*.

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<sup>26</sup> Refer to "World Premiere: Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, *THE SHIPMENT*," on the homepage of the Wexner Center for the Arts, 20 June 2009 <<http://wexarts.org/pa/index.php?eventid=3191>>.

Young Jean Lee continues to surprise. After *The Shipment* in 2008, Lee presented a new play, *Lear*. Its world premier was at Soho Repertory Theater in New York from January 7, 2010 - February 14, 2010. Lee's incomplete and unfinished dissertation topic at UC Berkeley was Shakespeare's *King Lear*. After a series of experimental works it may seem odd that she returns to her previous academic focus, which she abandoned in frustration when she left the PhD program. However, in true Lee fashion she converts *King Lear* into an unfamiliar work, one that examines the age-old story of the quintessential patriarch in a challenging theatrical way. I expect to conduct further research on her experimental trajectory with her so-called 'last' or 'impossible' plays.

One of the issues I have discussed throughout the chapters is Lee's use of discomfort and unease. I argue that such a theatrical strategy creates a critical distance that can possibly be compared to Korean American scholar Elaine H. Kim's articulation of 'a third space' which she explains is an area, or a gap in traditional binary thinking, thinking that is unfortunately dominant and pervasive in relation to race and identity. Kim calls for a profound and deep self-criticism, a rejection of the 'us and them' colonial mentality that places racial difference in neat and tidy boxes. Kim states: "A third space is needed. Tiger Woods has said, 'I don't consider myself a Great Black Hope. I'm just a golfer who happens to be black and Asian.' Why can't a person be both black and Asian? Or will we just let Nike decide what Tiger Woods is?" (77).

In concluding this thesis, it may be most fitting to end with Lee's words of discomfort: "My work is about struggling to achieve something in the face of failure and incompetence and not-knowing. The discomfort and awkwardness involved in

watching this struggle reflect the truth of my experience."<sup>27</sup> Lee's 'not-knowing' is her 'third space', a self-scrutiny that she demands of both herself and her audiences, one that understands the importance of being uncomfortable and taking the risks of witnessing one's own personal and creative struggles.

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<sup>27</sup> Refer to "World Premiere: Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, *THE SHIPMENT*." on the homepage of the Wexner Center for the Arts, 20 June 2009  
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