

Young Jean Lee's Performance of Whiteness:
Resisting Colorblind Through Theatrical Realism

Young Jean Lee is a recognized Korean American playwright leading the Young Jean Lee Theatre Company. Lee's eleven performed pieces range from a play on religion (*Church*, 2007), an Absurdist rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (*Lear*, 2010), a band performance on death (*We're Gonna Die*, 2011), to a six-women feminist performance (*Untitled Feminist Show*, 2011). Lee is often categorized as an avant-garde playwright who experiments with and introduces new forms of theatre, encouraging the audience to think outside the box. What makes Lee stand out from other experimental playwrights is her skillful exploration of racial issues in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006), *The Shipment* (2009), and *Straight White Men* (2014). It is thus not surprising that most scholarship centers on her presentations of race, but a majority of academic interest lies in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (*Songs*).

The original title for the play when it premiered was *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven: A Show About White People in Love*. Lee has also explained that "while it [is] about many things, it [is] *most of all* about white people" (Hatch 90). However, Lee's intention gets lost as analyses of the play focus on exploring Asian American identity, failing to recognize the significance of white performance that takes up a half of the plot. While most scholars acknowledge that the play has a parallel structure of Asian and white plots alternating on stage, they tend to merely mention the fact that the white plot exists. If they do engage this analysis further, they attempt to interpret the plot in relation to Asian American identity such as interpreting WHITE PERSON 1 as a projection of Asian American female identity (Hwang 132).

This paper aims to provide an alternative interpretation of *Songs* that incorporates both Asian and white plots through examining Lee's race plays altogether and creating a context for

Lee's double-plot structuring of *Songs*. The paper intends to reveal the significance of *Songs* in the history of Asian American theatre that has been overlooked since its premiere. The paper argues that through structurally and characterally stereotyping whiteness in nonwhite narratives, Lee dismantles standardization of whiteness as the norm of the society.

Colorblind and White as Normative

While colorblind casting is applied in contemporary theatre as a means to encourage diversity, controversy around the practice is ongoing. Harvey Young gives a summary of general misconception embedded in the notion of colorblind practices in his book *Theatre & Race* (2013):

The argument against colorblind casting practices [...] is anchored in the fact that most currently produced plays in major professional theatre houses, particularly in Europe and the United States, are by white male authors and often feature characters originally imagined (by the playwright) to be white and heterosexual. Although the colorblind push appears to be a move toward diversifying the theatre, it fails to accomplish this aim in a truly transformative way because it merely encourages a rethinking of how to present existing "white" plays rather than promoting the development of new plays by authors of color (58-59).

Young purports that inclusion of nonwhite Americans should be carried out by creating a new theatre environment, rather than assimilating the "others" to the dominant group of the society. Thus, while colorblind casting assumes that providing room for nonwhites in the realm of white Americans is a step towards equality, in effect, it operates against the original intention. Colorblind casting posits further problems as it is a policy applied merely to support equality. Carried out without regard to its connection to performative aspects, colorblind casting works more as a hindrance to the performances rather than giving power to them.

The notion of colorblind casting “assumes that color is the least consequential or least significant element when evaluated alongside age, physical ability, and gender and that, as a result, it can be ignored or overlooked” (Young 57) and that “a total ignorance of race is obvious, and the only, solution to the problems that an acute attention to race has brought our society” (Catanese 6). Insistence on ethnicity being a disregardable element of a person’s identity becomes especially problematic when it comes to theatre. In her book *The Problem of the Color(blind)*, Brandi Wilkins Catanese analyzes the symbolic significance the acting body possesses on stage where the visual elements give stronger impact on the viewers than they do in everyday life. Catanese acknowledges the complexity of racial presentations as racial stereotypes are indeed a social construction, but at the same time, the culture associated with them is so much intertwined with the stereotypes that they cannot be neatly set apart.

The reason for the belief that a simple ignorance of race is the solution for racism stems from the ideology that white stands for the normative. Normalization of whiteness leads white subjects to fail to see its workings (Warren 94). In other words, this ideology encourages the view that whiteness is a non-colored quality exempt from the discourse of race. John T. Warren argues against this assumption, stating that “whiteness, while a systemic, historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment—through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding scrutiny and detection” (92). Warren further points out that there are “limited amount of critical research by whiteness scholars on race and people in interaction” (92) and that he aims to account for such lack of discussion by uncovering the ideology working to standardize whiteness. Warren stresses the need to recognize whiteness as a performance, because refusal to acknowledge the systematic reproduction and solidification of whiteness as normative results in “whiteness maintain[ing] its

power and go[ing] unquestioned, uncritiqued, and unchallenged” (94). Thus, “performing whiteness” in this paper signifies the attempts made to defy standardization of whiteness through performance of white role with an awareness to its race and stereotyping of it. While “many nonwhite theatre artists have deep concerns about becoming signifiers of diversity” (Catanese 37), Young Jean Lee steps out front to discuss racism and diversity. She successfully performs whiteness in a racial context without giving too much focus to white characters.

Young Jean Lee and Performing Whiteness

Young Jean Lee has a rule of beginning playwriting by asking herself the question of what the last play in the world she wants to write about is (Jones 183). While the broad range of topics may make her plays seem randomly written, a consistent starting point of writing presents some consistency in her choice of subjects. While Lee experiments with different aesthetic strategies and topics in each of her works, a persistent interest on performing whiteness exists in her plays on race.

Songs opens with a sound of Lee filming herself being slapped over and over, followed by the actual video. The leading character of the play, KOREAN-AMERICAN, then appears on stage and gives a speech on a secret Asian plot against white Americans. The play develops by alternation of Asian and white plots. In the former, three KOREANS in traditional Korean costumes talk about sex, while their language is delivered mostly by exaggerated physical motions and gestures. In contrast, the latter consists of two WHITE PERSONS who give static performances where they either stand or sit still and talk about their relationship that basically works as a time killing strategy to cope with extreme boredom in life. The KOREAN-AMERICAN stands at an ambiguous position between the two plots throughout the performance, wanting to be admitted to the Asian community, but being constantly rejected from it.

The Shipment takes the form of minstrel show—more precisely, the second part of minstrel show called ‘olio’ (Scheytt). It is an all-black play that opens with a short dance subtly reminiscent of a minstrel show, followed by a STAND-UP COMEDIAN who talks about racism (mostly reproach against white Americans), then a short performance overemphasizing black stereotypes. The second part of the play is performed by the same actors who appeared in the first section, and is a farce set on a party at THOMAS’ house. As the excessively pretentious party goes on, each character gets to reveal hints of their psychological problems. While the party becomes a total mess from THOMAS’ outburst, all the characters come together in the last scene by playing a game about African Americans. While they enjoy the first sincere laugh since coming to the party, a twist comes on by OMAR’s line “I just don’t think we’d be doing this if there were a black person in the room” (53), revealing that they have been playing white roles throughout the farce.

At a glance, *Straight White Men* may look as a regular drama about families getting together for Christmas. However, the presence of STAGEHAND-IN-CHARGE in between the acts and before the show adds another layer to the play. Lee specifies this outer layer in the script notes that “the pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions are an important part of this play. They should create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men” (62). In addition, STAGEHAND-IN-CHARGE should be “a transgender or gender nonconforming,” with “an air of authority [or] a sense of agency and control over their role” (62). The inner layer revolves around the silent misery the eldest of the three brothers is going through, and the family members get into a fight by throwing sour remarks at each other.

As noted earlier, scholars have taken an interest in the ways meanings of race are performed in the above plays, but not many have given particular attention to how whiteness is presented in them. Karen Shimawaka decidedly states that *Songs* is “an ‘identity’ play—something

that will genuinely or accurately reveal some truth of Asian-American gendered experience” (89), and poses a brief question near the end of her article about the domination of white plot on stage in the last scene. Ilka Saal examines blackness in “On the Portability and Meanings of Blackness in Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment*” (2017), concluding the article by briefly mentioning the play’s relevance to whiteness. Likewise, Ryan Anthony Hatch analyzes Lee’s structuring of *Songs* and *The Shipment* in racial contexts in “First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce: On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee” (2013). Hatch acknowledges the fact that both plays concern whiteness in a significant degree of the plot, but he dismisses the need to look further into the white-performing in the second half of *The Shipment*, stating that “by design, [Part Two] is neither a full expression of Lee’s ‘talent,’ nor is it so conspicuously poor in quality that it slides into parody. In a rare move for Lee, Part Two *The Shipment* seems to quote a traditional dramatic form without subverting it” (106) and continues to talk about presentation of blackness in the play.

Such lack of attention on whiteness seems to derive from the fact that the critiques fail to see whiteness as being performed. In each play, the ethnicities of characters are presented in conjunction with the form of theatre stereotypically allotted to them: Asians with emphasis on dance movement and physical gesture in flamboyant traditional costume, African Americans with the form of minstrel show, and white Americans with realism relying much on verbal communication. Patricia Ybarra comments on whiteness and dramatic realism in *Young Jean Lee’s Cruel Dramaturgy* (2014):

It is no surprise, then, that [Lee] came to *Straight White Men* with a formal imperative – to explore realism and naturalism; as well a political project – to think about white male subjectivity as a culturally specific identity. As one of the actors in the Brown University production explained, *Straight White Men* explores “the topic of privilege and straight

white maleness with naturalism and realism, because that's kind of the straight white male of theater genres" (Zachary Segel; qtd. in Smyth) (513).

The close-connected dramatic realism and whiteness renders it possible that dismantling illusionistic aspects of realism would unstabilize whiteness as a default status. Lee uses Brechtian methods of creating critical distance so that, even though the play takes the form of realism, it is blatantly unnatural. The fact that an intentional poor quality performance is a more readily accepted explanation than a performance of theatrical whiteness for artificiality in realism reveals the depth of ideology currently working. For instance, Hatch explains the second half of *The Shipment* to be "where the measure in question is representational verism, the 'documentary' truthfulness associated with realism, *The Shipment* cannot but be construed as an allegory of representational upward mobility, the partial record of an oppressed people's slow, yet triumphant ascent of the mimetic hierarchy" (109).

The mix of representational and nonrepresentational forms in the plays, structuring the former as the interior or the latter as the exterior layer, is what dismantles the illusionistic aspect of realism. The three plays begin with non-realistic form and are followed by naturalistic style of representation. Although the realism portion may be illusionistic to some extent, the impact of the opening of the plays with nonrepresentational forms enables the realism segment to be Brechtian and thought-provoking (Hwang 135). In other words, the three plays are structured so that there is always an outer frame of realistic scenes. *Songs* begins with KOREAN-AMERICAN talking directly to the audience and letting them know that the show is going to be her storytelling. When the white characters' plot comes on stage, audience members would be aware that this is part of KOREAN-AMERICAN's composition. The white characters are never allowed to talk to the audience, and the last Asian scene is performed in front of the white plot while the white characters

freeze during their speech, as if robots operating by the engineer's manipulation. In both *The Shipment* and *Straight White Men*, actors playing stagehands appear in between the scenes and arrange the stage as part of the show. Added to the double-layer structure is that all three plays have race-conscious lines spoken by white characters that direct attention to whiteness as a race. Combined with the outer layer manipulated by nonwhite roles, the plays successfully portray whiteness as a race that becomes more recognizable by marginalization from other races.

Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven

Although there is some scholarship on performing whiteness in theatre, it is focused much on African American perspectives. There may be similarities between African American and Asian American views in the standpoint of ethnic minorities in America, but the context and background are vastly different to be discussed along the same vein. When it comes to the Asian American performance of whiteness, it is considered in terms of either forced production of a white narrative or stemming from a confused identity problem that ends up in a strong desire for inclusion in American culture ("A History" Lee). National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATC) and Ma-Yi Theater Company, recognized Asian American theatre companies in America, display eagerness for assimilation. NAATC makes it a rule to only produce renowned white plays in all-Asian cast members. Moreover, in the famous Asian American play *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang, Song Liling and Gallimard take turns performing Asian stereotypes, while whiteness is presented as the natural state of being. Another well-known play *Yankee Dawg You Die* by Philip Kan Gotanda focuses primarily on Asian American emotions against the dominant ethnic group. Such existing presentations make a contrast with the KOREAN-AMERICAN in *Songs* who does not aim for assimilation into the dominant culture as the ultimate solution to racial problems.

Songs is designed to arouse a sense of bewilderment and puzzlement in white American

audience members. The play abounds with exaggerated displays of Asian stereotypes that reach its peak in a consecutive suicide scene performed with Mariah Carey's song "All I Want for Christmas Is You" in the background. The scene is reflexive of the opening scene where ASIAN-AMERICAN delivers a monologue about Asians who are thought of as inferior and the audience members burst out laughing when she says that Koreans would crush white Americans. The suicide scene is designed to elicit a guilty laughter rather than an enjoyable one because the stereotypical presentations are playful mystifications that are in no way conforming to the existing racial hierarchy. Seunghyun Hwang analyzes the effect of performing exaggerated Asian stereotypes pointing out that "Lee utilizes incongruous laughter created by the vacillating uneasiness between violent images and comic elements throughout her work to call pervasive stereotypes into question. The play encourages a critical distance, allowing the audience to rethink the stereotypes of Asian women through these alternating experiences of discomfort" (135).

The puzzling presentation of narrative intensifies with the use of foreign language. Lee does not provide a subtitle for Asian performers who speak in their native language, and does not specify the nationality for KOREANS. In her script notes, Lee suggests that "ideally, one would speak Korean, one would speak Chinese, and one would speak Japanese" (76). The result is that the actors are actually communicating in different languages, each speaking a language of their own, while audience members are not provided with any information on what is going on, except some explicit gestures signifying sex. Thus, the opening statement of KOREAN-AMERICAN's declaration of Asian domination takes action throughout the performance until the ending scene of Asian plot, which includes the confident statement that if anyone is confused, it is because the play is too sophisticated for whites to comprehend.

Shimakawa gives a rundown of the white plot as "WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 appear to

be peculiarly afflicted with a bland sort of comfortably-bourgeois hipster anomie: nothing in particular is wrong, but nothing in particular is right, either. They cast about for reasons to break up, ways to stay together, but more than anything they spend their scenes trying to relieve the apparent boredom that has beset their relationship” (97). Completely unaffected by the preceding suicide scene, the white plot resumes for the last time. After long and protracted rants about their mental distress, the couple rejoices for coming up with a perfect and easy solution. As Lee’s original title of the play indicates, it ends with happy white people, while all the issues raised are overridden by white problems. Through the caricatural presentation of WHITE PERSONS submerged in privilege who make immoderate fuss about minor things while displaying total disinterest in others’ stories, Lee successfully associates whiteness with certain behaviors.

Conclusion and Extended Application of Performing Whiteness

Structurally subordinating white plots under nonwhite plots and enhancing theatricality in realism associated with the white plots, Lee efficiently brings whiteness to the front and uses it to portray racial issues better. Lee’s experiments are new especially in Asian American theatre context, but they are by no means intended to suggest a vision of nonwhite subversion. Instead, by identifying stereotypes and their artificiality for each race, Lee presents a more balanced portrayal of current social status regarding racial problems. Likewise, *Songs* ends with the white plot dominating the stage, and critical reception of the works reflects present status as well.

The 2017 production of an all-Asian cast *Songs* in Seoul, South Korea gives an excellent example of the active use of colorblind casting as a tool to disclose the delusion of colorblindness rather than as inevitable inclusion of actors of racial minority due to equality issues. WHITE PERSON 1 and 2 were changed to KOREAN PERSON PERFORMING WHITE PERSON 1 and 2. In the production, the two white persons were played by Korean actors, and both of them put on a wig

and sunglasses in the last scene to visualize that they are performing whiteness. It is a revelation that resonates with the last scene of *The Shipment* as audiences realize that they have been acting out whiteness so far. The experimentation with different racial casting options opens up possibilities for nonwhite American plays to cast nonwhite Americans in the role of white Americans, which both mirrors previous white-dominated theatre practices in reverse and creates a visualization of whiteness being performed.

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