

# Debunking the Diasporic “China Doll” with Satirical Disquietude: Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

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**Abstract:** Asian-American women are confronted with both homeland traditions and American culture, caught between two conflicting cultural identities in a third time-space. This article examines the strategies playwright Young Jean Lee uses to excogitate this dual identity within the context of diasporic disquietude, debunking the “china doll” stereotypical portrayal of diasporic Asian women.

**Keywords:** disquietude, diaspora, duality, race, gender, stereotypes, third time-space

**Résumé :** Les Asiatiques-Étatsuniennes sont confrontées à la fois aux traditions de leur pays d’origine et à la culture des États-Unis. Elles sont prises entre deux identités culturelles, dans un troisième espace-temps. L’article se penche sur les stratégies employées par la dramaturge Young Jean Lee pour penser la double identité au contexte de l’inquiétude diasporique; il déboulonne au passage le mythe de la « poupée chinoise », représentation stéréotypée des Asiatiques de la diaspora.

**Mots clés :** inquiétude, diaspora, dualité, race, sexe social, stéréotypes, troisième espace-temps

In the initial years of the twenty-first century, a number of Korean-American dramatists joined the contemporary theatre scene. This blooming period for Korean-American theatre produced numerous playwrights who dealt with Asian identity and racial/gender

issues and expanded the Korean-American artistic territory. One of the most successful of this group is Young Jean Lee, who, in her play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, negotiates between two cultures, the Asian culture of her parents and the American culture of her environment. Born in Korea in 1974, she immigrated to the United States with her parents at the age of two and can thus be classified as a 1.5 generation Asian-American.<sup>1</sup> Since moving to New York in 2002 and establishing her own theatre company, Lee has contributed her satirical, introspective views on a variety of identity issues to the American theatre.

One of Young Jean Lee's first plays addressed the issues faced by diasporic Asian women in general and Korean-American women in particular. More broad spectrum than the traditional use, the present-day use of the term "diaspora" (especially with reference to Koreans) involves "cross-border migration" (Choi 10). Within the migration process, the women carry the essence of the homeland tradition. To generalize, in an Asian-American family, the women maintain the culture of the home country in the second homeland. In public settings such as in school or the workplace, 1.5 and second-generation<sup>2</sup> women live as Americans with roots in American culture. However, in the private sphere, they live as Asians with memories of their Asian roots, often encouraged or forced by parents to maintain the traditional values of the Asian homeland.<sup>3</sup>

Between these two worlds, a borderline is established. Critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha defines this borderline as the third space, a space of hybridity. Bhabha argues that people deal with the dilemma of identity within "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" (2). In these transitional spaces, individuals engage with the "displacement of [the] domains" of different cultures and resolve their adjustment to their national and cultural identities (2). Through these "in-between" spaces, individuals can begin to negotiate the acceptance of aspects of identity stemming from the new society and move from the past to the present.

Paulina Aroch Fugellie summarizes Bhabha's ideas on "de-realization" as follows:

The author introduces the concept of “de-realization.” He then associates “de-realization” to “translatibility,” 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. (349)

Applying Bhabha’s thoughts to the diasporic experience, it is within this incubational or in-between space that Asian-Americans cope with and embrace their individual dilemma of being between two worlds. Within the in-between or third space, the meaning and symbols of Asian-American identity are not fixed or uniform. Anthropologist Smadar Lavie describes it as a “borderzone between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture” (17). By linking a time component to the third space, Lavie explores the concept of third time-space and explains that “[a]voiding the dual axes of migration between the distinct territorial entities, the hyphen becomes the third time-space” (16). Thus, the symbolic hyphen in the term Asian-American becomes a buffer between the two dissimilar cultural backgrounds. According to literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, the hyphenated time-space is an “active and intransitive” process (Trinh 161). This process includes “the consciousness of ‘root values’” and “a heightened awareness of the other ‘minority’ sensitivities” (Trinh 159). Thus, within that third time-space buffer zone, the process of Asian-American cultural identity includes the struggle to handle the conflicts of the original homeland culture along with the conflicts that come with being a member of a minority in the new homeland culture. In addition, Asian-American women are saddled with stereotypes stemming from both the original and the new homeland cultures. That is to say, identity issues connected to Asian-American women are built both from *inside* the Asian-specific community and from *outside* in the general culture.

In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Young Jean Lee addresses these conflicting identity issues in a uniquely satiric and disquieting dramatic work. In the words of *Washington Post* staff writer Peter Marks, the play is a “wildly sardonic performance piece . . . a

provocateur's funny, guns-blazing take on the utter banality of ethnic stereotypes and other cross-cultural outrages." Lee does not specify a particular target audience; however, in an article in the *Seattle Star*, her main audience was tagged in general as "[c]ollege-educated, city-dwelling, liberal . . . [u]sually white" (Willey). *New York Times* reporter Anita Gates notes Lee's technique of maintaining audience disquiet:

Just when the largely Caucasian audience thought it had caught up to Ms. Lee's off-and-on ironic point of view, she called our bluff again. Whites are bigoted, Asians are bigoted, everybody's bigoted, and isn't it great that it's all out in the open now, and we can laugh about it? But not really.

Through her sarcastic wit, Lee capitalizes on the reactions of the audience to twist the situation from uncomfortable to funny to uncomfortable to funny in order to make her points about the issues facing diasporic Asian-American women. By coupling analysis of the playtext with observations about the reactions of a typical audience (as captured in reviewer comments and on recordings of actual performances),<sup>4</sup> the present article analyses Lee's use of satire to portray a third time-space, where Asian and American cultures wrestle within the diasporic woman, and explores Lee's use of theatrical violence and disquietude as a critical distancing technique for debunking the pretty, fragile "china doll" stereotype imposed on Asian-American women by both mainstream American society and the Asian-American community. It also examines how Lee presents both the ethnic borderline between her Asian self and her American self and the gender-demarkation issue of being an American woman in relation to an American man.

### Diasporic Disquietude: Asian-Women Stereotypes

Beginning with her choice of the play's satirical title, Lee exposes her personal internal cultural conflict. At the time of my association with her in 2009, at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Young Jean Lee explained in an e-mail why she chose *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* as the title:

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. (qtd. in Lee, Interview)<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the title suggested to *Village Voice* theatre critic Alexis Soloski a “predictable, confessional, Korean-American identity play with a flowery Asian-sounding title.” However, the play is far from predictable. Lee’s design, including the title, emphasizes her embarrassment over Korean culture and about her own identity. The flowery title echoes the play’s stereotypical portrayals of shy and submissive Asian women and clearly foreshadows Lee’s representation of stereotypes, setting the stage for her efforts to demolish them. Given her abhorrence of the stereotypically flowery, her choice engages well with her “last play” theme. She asks herself, “What’s the last play in the world I would ever want to write?” In a *New Yorker* article, Lee explains, “I’ve found that the only way to make theatre that gets the audience thinking is when I feel uncomfortable making it” (qtd. in Als). In an interview with *American Theatre*, Lee stated that her aim was “to get in the way of the audience’s self-complacency, or to put a little piece of gravel into their brains that irritates them” (qtd. in Bent, “Young Jean”). This technique begins to disrupt the automatic and mechanical identification of a subject with reference to its stereotype. Lee’s theme of the “last play” connects her experiences to her work as she manoeuvres, through satire, within the uncomfortable and controversial sphere of racial and gender issues. Lee’s manner of making the audience laugh and then feel uncomfortable fits with the incongruity theory of laughter, where “[h]umor based on incongruities, or things that appear inappropriate for their context, is particularly well suited to reappraising negative situations from different, less threatening perspectives” (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 349). In an article for the *Brooklyn Rail*, Eliza Bent describes Lee as a dramatist who is “a queen of unease” and “a distressingly self-aware writer” (“Church”). Lee’s use of satire is reminiscent of the work of Italian satirist Dario Fo, who was described by *New York Times* columnist Celestine Bohlen as “an iconoclastic Italian playwright-performer known for mixing wacky social farce with sharp political satire.” Antonio Scuderi suggests that Fo “expounds on the subversive nature of satire and how it is a tool for turning a situation on its head, revealing infamy and hypocrisy,

and getting to the truth" (15). Similarly, Young Jean Lee utilizes the "subversive nature of satire" in her method of disquietude onstage as the play waffles back and forth between violence and frivolity, exposing the truth of the effect of the conflict in diasporic cultures.

### Duality in Structure

The overriding theme guiding the play is duality within the third time-space. Lee uses it in the play's structure to elicit the disquietude she wishes to instil in the audience. Her use of violence contrasted with humour creates an imbalance, as do the seemingly unconnected stories of the group of Asian women and the Caucasian couple.

The play's full title, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven, A Show about White People in Love*, sets up a dual narrative structure that is divided between Asian and white characters, with no obvious connection between them. Among the Asian characters, there are four Asian women, one who is specifically Korean-American, and Young Jean Lee herself, who appears in an opening-scene film. The white characters are a man and a woman, who appear to be a couple. The two narratives do not seem to fit together, creating a "third time-space" as the play swings back and forth between the two racial cultures. Juxtaposed with the Korean story, the white couple periodically appears and quarrels about their ongoing but troubled relationship. At first, they seem to be out of place and merely visitors from a different story. Thus, two separate narratives, which seem to have a connection only in the title, are put in place.

Violence contrasted with absurdity first appears in the opening few minutes of the play, in a video clip, in which Young Jean Lee's face is hit as she weeps audibly. The sound of weeping is intermingled with a lyrical traditional love song, sung in Korean. Following the video, the character "Korean-American" appears onstage and speaks about racism and minority issues in the United States (39). She is joined by three characters designated "Korean 1," "Korean 2," and "Korean 3," who at first dance playfully and then begin to punch and kick Korean-American, as if to call into question the racism she had spoken about in America (41-3). Through a combination of Korean and pantomime, the three Koreans tell

the story of a teacher's rape of a school girl with her father's permission and recount episodes of sexual abuse, which are then countered by Korean-American's story, taken from her experience of Korean culture: her grandmother's dying wish that Korean women should give up their pride and be obedient to men. The matching of contradictions continues throughout the play. As Soloski points out in his review, "Lee is a queen of unease; chuckles never come unaccompanied by squirms."

Lee deliberately provokes the audience into experiencing a feeling of uneasiness: watching *Songs* is not comfortable. This discomfort is a useful theatrical device that allows the audience to maintain their critical distance as the play unfolds. For example, as Korean-American ends her monologue about living in American society with threatening words such as "we will crush you," she lifts her arm in a raised fist reminiscent of the Black Power salute and yells, "Let the Korean dancing begin!" (Lee 41). Then the three Korean women join her onstage and dance, creating an atmosphere of merriment (41). However, moments later, the dance begins to incorporate erratic movements and the pulling of hair, changing the scene into something resembling a catfight. The three Koreans surround Korean-American, implying that Korean-American cannot escape from her parents' culture. What begins as a playful, comic dance is transformed into a vengeful mob beating. This pattern of pulling the audience into the fun and then using abrupt, violent manoeuvres to repulse them continues throughout the play with the intention of making the audience question the levity that accompanies stereotyping.

### Duality in Identity

Lee also presents layers of duality in the cultural, racial, and gender identities with which the characters struggle in the hyphen-space battleground. She uses her characters to display her awareness of her own confining and conflicted identity and her struggles with sensitive issues, such as Asian identity in politics and gender inequality in a society dominated by white males. Soloski sums up: "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."

The duality of Asian-American identity is rooted in expectations or stereotypes, and Lee attempts to disrupt and destroy these stereotypes through her characters' incongruent actions. Establishing the context of Asian identity gives the audience a starting point for Lee's provoking efforts. On entering the performance space, the audience is enveloped in a stereotypical layer of Asian identity, as they pass through "a quasi-Korean-Buddhist temple with a large, multipaneled Korean dragon mural painted on the back" (35). This exotic and mysterious entranceway is intended to produce a sense of comfort in the audience, providing an image they consider authentically Asian. The set consists of an Asian-style wooden room lit by fluorescent lights, which feels like "an elegant, ascetic playroom" (Cote). The entrance and set construct a spatial, visual image of a Korean meditation temple. Once the audience is seated, the house goes dark.

In the opening scene, Lee symbolizes the social stereotypes of submissiveness and self-hatred in Asian-American identity. Out of the darkness, a pre-recorded conversation between playwright and director Young Jean Lee and her three male friends permeates the theatre, as they talk and laugh about making a face-hitting video (36–9). This short, light conversation in the dark is followed by a shocking video that aims to stir the audience. The background music, sung by a male narrator, comes from the Korean traditional story of "Chunhyang." In the original story, a wealthy upper-class man falls in love with Chunhyang, a lower-class woman, and they are secretly married. In a traditional telling of the story, a narrator relates the love conversation between the couple on their wedding night in the song Lee has chosen to accompany her video violence. This song features a quick tempo and a palpably cheerful mood, with romantic lyrics, sung in Korean, such as "Come and let's play piggyback riding. Love, love, love, my love. It is love, my love. It is my love. Definitely, my love."<sup>6</sup>

Against these touching lyrics and upbeat music, the video projects a shocking close-up of Young Jean Lee's pummelled face. It is unlikely that non-Korean speakers would understand the deeper significance of the contrast between the song and the violence; however, even for someone who does not understand the lyrics, Lee's slapped face and the cheerful music create an off-kilter feeling of uneasiness. This particular theatrical moment displays Lee's ability to provide a kind of intercultural double-speak: the discomfort that comes from experiencing simultaneously the violence of



the repeated slaps mixed with the sound of her weeping juxtaposed with the traditional *Pansori* music.<sup>7</sup>

Lee references another key *Pansori* text in the hitting scene, “Song of Ten Strokes,” in which Chunhyang is savagely beaten when she aggressively resists the local mayor’s demands for sexual favours. This violent scene emphasizes Chunhyang’s strong will to preserve her chastity, in the name of the moral duty she owes to her husband and to his family name, as dictated by traditional Korean society. Moreover, the scene contains a moral lesson, for every woman, that she should stay faithful to her husband. Chunhyang’s resistance and the violence perpetrated on her body can be linked to the hitting scene in *Songs*, as a moral lesson for Korean-American women to honour the beauty of traditional Korean culture.

The hitting scene demonstrates staging strategies that Lee employs to layer her playtext 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 of the character Young Jean with tears trickling down her cheeks and simultaneously listens to two sounds—song and slap. This synesthetic combination of sound and sight creates an incongruous moment. While the traditional male narrator presents an auditory love theme, the modern woman is visually beaten, as the sound of the slaps ironically match the rhythmic beats of the traditional *Pansori* drum. The hitting sequence in *Songs* can 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-American writers and artists and a central concern in Lee’s play. Indeed, she continues her examination of her Korean heritage through the character Korean-American, Lee’s autobiographical stand-in, in a monologue in which she describes what it feels like growing up in the United States with Korean parents. Korean-American describes herself as “slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents” (39) and her parents as “retarded monkeys” (40). In an article in *Women and Performance*, Karen Shimakawa interprets Korean-American’s comments as a

“horrific (if hilarious) monologue, filled with self-loathing” (90). This issue of self-loathing emerges in Lee’s choice of another love song, “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” sung by the American singer Mariah Carey, which is coupled with a suicide scene. Carey’s voice joyfully echoes throughout the theatre as the three Korean women appear, dressed in traditional Korean *hanboks*, and begin scuttling like crabs and flapping their skirts. Significantly, Korean-American changes from her casual western outfit into a *hanbok* and joins the other women, dancing together in time to the beat of the love song.

The light-heartedness of the dance ceases as the four women move to the upper-left corner of the stage and then take turns walking into the centre-stage spotlight. One by one, they mime eleven suicidal gestures with extreme exaggeration. While the women perform some of these mimed, Korean, traditional-method suicides, such as hara-kiri, self-immolation, and hanging, they also display bizarre, often grotesque, manners of suicide, including stabbing the vagina with a knife, sticking a chopstick in the eye, cutting off fingers and tongue with a pair of scissors, and cutting a breast with a knife.

The crab-like movements and overblown, violent physical gestures, coupled with elements of comic slapstick, dehumanize the women and make them seem animal-like, inducing absent-minded audience laughter. The humour, however, is combined with violence, and the combination generates discomfort, as the Asian women’s committing suicide—a representation of the self-loathing and self-hatred that in Lee’s view is part of Asian-American women’s identity—is disturbing. Lee links this identity, with its implications of being degraded or discarded, to laughter-inducing vaudeville effects, in order to satirize, for her audience, the societal issue of Asian-American identity. Henri Bergson describes this use of laughter for satirical purposes when he connects laughter to reflections on society:

To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification. (12)

Deeply rooted in society, laughter happens mechanically, absent-mindedly, automatically (Bergson 15). When this absent-mindedness occurs in relation to stereotypes of race and gender, the laughter humiliates and excludes a certain group of people. Lee's way of using satiric scenes prevents the audience from absent-mindedly activating automatic laughter and leads to reflective laughter and discomfort. Her stage method is similar to that of Brecht's Epic Theatre: the alienation effect of that laughter discomforted by representations of verbal and physical violence prevents the audience from laughing with Bergson's "mechanical action" or "automatism" (12, 13), which is emotionless, free from any sympathy with the objectified characters or stereotyped group of people. Just as for Brecht or Bergson, satire with laughter becomes, for Lee, a tool to reflect upon reality. Deeply connected to society, it becomes a bump on the way, a blockage for the audience's mindless consumption of stereotypes. The main point of Lee's theatrical representation is to lead the audience to reconsider American society and reflect on the playwright's fundamental thoughts about the heterotopy of Asian-American women's identity.

The audiences that attend performances of *Songs* are often mixed in their reactions to the chorus of the comic suicides—some laugh and smile, while others show discomfort with the violence. This is the reaction that Lee is looking for—a mixed one, a jarring bump for the stereotype to encounter. In a review on *Off Off Online*, Mitch Montgomery remarks that "the juxtaposition of culture and identity is so vivid that audiences can't help but laugh." The violence of the scene is designed to emphasize dramatically how the type-casting of Asian women as self-sacrificing and self-harm-inflicting oppresses all Asian women in society.

All people harbour unconscious biases and stereotype others (Paul). Lee aims to "challenge theatergoers to overcome their own racial biases (conscious and otherwise)" (Healy). In general, stereotypes oversimplify impressions of a certain group of people on the basis of historical assumptions. The suicide scene in Lee's play is an instance of such stereotyping. Historically, suicide was often the only solution available to women in Korea to escape "dishonour." Upper-class women were given a decorated silver knife to commit suicide with if they lost their chastity or virginity. In an article in *Human Studies*, Young-Hee Shim explains how this phenomenon lingers in modern Korean society:

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)

Such gender stereotypes of Asian women as self-sacrificing and silent appear not only within Korean/Asian society, but also in European/American arts and theatre. For example, Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (1903) presents an Asian woman who commits suicide for the sake of a man's happiness. The stereotype Puccini relied on was widely accepted, at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, as a true image of the "Exotic East," and the image still survives in some parts of contemporary American society. Portrayals of Asian women sacrificing themselves dominate much Asian narrative, reinforcing the stereotype of self-sacrifice through repeated performances. In "Staging Violence against Women," Lesley Ferris underscores the force of theatrical repetition, "the 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" (32). Ferris's point about the economic underpinnings of theatrical repetition is telling in relation to mainstream works that include significant Asian female roles, such as *Madame Butterfly*, which ranks first on the list of most performed operas in North America ("Most Frequently"). So, as *Madame Butterfly* is viewed again and again and again, the narrative of the submissive and self-sacrificing Asian woman becomes more and more familiar to audiences, and the gender and ethnic stereotype it promotes becomes more natural-seeming. It is this stereotype, reinforced by the longevity of popular theatrical works, that the *Songs* audience brings with them as they enter the theatre. It is also the stereotype that Young Jean Lee places in the centre of her target.

In *Songs*, Lee capitalizes on this stereotype of self-sacrificing/self-harming women to emphasize the cultural expectations imposed on Asian-American women to their detriment. Her strategic choice of music and the connotations of the songs support this emphasis and

continue her strategy of duality. While some musical selections come from pop culture (Mariah Carey) or cultural heritage (*Pansori*), Korean 3 sings an original song. The character says that she learned it from her grandmother. The source is incongruous with the lyrics:

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. (45)

The sweetly remembered grandma's lyrics reek of horrifyingly brutal and bloody self-inflicted violence. The fact that the grandmother taught this song to her granddaughter is immensely troubling but recalls a legacy of such familial violence in Asian culture—for example, the binding of girls' feet in China, a practice now abandoned. The song evokes the ways in which one generation passes on to the next generation a practice of using violence to control and manage women. It is this inheritance the Asian-American woman must grapple with as part of her dual identity.

### **Pan-ethnicity in Asian-American Identity**

Young Jean Lee expands her characters' ethnicity into the area of pan-ethnicity, Pan-Asian American ethnicity, in particular. Through this pan-ethnicity, Lee portrays the theme of self-loathing and self-hatred, not only for women in America of Korean heritage, but also for women of Asian heritage generally. Yen Le Espiritu explains pan-ethnicity as "the generalization of solidarity among ethnic sub-groups" (6) and specifies, "Pan-Asian American ethnicity is the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among several ethnic and immigrant groups of Asian ancestry" (14). As the audience settles into watching a play about Korean women, Lee exploits textual effects to complicate and add depth to our understanding of the Asian-American identity, possibly

creating confusion for some of the audience as they hear different Asian languages being spoken—Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, according to the stage directions (34). The introduction of multilingual conversation into the dialogue expands each character's ethnicity. Lee's casting note should be read in whole to clearly understand this over-layering:

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 an American accent. When not speaking English, Koreans 1, 2 and 3 speak their native languages, whatever those 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, which is reflected in the stage directions. (34)

With the introduction of multiple languages into the dialogue, the Korean characters become Japanese, Korean, Chinese, any Asian ethnicity, or Asian hyphenated-American. Even though the characters' names are specifically Korean, the casting note expands the ethnic boundary from Korean women to Asian women. This emphasizes the commonality of the experiences that Asians share beyond the boundaries of cultural and linguistic differences. For this reason, the playwright frequently refers to the characters Korean 1, 2, and 3 as Asians.

Once the multiple Asian identities are established, Lee erases the linguistic differences in the Dong-Dong scene. In this scene, Korean-American is transformed and theatrically *born* by sliding on the floor through the legs of Korean 3. Korean-American, now referred to as Dong-Dong, emerges wearing a traditional Korean man's jacket and groom's wedding hat. The stage direction describes the hat as having "*flaps on the sides that look like Mickey Mouse ears*" (49), predicting the comic effect the hat may have on the audience. In addition to the wardrobe change, all characters switch to speaking English for the duration of the play. This scene represents a birth into Korean-American identity and a marriage of the two cultures.

After this optimistic union, Lee directly addresses the stereotype of sameness by challenging the "all Asians look alike" mentality. To set up the stereotype of Asian sameness, Lee changes their

names in the following note: “[T]he Koreans address each other by constantly changing fake-Asian names, so there is no use trying to keep track” (43). The new nonsense names (Chu-Chu, So-So, and Dong-Dong) sound vaguely Asian and are reminiscent of the names given to stock Chinese characters in plays of the late nineteenth century, like Washee Washee from Joaquin Miller’s *The Danites* (1881) (Williams 103). The use of fake names clouds the identities of Lee’s characters, a theatrical technique reminiscent of *The Last Performance* (1998), by avant-garde artist Jérôme Bel. In *The Last Performance*, four performers continuously change and exchange their identities through name changes. In adopting this approach, Bel was preoccupied with challenging dominant styles of representation “complicit in reinforcing ideological power structures of subjugation and oppression” (Murray and Keefe 88). Lee’s use of name changing and her overall approach to performance seem to have a similar goal.

As the nonsense names in the play invoke the stereotype of Asian sameness, Asians and Asian-Americans—regardless of individual differences in ethnicity, language, or national heritage, or even, on a personal level, in facial features and body types—are subjected to a totalizing discourse that dehumanizes. Lee uses the multilingual dialogue and fake-name scenes to rouse the audience from passive consumption on the sidelines in relation to Asian-American social issues and directs them toward becoming active viewers and active thinkers.

### Duality in Racial Power Identity

Asian-American women are faced with national- and cultural-identity issues stemming from the double standards and heterotopic stereotypes of ethnicity and gender in both Asian culture and American society. They are often regarded as Asian women rather than American women and as members of a minority group subject to social expectations and prejudices. In *Songs*, Young Jean Lee voices her feelings of minority rage through the opening monologue, as the character Korean-American 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” (41). The monologue begins with the character’s mocking white people. She claims that white

people fear the power of minorities, so they type-cast minority groups using racist stereotypes—Koreans, she says, are supposed to have undesirable characteristics like wiliness. Added to this comment on race, she outlandishly declares, “[W]e will crush you. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke” (41). Against this rage, the actor’s style of delivery in this opening monologue, which is high-pitched, with exaggerated facial expressions, actually leads the audience to break into laughter. When Lee’s Korean-American speaks of racial experiences and makes fun of present-day racism, this too makes the audience laugh. In this case, though, the humour arises from an interplay between feelings of ease and unease in regards to racial topics. Such coexistence of contrasting un/ease is a part of Lee’s hyperbolic strategy to deconstruct stereotypes.

Her strategy becomes more emphatic in the collective recitation of the four Asian-heritage characters. These Asian characters, including Korean-American, speak in the same breath, in unison, in order to stress a sense of collective power: “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” (66). Through her characters’ last appearance and united declaration that they are a white guy, Lee comments on the shared experience of women of Asian heritage, stereotyped as self-harming and submissive and looked down upon as inferior (being Asians and women) to white men in US society. Their declaration directs attention to the stereotype and to the paradox that only when they are considered equal to white men can the effects of the stereotype of the minority or female be erased. In other words, Asian heritage women cannot simply toss off and become fully free from the projected expectations and stereotypes through which society consciously and unconsciously defines them unless they achieve a social status equal to that of white men. Since all the actors speak the united speech with a deadpan face, the audience does not necessarily laugh at the declaration. Instead of eliciting laughter with the scene, Lee effects a Brechtian alienation that leads the audience to rethink and reconsider their perceptions and their expectations of the Asian-heritage body in American society.



In terms of the play's structure, this final group recitation parallels Korean-American's first monologue. In both speeches, all of the actors look straight ahead, addressing the audience and, in this way, emphasizing the content of their speech. Yet, although the style of the two scenes is similar, the moods are quite different. In the first monologue, the actor makes exaggerated facial expressions in a bright spotlight; in the group recitation, the actors' faces are deadpan and the spotlights are dim, to emphasize their hidden feelings toward white patriarchal society. Likewise, in the first monologue, Korean-American clarifies the purpose of the play as that of crushing white people, using a style that produces a comic effect; in the final collective recitation, the Asians state, with a patronizing air, that they love white patriarchy and that they believe themselves to be white.

On the surface, these speeches are in contrast with each other; yet they both demand a closer examination of society. In a white-dominant, patriarchal society, people are educated, through social systems such as educational institutions and mass media, to adopt a certain worldview and are strongly influenced by cultural ideology. They are likewise contaminated by certain social codes in the name of common sense. It is plausible that, as long as Asian-American women are educated to hold these same views of patriarchal society, it will be difficult for them to gain social power that is equal to that of white men. Thus, the Asian women in *Songs* cannot claim that they are empowered *Asian women* but rather declare their power—in tune with education in white, patriarchal society—as “white guys.”

### Duality in Gender Power Identity

One possible reading of the play's use of the device of parallel narratives is that the presentation of two racial groups stages two different racial stereotypes, the Asian women and the white couple. However, another reading, one that better matches the tone of Lee's other plays, is that the parallel narratives serve as a vehicle to put separate and equal focus on the dual identities in terms of both race and gender. While the Korean/Asian group represents Asian-American women's ethnic identity, the white woman in the other narrative reveals Asian-American women's female-gender identity as being separate from their ethnicity. Thus, Asian-American women's identity issues are generated both by their being Korean/Asian and by their being American women.

Because Asians and women are categorized in biologically binary and prejudiced ways, Asian-American women cannot be a dominant group in society: they have to choose an alternative identity. Lee's characters, in the last collective recitation, choose the identity of a white macho man: "People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really I'm just a fucking white guy" (82). This choice supports the claim from the first monologue, "I can promise you one thing, which is that *we* will crush you" (41). The method Lee designs to crush white male supremacy is to assume that group's identity. However, the words she chooses do not sound natural coming from the Asian female actors, first, because they are not physically white, and second, because the tone does not fit the silent, subservient Asian-woman stereotype that society consciously or unconsciously supports.

Through the white couple, Lee strips away the racial element and shows the gender aspect of the power struggle faced by Asian-American women. The man and woman perform a kind of soap-opera love story that turns strange and absurd. In their first appearance, the woman announces to her boyfriend her intention to move on because he has "subpar intelligence" (52) and is lower than she is in the social scale: "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" (52). Thus, at the outset, she holds the power in the relationship. But a shift occurs in that gender-based allocation of power as the man starts stealing the woman's pens. The pen, a phallic symbol, represents power in their love relationship. When the woman insists that her boyfriend stop stealing her pens, she is really struggling against a shift in power: "My pens. You have to stop stealing my pens. I like to use these very expensive roller-ball 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" (63). Moreover, implicit in the woman's complaint to her boyfriend is the understanding that stealing power, even in the name of love, renders their relationship unfair. With this interaction, Lee shows in a general sense that, in a strong patriarchal society, women's power is frequently stolen by men, leaving them powerless and vulnerable.

### Debunking the “China Doll”

In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Young Jean Lee enacts stereotypes that hamper Asian-American women in a sensational pattern of struggle and violence. One such stereotype is that of the china doll, a fragile doll made of glazed porcelain, which implicates Asian women merely as breakable objects. Lee’s play illustrates how American society is plagued by 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, Lee feels herself trapped between Asian traditions and contemporary American society. For Lee, the Asian woman’s body is fixed in accordance with certain types. Likewise, the play views the stereotypes Asian women are forced to adhere to as fixed positions, even though the women believe themselves to be empowered and strong individuals. The social ideology of the Asian woman does not allow her to take on a new, powerful identity. Frequently, stereotypes from the dominant social ideologies prevent her from having political power and a strong voice.

In *Songs*, Lee spotlights the negativity of type-casting Asian women; this is manifested in the series of comic scenes, which overtly make fun of Asian-women stereotypes by showing how ridiculous they are. Simultaneously, the production explores various violent manoeuvres, from face slapping to comic Asian suicide, by situating them within original modes of comic performance. Lee’s play presents a radical staging, one that aggressively and with outlandish humour explores the troubling position of Asian women. She does not limit herself to a single perspective but explores her issue from both inside and outside Korean/Asian culture because Korean/Asian-Americans must deal with the boundary between traditional Korean/Asian-heritage *roots* and a contemporary, American, tangible *home*. The identity issues of in-between-ness are evident in the grandmother’s story scene. The Korean grandmother imparts her dying wish to Korean-American, calling her Myung Bean, a name ironically similar in sound to the playwright’s own name. The grandmother, with her Korean accent, even asks Myung Bean, “Why you ask your friend hit you in face? And then make video?” (55). This seems to suggest that the character Korean-American is Young Jean Lee herself. So, the grandmother’s dying wish can be interpreted as representing Lee’s feelings about her Korean heritage and traditional influences.

The grandmother says, “[G]ive up your pride, be humble. Jeejus will help you. This is my dying wish” (56). Shimakawa suggests that the grandmother’s story helps define Korean-American female identity in that “it 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” (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 summary, Lee utilizes incongruous laughter created by 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 stereotypes of Asian women through these alternating experiences of discomfort (the slapped face of Young Jean Lee, the grandmother’s wish, the suicide mimes) and clowning (Korean-American’s birth with Mickey Mouse ears, Korean women’s crab-scuttling dance in *hanboks*). By placing these stereotypes literally on centre stage, Young Jean Lee brings awareness and challenges the ways in which they are recycled and replayed. Using such effective and powerful strategies to debunk the “china doll,” she forces the audience to rethink the cultural stereotypes applied to Asian-American women.

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### Notes

- 1 “1.5 generation” immigrants immigrated at an early age and accept the new country as homeland.
- 2 Second-generation immigrants are those born in the new country after the immigration of the parents. 1.5 generation and second-generation immigrants often experience cultural identity issues because their parents tend to adhere to the original culture, while they tend to feel closer to the new culture.
- 3 Author Amy Tan and comedian Margaret Cho also treat this topic.

- 4 Most audience reactions mentioned in this article are viewable on the DVD recording of a performance at the HERE Arts Center in New York in 2006.
- 5 From the unpublished e-mail correspondence and a personal interview between the author of this article and Young Jean Lee during rehearsals for *The Shipment* at the Wexner Center for the Arts at the Ohio State University.
- 6 Translated from the original Korean by the author.
- 7 *Pansori* is a genre of traditional Korean music that tells a themed story. A singer narrates the story using songs, narration, and body language and is accompanied by a drummer.

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