

Young Jean Lee's Cruel Dramaturgy

PATRICIA YBARRA

- ED What about all that community organizing you used to do, Matt? What happened with that?
- MATT Nothing. Look, I don't want anything more than I have now, which is the ability to be useful to Dad. Why do you guys have such a problem with that?
- ED It's ridiculous to think that this is the best you can get.

—Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men*

Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* began, as many of her others projects did, as “the last show [she] would ever want to make” (*Young Jean Lee's Theater Company*). Her plays about U.S. racism and sexism, which have included plays about Asian-American identity (*Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven*, 2006), African-American identity (*The Shipment*, 2009), and feminism (*Untitled Feminist Show*, 2012) interrogate the supposed universality of straight-white-male experience as a societal and dramaturgical norm, using formal innovation to make a political critique. It is no surprise, then, that she 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).

I read this comment analogically and historically. In the first instance, the comment suggests that realism and naturalism are the “straight white male of theater genres” because, within U.S. mainstream theatre, these styles exist as a supposed universal norm against which all others are measured, in the same way that straight white men still stand in as a universal subject, effectively marking persons of different races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities as divergent from that norm. In the second instance, I read the comment historically, claiming, as Raymond Williams has suggested, that realism

and naturalism, by erasing the theatrical construction of the worlds they represent, have effectively naturalized, as universal, the conflicts and concerns of (middle- and upper-class) straight white men (and sometimes women); in this way, they keep us “inside the ideology of the middle-class world [they] represent(s)” (qtd. in Zarilli et al. 389). Stylistically, this operation depends upon a mode of theatrical representation that “purports to be clinically life-like, providing a transparent window on events” and effectively hiding its “craft-wise operations” by employing verisimilitude in acting style, scenery, costumes, and props (Williams; qtd. in Zarilli et al. 389). Structurally, this operation depends upon the “well-made” three act play, whose characters’ fates are developed by cause-and-effect relations between the actions of individual humans and the consequences of those actions. These culminate in conflict resolution and denouement in the final act (Zarilli et al.). Historically, naturalism went farther than realism in its biological determinism, but the two shared many theatrical and dramaturgical tactics, so for my purposes, they can be taken as equivalent. Both realism and naturalism attempt to obfuscate or de-emphasize theatre’s theatricality. Adherents of these styles defined their work against nineteenth-century forms, such as the melodrama. Today, the self-consciously theatrical frames employed by artists like Lee, for both political and aesthetic reasons, prevent viewers from sinking into the supposition that they are watching reality onstage. In this essay, I use the terms theatrical and theatricality in a register similar to that of Josette Feral, who claims that theatricality “is the result of a series of cleavages (inscribed by the artist and recognized by the spectator) aimed at making a disjunction in systems of signification, in order to substitute other, more fluid ones” (10).

In reality, definitions of theatricality and realism are messy and various, as are attempts to successfully erase or, alternatively, consciously underscore the cleavages Feral describes. As Lee admits, in *Brown’s Daily Herald*, her attempt to work through dramaturgical conventions of the well-made play (Lee’s term for realist dramaturgy and style) ended in a performance that “sort of half obeys [these conventions] in a way that doesn’t really work yet” (qtd. in Smyth). In the present article, I wish to think long and hard about this “half-obeying” of theatrical and dramaturgical conventions because Lee’s engagement with them reveals how and when they translate (or don’t) into contemporary capitalist dramaturgy and performance, on and offstage.

To this end, I examine how Young Jean Lee’s April 2013 workshop production of *Straight White Men* at Brown University stages the performance of the straight white male self under neo-liberal capitalism, by engaging with Euro-American dramaturgy, theatrical realism, and theatricality. The present analysis sheds light on the tensions between post-Fordist self-making, which, from the 1970s, has asked white middle-class men to deal,

at the level of subject-formation with increased labour precarity, while recognizing, at the same time, their identity privilege. *Straight White Men* reveals these tensions by dramatizing the demise of the liberal hero, who, in U.S. and European dramaturgies, stood successfully against the incursions of capital and other societal forces. *Straight White Men* makes us confront our unhealthy attachment to these heroes and to plays that stage their conflicts. I believe that this exploration is crucial at this moment precisely because, some forty years into the neo-liberal period, we are still confused as to how and why our forms of representation cannot capture the epistemological violence that comes with the large-scale disenfranchisement of middle-class subjects under contemporary capitalism. Considering the specific subjectivation of the First-World "precariat" (those formerly sustained by the social-welfare state) as a performative gesture can help us denaturalize the language of human-capital investment. Considering a theatrical production is an ideal intervention in the debate because theatrical production traffics and exposes forms of affective labour at the centre of debates in political theory and performance studies. In short, I believe that a close analysis of Lee's play helps us think our unhealthy attachment to the liberal hero as an impediment to understanding contemporary capitalist subjectivation.

I take the idea of unhealthy attachment from Lauren Berlant, who has examined the "cruel optimism" that precarious First-World subjects (often white and/or European men) inhabit so as to survive the everyday. As she argues, it is our optimism about the good life that often wounds us (Berlant 2). For her, present-day neo-liberal conditions often necessitate a different stance, an impasse – "the way the body slows down what's going down" (5) – that functions as an ambivalent tool of survival. She fleshes out this neo-liberal structure of feeling primarily within contemporary film. The present article, in contrast, will think about the impasse theatrically, by working through Lee's *Straight White Men* in relation to its dramaturgical inheritances: Williams's conception of "liberal tragedy" and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the latter of which was key to Lee's conception of *Straight White Men* (Lee, "Young Jean Lee Discusses"). Ultimately, my argument is that *Straight White Men* proffers a new kind of hero, who theatrically embodies the impasse faced by the First-World precariat in the contemporary United States by performing badly, breaking the fourth wall, and looking straight at his audience. Lee's theatrical choices, despite her inheritances, effectively denaturalize the liberal hero as a dramaturgical norm while underscoring the violence of everyday capitalist subjectivation. By attending to characters in *Straight White Men* as racialized subjects, I offer an analysis of the specific experience of these subjects under capitalism, as a part of Lee's theatrical project to think about racialized and gendered identity, through the index of theatricality. Given this frame, I will pay careful

attention to the people of colour who appear in the wings of Lee's play, effectively disrupting the idea that the experiences of white middle-class men under neo-liberalism are universal.

Lee created the Brown University workshop script through conversations and improvisations with four white male undergraduate actors, a cadre of student assistant directors and dramaturges of various ethnicities and genders, her New York City-based associate director, Morgan Gould, and dramaturge Mike Farry. Lee also used answers to a series of provocative questions she posted to her Facebook feed from "friends" representing a wider demographic. According to assistant director Jillian Jetton, privilege was the key word in rehearsal. The working definition of that term that they used was "the ability to receive things that you did not earn (which people of another group do not automatically receive) either because of your physical appearance or your learned cultural behaviors" (Jetton 2). As the play reveals, these privileges may be disappearing, but not for the reasons some of its characters suggest.

Straight White Men stages a Christmas reunion between Ed, aged seventy, and his three sons: Jake, forty-two, an environmental lawyer; Drew, forty-one, an English professor; and Matt, forty-four, a graduate school and law school drop-out. Over the course of the play's twenty-four-hour dramatic arc, we explore the conflicts and problems created (or imagined to have been created) by Matt's renunciation of privilege. This renunciation, which took the form of completing various not-for-profit and social-welfare projects in his youth, eventually landed him in graduate school to study Russian literature, and then law school, where he attempted to "sell out." At the beginning of the play, having abandoned these ventures, Matt is back at his childhood home, living with his father, temping and helping out around the house. Ultimately, Matt's goal is to be useful to his father and to try "not to take up space" (58). From early in the play, the other characters try to figure out what is wrong with him. Drew says that Matt needs therapy; Jake thinks that he needs to learn to "turn off the part of the brain that knows you are bullshitting" and start a new career (45); his father Ed, enacting typical middle-class anxiety, wants Matt to use the education that he worked so hard to provide for his sons. In three acts, the brothers and father bond and spar, set up a Christmas tree, eat Chinese food, dance badly, get drunk, wake up the next morning, eat bagels, and ultimately, put Matt through a humiliating mock job interview for a job in advertising copywriting. The play's last image is Matt, sitting on the couch, staring into the audience, after everyone else has left the room, his quarrels ended but his situation unresolved.

In his 1966 classic *Modern Tragedy*, Williams defines liberal tragedy as one where "the individual refused the role of victim, and became a new kind of hero. The heroism is not in the nobility of suffering as the limits

were reached. It was now, unambiguously, in the aspiration itself" (95). Coming to fruition under the tutelage of Ibsen and in the shadow of industrial capitalism, the individual hero of liberal tragedy aspires to a self-fulfilment that refuses to compromise with "false society." He is destroyed "in his attempt to crawl out of the partial world" and transformed from hero to martyr (97). Ibsen's dramaturgy, according to Williams, pairs the "tragedy of the aspiration" with the concept of a "debt" that can be "contracted in the act of the refusal of compromise" or is simply a happenstance from being a part of the world he struggles against (97–98). As Williams points out, debt cannot simply be defined either as inheritance of original sin or as pure monetary debt. Certainly, Ibsen's characters often have literal debts and are working in a world that advocates capital accumulation to create social prosperity. But the characters are not fully defined by market rationality. In fact, these market values contrast with the moral and political realm that exists outside the market. Given the agonistic structure of these plays, Ibsen's heroes always resist these calculations on some level. In contrast, Williams sees *Death of a Salesman's* Willy Loman as a victim,

a man who from selling things has passed to selling himself, and has in effect become a commodity which like other commodities, will at a certain point be discarded by the laws of the economy. He brings tragedy down on himself, not by opposing the lie, but by living it. (104)

Charting the change from industrial capitalism to consumer capitalism, Miller's liberal tragedy realigned Ibsen's conceptions of aspiration and debt. These changing conceptions, I argue (although Williams does not) are particular to differential modes of self-making under the different historical modes of U.S. and European capitalism.

Close analysis of *Death of a Salesman* underscores this distinction. Written and set in the 1940s, *Salesman* features Willy Loman, a mediocre salesman, who is not "well-liked" enough or not good enough at his job to do more than get by. His sons Biff and Happy are also less successful than he wants them to be. Happy has a decent job in a department store, but has little chance of promotion. Biff, a football star and high-school drop-out, moves between seasonal jobs and has been jailed for stealing. Over the course of the play, Biff realizes that he does not want to be an entrepreneur. Nonetheless, he gives it one last try, by attempting to get a loan from a former boss so he can start a sports equipment business with his brother. When Biff fails miserably, Willy commits suicide so that he can give Biff an inheritance with which to start the business. The play's tragic knowledge lies in Biff's (rather than Willy) recognizing the futility of Willy's dreams.

Salesman is an intense critique of consumer capitalism just as much as it is a psychological family drama, whose tragedy revolves around the primal

scene of Willy's sexual infidelity. Willy suffers, not only because he cheats or buys into a consumer ideology of selfhood, but because he is forced to drive long hours and work on commission on undesirable routes. His bosses' pursuit of profit is physically abusive to him. His struggles puncture a hole in the idea that the American dream is for everyone (Ferguson). The success won by his brother Ben, who "went into the jungle and comes out, at the age of twenty one and he's rich" (Miller 401) (through brute imperial extraction – he mines diamonds in the Gold Coast in Africa), is no longer possible; Dave Singleman, another idol, is just that: the exception and not the rule. In *Salesman*, this change in labour is intimately bound to a crisis in straight white masculinity (Savran 305–8). *Salesman* reveals how consumer capitalism's reliance on selling consumable products reduced the value of masculine practical knowledge, charisma, and independent spirit. Aspiration to consume, first recognized by Thorstein Veblen in the late nineteenth century and more prevalent after World War II, encouraged the emergence of the self as consumer (Veblen 49–70; Cohen 8–11). Given that much of this consumption was done on credit or instalment – the relationship between aspiration and debt evidences itself in everyday discourse and practices (Calder 28–31, 199–208). Reading *Salesman* today, one is shocked by how often monetary debt is mentioned. We learn how much Willy and Linda owe on their insurance policy, their washing machine, and their mortgage. The nature of these debts as daily instalments rather than as a one-time sacrifice speaks to mid-twentieth-century diversification of risk (i.e., insurance), the democratization of property and commodity ownership, and a new form of effective debt management and valuation. It is worth noting that the play culminates just as Loman has finally paid off his twenty-five year home mortgage, marking the end of his life with the end of his debt. That he commits suicide to give his son his \$20,000 life insurance policy monetizes Loman's life, with his time on earth as an instalment. That his commission defines his worth – a changeable sum based on sales, not a salary – makes his livelihood precarious, despite his Fordist existence. Willy Loman's economic conditions eclipse his and Biff's so-called spiritual or psychological debts, marking a shift away from Ibsen's conception of debt. Yet *Salesman* holds onto the ideal of individual refusal, even if it is in the negative: in this, Loman becomes a kind anti-exemplar of Ibsen's form of aspiration (Savran 303).

Straight White Men owes a lot to *Death of a Salesman*. Ed, the patriarch of *Straight White Men*, is a retired insurance salesman. As in *Salesman*, the family's tensions revolve around a son's lack of accomplishments; consistent with the structure of the well-made play, the action takes place over the course of a day when all of the sons are home, and a failed job interview is crucial to the plot. The divergences, however, are just as striking. Ed is successful, but he is not as professionally accomplished or culturally privileged

as his sons are. There is no single familial trauma in the past that can be used to explain Matt's lack of accomplishment. And, there is no tragic action that brings knowledge to any character at the end of the play. In *Salesman*, Willy's tragic suicide affords the possibility of a new form of self-making for Biff. In *Straight White Men*, the failed interview does not bring about catharsis or transformation. In fact, a fake fight between Matt and Jake, where Jake tries to "kill" Matt, mocks such grandeur. This dramaturgical attitude marks the play as an ambivalent homage to Miller, shot through with shades of downtown New York theatre artist Richard Maxwell, whom Lee acknowledges as a mentor and influence (Winter).

In Lee's play, the "hero" is Matt, one of the *Straight White Men* of the title. As Lee explains,

As an experiment, I wrote a straight white male character who did all of the things I've heard people say they wished straight white men would do: acknowledge your privilege, shut up and listen, don't take up too much room, don't think you know everything, put yourself in others' shoes. The result: NOBODY liked him. (18 Mar. 2013)

Certainly, Matt is hard to see as a liberal hero. Despite his desire to renounce privilege, he has no ideological critique of the economic and social regime he lives in. Nor does he have an epiphany that changes his possibilities, as Biff in *Death of Salesman* does. He is despondent rather than angry or joyful. He cries at the dinner table (i.e., on the couch eating Chinese food), for no apparent reason, and is "barely even a person" when he is in the room (26). Matt's failure contrasts with his other brothers' and his father's successes. Their successes make Matt's failure to rise in his career seem volitional rather than conditional. Certainly, Matt's aspiration to unlearn privilege is distinctly anti-aspirational when he is compared to his tragic predecessors. Yet, rather than seeing Matt as a failed liberal hero or *Straight White Men* as an incomplete or failed liberal tragedy, I argue that the play successfully reconfigures modes of aspiration and debt in relationship to self-making possibilities for the middle-class precariat under U.S. neo-liberal conditions. Unlike with Ibsen's heroes, the very idea of a self not constructed by capitalistic rubrics of value is no longer possible for Matt, as it is not for many of his contemporaries (Feher, 23–24). Lee grapples with this epistemic shift by confronting the idea of privilege, in a revision of liberal tragedy's dramaturgy.

Focusing on this aspect of the play prompts readers to de-emphasize Lee's concern with the white cultural co-option of "minority culture" (represented by white men eating Chinese food and dancing to racially incendiary hip hop) and to instead emphasize her critique of the embodiment of white middle-class male subjectivity under neo-liberalism as an "unnatural"

performance of identity under late capitalism.¹ Given the coterminous nature of the intensification of neo-liberal economics in the eighties and the simultaneous rise of the critique of white male privilege in the academy and the media, Lee's play is all the more fulsome in articulating how methods of capitalist subjectivation are regularly misrecognized, a generation later, in relation to scattershot notions of 1980s "identity politics." Historical specificity is crucial here.

The roots of neo-liberal practices can be traced to the mid-twentieth century, but influential scholars such as David Harvey see the emergence of American neo-liberal economics in the mid-nineteen sixties and early seventies. Associated with the decline of the welfare state, organized labour protections, and trade policies, neo-liberalism's stripping of social welfare programs have intensified under the reign of both Democratic and Republican presidents from the time of Reagan to the present. Not all of its effects are merely economic; neo-liberalism is a mode of governmentality and subjectivation as well as an economic regime (Foucault; Brown). Neo-liberal subjectivation makes "man," or the U.S. capitalist man at least, a *homo economicus* – an entrepreneur of the self – who imagines himself as a form of human capital above all else (Foucault, 225–26). The term "human capital," whose most basic definition was "the set of skills that an individual can acquire thanks to investments in his or her education or training" later became a mode of thinking about the self as human capital, effectively erasing the possibility of a liberal self (Feher 25). This formulation extended Gary Becker's explanation of the inseparability of personae and their human capital "because you cannot separate a person from his or her knowledge, skills, health or values the way it is possible to move financial and physical assets while the owner stays put" (Becker 16). As Michel Feher explains, referencing Foucault,

[I]f we take seriously the subjective apparatus of human capital, we can see that neo-liberalism treats people not as consumers, but as producers, as entrepreneurs of themselves or, more precisely, as investors in themselves, as human capital that wishes to appreciate and to value itself and thus allocate its skills accordingly. (30–31)

This notion challenges the divide between reproductive and productive labour and articulates a mode of value in which neo-liberal subjects "are primarily concerned with the impacts of their conducts and thus of the satisfaction they may draw from them, on the level of their self-appreciation or self-esteem" (27). In this sense, capital is aspirational because it induces people to aspire to self-appreciation. Accordingly, educational debt becomes investment in human capital. On one hand, then, there is a simple historical differentiation between Lee's characters and the Lomans. The

Lomans lived in the moment of the consumer explosion and the emergence of high Fordism that allowed Willy to enjoy class mobility, despite his lack of formal education. For Matt, Jake, and Drew, college education (and perhaps graduate school) was a necessary investment for their futures.

On another level, however, there were changes in self-making processes in this period, which, although determined by economic regimes, were not limited to strict redefinitions of class position or to the isolated recognition of white male cultural privilege. When Matt tells Ed that "there were things he didn't have to worry about," he may be referring as much to the psychological and social consequences of becoming units of human capital as he is to the way white men of his generation have had to interrogate their privilege in ways that his father did not (52). One must acknowledge here, that, for less privileged people – namely, first-generation students from poor, immigrant, and/or minority families – college has often been a calculated investment in a better future, and an urgent one, which leads students to seek degrees that promise economic advancement. These students often do not have the luxury of interrogating the shift in thinking about their role under capitalism – a point I return to later in this article. For now, however, I concentrate on how Matt's failure to perform as a straight white man can be understood as his consciously failing to become a successful unit of human capital, at a particular moment in the history of neo-liberalism.

As Lee and her cast explain it, Matt's failure to achieve is his way of not enacting his privilege as a straight white male. It is a rejection of being someone who takes it upon himself to change the world, speak for others, and shake things up for society's benefit. At the beginning of the play, Matt has left his revolutionary ideals and activism behind him. Rather, he sees his primary purpose as "being useful" and "not taking up space," two ways of doing what Lee's Facebook friends suggested white men could do so as to reject the privileges that they did not earn. Matt's rejection of privilege is also a rejection of his father and brothers' ambitions for his career and personal happiness. It is not, however, a renunciation of the commodification that Miller decries through Willy Loman's tragic fall. Matt is sceptical about advertising copywriting neither because it is capitalist in orientation nor because it could ask him to commodify his creative and intellectual skills; in fact, he claims to have no issue with "selling out" his activist past. The once leader of the School for Young Revolutionaries never once mentions money or the capitalism system as an evil. Instead, he simply thinks he can't sell himself or anything else. His statements are at once a sign of self-abnegation and a rejection of any career that is productive of self-appreciation without being useful. His final conversation with his father at the end of the play brings this point home:

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- MATT Drew, I don't care about self-actualization or self-expression or becoming my best self! I don't believe in any those things!
- DREW Then what do you believe in?
- MATT Being useful! (53–54)

In the second scene, Matt's investment in usefulness and remaining in place is in direct contrast to Feher's conception of the aspirations of human capital. Matt's most vehement moment comes after Drew suggests that he is "an amazing person," who is "capable of leading a happy and productive life." Matt responds by rejecting the very terms in which the self is appreciated under neo-liberal capital: self-expression, self-actualization, and being one's best self.

Similarly, Matt's refusal to perform well in the mock interview is both a renunciation of "acting like a white male" and a refusal to act as an agent of neo-liberal self-appreciation. When he participates in mock interview for a copy-editing job, he does not engage in a number of behaviours associated with white male mastery. Instead, he slumps, stumbles, and makes a weak case for his skills. His brother Jake, in contrast, stands up straight, talks a good game, and takes over the space. More crucially, Jake sells himself as someone invested in his self-appreciation, without actually talking about skills. Instead, he talks about "directing his abilities" and "realizing" he is a "creative type." He makes a convincing (to the onstage audience, at least) claim for why he, as a forty-year-old man, should be considered for an entry-level job. Yet Matt, even after seeing Jake's example, can't perform self-appreciation. His failed imitation of straight-white-male privilege – where he half-heartedly claims he is creative because he appreciates creativity in others – shows that he remains wedded to an assessment of his actual labouring activities rather than selling his affinities as human capital.

Lest it seem I am over-reading, one must remember that many of the "self" terms Matt treats with derision gained traction with the dissemination of conceptions of self-esteem and human capital in the mid-nineteen sixties. Although one can link the term self-esteem historically to William James, and self-actualization to the 1930s, they did not become legible in the mode articulated here until the 1960s and 1970s. Eventually, policymakers instrumentalized self-esteem, and its concomitant rhetoric of responsibility as tools for making more economically productive citizens under globalized capital (Murphy 68–101; Cruikshank 87–103). The California Commission on Self-Esteem is but one example. Business leaders followed suit. Matt, whether he (or Lee) knows it, is rejecting this mode of neo-liberal capital subjectivation when he refuses to play along with Jake's scenarios. This is not to say that Jake, as the play's most open adherent to capitalist self-appreciation, is the only one who works under neo-liberal rubrics. Drew, who rejects Jake's tactics, sees the terms "happy" and "productive" together

in his appeal to Matt to get therapy, correlating one with the other (54). Matt, although he rejects his brothers, can't help but betray how naturalized this discourse has become when he tells Drew that it is not going to be a "productive" conversation when he begins talking about therapy (32). Ed's language is not as neo-liberal as his sons' is; he still sees the world in dollars and cents associated with prior modes of capitalism. For example, when Drew talks about his writing award, Ed asks him if there is a cash prize, rather than understanding the said prizes function as cultural capital. Yet, Ed measures Matt's success under the rubric of human capital and self-appreciation as surely as his sons do. Ed admittedly enjoys having Matt home, but claims that the situation is not the best "for someone of his abilities," eventually telling Matt that "[i]t's ridiculous to think that this is the best you can get" (53). Ed's anger stems from the fact that he paid for his sons' undergraduate education to give them better human capital appreciation and Matt is rejecting his investment.

Matt's choices stand in marked contrast not only to his brothers, who seem to have done right by their father's investment, but to one of the characters held conveniently off-stage – the son of the waitress of the Chinese restaurant from which they order takeout. He, unlike Matt, is off to an elite medical school. After this bit of small talk where he relays this information, Ed asks Matt if he needs anything to which he answers, "Yeah. Sorry." This exchange, in my opinion, is less important as an indicator of the family's culinary orientalism than it is in offering another counterexample to Matt. It seems no accident that Matt is asked if "he wants anything" at the end of this conversation. In contrast to the offstage son of the waitress, he clearly *does not want enough* in his family's opinion. Although the waitress at the restaurant is not marked as Asian American or an Asian immigrant, the implication is there, signalling the myth of Asian American model minorities who marshal limited means so as to succeed in preparing for white-collar careers that will bring their families prosperity. For these subjects, deciding not to "assert themselves" may not be an option because the pressure to do so is too intense and the needs too great. Given that Lee plays with and refuses to instantiate model minority conduct and affect in her other works – namely *Songs of Dragon's Flying to Heaven*, the present absence of this figure is all the more telling.

Another absent presence haunts Matt's choice of compensated and uncompensated labour: the nurse his father says "he can hire" to take care of himself "if he needs it." Matt performs acts of domestic maintenance inside the home while he works as an office temp outside of it. But the domestic labour he aspires to do – elder care – is usually feminized and outsourced to poor women, women of colour and others who do not have the human capital under globalized capitalism to avoid such intensive and poorly paid work. Thus, despite his dedication, and the difficulty of this work, his family

dismisses its worth because such labour is not an efficient or robust use of Ed or Matt's investments. In this light, Matt's aspiration to not be a straight white male is anti-aspirational in a general sense *and* is a particular refusal of a (privileged) position of self-appreciation by a First-World subject. Rather than theorizing an outside to neo-liberal capital, Matt instead deigns to be defined by discourses of self-appreciation. As anti-climactic as it is, Matt's request that Drew help him by talking about basketball rather than trying to intervene in his self-making might be an act of resistance. Matt rejects activity to make himself better, choosing to enjoy non-productive activity that makes him happy instead. Matt echoes Melville's *Bartleby's* rather passive refusals, which instantiates what Sianne Ngai calls ugly feelings: ambivalent affects that reveal the ways in which seemingly negative emotions both challenge and drive capitalist accumulation (Ngai, 105). In Matt's case, these affects are intimately related to debt.

The relationship between Matt's anti-aspirational aspiration and debt is tricky, in *Straight White Men*, because the play neither tells us exactly how to deal with its characters' psychological debts nor gives us a clean read on the family's economics. In the first case, Lee engages ironically with the idea of familial inheritance. Unlike in Ibsen's and Miller's plays, in *Straight White Men*, there is no familial event that precipitates Matt's "failure" or "tragic demise." Instead, the play ironizes the idea of such an event throughout, by joking about experiences the sons have as children that do not scar them – such as Drew's being ridiculed as "gross baby" by his brothers or all of them dealing with Ed's temper. We are left to believe that the "primal scene," if there was one, was Matt's college experiences during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The play comes back to this time repeatedly, if ironically. The fullest explanation comes after the failed job interview:

ED I don't believe that, Matt! Just like I don't believe you couldn't do better in that interview. You don't want to try. Tell me, Matt, what happened?

JAKE I know what happened.

ED Please, enlighten us.

JAKE He got brainwashed by all those ethnic studies people and now he's totally paralyzed.

ED What?

JAKE Okay, this is what happens to a guy like Matt who goes to a small liberal arts college. You sit in class and get told by women, queer people, and minorities that you don't understand shit, which is true. You're taught that you have unfair advantages and that you take opportunities away from everyone else, which is also true. If you want to help, you're either being paternalistic or it's not your fight. If you try to shut up and stay out of the way, people hate you for being a loser. No matter what you do, you're fucked (52).

It is clear that Lee is being tongue-in-cheek here. Yet, since *Straight White Men* follows a well-made-play structure, we are constantly looking for an explanation for each character's actions. Given the weakness of other possibilities – there is no relationship history for Matt, he has a good relationship with his father (women are notably completely absent in this play), and there seem to have been no traumatic events – Matt's liberal-arts experience is the best candidate for causing his problems. An academic audience, living in the conditions *they perceive* to be like those Jake describes as *Matt's past*, might be especially conditioned to give Jake's comments credit, despite how firmly Lee's tongue is placed in her cheek.

The lack of clarity about the characters' class position also complicates matters. One can't quite tell how privileged Matt is. The house read to me as solidly middle class, but not professional upper-middle class, as it did to student reporters and participants in the production (Jetton). This discrepancy seems largely to have been an issue with the budget for the set; the play's class context was not legible to the students who viewed the set only as spectators and was, perhaps, ignored by those who worked on the show and thus knew more about the class position of the characters than the audience did. More materially relevant are Matt's student loans:

JAKE Matt's a freak. I mean, all those years of banging his head against the wall as a community organizer. And then not letting Dad pay off any of his student loans . . . All that debt and nothing to show for it. (26)

If Matt took out all of those loans, one would assume he did not have the family money needed not to take out loans. Yet, there is the suggestion that his father could have helped or perhaps paid them off. Given the age of the characters and the loan policies of the time, it seems likely that the bulk of his debt would have come from funding his graduate and professional schooling rather than from his undergraduate education. If this were true, then, unless Ed was extraordinarily wealthy or an especially good investor, he would have had to accept a considerable reduction in his retirement income in order to pay them off in full – a different form of neo-liberal risk management the play skirts around rather than confronts openly. Framing educational debt as individualized risk management (“all that debt and nothing to show for it”), of course, is a neo-liberal mode of valuation, which, alongside Matt's role as a (failed?) liberal hero, makes Matt culpable for his situation. Matt's culpability makes his assumption of monetary debt a psychological problem rather than an economic reality, inverting a more plausible relationship of cause and effect. Watching the play, I asked myself, might Matt's inability to cope be an effect of his debt rather than its cause?

Although not quantified in the play, his loans were estimated in rehearsal as “hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Jetton 4). A question remains – for

me, at least – what remains of the debt and how does this “debt” affect his psyche? Even if he originally chose to shoulder the burden, might he regret that now? Is debt the reason he moved home? Is he trying to dig himself slowly out from that debt while he helps his aging father? If we consider that Matt is forty-four and spent thirteen years in school, this means that he would have entered the academic market or the legal market at a time when, even if he had finished his degrees, he might have been in a precarious state. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the widespread hiring of adjuncts and the decline in tenure-track jobs in the academy (particularly, in language departments) precluded a sustainable career in the academy for many. By the time Matt was out of law school, the financial crash might mean that a firm would lay him off before he had advanced to the higher ranks. Matt's life is precarious because he joined the white-collar labour force fifteen or so years later than his brothers did, after a sizeable reduction in opportunities for workers with advanced degrees. That he temps is within the realm of possibility for someone with Matt's skills, irrespective of his level of ambition or sense of self-worth. This makes his failure a material consequence of leading a neo-liberal life. Matt's malaise is also historical and social, mirroring the affective state of indebtedness so widespread among the First-World precariat. Unlike Willy Loman's, Matt's precarity comes, not from being exhausted under the grind of consumer capitalism and its forms of consumer debt, but from being crushed under the financialization of educational debt as self-appreciation. This is a condition, it should be noted, that his class status would have exempted him from experiencing a generation earlier.

Lee's choice not to quantify Matt's debt, perhaps motivated by writerly elegance, echoes the shift from monetary quantification of labour power to self-appreciation as the reigning vocabulary of value. Within the frame of the production, the fact that Matt's debt is not quantified, alongside the repeated mention of “those ethnic studies classes” as the reason for Matt's conditions, allows audiences to concentrate on his cultural identity as the primary driver for his problems rather than on his cultural identity's relationship to a particular economic reality: the emergence of the First-World precariat. In addition, the play's inadvertent class confusion allowed audiences to ignore the impact that being the first, “privileged” son of someone who rose from working-class roots could have on someone who attended an elite liberal arts college dedicated to replicating and/or producing privilege. This is another of the things Matt claims Ed “didn't have to worry about” (52).

This type of misrecognition also occurs off the stage. Historically, the emergence of identity-politics movements in the eighties has been blamed for blinding people to the large-scale economic disenfranchisement that happened as the authority of neo-liberal economic regimes grew, by focusing

on the relationship of cultural identity to disadvantage, to the exclusion of class-based disenfranchisement. *Straight White Men* does not blame affirmative action for sticking straight (working-, middle-, and upper-middle-class) white men with educational debt and narrowing the opportunities available by excluding them from certain forms of entitlement. Instead, the play allows its audience to see how making education a mode of risk management, manifested concretely in increased tuition and the elimination of caps on private-loan debt, caused this problem. *Straight White Men* does this by denaturalizing the contemporary language of self-appreciation and personal responsibility so easily accepted as neutral rather than ideologically driven. Matt speaks to this misrecognition, when he admits, “I probably am depressed, just not in the way that you think” (31).

Until now, the focus of the present article has been dramaturgical rather than theatrical. There is, however, something to be learned by thinking carefully about *Straight White Men*'s theatrical tactics – and, in particular, about the ways in which Lee obeys theatrical conventions half way. *Straight White Male*'s relationship to naturalism and realism is not as straightforward as it claims. The fake Christmas tree the family brings in the door as the play opens does not masquerade as a real one, and its fakeness is an important comment on Ed's frugality and anti-sentimental attitude. Here, of course, he performs consciously as a foil for Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who enters the play lavishly decorating for Christmas and brings Ibsenian theatrical realism along with her. More pointedly, the tree's fakeness calls attention to the façade of naturalism and realism that characterizes the play's first moments but adds a self-consciousness that these genres generally abjure.

These details attune us to the play's theatricality. As Andrea Most suggests, anti-theatrical ambivalence and fraught adherence to naturalism are also inherent in *Death of a Salesman* (550–53). Willy Loman is a theatrical character that performs in vaudevillian style (558). Most productions of the play capitalize on this theatricality, even when sticking close to realistic styles of acting. While Lee's aesthetic is less openly theatrical than Miller's, *Straight White Men* has an equally vexed relationship to naturalism and its so-called truthful rendering of reality, untroubled by theatrical artifice. In addition to bringing fake trees onstage, Lee also breaks the fourth wall and winks to the audience subtly to make her claims about identity and affect.

Quite simply, given Lee's ironic tone in her plays about American identities, we can't imagine that we are supposed to read the play “straight.” Instead, we are to remain sceptical, keeping a critical eye on how whiteness and naturalism are laminated onto each other. As Christine Mok points out, in her discussion of *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Lee constantly interrogates how whiteness gets absolved from theatricality, while minorities are asked to enact themselves through that same theatricality (Mok 113–15). She does this by openly revealing the coercions of the performances ironically,

through a meta-commentary on theatricality and acting style. *Dragons* puts pressure on acting style, to this end. Juliana Francis and Brian Bickerstaff, the white characters in the play, act naturalistically in white light, while the Asian and Asian-American characters lip sync, break the fourth wall, and enact ridiculous "Asian" stereotypes. The juxtaposition forces Lee's audiences to confront these operations. That said, such distinctions between white and Asian-American subjectivity are challenged in Lee's self-presentation, as much as they are in her plays. For example, in rehearsals for *Straight White Men*, Lee talked with her cast about how she was, in some sense, a white guy, and often hires people who act like them, so she can get things done (Jetton 9). In this, she echoes an Asian American, in *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven*, who says, "People think of me as this empowered Asian Female, but really, I am just a fucking White guy" (66). When these facts are taken together, it stands to reason that Lee may be ironically speaking, through Jake, about her own experience of subjecthood. More crucially, her stylistic choices suggest that the naturalistic acting embodied by the straight white male characters in her plays is supposed to be read as "acting" like straight white men, interrogating the very form of realism she seeks to emulate. In making the performance visible, Lee denaturalizes late capitalist self-making, even as she admits her part in performing its gestures.

The execution of the job interview scene is a case in point. This scene plays and replays, as Matt and Jake perform an exercise in applying for a hypothetical job in copywriting. Because we are watching this scene in a theatre and see it rehearsed, we become aware of its staginess, leading us to conclude that embodying white-male self-assurance is a performance. This meta-commentary is at odds with what often seems to be a naturalistic play, with little cleavage between actor and character, or reality and representation. It is for this reason that the scene is the most successful in showing how the performance of white maleness is complicit with capital in subtle and everyday ways that are, nonetheless, not universal. Watching Matt fail makes us realize that "success" and "self-appreciation" are performed in public space. Matt's theatrical performance of failure, rather than his "real" failure to perform, makes performing capitalist subjectivation less natural. Within this framework, Matt becomes the white version of Asian American, in *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven*, who "fails" to be Asian in wonderfully theatrical ways, making the ridiculousness of such an imperative visible. As in her other plays, then, Lee's departures from realism within realism (or naturalism within naturalism) may offer the play's most pointed critique.

To probe this, I consider the most visible break with naturalism and realism in the play, crucial to thinking about how *Straight White Men* theorizes the experience of precarity under neo-liberal capital. Matt's last stage direction reads: "*MATT sits alone. MATT looks out at the audience, breaking the fourth wall, making direct eye contact. BLACKOUT*" (60). Notably, this is the

only place in the play in which the fourth wall is broken, which is at odds with the usual propensity of Lee's characters to address the audience directly from the stage. Matt's paralysis seems to suggest that he has failed as a liberal hero. Yet something else might be happening *theatrically*.

Here, I return to *Cruel Optimism*. Perhaps Matt, instead of failing, has met with what Berlant theorizes as an "impasse." Berlant explains that, in her attempt to understand our cultural moment, she "turns toward thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by the crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8). The filmic examples she gives often depend on a kind of faciality, in which the impassivity of faces, or their "implosions," meet "stillness," or a "plotless" lack of movement. Recognizing the "mild theatricality" of familial life under neo-liberalism and the "method acting" necessary to corporate life, Berlant implicitly frames these moments of impassivity as a kind of *non-* if not *anti-*theatrical moment of *verité*, in which the performance of capitalism is exposed (212–18). Lee, in sharp contrast, has used the ultimate theatrical gesture – the breaking of the fourth wall – to reveal this same impasse. Matt's facial impassivity echoes that of many of the characters in the films that Berlant analyses. At the same time, this is the one place where Matt openly connects with the audience, staring straight at us and transmitting his affective state into the theatre. The end of *Straight White Men* allows us to share Matt's impasse. Lee asks each member of a largely college and/or college-educated audience to participate in these shared neo-liberal modes of self-making, even if she or he is not a straight white man. The audience member's recognition of herself as a potential member of the precariat is opened up as a distinct possibility. This reading of Lee's work opens up a political potential in *Straight White Men*, affected by, but not entirely circumscribed by, the viewer's cultural identity. By reconfiguring liberal tragedy's ideas of aspiration and debt, Lee ironizes the rhetoric of self-appreciation while making an earnest connection with a potentially precarious audience. She engages our ugly feelings and asks us to rethink malaise as a historically and socially particular phenomenon. At its end, the play asks its audience to end its "unhealthy" attachment to the idea of the liberal hero on and offstage because it impedes truthful understanding of subjectivity under neo-liberal conditions.

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NOTE

- 1 I thank Nick Ridout for informing me about the commerce Die Antwoord's "I Fink You Freaky" has with blackface performance.

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ABSTRACT: “Young Jean Lee’s Cruel Optimism” argues that the Brown University production of Young Jean Lee’s *Straight White Men* stages the tensions inherent in performing white masculinity under U.S. neo-liberal capitalism. The article performs a dramaturgical analysis of the production in relationship to Raymond Williams’s conception of liberal tragedy from *Modern Tragedy* (1966) and Lauren Berlant’s theorization of the impasse in *Cruel Optimism* (2011). This analysis reveals how the reconceptualization of liberal tragedy in the neo-liberal age asks that we reconsider the relationship between debt and aspiration so crucial to Williams’s conception of Ibsen’s dramaturgy. The theatricality of the play offers a new way to understand the affect and effects of living with the spectre of labour precarity and debt in the contemporary United States.

KEYWORDS: affect, Cruel optimism, labour, liberal tragedy, neo-liberal, dramaturgy

Young Jean Lee's Cruel Dramaturgy

PATRICIA YBARRA, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown, is the author of *Performing Conquest: Five Centuries of Theatre, History and Identity in Tlaxcala, Mexico* (Michigan, 2009) and co-editor of *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).