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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “A Sick Way of Thinking?”: The Unorthodox Dramaturgy of Young Jean Lee’s Identity Politics Theater

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The article addresses the predicament of what I refer to as “racial contingency” in Asian American theater and how such conception draws critical attention to the naturalizing of neoliberal multiculturalism. Utilizing “racial contingency” as a critical lens to examine the emerging wave of Asian American artists, this essay explores Young Jean Lee’s identity politics theater as a counter-ideological project that responds to neoliberal multiculturalism. It aims to explore her “unorthodox” dramaturgy as critical aesthetic embodied in her latest Broadway success, *Straight White Men* (2015), which expresses (quoting her own line) “a sick way of thinking” that is deemed as both a symptom and a critique of racial contingency in neoliberal multiculturalism. By demonstrating the ways in which racial subjects have become racially contingent in Asian American theater, the essay argues that Young Jean Lee’s identity politics theater generates from while also responding to the rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** racial contingency, neoliberal multiculturalism, Asian American theater, Young Jean Lee, unorthodox dramaturgy

DREW: Dad, Matt’s interview skills are not the problem! He’s trapped in a sick way of thinking!”  
—*Straight White Men* (Y. J. Lee, “Straight White Men” 74)

With the Broadway debut of *Straight White Men* on the 29th of June 2018, Young Jean Lee also became the first Asian American woman playwright who has "made history" (Carucci 1). However, shall such mainstream recognition, on the Asian American stage, be celebrated or, in more critical terms, as Esther K. Lee puts, considered a "mixed blessing"? As Lee reminds, it was hard for the playwrights of color to have their plays produced at the mainstream venues (including Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theaters) (E. K. Lee, 408), but the success of the second wave, as represented by David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, and others, has marked the milestone of *going to mainstream*, a flourished period that sanctioned an inclusion of a "wider/wider"<sup>2</sup> audience that would paradoxically undo Asian American identities by losing ourselves into it. To interpret this paradox of success, how shall we reconceive whether such mainstream success should be recognized as an attribute relevant to the playwright's Asian American currency or its straight white subject matter, which is deemed more prevalent? By addressing this question, this essay aims to interrogate the asymmetrical dynamics underlying the status quo of post-racial ideology by exploring Young Jean Lee's unorthodox identity politics theater, particularly her latest Broadway success—*Straight White Men*.

### Neoliberal Multiculturalism as Naturalizing Hegemony

In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed examines three phrases of official anti-racism in the United States and argues that they are critical to ratifying the country's global ascendancy. Melamed demonstrates how racial liberalism (1940s–1960s), liberal multiculturalism (1980s–1990s), and neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s) made racism appear to be disappearing. And neoliberal multiculturalism, according to Melamed, refers to a "market ideology turned social philosophy, a unifying discourse that has disguised neoliberalism as 'a form of racial capitalism'" (Melamed, *Represent and Destroy Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* 138). In other words, it portrays an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism deemed as a key to a post-racist world of freedom and

opportunity. Ostensibly, neoliberalism has transformed and opened doors for multiculturalism through which neoliberal calculations have come to govern biopolitical life to rationalize, engineer, and organize forms of humanity. However, we cannot simply ignore that neoliberalism, as a form of contemporary racial capitalism, "deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differently to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders" (Melamed, "Racial Capitalism" 77). While the social and historical progression of multiculturalism speaks in line with the transformation as well as institutionalization of Asian American theater, there are cultural critics who interrogate the production of multiculturalism. For example, in *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe is skeptical of multiculturalism in terms of "forgetting history through promise of inclusion" (Lowe 86). Wen Jin, likewise, critically sees it as "pluralist universalism" (Jin 6) or, more radically, as Slavoj Žižek puts, "a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism with a distance" (Žižek 44). Therefore, instead of simply embracing neoliberal multiculturalism as an ideology to bestow the institutionalization of Asian American studies/theater, we should also be aware of its hegemonic appropriation in a particular way that post-racial aesthetic, as Yoonmee Chang frames, "a mode of freedom from the ethnographic imperative" (Chang 202), could be easily rendered as racial obliteration engendered from colorblindness sugarcoated as neoliberal multiculturalism.

### Waves of Asian American Theatrical Representations and Racial Contingent Predicament

Marked by the founding of the East West Players in 1968, Asian American theater has been burgeoning with increasingly diverse styles, themes, aesthetics, and ways of expressions. Throughout more than four decades of development, Asian American theater has been experiencing contingent expressions of identity politics between the early and recent forms of theatrical representations. Such a racial contingent condition also coincides with what Esther K. Lee describes as "waves" of Asian American writings—"artistic movements and styles" that have succeeded one another in Asian American theater since then (E. K. Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* 125). While the first wave of writings are regarded

as what Nguyen suggests as the “legacy canon” for their political visibility and voice by centering on historical racism, orientalism, cultural nationalism, and feminism in the early 1970s, the second wave of Asian American literature, in the 1980s–1990s, is critically viewed as a “mixed blessing” because of its propensity for accommodating a “wider/whiter” audience as their mainstream and market success has blurred the line between *minority* and *majority* culture (Lee 408). Apart from David Henry Hwang, Young Jean Lee is the second Asian American playwright who attained a foothold on the Broadway stage. While their successes should be celebrated in relation to American multiculturalism, both of their works have been, in one way or the other, critiqued for “selling out”<sup>3</sup> to the white/wider audience. Therefore, in negotiating between artistic freedom and the writer’s ethnic/racial responsibility, this article interrogates this *Broadway success* in critical terms of “racial contingency” in which racial subjects are rendered anew in the status quo neoliberal multicultural ideology.

### Racial Contingency as a Predicament and a Theoretical Frame

To reiterate Esther K. Lee’s “wave” paradigm, one can generalize an explicit distinction between the *early wave* and the *later wave* of theatrical representations in Asian American theater. While the early-wave writers tended to adopt mainly autobiography and realism to create and (re)imagine their works that mostly, if not all, deal with the important Asian American historical moments such the Internment of Japanese Americans and Chinatowns, the writers of emerging waves, while enjoying a certain artistic freedom, tend to expand the definition of Asian Americans by presenting what Tisa Chang describes as “new idioms of expressions”<sup>4</sup> (Houston 135). As Lee characterizes, while the first-wave playwrights included details of their personal experience with racism, displacement, and what Karen Shimakawa calls “national abjection,” the second-wave writers, aiming to “search for the holy grail of [Asian American] authenticity” (Hwang xii), have institutionalized Asian American theater by going to the American mainstream. Now, the third-wave writers, those who “grew up taking [Asian American identity] for granted,” would regard ethnicity as simply “one piece in a much more complicated mosaic of identity” (Hwang xii). However, as Esther K. Lee

reminds us, despite the fact that the first- and second-wave writers have gained limelight in the American stage, the third and emerging wave of writers such as Chay Yew, Diana Son, Han Ong, Ralph Pena, Alice Tuan, and Julia Cho (to name a few) would tend to “reject the binary choice [of including and excluding Asian American experience] and the responsibility of representing their entire group” (E. K. Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* 203). In other words, while the third-wave playwrights such as Chay Yew, who believes “race ceases to be the primary focus,” or Diana Son, who echoes “Asian Americanness is not required and is only *incidental*” (203), we should be aware of the dilemma once debated at the Big Bang Conference that the emerging Asian American playwrights, while being immersed in diverse aesthetic practices, are not interested in their history (Houston 135). Despite the fact that Asian American theater, upon the mainstream success rendered by the first and second waves, has gained some mainstream limelight on the American stage, incidents such as whitewashing and underrepresentations of racial subjects in both Hollywood and the mainstream stage are still occurring. Therefore, it is crucial to reconsider the relationship between this *incidentalness* as a predicament of racial contingency in that one should not entirely see it as a post-racial artistic freedom to have omitted staging racial subject matters but actually as a diminishing racial awareness that forgets or systematically omits the staging of Asian American subjects.

In view of a predicament in which racial (Asian American) subjects are moving from racially marked to becoming contingently marked or even unmarked in terms of staging/performing racial subject matters onstage, this article attempts to frame, in critical terms, such a condition as “racial contingency”—a predicament in which asymmetrical dynamics and evasion of racial political awareness shall be addressed and put into question. Apart from serving as an ideological descriptor to identifying the predicament of *incidental* racial politics particularly in the genre of performance, “racial contingency” is also proposed to serve as a critical frame to explore the very symptomatic condition that is arguably adhered with the problematic dynamics of neoliberal multiculturalism. In other words, “racial contingency” is not simply a trope that identifies the weakening racial identity politics of the emerging wave of Asian American theater but also a critical category to generate critiques towards the

problematic dynamics of neoliberal multiculturalism by reflecting on the emerging wave of Asian American representation.

Similarly, Young Jean Lee's identity politics theater also manifests such a paradigm of racial contingency in which her "unorthodox" dramaturgy can be conceptualized as a critical aesthetic or as a trope called, in her own words in *Straight White Men*, "a sick way of thinking." And through scrutinizing Lee's unorthodox dramaturgy, the paper attempts to demonstrate how Lee's aesthetic, as embodied in her identity politics theater, manifests "a sick way of thinking" that not only is a symptomatic response of dominant neoliberal multiculturalism but also demands a critical reflection on racial contingency in the "so-called" American multicultural theater. By deploying racial contingency as a frame to scrutinize Asian American dramatic literature as a particular genre, the paper intends to explore Lee's identity politics theater by focusing on her latest Broadway show—*Straight White Men*—in relation to neoliberal multiculturalism through the following questions: How shall Lee's unorthodox dramaturgy be seen as a "sick way of thinking" that renders representations of intentional displeasure, self-sarcasm, and self-reflexivity (i.e., her way of "destroying the audience") as we may see in her identity politics plays? How does Lee's unorthodox dramaturgy respond to the discourses on American identity politics? And how is this unorthodox dramaturgy rendered, in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism, as a racial trope in Lee's works?

With these questions in mind, this paper examines Lee's unorthodox identity politics theater to argue that her works, while exemplifying a racial contingent condition of Asian American theater, are inevitable symptomatic manifestations of a collective "sick way of thinking" responsive to, and generative of, the rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism.

### Unorthodox Dramaturge—Performing Lee's Aesthetic

While neoliberalism, an ideology touting market freedom to privilege one's biopolitical "homo economicus" (Foucault 225), can transform multiculturalism, its "free-market" sovereignty is also, as David Goldberg claims, committed to "privatizing property" and even to "privatizing race, removing conception and categorization in racial terms from the

public to the private realm" (Goldberg 337). Ostensibly read as a response to concern about the impotence of whiteness in a multicultural realm, neoliberalism's instrument for undoing the effects of racism actually serves as the very condition of racism itself by covering the hypocrisy of colorblindness and post-racialism. It is to say that when neoliberal multiculturalism has been naturalized as hegemony, one can only see the artistic freedom of racial contingency but not the underlying problematic dynamics of neoliberal multiculturalism as a means of incorporating difference without fully attending to asymmetrical dimensions of ongoing racialized power such as those whitewashing incidents.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, if we accept the fact that Asian American theater is defined, in principle, by performing the subject matters of Asian Americans on stage, the predicament of racial contingency such as the ongoing whitewashing incidents as well as the diminishing racial consciousness as experienced in the third and fourth waves of representations has become a critical concern for Asian American theater. And Young Jean Lee's identity politics theater has manifested the very neoliberal multicultural symptom that can be allegorized, ideologically, as a *sick way of thinking through her unorthodox dramaturgy and aesthetic*.

Before turning to Young Jean Lee's unorthodox dramaturgy, I would like to begin with her upbringing and training deemed crucial to the establishment of her dramaturgy and aesthetic expression. In an interview, Young Jean Lee describes that she has always been "conditioned" (in post-racial terms) to hide her racial/ethnic difference as much as possible. Race and ethnicity for her are merely labels without any attachment to cultural meanings and racial historicity. Amid her ten years of PhD training in Shakespearean Studies at UC Berkeley, Lee admits that her ultimate desire was to become a playwright. Instead of pursuing in academia, she committed to becoming a playwright under the tutelage of several renowned downtown (experimental) artists including Mac Wellman, Jefferey M. Jones, and Richard Maxwell. Therefore, Lee's dramaturgy, under their artistic tutelage, reveals a semblance of (white) downtown experimentalism.<sup>6</sup> For the same reason, Young Jean Lee, as Chai quoted David Henry Hwang's words, is never quite recognized, due to her downtown experimentalist style, as an "Asian American artist but an avant-gardist" (Chai 1). Likewise, emerging writers of Asian descent (or what Hwang calls the "fourth wave") such as Diana Son



and Young Jean Lee would enjoy a certain amount of *artistic freedom* that they “don’t deny they’re Asian American, but neither does that necessarily dictate their subject matter” (Chai 1).

Perhaps, artistic freedom, especially for the ethnic writers, should better be understood in an ideological context of neoliberalism, the kind of laissez-faire market freedom that transforms not only multicultural expression but also institutional and cultural productions including theater. For example, in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*, Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra examine how theater and performance negotiate the many and interlinked violences of neoliberalism and seek to complicate understanding of production processes that are locally circumscribed, if globally imaged (3). Driven by neoliberal governmentality and global capitalism, Nielsen and Ybarra gesture us to rethink art in relation to “abstraction, appropriation, and privatization” practices that somehow justify the mode of cultural production of contemporary artists. One of the characteristics, as Claire Bishop suggests, is that contemporary artists “engage in strategies of mediation that include delegation, re-enactment, and collaboration” in order to complicate authorship through overt techniques that “outsource” originality (Nielsen and Ybarra qtd. in Bishop 5).

Lee’s identity politics theater similarly embodies such *participatory* collaboration through which “collective endeavors” are practiced in what she calls a “crowd-sourced dramaturgy”<sup>7</sup> (Bent 30). Through practices of abstraction, appropriation, and privatization, Lee also accommodates a neoliberal mode of (multi-)cultural production that involves participation of spectatorship. By inviting the spectator/audience as a tangibly active creator of the theatrical event, Lee’s identity politics theater also embodies what Susan Bennett and Jerome Rothenberg describe as “an ultimate democratizing of the arts” (Rothenberg 14). Therefore, by recreating “a flexible actor-audience relationship and a participatory spectator/actor” (Bennett 43), Lee’s dramaturgy of *collective endeavor* becomes more enabling to appropriating cultural permits in terms of producing shows of “multicultural” identity politics.<sup>8</sup> While consciously producing plays of *multicultural* categories, Lee’s theater embraces neoliberal currency by celebrating representations of various identity politics imbued in what she reckons “the historical moment [for] privilege of all kinds.”<sup>9</sup> If

the impotence of whiteness has been impending owing to the fact of demographic change, the restructuring of power relations within the ostensible neoliberal multicultural context has also provided the timely currency for Lee to playfully tout that “minorities have all the power” (Y. J. Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* 41) or “privileged white dickheads need to make [themselves] invisible” (Y. J. Lee, “Straight White Men” 96).

What makes Young Jean Lee an avant-gardist rather than an Asian American artist is not simply her lack of performing Asian American subjects but her experimentalist style inherited from the prominent (white) dramatists as mentioned previously. Her dramaturgy is characterized as “unorthodox” because she, under Mac Wellman’s tutelage, is taught to embrace her utmost discomfort of “think[ing] the worst show ever” in order to tackle the “stoniest ground for creativity” after her ten years’ training on theater criticism (Bent 32). To some extent, Lee’s creativity is attained through a process of unpleasant destruction that is deemed unorthodox. But what exactly does Lee’s unpleasantness and mode of *collective endeavor* imply to us when it comes to the critical perspective of an Asian American theater?

### Lee’s “Unorthodox” Aesthetic in a Neoliberal Multicultural Context

Contemplating the above question enables us to also interrogate how the dominant neoliberal multiculturalism has been appropriated as a hegemonic gesture to illuminate the ideological manifestation of post-racialism. If (racial and cultural) difference is truly valued, there would not have been the cases of racial contingency such as those racially unmarked performances of Diana Son, Chay Yew, and Young Jean Lee. The reality is that the neoliberal sovereignty, when equating colorblind/post-racial ideology with multiculturalism, has been naturalizing the condition of racial contingency (namely, to unmark race) as a form of representational violence. But instead of embracing such (post-racial) neoliberal multiculturalism, Asian American theater and artists shall reserve a critical distance through which political awareness needs to be readdressed. In this way, the scrutiny of Young Jean Lee’s identity politics theater serves as a crucial project as well as a site of racial contingency in which the status quo neoliberal multiculturalism is called

into question.

In scrutinizing Lee's identity politics theater, it is important to conceive her "unorthodox" dramaturgy as a critical aesthetic. Apart from understanding Lee's "collective endeavors" as a neoliberal multicultural mode of producing her theater, we need to also apprehend such "unorthodox" dramaturgy in terms of a critical aesthetic to parse the fact that sanctioning and embracing racial contingency (as engendered by neoliberal multiculturalism) is, compellingly, a "sick way of thinking" to sanction representational violence and systematic racism. Thinking through this trope, in other words, enables us to a process of reflective thinking through which critical awareness of racial contingency is crucial in reassessing Asian American theater in relation to its ethnic artists as well as racial subject matters onstage.

Perhaps, what makes Young Jean Lee's identity politics theater "unorthodox," apart from the neoliberal multicultural mode of making and appropriating identity politics plays, is her very way of deploying *unpleasantness* and rendering it as a litmus test to intentionally "destroy the audience" (Bent 30). In other words, Lee's identity politics plays such as *The Shipment*, *Songs of Dragon Flying to Heaven*, and *Straight White Men*, in one way or the other, are the very neoliberal multicultural productions in which abstraction, appropriation, and privatization are more or less practiced through the means of "collective endeavors." But such dramaturgy also shows Lee's notion of unpleasantness as she is compelled to express identity politics in conflation with stereotypical clichés that she hardly believes in this ostensibly multicultural (yet post-identity) landscape. While Lee's artistic creativity can only be deployed under an "unorthodox" dramaturgy of what she describes as "the worst play ever," it also means that her identity politics theater is engendered out of a conflict between her self-belief and the societal material condition that is meant to be *unpleasant*. This unpleasantness then has become both her creative ground and her aesthetic device, according to her intention, to *destroy the audience*.

For example, *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*, among Lee's identity politics plays, is borne out of Lee's *unpleasant* experience that it can be rendered, as a personal response to what Karen Shimakawa calls "affective difficulties"<sup>10</sup> (Shimakawa 92), while also speaking Lee's erased ethnic awareness. Regarded as a personal affective play stemming from her failures

in graduate studies and marriage, the play implicitly shadows the playwright's transitional anxieties coupled with frustrations of confronting her dismissed racial differences. If Lee's "unorthodox" aesthetic is meant to engender her *unpleasant* approach of what she conceives to be "the worst thing she could possibly do" (Gassman 14), then dealing with an Asian American show as her "never wanted to do identity politics art" (14) is, in other words, what she describes as the very "paralyzing and disturbing" resort to making art.

To Lee, making her own identity politics show is disturbing and paralyzing because she has always been conditioned that race does not matter. If recalling a racial awareness, for Lee, has been an unpleasant experience, then *Songs*, as her debut play on Korean American identity politics, has been so compellingly commodified and eventually rendered as the most successful sellout (Grote 27). Expressed as what Lee intends as the "very formulaic, very cliched genre [...] assimilated into white American culture" (Jones, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven [An Interview with the Playwright]* 1), *Songs* performs not only what Ryan Hatch puts as "a chaotic barrage of baroque yellowface minstrelsy" (Hatch 90) but also a play fueled with "affective difficulties" rendering, as Karen Shimakawa suggests, "a hysteria of backlash/neoliberal (or perhaps neo-conservative) rhetoric either directly or through paranoid projects of minorities gone wild" (Shimakawa 91). While *Songs*, according to Shimakawa, can be considered as "an indicator of, and response to, the generative value of what Sianne Ngai calls the *ugly feelings*" (Shimakawa qtd. in Ngai 89), Lee's identity politics theater, likewise, is driven by this "destructive impulse," the very *unorthodox aesthetic* that is pathologically formulated by her *not knowing and struggling* in the sense with what Asian American identity politics means. In other words, if the generative way of making theater that unsettles and destroys her audience is to do things that also make herself unpleasant, it is also the very "sick" way, to achieve something in the face of "failure and incompetence and not-knowing" (Jones, "An Afterword: What's Wrong with These Plays?" 184).

Besides *Songs* (the worst nightmare yet well received in terms of making identity politics show), Lee's latest identity politics play, *Straight White Men*, has been her greatest success that is yet expressive of her "unorthodox aesthetic." If *Songs* is considered a sick (pathological) way of performing racial

identity politics and racial subject matters under the naturalizing neoliberal multicultural condition by staging self-displeasure and self-destruction through various absurdist scenes of (racial) violences and ugly feelings, then *Straight White Men* has certainly extended Lee's performance of identity politics to another level of "sick way of thinking," especially when racial contingency is critically identified in relation to the status quo of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Therefore, Lee's aesthetic can be understood as a symptomatic response to the hypocrisy and asymmetrical dynamics of the dominant neoliberal multiculturalism in both personal and collective dimensions. As reflected in *Songs*, Lee's most personal Asian identity politics show, her unorthodox aesthetic has mediated (via her "unpleasant" condition of not knowing about what Asian identity politics is) disturbing racial clichés rife with stereotypes, anger, and ambivalence including a ten-minute scene of slapping Lee in the face as well as a collective performance of gruesome suicide, etc. While the inspiration for *Songs*, as Lee intends, stems from the "felt pressure to write a resentful ethnic play" (Grote 27), the aesthetic underlying such unflinching depiction of race in America has become what Lee calls "the most politically incorrect" play that is yet the most successful show making her a sellout (Grote 27). While *Songs* reflects Lee's unorthodox aesthetic rendered as a personal dimension of sickness, *Straight White Men* (the white identity politics show) can be analyzed as Lee's litmus test to scrutinize such sickness from a collective dimension.

### The Straight White Male Fantasy

*Straight White Men* is devised in what Lee calls "collective endeavors" that the play is intended to be a white labelling project constructed by nonwhite voices. By opening the conversation to other collaborators of diverse identities and backgrounds, Lee writes the script based on a list of questions that ask "what do you [the audience] wish straight white men would do [in order to] hate them less?" (Bent 34) and incorporates these qualities in the conversations improvised by the performers as a means to deliver a naturalistic performance. Also, conceived in what Lee believes to be the "historical moment" in which the straight white male needs to be identified and examined, the play (similar to *Songs*) is devised to deal with an *unpleasant*

*experience* of labelling straight white maleness in terms of the "default human position."<sup>11</sup>

In theater, this default position always sanctions the (white) privilege when a play is not specified with a racial casting, and thus, the characters would always cast white by default. The white body, in other words, is always regarded as the natural corporeality associated with a sense of universal privilege. With the preoccupied universality of a straight white male experience as a societal and dramaturgical norm, it is conceivable for Lee to approach white male subjectivity through the theatrical lens of realism/naturalism. Therefore, it is how *Straight White Men*, as explained in its production at Brown University, explores the "topic of privilege and straight white male of theater genres" (Smyth 1).

In *Young Jean Lee's Cruel Dramaturgy*, Patricia Ybarra reads the above comment "analogically and historically" (Ybarra 513). Analogically, realism exists as a *universal form* that is inextricably conflated with a straight white theater tradition, against which all racial and sexual others are measured. Historically, as Ybarra quotes Raymond Williams's terms, realism "effectively naturalizes (as universal) the conflicts and concerns of (middle- and upper- class) straight white people that keep us inside the ideology of the middle-class world [they] represent" (Ybarra qtd. in Williams 513–514). But instead of following a tradition of realism that justifies the structure of cause-and-effect relations between the actions of the individual, *Straight White Men* (*SWM*) disrupts this dramaturgical convention by staging its protagonist (Matt), who fails to justify his own fault of actions as well as redeem social empathy—namely, an outmoded liberal hero obsessed with liberal ideal and white guilt.

Taking the idea of unhealthy attachment from Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism," Ybarra argues that *SWM* proffers a "new kind of hero theatrically embodies the impasse faced by the First-World precariat" and a critical analysis on the play would help us think that our "unhealthy attachment to the liberal hero [is] an impediment to understanding contemporary capitalist subjectivation" (515). Further, Ybarra also reads how the protagonist performs badly in the contemporary late-capitalist US as well as how he inhabits himself as a precarious First-World subject within the optimism of a good life that would often wound us and leave us in



what Berlant calls "an impasse – the way of body slows down what's going down helps to clarify the relation of living on the ongoing crisis and loss" (Ybarra qtd. in Berlant 515).

To tackle the challenge of interrogating the straight-white-male experience as the default dramaturgical norm, Lee opts for her "crowd-sourced" dramaturgy by synthesizing *voices* of racial and sexual minorities upon a "list of things they wished straight white men could do" (Bent 34). With the deployment of the collective antiwhite rhetoric, Lee's theatrical choices effectively "denaturalize the liberal hero as a dramaturgical norm while underscoring the violence of everyday capitalist subjectivation" (Ybarra 515). To effectively render the straight white men as racialized subjects, the play is attentively created in a "sense under the control of people who are not straight white men" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 62). By doing so, it is how a transgender or gender-nonconforming stage-hand-in-charge is particularly assigned at the threshold to speak with an air of authority in order to create a theatrical effect to manipulate the straight white men as the racialized subjects, as if undergoing a social experiment.

### ***Straight White Men* as the "Litmus Test"**

As a three-act realistic tragedy, *SWM* stages a Christmas family reunion between Ed, aged seventy, and his three sons: Jake, forty-two, a banker; Drew, forty-one, an English professor; and Matt, forty-four, a graduate dropout and a temp helper for a community organization. Among the brothers, Matt is the only one who returns and lives with his father. To pay off his student loan, he helps around the house and keeps Ed company. Amid the family Christmas dinner, Matt breaks into tears and draws speculations from his folks. Unlike his two professional brothers, Matt's goal is to be "useful" to his father and "not to take up space" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 70). While Ed speculates that Matt's return would hinder his personal growth, Drew and Jake consider that Matt needs some space to figure out his new life and should seek therapy "to learn how to be happy" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 69). Throughout the three acts, the brothers and father bond and spar, play games, set up a Christmas tree, sing and dance, and finally put Matt on a mock job interview in which the folks find Matt akin to a "freak" trapped in "a sick way of thinking" ("Straight

White Men" 74). Eventually abandoned by his family, Matt finds himself "a loser for no reason" ("Straight White Men" 97), sitting alone on the couch, staring into the audience, breaking the fourth wall and leaving his problem—being "a loser for no reason"—unresolved.

By staging Matt as a "loser for no reason," Lee aptly devices the play as what she calls a "litmus test" (Bent 34) that aims to engage the audience with a social experiment. As an experimental show, *SWM* renders Lee's mission to "destroy the audience" in terms of attacking their "self-complacency – the kind of bind and disjunction between the desire for social justice and the desire for things to stay the same, and for people not to be losers, and to be aligned with power" (Bent 34). In other words, the play, as Lee intends, is to irritate the audience's hypocritical social justice by interrogating whether we, as part of the audience, shall judge if Matt as a "loser for no reason" is worse than a "successful asshole" just like Jake, who mirrors us all.

Being staged as an experimental subject created by the (sexual and racial) minorities, Matt can be regarded as a collaborative complicit act of political retaliation against the straight white man category. In this way, Matt has been made the *scapegoat* for such persecution performed by the nonwhite and nonheteronormative alliances. And the task to attack the straight white masculinity, owing to poststructuralism, has been more palpably and desirably apprehended as a counter-imperialist discourse since the post-WWII liberalism. For example, David Savran tells us that white masculinity has been a "casualty" in the battles fought by the Civil Rights and Women's movements. With the rise of gender studies and queer theories, (white) masculinity has been "a function not of social or cultural mastery but of the act being subjected, abused, even tortured" (Savran 38). So, the accruing of post-structural discourse together with multicultural ideology has engendered timely sensibilities to embrace what Lee recognizes the "historical moment" in which "labelling/attacking" white masculinity could be a pleasurable political act to redeem social justice.

### **Constructing and Destructing the Straight White Man**

Unlike the historically oppressed minorities, the straight white male category has always been immune from being labelled. To attack the straight white male subject, the play aptly portrays the character (Matt) that

needs to be unfavorably received and judged by the audience. The tactic of rendering this tragic hero needs to involve both construction and destruction of the straight white maleness. To construct a straight white male identity, Lee opts for collective endeavors from her straight white male friends who would improvise the quotidian petty acts of white heteronormativity. And these straight white behaviors are performed through, borrowing Raymond Williams' terms, their "structure of feeling" (Williams 132). Somehow reminiscing "the good old days," the three brothers perform whiteness by indulging in their white privilege. If "structure of feeling," according to Raymond Williams, is a recursive process that comprises the "dominant, residue, and emerging" ideologies (132), white privilege as the dominant ideology mediated the (white) characteristic to denote white subjects. In Act One, for example, the (white) "structure of feeling" is reflected through several quotidian ridicule yet encrypted white acts such as their favorite (converted Monopoly) game called "privilege" that "you [the white] have fun by not having fun" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 63) as well as the self-mocking KKK performance that used to chant "we know we belong to the Klan. And the Klan we belong is grand!" (65).

While the straight white male identity can be constructed by repeated acts of performing their white privileged "structure of feeling," the play's racial political value is to dismantle such a category by displaying the obsession of Matt's obsolete white privilege. Among the straight white male characters, Matt is portrayed as a "hard-working prodigy" who used to be a role model for Jake and Drew for leading his "Matt's school for Young Revolutionaries." To his two younger brothers, Matt used to be the heroic figure who taught them to fight and instilled in them (white) liberal values by showing how to "terminate" a racist teacher for "only casting white people in Oklahoma" and "bash the offensive Gay Chicken game" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 64–65). By characterizing Matt as a "puffin" with qualities of being "funny, good-looking, cool, and socially conscious" ("Straight White Men" 68), the play intends to stage an idealized liberal hero conflated with straight white maleness. But the construction of such an idealized white masculinity is meant to be deployed as the same tactic to trouble and destroy the straight white man.

The emasculation of the straight white man enacts near the end of Act One in which Matt breaks into

tears amid the Christmas dinner. Of course, unlike a conventional tragedy, Matt's breakdown does not earn him an honorary catharsis. Instead, it is a very emasculating act of rendering him a "cowardly macho bullshit" (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 68). In other words, the conventional heroic catharsis is disrupted because of his own willing attachment to the obsolete liberal ideal which, ironically, is regarded as the failure of indexing a set of neoliberal disqualifications. "Why can't a guy fucking cry if he wants?" as Jake tries to defend Matt, but crying fails to justify the lack of choice and agency defining him as a tragic hero. Nonetheless, Matt is hardly seen as a liberal hero. Despite his desire "to renounce [white] privilege, he has no ideological critique of the economic and social regime he lives in" (Ybarra 519). If social values, under neoliberal condition, are in alignment with the market values that prioritize capital (including human capital), Foucauldian biopolitics that celebrates "being the entrepreneur of oneself, one's own capital, one's own producer" (Foucault 225–226) is deemed crucial in playing a game within the "social change." Obviously, both Drew and Jake reckon such neoliberal values of "social change" have been shifting from liberalism to neoliberalism. While neoliberalism transforms multiculturalism, the "straight white men" like them would have to adapt to such "change" to also "make [one]self into a self-actualized commodity." Otherwise, there is "something wrong" if someone like Matt cannot as well become what Jake calls "an ambitious self-actualizer hypocrite" who "can be white and also make a difference" (Lee, "Straight White Men" 69–70).

The destruction of the straight white male subject further goes on when Matt is rendered as not merely a "loser for no reason" but also attached to the liberal ideal by overly obsessing with obsolete white privilege as he is yet to be consumed by his own white guilt. In Act Two, Drew tries to theorize what is "wrong" with Matt by suggesting psychiatric therapy to him, assuming it is the way to learn "how to be happy" by actualizing his "abilities in service to something bigger than [one]self" (70). But in fact, Matt's happiness can only be attained by going back to his home, the only comfort zone in which he could redeem his liberal white guilt for the (sexual and racial) minorities. Matt becomes a hateful subject not simply because of acting as a "cowardly macho bullshit" but also his reluctance to change, as Jake speculates, to offer "noblesse oblige" to the minorities by "making [unnecessary] sacrifice

and not trying to take up space" (70). And staging Matt in a self-evading costume trying to take the back seat therefore mediates, both physically and figuratively, Matt's intention of "making [him]self invisible"—an effective approach of repositioning the power structure.

In contrast with those "minorities" of upward mobility such as the Kims, who are building a giant new house, or a black CEO who grew up in the projects, Matt however only desires to stay home to keep Ed's company and works as a temp. Unlike Drew, who throws "achievement, service, and happiness" as the "three most wanted things" in his life, Matt names "you (Ed), those guys (Drew and Jake)" instead (Y. J. Lee, "Straight White Men" 84). Though he used to be complimented as "the most gifted person who can be good at anything [he] wanted" (85), Matt does not want to adapt or, in neoliberal terms, to "sell" himself. Notwithstanding Jake's criticism that "if you can't sell yourself, you're fucked" (73), Matt does not want to enact and reckon the fact that "things are different now." But Ed is reluctant to believe Matt's unwillingness to "convince others of his specialness" (73) and thus sets up a mock interview for an entry-level job in a human rights organization.

As a critical scene to show Matt as an obsolete tragic hero, the mock interview is also the crucial moment of diagnosing his "sick way of thinking." To stage a visual saliency on Matt as a (white) subject, the scene of the mock interview is deployed as an opportunity to draw theatrical attention to the presence of Matt. Supposedly staged as an opportunity for Matt himself to prove himself not "a loser for nothing" to the audience, the interview has yet become the very technique of revealing and staging the hypocrisy of his white liberal guilt that has repressed his interview performance. Though Ed tries to cover Matt in the first attempt by calling it "great," Jake critiques Matt's performance as "terrible." It is not, Jake believes, that Matt is not qualified but the fact that Matt is "choosing not to" (Lee 73). Instead, as Jake expounds, "[Matt] can't work for a bunch of privileged first-worlders who use 'human rights' as an excuse to slap the world around with their Western dicks" (74). Matt's interview skills, in other words, are not the problem, but Matt is trapped in what Drew infers as "a sick way of thinking" (73). By being trapped in his own "vortex of negativity," Matt is experiencing an impasse of "cruel optimism"—an "unhealthy attachment" (Ybarra qtd. in Berlant 515). In a neoliberal multicultural society

where minorities are excelling, Matt, however, is yet obsessed with his (obsolete) liberal ideal that is haunted by his own imaginary white guilt. As Jake states, "there is nothing people like us (the straight white guys) can do in the world that isn't problematic or evil" (74), but social change is happening, he further reminds Matt, that "privileged white dickheads are pretty hard-pressed to explain why the world needs [them] to succeed while their counter-parts (women and minorities) are doing enough to make the world a better place just by getting ahead" (74). If someone like Matt "has done a good job of taking a back seat" without conforming to the impetus of neoliberal multiculturalism, that person is not simply trapped in a *sick way of thinking* but also obsessed with, as Jake's sharp diagnosis reveals, a "freak way" of rendering himself a "loser for no reason" (97).

If Matt, according to Ybarra's critique, is seen as beyond "a failed liberal hero in terms of theatrically embodying the impasse faced by the First-World precariat in the contemporary United States" (Ybarra 515), his self-inflicted precarity is therefore unsympathetically judged by the audience, especially being juxtaposed with Jake, who is deemed as a neoliberal outperformer. And the contrast between Matt and Jake further demonstrates how a loser with a "sick way" of performance, under neoliberalism, can be worse than an "asshole" like Jake:

JAKE: [...] Look at me! I'm an asshole, but people kind of like me, whether they know it or not.

JAKE. Yes, I am! My company's run almost entirely by white guys, and I do nothing about it. I make "ironically" racist jokes, I give straight guys shit about "acting gay," I talk about which of our interns I want to fuck. As much as I'd like to bring someone other than a white guy to a client meeting, the clients don't want, so I'd never do it. Together with my ex-wife, I'm raising our kids to be as white as possible, except for when their blackness makes them more appealing tokens. So it's good to know Matt's out there doing what he thinks is right, being a martyr so I don't have to!

MATT. That's not what I 'm doing.

Jake. Yes, you are! You're making sacrifices

for people who are “other,” but what are they sacrificing to make the world better? Nothing! They don’t want you. They don’t even want each other. They want me. (Y. J. Lee, “Straight White Men” 74)

Nothing seems to be more desperate and sabotaging than being excommunicated by one’s own kind. Serving as the “scapegoat,” Matt has become an outcast of the straight white men by failing the neoliberal multicultural subjectivation. Also, by totally flunking all the mock interviews, Matt is unhealthily attached to what Drew unbearably calls “the egoistic white male despair,” showing an incorrigible symptom that “can’t stop hating [him]self” (75). As Drew warns, social change is happening whether Matt chooses to sabotage himself or not. But if Matt continues to “intellectualize [him]self into uselessness,” he is going to find his way of life unbearable. Under the neoliberal evaluation, the play has successfully denaturalized and differentiated heteronormative whiteness by marginalizing and expelling Matt as a total “loser for no reason.” Inflicted with hostility, Matt is staged as a total straight white male outcast whom Jake wants to “kill,” Drew tells him to enjoy his “misery,” and Ed, intolerably, finds him “repugnant.” As a result, Matt has also performed, ironically, his own Nietzschean version of *The Birth of Tragedy* yet is deemed “repugnant” by breaking the fourth wall and staring out at his audience for soliciting an impossible catharsis.

### Reflection on White Privilege and a New Form of Whiteness

*Straight White Men* is a powerful political work that yet demands a collective reflection and self-inquiry. With social change, white privilege is absorbed within the liberal ideal and transformed as white liberal guilt. By consuming such guilt, a liberal straight white man like Matt is rendered a white precariat deemed as neoliberally undesirable, by taking the “back seat.” As such, it is considered a successful political tactic, as Lee intends, of attacking the straight white subject by pathologizing and racializing Matt as a white “loser for no reason.” However, in the process of destroying the straight white man, there is also provided a space of diagnosis that reflects a common sickness. And this symptom is after all embodied in Jake, the only character who seems capable of apprehending how

and where Matt has gone wrong. On one hand, Jake sympathizes with Matt’s white liberal ideal. On the other hand, he bears zero tolerance for Matt’s (hypocritical) political correctness. With Jake staged as a character of *cognitive dissonance* to attack Matt, Lee’s real trick is to deploy the same contradictory dissonance as the very “litmus test” to dissect the audience’s unaware self-hypocrisy and complacency. In other words, whoever is experiencing the very cognitive dissonance among the audience is perhaps the very homogenized cultural symptom engendered under neoliberalism. Notwithstanding all these values of social justice, being “a loser [like Matt] is worse than being an asshole” (Bent 34).

Inspired by Mac Wellman, Lee’s unorthodox dramaturgy targets to “destroy the audience” by attacking their self-complacency. Deploying an approach of self-critique, Lee hopes that the production of *Straight White Men* would have “prevented [her] from feeling totally self-righteous as an Asian female” because working on the show has also forced her “to confront her own hypocrisy” (Bent 34). However, in the same vein of conceiving the trick of challenging the audience’s committed sense of social justice, Lee’s motive also operates in alignment with the same neoliberal symptom of *cognitive dissonance*, namely, a “sick way of thinking” as experienced in her identity politics theater.

To Young Jean Lee, making identity politics theater is always a “nightmare.” While *Songs of Dragon Flying to Heaven*, her only Asian American identity politics play, can only be articulated in complicated affective terms of “ugly feelings,” *Straight White Men*, an ostensible retaliation against the defaulted white heteronormativity, performs a critical diagnosis on neoliberal multiculturalism in which we all have been increasingly absorbed in what Jodi Melamed calls “a new form of whiteness” (Melamed, *Represent and Destroy Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* 152). For this same reason, if creating racial identity politics theater, for emerging ethnic playwrights such as Lee, has been increasingly contingent, such racial contingency also serves as a timely reminder to reevaluate the meanings of identity politics undermined by the status quo of neoliberal multicultural ideology. In the case of *SWM*, Lee’s identity politics seems to have successfully labeled and attacked the straight white male category as timely racial political retaliation, but such a vindictive tactic



can be the very undoing of the Asian American identity due to the cultural material absence of what Franz Fanon calls "corporeal schema" (Fanon 111).

## Conclusion

With the frame of racial contingency, Lee's identity politics theater, therefore, does not simply serve as a litmus test to expose the hypocrisy of neoliberal multiculturalism but also reflects on this collective "sick way of thinking" urging for critical need to create potential platforms for reflection among audience on their political and/or cultural identities. In this way, reflecting on Lee's aesthetic "sick thinking" also desires to connect with a theoretically uncertain audience and encourage them to consciously reconsider how such "thinking" has engendered in relation to racial contingency in social and historical terms. By producing various shows of multiple/multicultural identities, Lee's identity politics theater embraces the currency of neoliberalism by engaging cultural appropriations and exchange models. However, her "unorthodox dramaturgy" not only gestures as a critical aesthetic in signifying a new wave of Asian American playwrighting but also exposes a neoliberal multiculturally driven predicament of racial contingency in which identity political subjects have been (racial) contingently underrepresented or dismissed. Therefore, if both ethnic artists and critics also bypass to negotiate such a racially asymmetrical reality in the American theatrical landscape, aren't we (the neoliberal products) also trapped in the very *cognitive dissonance* of "sick way of thinking" in the course of consuming the *jouissance* of laughing at the straight white loser?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In *Contemporary Asian American Drama*, Esther Lee reminds us that it was hard for the playwrights of color to have their plays produced at the mainstream venues, which include Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theaters. And she interprets that such recognition of mainstream is a "mixed blessing" in the ways that writing for a wider/whiter audience would potentially undo Asian American identities by losing ourselves into it.

<sup>2</sup> As Esther Lee suggests, through multicultural programming, Asian American playwrights slowly found opportunities to write for a wider audience, albeit in a

limited way. A wider audience, for most second-wave writers, was a vexed question. For example, "whiter" and "wider," for Velina Hasu Houston, were synonymous because her supervisor once suggested to her to write for a "wider" audience due to her marginalized minority topic.

<sup>3</sup> In his 1991 article "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Frank Chin criticizes Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan, whose works are fake due to their sources in Christian dogma in Western philosophy, history, and literature, while Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* has been her most successful "sellout" show due to her deliberation of commodifying all the Asian subjects (Grote 27).

<sup>4</sup> In the Big Bang Conference in 2006, Tisa Chang (the Pan Asian Rep) valued aesthetic diversity, but she has a more customary view of what Asian American theaters should focus on artistically. She observed that younger artists immersed in diverse aesthetic practices are frequently not aware of their history. Chang commented that it was a "big mistake" that the younger artists didn't seem to be interested in these markers of history (Houston 135).

<sup>5</sup> Diana Son, a third-wave playwright, whose *Stop Kiss* (1998) won the GLAAD Media Award for the Best New York Production. But after the premiere featured Sandra Oh and Kevin Carroll as the leading roles, the subsequent productions (more than 100) had an all-white cast, even in a city as diverse as London or New York City (Hong 62).

<sup>6</sup> In the preface of *New Downtown Now*, Lee observes plays written by Jeffrey M. Jones and Mac Wellman are interesting and original. And much of what she acknowledges as "downtown" or "experimental" does not rely on a single playwright and employs collaged texts that couldn't really be called "plays" in the traditional sense. The downtown playwrights play with "theatrical conventions, structure, and language in ways that excite audience, without consideration of the demands of mainstream commercial theater or of the imperatives of some outdated notion of the avant-garde" (Wellman and Lee viii).

<sup>7</sup> In the process of producing the identity politics shows, Lee points out that the scripts are collaborative and built out of improvisation with the actors as well as the spectators. She describes it as a "crowd-sourced dramaturgy" that involves collective efforts to improvise the plays.

<sup>8</sup> With the establishment of Young Jean Lee's Theater Company in 2003, Lee has been producing various identity politics shows including the well-received *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* (Asian American identity), *The Shipment* (Black identity), and *The Untitled Feminist*

*Show* (female identity), together with the well-acclaimed *Straight White Men* (White identity), etc.

<sup>9</sup> In her talk show “World Stage 2015,” Young Jean Lee mentioned that *Straight White Men* was conceived upon the seemingly naturalizing multicultural society in which straight white maleness has been labelled as an identity, while “privilege of all kinds” is neoliberally acknowledged along with the demographic change.

<sup>10</sup> In *Young Jean Lee’s Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender*, Karen Shimakawa reads *Songs* (psychoanalytically) as a play that vexes all attempts in terms of politics and aesthetics. Using Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings,” Shimakawa argues *Songs* is a difficult play to characterize in terms of affect, or rather, its “affective difficulties” are directly and intimately related to its “difficult” politics and aesthetics (Shimakawa 92).

<sup>11</sup> “Young Jean Lee talks STRAIGHT WHITE MEN.” YouTube, uploaded by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 25 Jan. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdQibq7gY6o&t=35s>

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