Periperformativity and Ethnicity in the Theater of Young Jean Lee

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I. Introduction

Recent interest in the somatic dimension of language and embodied performance among academics and artists has risen in reaction to the obliteration of difference in this globalized era. In what became a world of “modernity at large,”(1) however, there are groups of individuals who prefer not to discuss their cultural and historical specificities explicitly. As demonstrated in the assurance of self-possession in ethnic absolutism

1) The phrase “modernity at large” comes from the title of the 1996 book written by Arjun Appadurai. It refers to the emergence of a perception that celebrates “a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present” beyond the Euro-American region (3).
and anti-colonial national movements during the second half of the twentieth century, we’ve seen that those who had insisted on their status apart from others frequently ended up being trapped in the image of enclosure. How then might one feel and express one’s relation to oneself without being subjected to binary thought about self and other, about ally and enemy?

This essay critically considers the organization of space and time in minoritarian aesthetic practices—namely, how those who feel a distance from dominant culture move around that culture in the contemporary United States. For this study, I use playwright and director Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, which premiered in 2006 at HERE Arts Center in New York City.2 The play calls for four women of Asian descent (one Korean American and three Koreans) and White Persons 1 and 2. *Songs of the Dragons* displays bodies scripted with hyperbolic ethnic signs (e.g., Korean traditional dresses and absurdly large smiles on Korean characters’ faces emphasizing their conformity to roles exaggerating ethnicity), but the display of ethnic spectacles is not the play’s only concern. Now and then the characters noted in the script only as “Korean 1, 2, 3” or “Korean-American”3 enact moments in which the ethnicity that the audience thinks it knows all too well becomes a sign of aggressiveness and at the same time represents a protean body. In the show, such change is sensed in an experimental video, in a shamanic dancing to Korean popular song (“Small Waiting” by Cool),

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2) Unless otherwise noted, all information about a live performance discussed in this essay is drawn from the recorded version of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* performed at HERE Arts Center on September 29, 2006, which was produced by Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company.

3) The hyphenated term “Korean-American” is the name given to the only Asian American character in the play. “When speaking English,” playwright Lee notes, “Korean 1, 2 and 3 speaks with authentic Asian accents and Korean-American speaks with an American accent” (34).