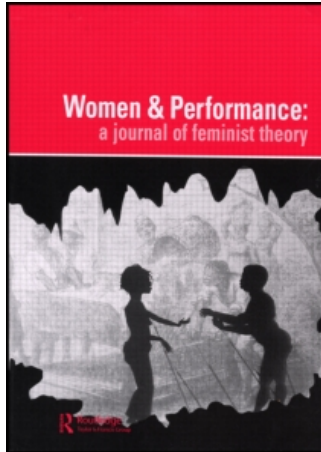


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YOUNG JEAN LEE'S UGLY FEELINGS ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

Stuplime animation in *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven*

Karen Shimakawa

*Playwright Young Jean Lee, like many Asian-American playwrights of her generation, chafe at the thought of writing an 'identity' play—something that will genuinely or accurately reveal some truth of Asian-American gendered experience. Her response to the call of identity, in *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven: A play about white people in love* draws upon the exhaustion and anxieties that characterizes recent postfeminism and post-race discourses. Jameson's lamentations over the waning of affect notwithstanding, Lee's play set in this post-post landscape is full of feeling—of discomfort, self-loathing, boredom, and mild bemusement. Using Sianne Ngai's formulation of 'ugly feelings,' this essay considers Lee's work as indicator of, and response to, the generative value of ugly feelings.*

I

Near the beginning of Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* the narrator reminds us, in good identitarian fashion, that 'the important thing about being Korean is getting to know your roots.' Performing the obligatory filial piety that is the hallmark of so many representations of/by Asian-Americans, she laments that:

we come to this country and want to forget about our ancestry, but this is bad, and [so] we have to remember that our grandfathers and grandmothers were people too, with interesting stories to tell. Which leads to a story from my grandmother, which is the story of the mudfish.¹

KOREAN-AMERICAN (the character's only designation in the script²) proceeds to give us her grandmother's recipe for a traditional Korean delicacy (meekudaji tang) 'that she would only serve once a year because it was such a pain in the ass to make.'³ Profanity aside, the story fulfills a readily recognizable function in a play 'about' Korean-American female identity: it illustrates the traditions and

relationships that connect diasporic Asians to their 'home' countries/cultures via familial (and very often gustatory) ties, especially as they bind female progenitors to their culinary inheritors, their Asian (American) daughters and granddaughters. That this link, between domestic material practices and *story*, should provide the starting point for such an 'identity' play by a Korean-American female playwright, seems only fitting.⁴

The audience has, in some ways at least, been primed to expect such a play: upon entering the building, we are held in a vestibule before being allowed into the seating area—a pause that gives us an opportunity to take in the 'dragon' mural painted in a stylized version of traditional Korean pictorial art as we listen to the soothing sounds of Korean Buddhist music and trickling water; the lighting is dimmed through red paper lanterns, but two gravel paths of shimmering white pebbles are visible, paths that lead past the murals and to our seats. If the oriental 'Shaolin Temple' aesthetic might set off the alarm bells for the vigilant anti-racist Asian-Americanist, it is likely seen as appropriate (at worst) or kitschy (at best) to less politicized theatergoers. In either case, the audience strolls through the 'temple' setting ready to see *something* about Koreanness/Korean-Americanness; and the story of a Korean grandmother lovingly preparing a ritual meal would seem to fit the bill nicely.

Except that KOREAN-AMERICAN's story of her grandmother does *not* open the play. 'Have you every noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged?' she asks us as the stage lights come up. KOREAN-AMERICAN launches into a horrific (if hilarious) monologue, filled with racist self-loathing:

It's like being raised by monkeys—these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status. Most of us hate these monkeys from an early age and try to learn how to be human from school or television, but the result is always tainted by this subtle or not-so-subtle retardation. Asian people from Asia are even more brain-damaged, but in a different way, because they are the original monkey.⁵

Although she takes a swat at white racists as well ('some white men who like Asian women seem to like this retarded quality'), the effect is still shocking and discordant with the ambiance of the theater vestibule—for Asian-Americans in the audience at least, it would be the discursive-theatrical equivalent of a slap in the face.

Except that this monologue, too, has a precursor: after the houselights go down and before KOREAN-AMERICAN takes the stage, we are shown a video of an Asian-American woman—the playwright—*literally* getting slapped in the face, repeatedly, and hard, her cheeks growing redder and streaked with tears as the video progresses. And even this jarring prologue is anticipated: when the audience rounds the 'temple' wall we see that it is painted on the outside of the stage set, the interior of which is starkly un-exotic: bare plywood, lit overhead

with glaring fluorescents. The audience is lulled by familiar (and perhaps comforting) stereotypes only to be confronted with the disturbing ramifications of that seduction: the violence (self-)directed at Asian women is literally and figuratively the flip-side of such Orientalia.

Lee's play is filled with such jarring juxtapositions—indeed, they arguably constitute the *substance* of the play. KOREAN-AMERICAN ends her opening monologue/rant with 'Let the Korean dancing begin!' and on cue, three Asian women in traditional Korean formal costumes bound onstage in a rush of bright colors and sumptuous, crisply-starched fabric. Although as the dance number progresses it becomes clear that their movements are by no means authentic 'traditional Korean dance', it is, in some measure, the exotic spectacle for which we have been prepared—made all the more exotic when KOREANS 1 through 3 proceed to deliver the ensuing dialogue in a 'foreign' language.⁶ That that language is a mix of Asian languages (stage directions specify that KOREAN 3 speak Cantonese while the others speak Korean) or that the characters comically run through a series of butchered or made-up names during the course of the scene may or may not be apparent to audience members, but even the monolinguals will likely note that 'sex' appears to be the topic at hand; and when an off-stage (male) voice asks KOREAN 3 menacingly, 'Shall we play "hookers and johns"?' the (very short) journey from 'Korean schoolgirl' to 'military prostitute' is complete.⁷

II

It would be inaccurate, however, to cast Lee's strategy in such didactic terms. It is not at all clear, in fact, that she has a single faction or demographic in her sights, and at times, *Songs of the Dragons* invokes an hysterical backlash/neo-liberal (or perhaps neo-conservative) rhetoric, either directly or through paranoid projections of minorities gone wild: 'There is a minority rage burning inside of me,' warns KOREAN-AMERICAN. 'I hate white people because all minorities secretly hate them.'⁸ In these moments she confirms the deepest fears of those who lament the ways post-Civil Rights identitarian claims for social justice have established legal and social precedents and practices. Outlining his characterization of the United States as a 'postemotional society,'⁹ sociologist Stjepan Mestrovic surveys contemporary culture and discovers a rather Orwellian landscape:

So-called postmodern culture feeds parasitically on the dead emotions of other cultures and of the past in general. The result is that various groups become the reference point for synthetically created quasi-emotions and the notion of an all-encompassing cultural reference point such as Americanism has been replaced by Americanisms pertaining to women, Hispanics, African-Americans, other minorities, and various permutations of these and other groups. (Mestrovic 2000, 1–2)

Mestrovic does not adopt fully Frederic Jameson's (1991) thesis on the 'waning of affect' in late capitalism, finding instead a '*post-affect*' that has been

'embellished with rationalizations, intellectualizations, and other products of mental ruminations' that may or may not be based on personal experience:

The Serbs still remember their defeat at Kosovo in 1389. African-Americans are increasingly revivifying the memories of slavery. Feminists cannot let go of the memory of patriarchy. And so on. (Mestrovic 2000, 91)

Not surprisingly, Mestrovic characterizes Affirmative Action as 'special rights that citizens in the majority do not enjoy' (15) and he rails against the evils of political correctness: 'Calling someone a racist, anti-Semite, sexist, or bigot is often sufficient to ruin someone's reputation even if he or she is none of these things' (90). Indeed, Lee's *KOREAN-AMERICAN* confirms Mestrovic's worst nightmare: 'minorities have all the power', she muses. 'We can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them and there's nothing you can do to stop us... I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you.'¹⁰ In her/their more compliant moments, however, *KOREAN-AMERICAN* and *KOREANS* 1 through 3 suggest that all of this 'minority rage' is so much posturing and that they have been properly interpellated into the post-race, post-identitarian, post-postemotional utopia that Mestrovic envisions: 'I want to be white', they declare near the end of the play. 'I want to say things like, "I don't think of people in terms of race. I find it more interesting to focus on our shared human experience"'. But as the audience's laughter at this line confirms, this post-race posturing is ludicrous and self-serving: 'I love the white patriarchy with all my heart because I'm ambitious and I want power', they continue. 'People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really I'm just a fucking white guy.'¹¹

On the two nights I attended performances, this last line drew some of the most sustained laughter; but I would venture to guess that not all of us were laughing for the same reasons or in the same spirit. *Songs of the Dragon* is clearly a play that vexes all attempts to situate it neatly in terms of politics or aesthetics. It is also a difficult play to characterize in terms of *affect*. Or rather, I would argue that its affective 'difficulties' are directly and intimately related to its 'difficult' politics and aesthetics. If Mestrovic's revision/critique of Jameson's theory of the 'waning of affect' seeks to reanimate 'live' emotion (as opposed to the 'dead', postemotions mobilized by identitarian politics), Sianne Ngai finds a usefulness in identifying the operation of *lesser* affects, those not typically celebrated or studied (envy, anxiety, irritation, etc.) but that are, she argues, nonetheless fully functioning in contemporary late capitalism. Drawing on Paolo Virno's corrective to Jameson's thesis on affect's demise (1996), Ngai writes:

The nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings—ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited... for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth. (Ngai 2005, 5)

In this changed scenario, reasons Ngai, we should look to the affective work being done in literature, film, visual arts, etc.—for it *is* being done, she argues, if not on the more expansive scale of earlier eras. Whereas Mestrovic sees contemporary culture caught in a cycle of rationalization and (manufactured) ‘postemotion’, Ngai looks to what she calls ‘ugly’ feelings as a site in which real affective work continues to take place (even if it does not or cannot lead to *action*). Moreover, this reduction in scale can itself tell us something about the moment in which we find ourselves: ‘There is a sense’, Nagi argues, ‘in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not.’ (Ngai 2005, 10) Ngai suggests that these ‘ugly’ feelings, and the (low-level) dis-ease they produce are important indicators of, and responses to, the specific moment and culture(s) in which we find ourselves, *and* that their shared characteristic of ambivalent ‘ugliness’ (as opposed to grander, unmitigated, or more passionate feelings) is the most crucial indicator of all. Ngai argues that:

the striking persistence with which the feelings in this book reflexively ‘theorize’ or internalize the confusion between the subjective status and objective status of feeling in general can be taken as following from their relatively weak intentionality—their indistinctness if not absence of object. (Ngai 2005, 22)

Indeed, this (deliberate) confusion of subjective and objective feelings, and of subjects and objects of racializing and gendering discourses more generally, in *Songs of the Dragons* points to the source(s) of the affective ‘difficulties’ or perhaps ‘ugliness’ in the play.

Ngai identifies seven ugly feelings that characterize recent literature, film, and visual art; each of these feelings, as they are produced by and in the creative work, indexes a particular *problem* in contemporary culture, specifically a problem with the location/placement of the subject in relation to other subjects and objects. In the remainder of this essay I would like to consider two of these ugly feelings as they circulate in *Songs of the Dragons Flying To Heaven*; for a closer examination of animatedness and ‘stuplimity’ as they function in and around the play may provide some insight into the function of *performance* in post-race, post-feminist discourse.

III

Although her eventual focus is on claymation animation and the production of race in that medium (Fox Network’s animated series *The PJs*), Ngai’s concept of *animatedness* extends well beyond stop-motion photography. For Ngai, animatedness refers not merely to the animation of (dead/inert) material as racialized representation (claymation or illustrated versions of characters); it also characterizes the reading, and sometimes the performance,

of racialized liveness. Examining early experiments with animation, Ngai notes that the ambivalence of animation—‘the ambiguous interplay between agitated things and deactivated persons’ (91)—dovetails with a national preoccupation with a similar ambivalence about the racialized subject:

As the translation, into affect, of a state of being ‘puppeteered’ that points to a specific history of systemic political and economic disenfranchisement, racialized animatedness actually calls attention to this predicament in a particularly emphatic way. (Ngai 2005, 12)

The question of subjective/objective control over the animated figure—who *animates* it/her/him?—is a loaded one for racialized performers, she argues, and as a result, the problem/question of animation haunts *all* racialized subjects, ‘for whom objectification, exaggerated corporeality or physical pliancy, and the body-made-spectacle remain doubly freighted issues’ (101).

If racialized performance necessarily mobilizes the ‘ugly’ affect of animatedness, what is the effect of that mobilization in *Songs of the Dragons*? The animation of racialized gender takes place throughout the play, but perhaps nowhere more spectacularly than in the figures of KOREANS 1 through 3. These figures are legible to the extent they are animated as hyperbolic, stereotypical constructions of Korean femininity. Whether fluttering through their rendition of a quasi-traditional Korean dance, cowering at the sound of the (horror-movie ghost’s) voice propositioning them as prostitutes, or mimicking the ‘graceful’ cadences of a ‘Korean Airlines promotional video welcoming Westerners to Korea’ (stage directions, 12) the three women animate, and are animated by, the stereotypes through which Korean women obtain visibility in mainstream US representation:

KOREAN 1

I know of a gorgeous island where all anyone ever eats is dukpuki and duk and—which are special rice pastries—and dumplings with hot tea. And then they dress up in dragon costumes and run around in circles!

[KOREANS form a dragon, with KOREAN 2 as the head, and run around in a circle.]

KOREAN 2

I’m going to climb up the mountain to look for the silk-worm!

KOREAN 3

I’m going to climb with my grandmother on my back up the mountain of Cho-Fu-San!¹²

The women pair these lines with exaggerated gestures that resemble, or perhaps parody, traditional Korean dance moves, gazing melodramatically and longingly off into the distance at the fabled mountains, to great comic effect. A more manic, darkly comedic demonstration of this quality of racialized

animatedness occurs during another dance number, set to the upbeat pop song, 'All I want for christmas is you':

The KOREANS and KOREAN-AMERICAN take turns walking downstage center and miming a gruesome suicide in a confident manner.

KOREAN 2 commits hari kiri.

KOREAN 1 douses herself with kerosene and lights herself on fire.

KOREAN 3 stabs her vagina with a knife.

KOREAN-AMERICAN does way too much cocaine [etc].¹³

The mimed suicides grow increasingly creative/violent until the song ends, when they 'scuttle' offstage. If, according to Ngai, animatedness both manifests and 'fixes' an ambivalence about the autonomy/agency of the racialized/gendered subject, then what might be the effect of mining that ambivalence, that is, performing racialized/gendered animation (here, the stereotype of the self-sacrificing/suicidal Oriental woman) *too well*? Ngai suggests this might effect some (limited) form of 'revenge':

racial stereotypes and clichés, cultural images that are perversely both dead and alive, can be critically countered not just by making the images *more* 'dead' (say, by attempting to stop their circulation), but also, though in a more equivocal fashion, by *reanimating* them. Thus... animatedness and its affective cousins... might also be thought of as categories of feeling that highlight animation's status as a nexus of contradictions within the capacity to generate unanticipated social meanings and effects—as when the routine manipulation of raced bodies on screen results in an unsuspected liveliness undermining animation's traditional role in constituting bodies *as* raced. (Ngai 2005, 125)

This *unsuspected liveliness*, I would argue, is mobilized elsewhere in the play to similarly vengeful effect: stereotypes of Korean femininity are performed 'too well' (Ngai 2005, 117) thus placing pressure on the animation process that maintains the legibility and visibility of these stereotypes. But Lee also deploys a counter-strategy: at several points she draws distinctions between the KOREAN-AMERICAN and KOREANS, and at times she puts them in (violent) conflict with one another. KOREAN-AMERICAN and the KOREANS don't seem to get along, at least initially—KOREAN-AMERICAN's attempt at 'Korean dancing' is so bad the scene devolves into a catfight; a second attempt ends as unhappily:

KOREAN 3 eyes KOREAN-AMERICAN's dancing critically and makes a disgusted face.

KOREAN-AMERICAN feels humiliated and terrible and stops. She glares at the KOREANS through the rest of their dance... When the dance ends, KOREAN-AMERICAN makes racist faces at the KOREANS. She makes 'Chinese

eyes' at KOREAN 2, mimes eating rice at KOREAN 1, does a karate chop for the audience, and bows to KOREAN 3—all while making big buck teeth. The KOREANS are horrified.
 SONG ends.
 KOREAN-AMERICAN exits, cracking up.¹⁴

What are we to make of this moment of intra-ethnic ridicule? I want to argue that as disturbing and alienating as we might find KOREAN-AMERICAN's gestures, they nevertheless work to make stark that *re-animation* strategy identified by Ngai as a possible strategy of resistance: to see the grotesque gestures deployed *by* an Asian-American woman, *at* a group of Asian women, highlights the extent to which Asians are 'puppeteered' into self-hatred and coercive assimilation.

Or does it? Deploying ambivalent racist/sexist animatedness is itself an ambivalent strategy: to the extent audiences don't 'get it' (that is, do not see the hyperbole as strategic but rather take pleasure in the reiteration of racist/sexist norms) the resolution of animatedness' ambivalence works to ramify racist/sexist stereotypes; and even to the extent audiences are in on the joke, what work does *pleasure* do in allowing (or even encouraging) continued animation of these 'humorous' types? Reviews of the play in major newspapers (*New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *The Village Voice*) were unanimously and enthusiastically positive;¹⁵ all of the reviewers seemed to take great pleasure in seeing Whites *and* Asians skewered for their respective prejudices and in the play's perceived edginess: 'Lee is a queen of unease,' writes Alexis Soloski for *The Village Voice*. 'Whites are bigoted, Asians are bigoted, everybody's bigoted, and isn't it great that it's all out in the open now, and we can laugh about it?' asks *New York Times*' Anita Gates, and though she answers her own question, 'not really,' her glowing review belies that equivocation. Gates rates it among 'the best parodies' and singles out Becky Yamamoto's performance of KOREAN-AMERICAN as 'priceless'. Still, that none of the reviewers note the insertion of Cantonese or playful name-swapping amongst the 'Korean-speaking' women, and *Time Out's* David Cote reads the bare plywood-and-fluorescent-bulb set as an 'Asian-style wooden room,' raises a question as to what degree of *unsuspected liveliness* actually registered with audiences.¹⁶

IV

Ngai identifies another ugly feeling that she argues characterizes certain works of contemporary literature, an 'unusual synthesis of excitation and fatigue I call "stuplimity"' (2005, 36):

I will briefly describe it as a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of a sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or

fatigue . . . Stuplimity reveals the limits of our ability to comprehend a vastly extended form as a totality . . . yet not through an encounter with the infinite but with finite bits and scraps of material in repetition. (Ngai 2005, 271)

If what I have described so far gestures toward (over-)animatedness (colorful costumes, lurid suicide pantomimes, dance numbers, catfights), stuplimity is to be found, if it is to be found, in another 'plot line' of *Songs of the Dragons*, the one referenced in the play's subtitle: *A show about white people in love*. WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 alternate scenes with KOREANS 1 through 3 and KOREAN-AMERICAN, occasionally sharing the stage, though rarely interacting, and their scenes are notable, for the most part, for their banality. The scenes featuring WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 (demarcated by a washed-out lighting scheme enhanced by the bare fluorescent bulbs, which are illuminated only for their scenes) seem to exist in a different temporal, social, and possibly geographical landscape: while KOREAN-AMERICAN and the KOREANS address the audience directly and in what appears to be real time, the WHITE PERSONS speak only to each other in a series of (disconnected?) dialogues in which they discuss their relationship in excruciatingly dull detail, contemplating their respective dissatisfactions (and occasional aspirations) with/for each other. 'We have to break up', announces WHITE PERSON 1 in their first scene.

WHITE PERSON 2

Why?

WHITE PERSON 1

First of all, you're sub-par. You're of sub-par intelligence.

WHITE PERSON 2

What?

WHITE PERSON 1

The world is arranged in a hierarchy with people going from the top to the bottom, and you are pretty high up there and so am I, but you are just a little lower than me so that is not going to work out.¹⁷

The reasons for the proposed break-up do not get clearer as the dialogue progresses, though different possibilities emerge: 'I think your nose is too big', says WHITE PERSON 1 when pressed. 'There's just something wrong with your face, I don't know how to explain it'. 'Why won't you have sex with me?' asks WHITE PERSON 1 in a later scene, to which WHITE PERSON 2 has no real response: 'The reason is because you gross me out, and I don't know why'.¹⁸ And indeed, fuller explanations are not forthcoming. WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 appear to be peculiarly afflicted with a bland sort of comfortably-bourgeois hipster anomie: nothing in particular is wrong, but nothing in particular is right, either. They cast about for reasons to break up, ways to stay together, but more than anything they spend their scenes trying to relieve the apparent boredom that has beset their relationship. 'I want to go to Africa', WHITE PERSON 1 announces, a non-

sequitur that she repeats over the course of several scenes before it elicits any response. In their third scene, WHITE PERSON 1 says (much to the relief, I suspect, of many audience members) 'I want to talk about something other than our relationship'.

WHITE PERSON 1

I want there to be some kind of *political* situation between us. I want us to be some kind of political rivals or something.

WHITE PERSON 2

Okay.

[*pause*]

I'm the vice president of the United States . . . and you are some guy who I want to hire for the government. Some white guy.

WHITE PERSON 1

Okay, let's start.

WHITE PERSON 2

I want you to be my communications director of the United States of America. I am your handler and I have been designated your handler to close the deal of you becoming communications director. Do you accept my offer?

WHITE PERSON 1

I do not wish to be your communications director.¹⁹

And so on. WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 manage to create a spectacularly apolitical scenario about politics, as well as a devastatingly un-sexy role-play game that, in the end, reproduces the flatness of their 'real' relationship. In his essay 'Feeling Brown' Jose E. Muñoz posits a relationship between an affective experience that might be roughly claimed as 'Latina/o' and a normative affective performance of 'national affect' understood as white, heterosexual, and 'minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment' (2000, 70). By resisting the tendency to measure the affective/bodily appropriateness of 'others' using the yardstick of heteronormative white US Americanness, Muñoz illustrates the ways that the 'norm' is defined by what it lacks affectively. In *Songs of the dragons*, WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 seem keenly aware that their relationship lacks *something*, if they are unsure what it is.

Stuplidity is not the same as 'absence,' however, nor is it *simply* a matter of boredom/sameness—Ngai's formulation is an admixture of boredom *and* astonishment (or irritation) and it is, in fact, the peculiar way these tendencies hold one another in suspension that constitutes the stuplime. The non-reasons WHITE PERSON 1 gives for wanting to break up (sub-par intelligence or a too-large nose) may seem rather trivial but they nonetheless elicit feelings of extreme (if transient) repulsion:

It's the kind of face where I could possibly get used to it . . . but if I were to go away on a trip for a few weeks and come back and see it, then I would be repulsed . . . it would be like I was sitting across from this monster, this repulsive

monster that might want to touch me at some point and I would have to push it away.²⁰

The stupefying effect of this moment is amplified by the fact that we are, in fact, looking at that 'monstrous' face which appears, of course, completely unremarkable. Even attempts to *engineer* arguments fail to pick up steam; at one point WHITE PERSON 1 attempts to perform the role of 'concerned girlfriend' insisting that WHITE PERSON 2 'stop being an alcoholic, boyfriend', to which he repeatedly insists, 'I'm not an alcoholic!' They are momentarily buoyed by the pseudo-conflict ('This is very exciting, all this talk about alcoholism, says WHITE PERSON 2 but it is soon diffused in yet another aimless role-playing game, a moody and romantic scenario in which one wakes at 3:00am to find the other sitting up, 'thinking'. ('Why do I always have to be the pathetic one?' asks WHITE PERSON 2 after WHITE PERSON 1 switches their roles for a second run-through.)

This repetition (they ultimately rehearse the dialogue four times) signals another characteristic of stупlimity, according to Ngai: 'the temporal specificity of the stупlime text', she writes, is:

marked by extended cycles of exhaustion and recovery (in the effort to manipulate finite but repeated bits of material or information) rather than by an abrupt, instantaneous defeat of comprehension (in the face of a singularly vast or infinite object). (Ngai 2005, 277)

In fact, the scenes featuring WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2, when taken together, are noticeably atemporal: there is virtually nothing in them to secure a linear, progressive trajectory—with almost no alteration, their scenes could be re-ordered with little or no disruption, and we are also given no indication of how long ago this cycle began. But as with animatedness, stупlimity holds the potential to produce something other than (or in addition to) the futility of more of the same: 'astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us', Ngai points out, 'and under what conditions. The shocking and the boring prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible' (262). And indeed, in this case, the WHITE PERSONS seem to find a way out of the temporal eddy in which they've been trapped: 'I want to go to Africa', says WHITE PERSON 1 yet again, except that this time the conversation *moves forward*: WHITE PERSON 2 asks the question we all have been wanting to ask all evening: 'Why do you keep saying that?' WHITE PERSON 1 responds with a curiously awkwardly-phrased monologue:

Because I want to go in the banana tree. There is monkeys in the banana trees and they are—it is a big green banana tree with many yellow bananas in it, and the monkeys are sitting in the tree eating the bananas, and they are smiling And that is what I want to do is go to Africa and climb up into the

banana tree and eat bananas with those monkeys and be happy. I don't want to talk about any of this stuff.²¹

Give or take a continent, we are returned to KOREAN-AMERICAN's opening monologue about having been raised by brain-damaged monkeys a.k.a. 'Asians'. Here we are presented with a concatenation of a different sort: WHITE PERSON 1 dreams of sitting in the trees with banana-eating monkeys as an escape from 'this stuff', presumably the stupefying banalities of bourgeois heteronormativity (and what Muñoz identifies as its affective 'impoverishment'), while KOREAN-AMERICAN dreams of shedding her ties to her monkey-parents so that she can be 'a fucking white guy'. If for KOREAN-AMERICAN having monkey-parents is experienced as a shameful hindrance, WHITE PERSON 1 fantasizes it as idyllic and emancipating. 'The negative affect of stuplimity', writes Ngai:

might be said to produce another affective state in its wake, a secondary feeling that seems strangely neutral, unqualified, 'open'... this final outcome of stuplimity—the echo or afterimage produced by it, as it were—makes possible a kind of resistance. (Ngai 2005, 284)

It is as if the harmonic resonance of this image is enough to shift her stuplime fantasy off its original foundations, in order to set it down in a slightly different orientation; and just this slight shift, in turn, produces startling effects in the ensuing dialogue.

While the scenes involving WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 have been, thus far, largely comic and/or affectively 'flat' (or impoverished), the remaining dialogue is rich, almost unbearably so, with feeling. 'There is so much beauty in you, I can't stand it', says WHITE PERSON 2, which sends WHITE PERSON 1 into an abject tailspin. Crying, she responds, 'I am a fucking monster. There is *nothing there*'. The play closes with the WHITE PERSONS in an attitude much closer to the sublime, having recognized 'the utter terror of living in the world without you', and dreaming of (though not actively pursuing) a future together. It is a curious ending for the pair, in that their declarations seem suddenly, unexpectedly, *heartfelt*—it is difficult not to be moved by their naked emotionalism in these last moments.

And yet. What are we to make of the absence of the Korean and Korean-American characters in this 'happy' ending? The 'plot' involving WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 comes to dominate, and eventually displace, the other scenes and characters, effectively absorbing or ablating their affective punch in service of the white, heterosexual romance. To the extent we want to situate *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven* in the context of 'Asian-American theater', it is instructive to consider the story that (ostensibly) justifies the staking of such a claim: KOREAN-AMERICAN's grandmother's story of the mudfish:

Every New Year's day, my grandmother would throw a bunch of mudfish into a bowl of brine, which would make them puke out all their mud until they were shiny clean. Then she would put pieces of tofu on a skillet, heat it up, and throw

the live mudfish onto the skillet. The mudfish would frantically burrow inside the pieces of tofu to escape the heat and, voila, stuffed tofu!²²

NOTES

1. Unpublished playscript, 1. *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven* premiered at HERE Arts Center, New York City, on 21 September 2006.
2. The 'Character' list identifies KOREAN-AMERICAN as an 'Asian-American female'. Other characters are designated KOREANS 1 through 3 (all Asian females), and WHITE PERSONS 1 and 2 (female and male).
3. Unpublished playscript, 2.
4. *Songs of the dragons* emerged from Lee's dread of writing 'a predictable, confessional, Korean American identity play' (quoted in 'Scorching dragons', Alexie Soloski, *Village Voice*, 3 October 2006; <http://www.villagevoice.com/theater/0640,soloski,74631,11.html>).
5. Unpublished playscript, 1.
6. Unpublished playscript, 4–6.
7. Unpublished playscript, 6.
8. Unpublished playscript, 12.
9. *Postemotional Society*, Stjepan G. Mestrovic (London: Sage, 1997).
10. Unpublished playscript, 2.
11. Unpublished playscript, 26–27.
12. Unpublished playscript, 13.
13. Unpublished playscript, 24.
14. Unpublished playscript, 8.
15. 'Laugh now, you may not when these women rule the world' (Anita Gates, *The New York Times*, 27 September 2006: <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/09/27/theater/reviews/27drag.html>); 'Review: *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven*' (David Cote, *Time Out New York*, September 28–October 4, 2006: www.timeout.com/newyork/details.do?page=1&xyurl=xyl://TONYWebArticles1/574/theater_off_off_broadway/songs_of_the_dragons_flying_to_heaven.xml); 'Scorching dragons' (Alexis Soloski, *Village Voice*, 3 October 2006: www.villagevoice.com/theater/0640,soloski,74631,11.html).
16. Cote concludes his review, 'Race has long been sacralized; it's bracing to see it treated with flagrant contempt. But of course, only this fucking white guy would say that'. Given Lee's assignation of 'fucking white guy' to the four Korean/Korean-American women, it's impossible to know what is meant by the reviewer's statement—an unknowability that, as a print statement, is arguably different from that of the performance of that line on a live stage, by four racially-marked, gendered/sexed bodies. But somehow, Cote's version doesn't read (at least to me) like a strategic attack on the ugly feeling of racialized animateness.
17. Unpublished playscript, 13.

18. Unpublished playscript, 23.
19. Unpublished playscript, 26.
20. Unpublished playscript, 14.
21. Unpublished playscript, 32.
22. Unpublished playscript, 2.

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