15 Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play: Staging Heterotopic Subjectivities

Esther Kim Lee

Young Jean Lee's 2006 play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* begins with a disturbing image that might cause audience members to turn away in disgust. A prerecorded voice-over of Lee, who also directed the play, is heard talking and laughing with her friends and then instructing one of them to hit her face hard. Lee is hit multiple times and is heard sniffling yet encouraging the hitting. After a dozen hits, a video of the hitting appears on the back wall. In a 2007 interview, Lee explains that the hitting can be interpreted as a clichéd representation of "Asian self-hatred," but she also emphasizes that the video was an experiment with how a playwright might insert herself into her own play.[1] In the past few years, Lee has emerged as a groundbreaking theatre artist, described by Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* as "hands down, the most adventurous down-town playwright of her generation."[2] Lee has a unique and original perspective on contemporary theatre, but she is also an Asian American woman playwright who has had to confront, both willingly and unwillingly, long-standing issues of identity, representation, and agency. The racial category "Asian American" does not fit her comfortably and should be an afterthought because the majority of her work does not deal directly with Asian American issues. Still, the label follows her and imposes a set of expectations. *Songs of the Dragons* is her most direct answer to these expectations, and she makes the audience feel her discomfort and pain in having to write about her identity.

Other contemporary Asian American women playwrights have articulated a similar dilemma in writing about identity. Whereas the first wave of Asian American women playwrights[3] dealt directly with identity issues in ways that Lee would call clichéd, drawing on semi-autobiographical history and centering on the politics of representation and resistance,[4] more recent works by playwrights such as Julia Cho and Diana Son, as well as Lee herself, defy conventional catego-rizations in terms of race and gender and have little to do with autobiographical identity or Asian American history. Son's *Stop Kiss* (1998), for example, is about two women of unspecified race who fall in love, Cho's *Architecture of Loss* (2004) is about family and grief, and Lee's *Church* (2007) is about religion. All three playwrights have in their portfolios more plays with characters without specific

ethnic or racial identities than those with specific Asian American references, and when present in their work, Asian American identity functions as one component of a complex combination of influences that shape the characters and dramatic situations. For minority writers, getting recognition for writing on topics not specific to their race, ethnicity, or gender has been read as a sign of success and acceptance, yet Cho, Son, and Lee have all felt compelled to write plays based on their lives and experience. In this essay, I will consider three of their "identity plays" – Cho's *99 Histories*, Son's *Satellites*, and Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* – in order to articulate how each playwright writes about her identity as both an Asian American and a woman while at the same time rejecting the limitations and expectations of that identity.

Cho, Son, and Lee do not represent all contemporary Asian American women playwrights, but they are the most produced and influential of the group in the early twenty-first century. The fact that they are all Korean Americans allows a more focused point of comparison within a broader context of Asian American theatre history. As I discuss in my introduction to *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, the opening decade of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a noticeable number of Korean American playwrights.[5] Korean immigration to the United States reached its numerical peak after the late 1960s, and so was much later than peaks of Chinese and Japanese immigration. The three playwrights I discuss were either the first in the family to be born in the United States or left Korea at a young age. Compared to other Asian American women playwrights, Korean American playwrights have only recently begun to address identity issues and to write about how they are different from their parents' generation. Their plays, therefore, present a more urgent and contemporary perspective on Asian American female identity.

The three playwrights approach identity using different dramaturgical styles and character types, but their plays are similar in how they address gender.[6] All three plays dramatize intergenerational relationships between women, with plot conflicts centering on mothers and grandmothers, daughters and babies. Male characters – real and imagined – occupy a significant part of the female characters' psyches and hauntingly shape how they deal with others. At the core of the plays, Asian American women characters deal with the difficulties of womanhood and with cultural expectations arising from both Korean and American gender politics. Each playwright is aware of the inseparability of gender and race and the legacy of stereotypes that have had a lasting impact on Asian American women. At the same time, they reject reductive trappings in representing gender and instead provide more complex and nuanced views of identity.

The complexities of staging identity in the work of contemporary Asian American women playwrights reflect the complexities of the field of Asian American studies, as well as the lived realities of those who identify themselves as Asian Americans. In the past twenty years, Asian American studies has grown from a small area of study focused on identity formation, history, and political representation to a major field that includes the meta-critical and decentered

perspectives of poststructuralism and transnationalism.[7] In "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," an often-cited chapter of her 1996 book *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe articulates the impossibility of making generalizations about Asian Americans,[8] and in literary and cultural studies, all assumptions about Asian Americans have been deconstructed, while concepts such as race, ethnicity, nationhood, and identity have been redefined as unstable and conditional. Despite these rapid changes and concerns, or perhaps because of them, scholars of Asian American culture have found productive ways to discuss racial and ethnic identities while acknowledging their fluidity and instability.

In *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, Kandice Chuh argues for a definition of "Asian American" that "relies not on the empirical presence of Asian-raced bodies in the United States for its intelligibility, but ... that instead emphasizes the fantasy links between body and subjectivity discursively forged within ... literary and legal texts."[9] Chuh uses the term "fantasy links" to emphasize diegetic representations and to theorize the multiple forms of interconnected narratives, subjectivities, identities, and differences in Asian American literature. In particular, she develops Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia to justify using an Asian Americanist critique to examine Korean American novels:

> [W]e might conceive "Asian America" as a heterotopic formation, one that enfigures the multiple and dissimilar spaces and places of discourse and history that collectively produce what seems at first glance, terminologically, to refer to a distinctly bounded site, "America." Foucault has theorized heterotopia as referencing both the real and unreal spaces that shape social relations.... As in the reflection of a mirror, where knowledge of self derives from seeing that self where she is not, where understanding of real places are determined by seeing through unreal spaces, these novels may be seen to articulate the imagined spaces and material locations variously referenced by "home" and "nation," by "Korean" and "Korean American."[10]

Chuh's interpretation of heterotopia applies to novels that are to be read, and the spaces and locations that she writes about are expressed literarily, but her interpretation of space and subjectivity also serves as a useful framework for analyzing the staging of identity in the plays of Cho, Son, and Lee.

In theatre, unlike literature, imagined spaces can materialize onstage, and the stage can function as a heterotopic site in which both real and unreal spaces can coexist. Foucault includes theatre as one of his examples of heterotopia because of its ability to bring onto the stage "a whole series of places that are foreign to one another."[11] He does not elaborate on theatre beyond a comparison to cinema and gardens in order to illustrate how heterotopia allows juxtaposition of several spaces in one location. In what follows, I take a cue from Chuh and Foucault and examine Cho's *99 Histories*, Son's *Satellites*, and Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* in terms of how the onstage spaces reflect the dilemma of the playwrights in representing identity.

"We remembered the wrong memories": *99 Histories* by Julia Cho

99 Histories was first produced by the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City in 2002 and has been described by Cho as her identity play:

> I guess you could say *99 Histories* was my identity play. I think most writers start there. It wasn't autobiographical but I did write about issues I cared about, issues of home, immigration and family. Growing up, I had very little sense of what Korea was and I had no sense of family history. The play explored that sense of disconnection and loss. It reflects my belief that the past is slippery and often irretrievable. But our need for a sense of continuity and selfhood is so strong that we are able to invent and imagine what we cannot – or will not – remember.[12]

The play revolves around the relationship between Eunice Kim, a Korean American woman in her late twenties, and her mother, Sah-Jin, described by the playwright as an "American-Korean" in her fifties.[13] Eunice was a child prodigy, a virtuoso cello player and overachiever that everyone in town knew. Just before she turned twelve, she witnessed her father getting fatally shot at the convenience store her parents owned. For a while, she focused only on improving her cello-playing and becoming "great," but all of a sudden, she developed a mental illness. She ran away after piercing her hand with her cello bow. At the start of the play, Eunice returns to her childhood home after a long absence. She no longer suffers from mental illness, but she is pregnant and plans to give her baby up for adoption. Eunice is portrayed as someone without a goal, a vagabond whose only mission was, at the advisement of her mother, to not get pregnant and not get AIDS. She avoided the latter, but the pregnancy was an accident, the result of a brief relationship with a white boyfriend. As the plot develops, Eunice begins to speculate about her mother's past in Korea in order to answer fundamental questions about who she herself is. She looks to her mother for answers, but her frustration grows when her questions are met with secrets and silences. Sah-Jin prefers to remember Eunice as the genius cello player and tells her to choose to be happy by focusing on her talent and not looking back, but Eunice refuses to bury the past.

During her search for answers, Eunice finds an old photograph of a woman she initially thinks is her mother, but she is later told that it is her aunt, who had the same illness as her. The photograph functions as the key to Eunice finding answers to her questions. Sah-Jin, whose name means "photograph" in Korean, initially refuses to tell Eunice about the past and what happened in Korea. She wants Eunice to be the ideal American, the model minority who can overcome the curses of the past, but despite Sah-Jin's lifelong efforts to forget the past and give her daughter a new life in a new country, Eunice's inherited genetic illness has the upper hand. It is as if when the illness took over, all of the baggage left behind in Korea resurfaced, forcing mother and daughter both to remember. The play ends with Eunice accepting both the past and the present, picking up her

cello again, and deciding to keep her baby. She also finally gets an answer to one of the questions she asked her mother: what is *chung*? Sah-Jin describes *chung* as "memory plus time" (82). Eunice does not say she understands this complex Korean concept, which defies translation, but she stops asking questions about the past.

During her search for answers, Eunice does not ask the familiar questions about ethnic identity, in the vein of "Am I Korean? Am I American?" or "Am I too assimilated?" Her questions are not either–or and are not solely based on culture, racial identity, experience, or other typical indicators of an identity play. Instead, she wants to know why her parents left Korea and sacrificed everything for her musical success, and whether she can genetically pass her mental illness on to her baby. She suspects everything, including love, memory, and even reality. The only constant in her life is the bond – *chung* – she has with her mother and the bond she is developing with her unborn baby. No matter what happens, even when reality collapses as it did for Eunice with her mental illness, she realizes that *chung* stays with and sustains her.

In her note on the play, Cho specifies how the play should be staged: "The scenes are fluid and run into each other, with only occasional brief beats. Keep in mind that scenes have different textures: some are memories, some are dreams, some are everyday realities. The shifts in texture should be reflected somehow, whether it's through a change in lighting, pacing or tone" (24). The stage described by Cho is a heterotopia where reality is reflected, distorted, and scattered. According to Foucault, "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."[14] The spaces occupied by Cho's characters are both real and unreal, but they are interwoven and connected as the scenes in the play shift between several versions of memory in Eunice's mind. The play begins with Eunice returning home, which is the present reality she has to deal with, but that reality is interrupted by a flashback to a conversation she had with Joe, the father of her baby. Cho indicates this temporal and spatial change with the simple stage direction, "The lights shift" (28). Eunice's reality alternates between present moments and memories of the past, and with each shift, her confusion about herself grows. In scene four, she asks her mother, "Ma, why'd you come here? You and dad?" to which Sah-Jin answers, "What kind of stupid question is that?" (44). When she does not get satisfying answers, Eunice begins to imagine her mother's past in Korea. In this fantasy Korea, a "woman," whom she decides is her mother, falls in love with a white American man who is different from her Korean dad in many ways, but this imagined "memory" overlaps with Eunice's memory of her boyfriend Joe. The layers of memory thicken with Eunice's remembrance of when she (she remembers herself as the "girl") had her mental breakdown.

Within each scene and between scenes, time and space change fluidly, and the boundaries between imagined memories and actual memories are never made clear. In the last scene, Eunice tells her unborn baby what she has come to realize:

> We took pictures of the wrong things, and we recorded the wrong events. We told the wrong stories, and we remembered the wrong memories. What has lasted is sadness; it will outlast flesh. What has lasted is forgetfulness; it wins over memory every time. But sometimes, in the blue hour, between midnight and dawn, I'll wake up and my hands will be alive, moving over an imaginary cello all by themselves. (47)

Just as she feels the muscle memory of playing the cello, she feels the baby inside her, and with the help of Sah-Jin, she accepts the fact that neither her cello-playing nor the baby needs to be perfect. They are both beautiful to Eunice, and she can finally be at peace with herself. In the last moment of the play, Eunice, the "woman," and the "girl" from her imagined memories simultaneously repeat the words "goodness, good day, memory" while Bach's "First Cello Suite in G" is heard in the background (82–83). The three female characters exist in different times and spaces, yet they together make up Eunice's identity. The "woman" could be either her mother or the aunt who had the same illness as her, and the "girl" may or may not be her when she was younger. Thus, Cho's fluid and heterotopic use of onstage space dramatizes the various combinations of Eunice's imagined and real memories. In the absence of definitive history and answers about who she is, Eunice's identity needs to be constituted with what Cho describes as "99 histories," which connotes a sense of infinite variations of imagined moments and memories.

"We can make up the words": *Satellites* by Diana Son

In *Satellites*, which premiered at the Public Theater in New York City in 2006, Son's central character Nina is opposite of Cho's character Eunice in many respects. Although Son states that the play is not autobiographical, it was inspired by the Brooklyn neighborhood that she and husband moved to after they had children, and she envisions "Nina as having a similar upbringing" to hers.[15] A successful New York City-based architect in her mid-30s, Nina is driven, ambitious, and focused on success. She is also a new mother who moves to Brooklyn to start a family with her African American husband Miles, who was adopted by a white family and graduated from Columbia University with a degree in computer engineering. Throughout the play, Nina is overwhelmed by the demands of her baby, her work, and those around her. Sleep-deprived and barely able to deal with motherhood, a new house, and a new project at work, she hires a Korean woman as a nanny. Her primary reason for choosing a Korean nanny is to expose her baby to the Korean language because she herself cannot speak it. The nanny, Mrs. Chae, is described as a "Korean from Korea" in her mid-50s or early 60s.[16] Nina's own mother has passed away, so Mrs. Chae's role is in a sense that of surrogate mother to Nina. In their first meeting, Nina is deeply moved by the immediate connection Mrs. Chae makes with the baby, Hannah, and by her sympathy for Nina and her predicament. When Mrs. Chae tells the

baby in Korean, "Oh, look at you, you're such a pretty girl," the stage direction reads: "This unexpectedly touches Nina." (269). In fact, everything Mrs. Chae does surprises and moves her, and when Mrs. Chae sings a song Nina's mother used to sing to her, she cannot help but compare Mrs. Chae to her deceased mother.

Nina quickly learns, however, that Mrs. Chae can never replace her mother, whom she sees as having been different from other Korean women in the way she taught her daughter about racial equality. As desperate as Nina is for help, she is adamant that Mrs. Chae must be let go when she makes a comment about the baby that Nina perceives as racist. Mrs. Chae tells Nina, "Hannah is not black. If you look at her, maybe you cannot tell. People cannot tell the daddy is black. She is just beautiful baby" (294). Mrs. Chae does not understand why she is being let go and pleads with Nina, but Nina shows no sympathy for the older woman. Instead, she angrily criticizes Koreans who feel superior to black people: "It makes me mad, it makes me ashamed of being Korean, fucking racists" (314). Nina's anger at Mrs. Chae's racism is compounded by the fact that the black neighborhood to which Nina and her family have moved does not seem to welcome them. Soon after they move to their new home, a rock is thrown by a neighbor and shatters one of the windows.

For Nina, the memory of her mother, whom Mrs. Chae can never replace, guides her in creating for her interracial child an ideal surrounding, a kind of utopia that neither she nor Miles could enjoy during their own childhoods. Both were denied history, culture, language, and a sense of belonging; Miles grew up as a black child in a white family, and Nina's childhood was spent in a predominantly white neighborhood. Both faced blatant racism while having to live as if they were white. As a single adult, Nina was a young Korean American woman with a successful career living the life of a "yuppie," as the characters put it in the play (286), but her interracial baby forces her to face her past and her ethnic background in order to make sense of how her family can belong in a neighborhood with a troubled past and in a home that was, as Miles observes, "a shooting gallery and a crack house before the city took it over" (299).

Throughout the play, Nina is mentally and emotionally pulled in multiple directions, each of which demands her full attention. She needs to hold and nurse her baby, work on an architecture project with a tight deadline, deal with a suspicious neighbor, and caution her husband against his manipulative brother, while at the same time trying to unpack moving boxes and renovate her new home. In her stage directions, Son specifies that "[t]he living room blends into the kitchen, a stairwell leads to the bedrooms above, another connects to the garden level office below" (406), while Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* provides a vivid description of the set that Mark Wendland designed for the original production at the Public Theater:

> [R]ooms slide sideways, backward and forward in this study of big-city-identity crises.... A seemingly solid structure splits again and again into a house divided, as distinctions between outdoors and indoors, between public and private, melt and dissolve.[17]

Because of the constantly shifting space around her, Nina becomes overly sensitive about where things and people belong in the house, but she never actually gains control over them. The new house functions as a projection of Nina's vision of a utopic environment for her daughter but also as a symbol of her failures. As an architect, Nina is supposed to be an expert on living space, but she finds herself losing control over her own space and, by extension, her life. She thought that moving to a bigger place in a mostly black neighborhood and hiring a Korean nanny was the best decision for her family: she could have her office downstairs and work from home and the baby would be exposed to a diverse culture that she herself did not experience as a child. In the process of attempting to create a utopic ideal home, however, she has instead created a heterotopia of multiple, disjointed, and fluid spaces. The stage representation of the brownstone reflects Nina's overextended life, suggesting a heterotopia with multiple interconnected spaces, each of which represents a part of her identity.

In the last scene, Nina reaches the breaking point when some workers start making a lot of loud noise as they smash the old glass in order to replace the broken window. The stage directions describe her reaction:

> Another smash. Nina releases a sound – something between a growl and a war cry. She picks up a pry bar and walks to the window and starts smashing the glass as Kit [Nina's friend and business partner] and Mrs. Chae watch. Reggie [the neighbor helping with the window], on the other side, backs up. Nina takes several whacks at it until there's little window left. The sound of Hannah crying. Nina takes a breath, her demeanor changes. (460)

As Nina heads upstairs to respond to the baby's crying, she sees Miles coming downstairs holding Hannah in his arms. When the two encounter each other, they seem to genuinely communicate for the first time in the play. In the last lines, Nina tells Miles that she thinks the rock that smashed the window was a meteorite that was "a chip off some billion-year-old comet that came crashing through here to let out all the ghosts, all the stories, all the history...To let us know...we can make up the words ourselves" (461).

The "words" that Nina refers to here are the lyrics of a lullaby that she and Miles had difficulty remembering earlier in the play, but they also signify the reality of their lives as they have been changed by the presence of the baby. Like a meteorite, she came into their lives and changed the way their relationship orbits, causing them to readjust everything, including who they are both alone and together. After smashing the window, Nina realizes that there is a bigger space, perhaps an infinite space, outside the house. Heterotopia, according to Foucault's definition, is a space that exists in relation to other spaces. Up to this point, Nina felt frustration in using the past as a point of reference, but at the end of the play, she decides to use other histories and the future's infinite potential to define her reality and spatial surroundings.

"I'm just a fucking white guy": *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee

Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven was originally produced by Young Jean Lee's Theater Company and premiered in 2006 at New York City's HERE Arts Center, which also commissioned the play. It has since been produced in the United States and Europe at various avant-garde venues.[18] The play is about a character named "Korean-American" who is described as an "Asian-American female" and who encounters nightmarish yet outrageously comical situations with characters named "Korean 1," "Korean 2," and "Korean 3," all of whom are described as "Asian female[s]" in the version of the play published in *American Theatre*.[19] After the audio and video sequences described in the opening section of this essay, Korean-American enters the stage and talks directly to the audience about her experience as an Asian American of Korean ancestry. The monologue consists of her thoughts on Asian parents, racism in America, her grandmother, and white people. She jumps from one topic to another and positions herself in opposition to everyone she mentions. About Asian parents, she says, "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," and then she adds, "I am so mad about all of the racist things against me in this country, which is America." She warns "white people," whom she seems to equate with the audience, "I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke" (39–41). The entire passage is disjointed and without a central message. If anything, it sounds like a random patchwork of cynical comments that might be heard from a stand-up comedian.

After this monologue, Korean-American raises her fist and says "Let the Korean dancing begin! (40)," which prompts the Korean characters to come onstage in brightly colored traditional Korean dresses and begin their unpredictable and weird acts. They call each other by fake Asian names and speak Korean and Cantonese while slapping, kicking, and spitting on each other. What happens between the Korean characters and Korean-American in this scene has been described in reviews as "deconstructive," "Asian minstrelsy," "emotionally raw," "angry," "ridiculous," "ludicrous," and "bizarre."[20] Koreans 1 through 3 and Korean-American engage in a series of games and free play that is both funny and disturbing. They talk about prostitution, rape, dragons, and ancestral homes, but there is no logic or meaning to their words. Each character reacts to what the others say and do and each seems to have genuine emotional reactions, but they are far from coherent and consistent. As Lee states in an interview, each line and interaction is a cliché about Asian women:

> It's a destructive impulse – I want to destroy the show: make it so bad that it just eats itself, eating away at its own clichés until it becomes complicated and fraught enough to resemble truth. So, I started writing every horrible thing I

> could possibly think of, like the story of the young Asian woman describing her brutal rape at the hand of some man that her father sold her to. Another was the intergenerational conflict scene between the grandmother and the granddaughter. Every cliché I could think of – I was just spewing them out.[21]

The incoherent yet bizarrely entertaining interaction between the characters continues until they are interrupted by the sudden appearance of White Person 1 and White Person 2, who are described as being female and male, respectively.

The white characters are dressed in gray, and when they appear, the fluorescent lights above turn on. In contrast to the fast pace of the previous scenes, the two white people talk only about their relationship, which is excruciatingly ordinary and uninteresting. Korean-American and Koreans 1 through 3 return, but the white characters gradually overtake the play, which eventually becomes entirely about them and their mundane lives. Lee has commented that she has heard many complaints about the white people taking over the play and she admits that the way the play ends has no obvious connection to the beginning or middle of the play, but she suggests that those who criticize this fact are missing the point. In fact, her intention with the white characters is evident in a passage spoken by Korean-American and the three Koreans in unison before the play is taken over by the white characters. After saying that they don't know "what the white people are doing in the show," they provide a possible explanation for why they take over:

> I love the white patriarchy with all my heart because I'm ambitious and want power. My whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male. People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really I'm just a fucking white guy. (65)

After this passage, Korean-American and the Korean characters leave the stage, where the white characters remain until the end of the play.

Drawing on Sianne Ngai's notion of "ugly feelings," Karen Shimakawa has described the white characters as experiencing what Ngai calls "a concatenation of boredom and astonishment – a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates."[22] The white people do not know what is missing in their lives, and they are unbearably bored and unhappy. In the last scene, they have a realization that brings them closer to a sense of happiness. White Person 1 tells White Person 2 that she dreamed that they both "stopped drinking and smoking and using drugs and caffeine and began to eat healthy and exercise and get lots of sleep, and that suddenly the world opened up before us and many of our bad feelings went away" (73). Shimakawa sees this ending as the white characters' empty lives displacing what is supposed to be an Asian American identity play by "absorbing or ablating" earlier actions.[23] Expanding on Shimakawa's observation, I would argue that the white characters' spatial

hijacking of the stage at the end of the play further illustrates Lee's pained effort to dramatize her identity.

When the Asian American characters say that they want to be white males, they confess, "My whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male" (65). The wording here is significant because what the characters say is not that their mentality is the same as that of a white male, but that the "structure" of their mentality is identical. Lee's emphasis on structure is reflected in the way she constructs the set and the audience space. In the script, the theatre space and set are described in great detail:

> The audience enters the theater and finds itself stuck behind the set, which is a quasi-Korean-Buddhist temple with a large, multipaneled Korean dragon mural painted on the back. There are rafters extending above the walls, suggesting the elements of an Asian-looking roof. Colored paper lanterns hang from the ceiling to the rear and sides of the temple, and there is the sound of the Asian flute music and trickling water.... As soon as the house opens, the sound stops and the audience enters down narrow gravel paths on either side of the temple. The inside of the temple is a large, bare room made of sheets of unpainted light birch plywood. (34–35)

Lee goes on to describe four rows of fluorescent tubes that initially suggest the temple's ceiling and later turn on when the white characters appear. What the audience members experience as they walk into the performance space mirrors the plot of the play. While entering, they see the elaborate paintings of dragons and hear calming music that they may expect of a play with the title "*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*," yet when they are seated, they can see the backside of the façade of the fake temple and witness how it is constructed with all of its exposed plywood. The house and stage are heterotopias consisting of both real and fake images of traditional Korean culture. At the same time, the fluorescent lights symbolize the mundane and unhappy contemporary life that can affect anyone anywhere. Paralleling this spatial structure, the plot begins as a clichéd identity play but ends with characters that literally and figuratively have no color. The white characters are like the unpainted plywood.

The play's façade, with the colorful stereotypes, and the internal view, with the boring white characters, are conjoined as two sides of the same structure, and this structure is a heterotopia that allows contradictions to coexist. For Lee, the best way – and perhaps the only way – to represent her identity is to let its contradictory sides mirror each other. This effect is similar to that of *mise en abyme*, a concept used in art to describe the visual illusion created when two mirrors reflect each other and copies are made infinitely.[24] Thus, the meaning of *Songs of the Dragons* should be found not simply in the façade or the white characters, but in how the two structurally mirror each other.

Lee has stated that she begins all of her plays by asking herself "what would be the last play in the world [she'd] ever want to write" and then forcing herself

to write it.[25] An identity play was something she did not want to write. The face-slapping video at the beginning of the play can be interpreted as an expression of her pain and anxiety in having to write the play, but it is also a way of making her presence known in the production. The play is about her identity even though the characters do not seem to resemble her, and the virtual space of the video is yet another extension of the heterotopia she creates onstage. The playwright getting slapped is a Korean-American with minority issues, a Korean born in a Korean city, a woman who wants to be a man, and a white person with contemporary anxieties about happiness. She mirrors all of them, both real and imagined, and her identity can be represented only in the contradictory, inverted, yet linked spaces.

In this essay, I have analyzed three contemporary plays by Asian American women playwrights in order to understand how they have dealt with the dilemma of writing identity plays. They have resisted formulaic ways of dramatizing identity that are based on history, confession, and autobiography and have chosen instead to dramatize multi-dimensional and evolving identities. The stories told by Cho, Son, and Lee in what I call their identity plays may be semi-autobiographical, but this may also not be precisely the case. The reality they dramatize is not reliable, and what is reflected of them onstage may be misleading. Their characters do not seek cultural authenticity nor do they ask familiar questions about gender or race. Instead, the playwrights open up possibilities for more complex understandings of identity by using the space of the stage to blur, shatter, and invert their ontological subjectivity. Their stage spaces are heterotopias as defined by Foucault, and the key terms used by him to describe heterotopia – simultaneity, juxtaposition, dispersal, connection, and reflection – are visually shown onstage. In *99 Histories*, Cho uses lighting and minimal staging to show fluid changes in her character's memory and to let multiple versions of memory coexist. In Son's *Satellites*, the brownstone literally and figuratively shifts under the characters' feet, but the playwright's main character finds herself by shattering a window to connect to another space. In *Songs of the Dragons*, Lee uses the structure of the set to show contradictory yet mirroring facets of her identity. Like Lee getting her face slapped, all three playwrights may have found it personally painful to write identity plays, but the heterotopic worlds that they create represent the contradictions and complexities of identity as they themselves understand and experience it as Asian American women.

Notes

1 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Script Sabotage: An Interview with the Playwright," *American Theatre* (September 2007): 74–75.

2 Charles Isherwood, "Beneath Pink Parasols, Identity in Stark Form," *New York Times*, 16 January 2012, available at *http://theater.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/theater/reviews/young-jean-lees-untitled-feminist-show-review.html* (accessed 14 July 2012).

3 This first wave is represented in two important collections published in 1993: Roberta Uno, ed., *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); and Velina Hasu Houston, ed., *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Before 1993, only one anthology of Asian American plays, *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, ed. Misha Berson (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), had been published, so the two new anthologies together made an unprecedented number of plays by Asian American women available for teaching and production. Also in 1993, Uno started what would become the "Roberta Uno Asian American Women Playwrights Scripts Collection, 1924–2002" at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, while she was the Artistic Director of the New WORLD Theater. This archive is the only site in the world devoted to manuscripts of plays, interviews, and other research documents relating to Asian American women playwrights. For information on the collection, see *http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/umass/mums345_main.html*.

4 For example, Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* is about her mother and other Japanese women who married American G.I.s after World War II. Houston's characters are distilled versions of women she observed while growing up in a segregated military camp. The play sheds light on a group of women who have been rendered invisible as US citizens in the country's history. Based on interviews conducted by the playwright, the play is about four Japanese women who gather to have tea after the suicide of one of their friends. For the first time, they share their secrets and find consolation in each other. The play is historical, confessional, and autobiographical, all of which characteristics might be described as clichés by later Asian American women playwrights. Velina Hasu Houston, *Tea*, in *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, ed. Roberta Uno (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 155–200.

5 Esther Kim Lee, ed., *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora from the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

6 For my discussion on gender in Korean diasporic plays, see *Seven Contemporary Plays*, xxii.

7 For examples of the field's development, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia* 21, no. 1–2 (1995): 1–27; Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, eds., *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

8 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 60–83.

9 Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), x.

10 Ibid., 111.

11 Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 25.

12 Julia Cho, e-mail interview with the author, 16 August 2010. Cho was responding to the question, "Why did you write the play?"

13 Julia Cho, *99 Histories*, in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora from the Americas*, ed. Esther Kim Lee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 22; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.

14 Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," 22.

15 Diana Son, "Author's Statement," in *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, ed. Chay Yew (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), 396–7.

16 Diana Son, *Satellites*, in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora from the Americas*, ed. Esther Kim Lee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 247–320; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.
17 Ben Brantley, "Settling Down on Shaky Ground, in Diana Son's 'Satellites,'" *New York Times,* 19 June 2006, available at *http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/06/19/theater/reviews/19sate.html* (accessed 15 July 2012).
18 For details of the production history of the play, see "Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven," available at *http://www.youngjeanlee.org/songs* (accessed 14 July 2012).
19 Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven, American Theatre* (September 2007): 76. This character description does not appear in the version of the script included in the anthology *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), 31–74. Unless otherwise specified, subsequent references to the play will be to the anthology version and will be given parenthetically in the text.
20 According to reviewer David Cote of *TimeOut New York*

> The downtown playwright-director is building a jittery, jagged body of work that resists pat definition – except as emotionally raw dispatches from an angry mind that lacerates itself as much as it does the world. To date, Lee has penned profane lampoons of motivational bromides (*Pullman, WA*) and the Romantic poets (*The Appeal*). Now she piles her deconstructive scorn upon ethnic stereotypes in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,* a sweet-and-sour parade of Asian minstrelsy and race-baiting that culminates in a perverse, soul-baring love scene between two Caucasians.

Peter Marks of *The Washington Post* provides an equally vivid description of the play:

> The events of "Songs of the Dragons" are not tied together dramatically in a classic sense: The play segues uncertainly from one vignette to another and ends in a most bizarrely anti-climactic fashion. The connectedness springs from the idea that any assigning we try to do of behavior by ethnic identity is patently ridiculous. And just as ludicrous, "Songs of the Dragons" tells us, is the "Kumbaya" notion that we could ever walk a mile in the other guy's shoes.

See David Cote, "*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee," *TimeOut New York*, 28 September 2006, available at *http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/songs-of-the-dragons-flying-to*-heaven (accessed 14 July 2012); and Peter Marks, "Review: 'Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven' at Studio Theatre," *Washington Post*, 8 October 2010, available at *http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/07/AR2010100706231.html* (accessed 6 October 2012).
21 Lee, in Jones, "Script Sabotage," 74.
22 Sianne Ngai, qtd. in Karen Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings About Race and Gender," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 17, no. 1 (March 2007): 96. The quote is from Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 271.
23 Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings," 100.
24 I thank Lesley Ferris for pointing out the similarity between the mirroring effect of heterotopia and *mise en abyme*.
25 Lee, in Jones, "Script Sabotage," 74.