

First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce

On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee

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I. STOP MAKING SENSE

A young Asian woman is alone on an otherwise bare stage, dressed casually and simply in a T-shirt and jeans, black hair worn down to her shoulders. The raw plywood box set surrounding her is neutral and rough, at once conspicuously artificial and devoid of theatricality. Center stage in this scenic no man's land, overlit by the clinical glow of fluorescent tubes, she stands impassive, returning the spectator's look with a cool, vaguely menacing assurance that is neither inviting nor invasive. Her presence exudes something illegible and discomfiting. She holds a pause; then, flashing a deadpan smile, she speaks:

Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents? It's like being raised by monkeys—

these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English . . . Asian people from Asia are even more brain-damaged, but in a different way, because they are the original monkey. (Lee 2009, 39–40)

Thus begins *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Korean American avant-garde playwright Young Jean Lee's obscene, violently funny send-up of that particularly American dramatic genre, the ethnic identity play. *Songs* cobbles together video art, song-and-dance, pantomime, slapstick, even the stock conventions of realist drama in an effort to explore and undermine the fantasies that structure the specular "meaning" of ethnicity and that nourish the widespread expectation that such meaning can and ought to be communicated in and as narrative—as one's story, or as the larger cultural story to which one is said to belong.

As the passage above signals, the linguistic and dramaturgical resources of Lee's play are devoted to frustrating such fantasmatic expectations and to tormenting the spectator who would dare maintain them. What would first seem poised to unfold as the redemptive drama of one Korean American's discovery of her heritage through an encounter with three "native," "authentic" Koreans (who in costume, bearing, and speech, are little more than walking signifiers of a stereotypical "Asianness") almost immediately devolves into a chaotic barrage of baroque yellowface minstrelsy. And as though this were not sufficient to upset audience members anticipating a coherent story about what it means to be Korean in the United States today, halfway through *Songs*, a hitherto unmentioned heterosexual white couple, bearing no discernible relation to the characters, action, or world that has already unfolded, hijacks the stage and sabotages the play with lengthy, boring discussions about their drinking and relationship problems. Though the published text does not retain it, when it premiered, *Songs* bore the subtitle "A Show About White People In Love," and in early interviews and advertisements, Lee claimed that while it was about many things, it was *most of all* about white people. Accordingly, as the show progresses, the white couple's interruptions grow longer and more frequent, until they colonize the stage once and for all to close the play with a drawn-out, profoundly mundane scene wherein they role play, argue, and talk aimlessly of their mutually reinforcing unhappiness, then

finally resolve to attend couples counseling. The play could scarcely end on a more anticlimactic, dissatisfying note.

Opening to critical acclaim in 2006 at New York City's HERE Arts Center (as with all her works, Lee directed and oversaw every element of the production), *Songs* solidified Lee's position as the darling of the "downtown" avant-garde theater scene, and the most formally innovative and politically daring writer to graduate from the esteemed experimental playwriting MFA at Brooklyn College, under the tutelage of Mac Wellman. Most importantly, though, it introduced what over the course of the next decade would prove to be Lee's central abiding concern: the relationship between forms of identity, especially those forms marked as marginal or other, and the theatrical structures that render these identity categories stable, legible, and meaningful.

Focusing mainly on two works that foreground the question of race, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) and *The Shipment* (2009), what follows will seek to articulate the political logic of Young Jean Lee's aesthetic method. Simply at the level of its structure, without in any way being explicitly "about" psychoanalysis, I want to argue that Lee's theater launches an attack on the ethics of identity politics *in the name of the Freudian subject*, understood here as something inassimilable to the "theater of the ego" within which identity politics and its aesthetic representations play out.¹ This is not to suggest that Lee's work dramatizes the subject of the unconscious, as though the playwright's task were merely to stage a theory. In any event, psychoanalysis is not a theory, but rather a clinical practice that, like theater, exists only to the extent that it takes place. Furthermore, there is no way to take the subject of the unconscious as a direct object of representation; it always figures as anamorphic with respect to the plane of representation. I wish only to demonstrate that something of Lee's formal method attests to the insistence of a subject much like the one articulated in psychoanalytic experience, and that for her, as for Freud, this subject is neither fully determined by, nor finally detachable from, the symbolic and historical coordinates of race. Indeed, given her Korean American heritage, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* could be read as a theatrical variation on the gesture with which Freud opens *Moses and Monotheism*, his unsettling and unsettled reflection on the question of racial inheritance. Like Freud meditating on the uncertain status of his

own Jewishness, *Songs* confesses a general ignorance of and personal distance from the traditional positive characteristics that constitute her own ethnic identity, going so far as to mock these attributes through flamboyantly inauthentic pastiche. And yet, in spite of its violent disidentification from a stereotypical Koreanness, her play just as vehemently rejects the idea of the subject as a neutral slate that transcends or exists apart from race; as with Freud, some hard kernel of her inheritance refuses to be eradicated. Something indivisible remains center stage.

Lee's object ultimately involves what Jacques Rancière has termed the "primary aesthetics" of politics, that is, the way in which the political configuration of the social link always already depends on a fundamentally aesthetic "distribution of the sensible," delimiting what can be seen and shown, heard and said, and by whom (2009, 12–19). Or, as Alain Badiou put it in an early text on aesthetics, "the 'raw material' of aesthetic production is already in itself aesthetically produced" (2013, 37). Conversely, Lee's theater partakes of "the politics of aesthetics" in so far as it precipitates a radical *redistribution* of the sensible, especially where this distribution tends to overdetermine the positive content of race and ethnicity, and to thereby close the gap between the subject and those identifications by which she is marked.

More precisely, her work *is* this redistribution, prying the gap back open by any theatrical means available. Lee challenges her spectator to see that the meaning of race is always formed via the logic of fantasy, and that this logic not only makes use of theatrical forms to consolidate its effects, but must in itself be understood as a kind of structurally primary theatricality. Unsurprisingly then, her theater rejects the conventions that dominate contemporary American theater, the overwhelming majority of which still draws on the resources (as well as the ethical presuppositions) of the realist dramatic paradigm. In the tradition of American Ethnic theater, this paradigm has been especially key to a trajectory seeking to confront and combat racist typologies and representational schema—such as originate in minstrelsy and pervade popular forms to this day—by presenting life in all the minute detail of its "authentic" particularity. This tradition has been particularly central to African American theater, and runs at least from Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, through the entirety of Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle* and Katori Hall's *Hurt Village*.

Certainly, the push to oppose the violent historical legacy exemplified by the minstrel show with the apparently polar aesthetic of dramatic realism is *prima facie* understandable in its urgency. Yet for Lee, the redemptive notion of authentic representations that successfully convey the reality of racially marked experience, free from the detours of misrecognition and unmarked by the work of fantasy, *is itself the ultimate fantasy*, one that implies an unsustainable idealization of the contract between spectacle and spectator. For one, it traffics in the naïve assumption, which Christopher Lane identifies as endemic to empirical studies of racial prejudice, that “racism derives largely from ignorance and false consciousness,” and thus that “knowledge enhances cultural understanding while diminishing inter- and intragroup hostility . . . that humankind, freed from alienation and political strife, would be wholly communitarian” (1998, 5). Such a viewpoint cannot but grossly underestimate the profound, and partly intractable, historical and psychological impact of racist representational schema, insofar as it construes their typologies as screens obscuring the complexities of the black subject’s inner life. In her rejection of dramatic realism’s fundamental idealism, Lee is not far from Slavoj Žižek, who asserts that “the first lesson of psychoanalysis is that this ‘richness of inner life’ is fundamentally fake: it is a screen, a false distance. . . . The story we tell ourselves about ourselves to account for what we are doing, is thus a lie—the truth lies rather outside, in what we do” (2009, 40). In fact, in a text otherwise unconcerned with the theater—this comes from Žižek’s book on the economic collapse of 2008–2009—Žižek cites Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek’s polemic against realism to support this antihumanist point. “Characters on stage,” Jelinek insists,

should be flat, like clothes in a fashion show: what you get should be no more than what you see. Psychological realism is repulsive, because it allows us to escape unpalatable reality by taking shelter in the “luxuriousness” of personality. . . . The writer’s task is to block this maneuver, to chase us off to a point from which we can view horror with a dispassionate eye. (Jelinek, quoted in Žižek [2009, 40])

Lee shares Jelinek’s and Žižek’s repulsion for the luxuries of realism, some-

times presenting characters as unbearably flat. Rather than think the typologies of minstrelsy and other such stock forms as distortions of the true story of racial identity, or as veils covering over the rich inner life of the racially marked subject, Lee's theater makes the more politically radical claim that the very impulse to construe race as possessing a true story—as a substance with a proper content whose authentic meaning is communicable via the more complex, “humanizing” logic of dramatic realism—participates in precisely the same fantasmatic logic (and, ultimately, the same kind of structural violence) as minstrelsy. These two representational models are thus shown to be not polar political opposites, with realism coming to repair the damage of minstrelsy, but rather as two points on an aesthetic Möbius strip. The discourse of her plays—the language of characters and the actions that comprise plots—effectively traces a path along the entire surface of this topology, proposing an estranging continuity between discourses usually regarded as being worlds apart. The ill-spoken, half-formed “characters” of her *pièces mal faites* oscillate between making sense, exposing the nonsense (the contingency) of what counts as sense, and making utter nonsense sound like its opposite. The unceasing oscillation between these discursive domains, the stylistic leveling of the distinction between them, produces a maximally disoriented spectator, who is made to confront the habits of his spectatorship in the very moment of its unfolding. It should come as no surprise that the official motto of Lee's theater company is “Destroy the Audience.” Discussing *Songs* and *Shipment* in an interview with playwright Richard Maxwell, in the context of her own aversion as a spectator to political theater and her tendency to want to evade its lessons, she admitted: “the hardest thing for me in making theater that is political is trying to trap the audience so they can't escape through . . . their dismissive loopholes” (Maxwell 2008). In concert with its Freudian dimension, then, Lee's theater practices an idiosyncratic, exaggerated form of Brechtian terrorism, laying traps for the spectator, so as to force a critical division of her position. Given that contemporary theater audiences, from downtown avant-garde to midtown mainstream, are by now well inured to the repertoire of classical Brechtian gestures, and thus know how to protect themselves against them, this redoubled Brechtian terrorism may be the only way to maintain fidelity to the Brechtian enterprise today. But to appreciate

the stakes of her intervention, we need to first examine the ideological field within which it intervenes.

II. BODIES + LANGUAGES

Logics of Worlds (2009), the most recent major installment in Alain Badiou's philosophical project, can enlighten us on this point: it opens with an examination of the ideological atmosphere of our present moment, the *doxa* that orients our access to the world and determines what we spontaneously experience as "natural belief." He calls today's ideological configuration *democratic materialism*, and gives as its main axiom the statement that "*there are only bodies and languages.*" On the one hand, the body, in all its resplendent materiality, figures in this ideology as a site of pleasure and unpleasure. Whether enjoying itself or suffering harm, Badiou argues, the body of democratic materialism serves, in its fleshy precarity, as evidence for the ontological primacy of human finitude. And on the other hand, making sense out of our flesh, there is language—which is really to say that *there are languages*, since what democratic materialism celebrates is the multiplicity of languages and, by extension, the plurality and variety of forms of life. According to our collective "default setting," this is what there is, and nothing more.

This ideology implies a range of political consequences. For one thing, what earns it the name *democratic materialism* is the "juridical equality" it grants to the plurality of languages and forms of life: "communities and cultures, colours and pigments, religion and clergies, uses and customs, disparate sexualities, public intimacies and the publicity of the intimate: everything and everyone deserves to be recognized and protected by the law" (Badiou 2009, 2). What is plainly at stake here is a political ontology of the *Many*, the philosophical footing for multiculturalism. Of course, what is problematic here is not the respect for differences in itself, which goes without saying, but rather the fact that this absolute ontological privileging of the Many excludes—indeed, forecloses as inexistent—any concept, proposition, law, or action that would exceed its original milieu, its consensually determined symbolic boundaries. That which would traverse the purely relative *partes extra partes* plurality of being is rejected at the outset. Of course, this

consensual celebration of the Many is ultimately in bad faith. In fact, democratic materialism makes a fetish of the Many, in the strict sense that psychoanalysis gives to fetishism.² The global ideology of “bodies plus languages” obeys the fetishistic procedure to the letter: it exalts pluralism as its cardinal virtue in so far as something else much more fundamental is at work “behind” or to the side of it. This something, the democratic fetish’s operative truth, is plurality’s inversion: the One of democratic consensus, which frames which differences count as legitimate “behind the scenes.” Badiou argues that this political ontology “provides a norm that in actual fact is transcendent, because it suggests not only plurality, but a subjective unity of the plurality. . . . This concession to the One undoes the radicality of the multiple, which had allegedly been guaranteed” (2005, 18). It is in this sense that we should read the sudden emergence, midway through *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, of an anonymous straight white couple—they represent the ideological truth, the *heart of whiteness*, behind the “food-court” multiculturalism that largely governs theatrical representations of race and ethnicity in the United States.

As a countermeasure to contemporary ideology, Badiou’s materialist dialectic asserts that “there are only bodies and languages, *except that there are truths*” (2002, 4, emphasis added). The simple introduction of a third term here, which seems to leave the original couple undisturbed, nonetheless changes everything. Yet this change is not of the order of a simple addition or enrichment; Badiou does not claim, *pace* democratic materialism, that there are really three discrete substances where there only seemed to be two. On the contrary, the crucial “only” of its axiom remains firmly in its place, and thus this polemical intervention can indeed be said to leave its materialism intact (though not its democracy). The syntax of the axiom clearly attests to the fact that a truth is not *additional*; on the contrary, it is *subtractive*, something that exempts itself from the forms of being, while yet remaining part of the field of being—an internal exclusion, a purely immanent exception. If the concept of subtraction is especially useful for a reading of Lee’s theater, this is because it plays a pivotal role in Badiou’s thinking on art, specifically, on the art of the avant-garde. In *The Century* (2007), he claims that what made the twentieth century such a ceaselessly revolutionary period is what he names “the passion of the real,” that is to say, the way in which the century’s emblematic militants

(such subjects as Freud, Lenin, and Brecht) sought to move beyond the illusions and promises of the realm of semblance and directly access the real, in its certainty and absoluteness.³ The last century's definitive mission was to finally realize the new, no matter the cost. Yet as Badiou notes, there are two distinct ways to construct the real, two variations on the century's defining passion. Where the real is thought of in terms of identity and authenticity, the passion of the real will of course be compelled to tear through the veil of semblance to the truth behind it; here, "we are in the realm of suspicion," and the more something presents itself to the realm of appearances as the real thing, "the more it must be suspected. . . . This passion can only be fulfilled as destruction" (Badiou 2005, 55–56). Behind every veil, the destructive passion finds yet another, and so this destructive protocol manifests as a bad infinity. But there is also the "subtractive orientation," which treats the real not as undivided substance but "right away as a gap," as the minimal difference of semblance from itself. This approach asserts that the topology of the veil is inadequate for thinking the realm of semblance, that there is absolutely no ideal "beyond," no Other of semblance. It is therefore semblance *itself* that figures the real, in its irreducible, detotalizing difference from itself.

Badiou's text very clearly prioritizes subtraction in terms of its ethical configuration. Tellingly, whereas he turns to Hegel's reading of the violent impasse of the revolutionary Terror and to a consideration of Stalin's purges to demonstrate how the destructive protocol works, Badiou turns to the historical avant-garde, specifically to Malevich's famous *White on White*, as an exemplar of the subtractive passion of the real. While he has precious little to say about any contemporary avant-garde art, and while Lee's aforementioned motto invokes destruction, one can nonetheless easily see how the subtractive orientation is at stake in Lee's work: it mocks the ambition to traverse appearances and plumb the inner depths of the subject for an authentic identity, treating this impulse to a stylistically cavalier contempt, and instead locates the real of its subject in the gaps, failures, and ruptures in signification. Consider, for instance, the white couple of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*. During their final long scene together—once they have triumphed over Korean American and the Koreans, and overtaken the stage for good—"White Person 1" and "White Person 2" engage in a dialogue so generic,

wooden, and inconsistent, that a primitive computer program might have authored it.

WHITE PERSON 1: Are you an alcoholic?

WHITE PERSON 2: Yes.

WHITE PERSON 1: That's bad!

WHITE PERSON 2: No. I'm not an alcoholic.

WHITE PERSON 1: You're an alcoholic! That's bad!

WHITE PERSON 2: I'm not an alcoholic! I just like to party!

WHITE PERSON 1: Stop being an alcoholic, boyfriend! (Lee 2009, 67)

This colorless antidrama goes on for some time, until White Person 1 punctuates it by expressing her wish to “talk about [her] inside, [her] inner private life” (Lee 2009, 69). Yet her attempt to do so breaks down almost before it begins. For, what she finds “inside” herself to express turns out to be just as vapid and insignificant as what went before it, if not more so. The exaggerated inarticulateness of her monologue bears witness to the futility of her pursuit:

You don't know what I'm really doing because the second I walk out of this room, you don't have any idea what the fuck I'm doing. . . . What if I—what if you think that I'm sitting across from you, listening to you, but instead I'm not listening at all and instead I'm thinking about all the nasty sexual things I'm going to do to your stuffed turtle. And I had cut a hole into the belly of your turtle and then when I said I was going to the bathroom, I went into our bedroom and strapped on a dildo and fucked this hole in the turtle's stomach until I came, and then went back down and put my napkin on my lap and was like, “Okay, I'm back.” (Lee 2009, 70)

That *Songs* assigns the hilarious task of expressing the empty, stupid secret of one's “inner private life” to one of two white people in a show ostensibly about Korean identity—that it uses whiteness as the occasion to lampoon the search for the real of (and as) identity—is, of course, certainly not incidental to the play's radical approach to race. Echoing Jelinek, Lee seems to suggest that this expressive discourse, and the whole humanist topology of depth and surface

that it implies, are in and of themselves “luxuries” fundamentally linked to the more conspicuous luxury of whiteness itself. Tellingly, when White Person 1’s attempt to give voice to her inner life finally breaks down, she admits, “I am a monster. I am a fucking monster. There is *nothing there*.” To this, White Person 2 makes the deadpan reply, “this is why I love you” (Lee 2009, 72).

III. THE SUBJECT, A FAILURE

Where the ideology of our present moment is concerned, “the subject” can only be the name given to a fictional effect of structure, a body passively bearing the impress of its symbolic environs, a creaturely construction. Against the impossibility to which contemporary doxa consigns the subject, the work of Young Jean Lee needs to be read and seen as the result of a rigorously subtractive method. This claim, however, raises an important question: How can the theater—*any* theater—effectively speak to the existence of the subject, when it in fact appears to be the medium most readily poised to affirm the basic logic of democratic materialism? *There are only bodies and languages*—is this not a perfectly accurate, if condensed, analytic of the theatrical medium, the kind of terse provocation one expects to find in Peter Brook? Consider the body of the actor in performance. It doesn’t so much move as it is placed; it *hits its marks*. For the duration of a given performance, this body is determined through and through by a complexly interconnected system of languages—not only the playwright’s text, but also the director’s blocking, the language of costume, the score of the sound, and lighting cues. The actor’s body is literally prescribed; chance is eliminated as much as possible. Even at the level of subject matter, from Oedipus to Oswald Alving, playwrights have dramatized nothing quite so well or so frequently as figures in thrall to the inexorable pull of some structure of “destiny” (as desire, passion, history, heredity, “nature,” prophesy, *atē*, and so on). How, then, could Lee’s work overcome this tendency?

Actually, this turns out to be a false dilemma. For, though the tendency to construe plot as necessity has been so pervasive and enduring as to seem essential, it is in no way intrinsic to theater as such. Rather, it belongs to the dramatic literary form as prescribed by Aristotle, one that has since the birth

of tragedy monopolized the Western stage to such an extent as to almost seem coextensive with it. It was Bertolt Brecht who effectively formalized the critical difference between theatricality and dramatic form and, in elaborating the consequences of this disjuncture, turned the Aristotelian aesthetic norm on its head and paved the way for Lee's postdramatic approach. Brecht understood that the exigencies of dramatic form are ultimately at odds with theatricality, that drama always depends on the suppression of something fundamental to theater—that is, its composite nature, its status as a mongrel assemblage of heterogeneous elements. (This is precisely why, after witnessing the Berliner Ensemble's touring production of *Mother Courage* at Théâtre des Nations, Roland Barthes is moved to define theatricality as “theater-minus-text . . . a density of signs and sensations built up on stage . . . which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language” [Barthes 1972, 26].) Theater is thus the composite art most up to the task of showing its seams and presenting the truth of its own disunity. This task, which Brecht spoke of in terms of “a radical *separation of the elements*,” invests the epic (or otherwise postdramatic) theater with its critical and political potential. With the dramatic paradigm and its suppression of heterogeneity, “the process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art.” Therefore, Brecht reasons, “*words, music, and setting must become more independent of one another . . . once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music, and setting ‘adopt attitudes’ . . . then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theater’s social function*” (Brecht 1964, 38–39). Aesthetic separation implies an analogous political separation: the epic work makes its existence as theatrical construction conspicuous, so that the spectator can take a distance from it and think critically about the manner of its construction and about how it might have been constructed otherwise. Separation foregrounds the contingency of the laws by which bodies and languages are organized, introducing a gap that is itself the site of the subject. It is in this formalist sense that Lee's project, specific political content aside, is indebted to Brecht.

Yet what is at stake is also a radicalization that brings the epic technique of

separation to such an extreme limit point that the link between Lee and Brecht is not always readily evident. This is radicalization in the strict, literal sense: what partly accounts for the alarming strangeness of Lee's plays is the fact that she applies aesthetic separation at a much more basic molecular level than Brecht ever did (even in his most revolutionary *Lehrstücke* experiments of the Weimar period). He sought to reinstate the boundaries such as the one between text and music, for example, or between the visual language of the set design and the world of the characters' situation, that Wagner's modernism had sought to integrate in the maximally seamless total work of art. Lee's work reinstates such classical Brechtian distinctions too, but also goes the crucial step farther, by treating each dramatic element not only as something to be separated from each other, but also as a complex phenomenon in its own right, something to be broken down into its own component parts. Hence, where Brecht decomposes (and detotalizes) the work of art, Lee decomposes its subject; "character" (*êthos*) does not simply contribute to the false unity of the Aristotelian paradigm, it is itself a false unity, the holistic sense of which depends on the play of heterogeneous subelements. Lee thus manages to "out-Brecht" Brecht himself; her plays perform *micro-epic* operations, disintegrating the elements of her dramaturgy and then cobbling them together again (usually in ill-formed, incomplete, and incorrect new combinations).

At the limit, these micro-epic decompositions sometimes serve to demonstrate that, taken to its maximal degree, aesthetic separation can cause aesthetic structure to collapse and break down altogether: epic method gives way to what in her study of contemporary performance theater Sara Jane Bailes calls a "poetics of failure" (2011).⁴ In Lee's works, plot, character, even dramatic forms themselves are "too" separated (from one another as well as in themselves), too shabbily constructed to support their own duration. Thus they fall flat, come apart, abort themselves.

Consider, for example, the following scene from the archly titled *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Lee's first full-length play, a ramshackle, inarticulately parodic retelling of the 1932 Boris Karloff film *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (in Lee's original production, Fu Manchu was played by the African American playwright Thomas Bradshaw). In form and theme, *Groundwork*

can be read as a more roughly hewn precursor to *Songs*; it addresses questions of Asian identity and colonialism by estranging the orientalism of the *Fu Manchu* narrative in a no-budget, style-less, antitheatrical vacuum, a “staging degree zero.” In the published text, the scene bears the title “Sheila’s Father’s Study”:

Sheila enters with the bench, sets it down, and sits. She is Caucasian and wears a glamorous melon-colored pantsuit that ties at the neck.

Pause.

Knocking.

Sheila: Come in!

(Terrence enters. He is Caucasian and wears a sharp black suit.)

Ah, Terrence.

Terrence: Hello, Sheila.

(Long awkward pause. They have no idea what they’re doing. Sheila and Terrence exit.) (Lee 2009, 150–51)

This is the entire scene. It figures, moreover, as the first time that the spectator has in any way been introduced either to Sheila or to Terrence. By itself, this scrap of dialogue is not unprecedented in the history of modern theater, either in terms of its style or its substance. There is something vaguely Beckettian in the simple scenario; one may even recall reading a scene much like Lee’s in, say, a late period Caryl Churchill play (*Heart’s Desire*, perhaps, or *This Is a Chair*). Yet whereas in Churchill, a fragment like this would serve as the trace or partial sign of an absent whole, of a fully realized “elsewhere” as yet unavailable to the spectator, what makes Lee’s scene genuinely novel (and profoundly comic) is that, strictly speaking, it isn’t a fragment at all, it is the puny whole to which these characters belong. Everything hinges on the stage direction “*they have no idea what they’re doing.*” The characters here have been so radically separated from any vestige of plot or characterization, which alone would furnish them with some dramatic purpose and momentum, that they fail to be anything more than the inert, empty bearers of their names. Their scene is dead on arrival, a nonstarter. Thus Hilton Als is absolutely right to observe that “Lee doesn’t end her pieces especially well.” He is wrong, however, to view

this as incidental, and to speculate, rather fancifully, that “her pieces just continue in her mind, because she has so much fun thinking about them” (2012, n.p.). If her *pièces mal faites* fail to end “well,” this failure is essential to the critical intervention her work seeks to make with respect to the conventions of the typical well-made play, and the well-made ego that goes along with it, and never fails to cast itself as the heroic victim.

Yet all this is only half the story of Lee’s method. What makes her plays uniquely compelling is not simply their embrace of failure—a move that has become commonplace in experimental theater—but rather the way in which they *survive and continue past their own failure*. What happens in the space between two failures, then, is the comedy—and *not* the “drama”—of the subject, neither fully bound to nor finally detached from, the common sense of its identifications. And just as Lee’s larger theatrical structures survive the meltdown of the dramatic forms they cite, so too does the subject of these works emerge as such only when dramatic sense collapses and gives way to something wholly other, a disorienting nonsense that obeys a logic other than that of the ego, thereby presenting the audience with a crudely literal approach to the Freudian *andere Schauplatz*.

IV. DESTROY THE AUDIENCE

Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven is nothing if not offensive. Yet if there is something calculatedly excessive central to its provocations—as of course there is—this is to some degree mitigated by the fact that the abuses it hurls at Korean and Korean American culture and identity issue forth from the imagination of a Korean American playwright. The legitimacy of its gesture (to be strictly distinguished from anything like its “authenticity”) banks on a common-sense notion that, up to a point, it is permissible to ridicule a group or mode of identification, as long as one belongs to it and is somehow included in the disparagement.⁵ Thus it is one thing for Lee to have a character named “Korean American” spew Orientalist vitriol that is at least partly self-directed, a kind of comic masochism; for many a spectator, it is quite another for her to invent a black character named “Stand-Up Comedian”—essentially, Korean American’s black male counterpart—and have him tell his audience, for in-

stance, that “black people be some of the stupidest, forty-drinkin,’ hot-wing-eatin,’ checkcashin,’ Tyler Perry-watchin,’ R. Kelly-listenin,’ dice-shootin,’ electric-slidin,’ money-mismanagin,’ Newportin-smokin’ mothafuckas in the WORLD” (2010, 13). Indeed, according to the rules implicit in our contemporary ideology, the black experience is a story that Lee is simply not in a position to be able to tell, let alone to lampoon in such vividly cartoonish, racist pastiche.

The Shipment, which opened at The Kitchen in 2009 and promptly elevated Young Jean Lee and her theater company from regional to international fame (the show has only just ended a four-year long world tour of international theater festivals), crosses lines and explodes ideological pieties that, at least in the theater world, have not been so flagrantly and creatively “disrespected” since Jean Genet’s *The Blacks: A Clown Show* (1960) emerged half a century ago. It extends Young Jean Lee’s inquiry into the dramaturgy of race that began with *Groundwork* and *Songs* into new, strictly foreign territory. It is thereby also a continuation of her aesthetic and ascesis of failure—her mission to make theater out of her “worst” ideas and most ill-conceived propositions. On the face of things, one can scarcely think of a worse idea than for a nonblack playwright, someone possessing no lived, practical knowledge of the black experience, to write a black identity play—which is precisely what *The Shipment* is. Opening in New York in the immediate aftermath of Obama’s first election, which more than a few glib pundits felt authorized to interpret as symptomatic of a new “postrace America,” Lee’s play tests the limits of our alleged progress. It does so partly by taking the idea of a postracial condition at face value (if we have really entered a “postrace” era, then why shouldn’t an Asian American write African American theater?), but also by reminding its audience that ideas about race have always been forged in theatricality’s foundry. It inventories the performative and narrative forms by means of which the stereotypical “meaning” of black subjectivity has been consolidated and addressed to the American spectator—a spectator who, it would be foolish to forget, has nearly always been construed as white. It is thus meta-theater-history, a compendium of the ways American audiences have fantasized the spectacle of blackness, all to which Lee applies her signature surreal touches.

Worse still, *The Shipment* refuses the ethical lure of opposing the history of

racism in representations of blackness with a dramaturgical or narrative strategy of redemption; it does not attempt to stage the truth of black experience, presenting a nuanced, positive, ennobling portrait of African American life. Instead it moves in the opposite direction, resummoning the depthless falsehoods of minstrelsy's perverse repertoire of imagery and stock figures to the stage, to discover the jouissance of racism encoded there. Indeed, the play must repeat the basic act of expropriation on which blackface minstrelsy necessarily depends—not an expropriation of blackness as such, of course, but of a certain right to representation, to mimetic self-determination. Given this repetition, albeit with a difference, there is an ambivalence that remains central to the critical gesture the work makes. As in her other works, this critical gesture is here an effect of Lee's radicalized, redoubled Brechtianism, the micro- or subepic operations that take aesthetic separation a step beyond its classical points of application.

The Shipment takes a strange approach to theatrical time, experimenting with the significance of dramatic duration as such, specifically in its relation to what Gertrude Stein referred to as the theater's temporal "syncopation," the disjuncture between spectator and spectacle she considered intrinsic to the stage (Stein 1977). Because of this, close readings of specific textual and performative moments must initially be subordinated to a more comprehensive vantage point; to decipher its critical gesture, that is, one must attempt the difficult task of thinking the work as a whole.⁶ First, a paradox: *The Shipment* is a two-act play played in a single, continuous act. Or rather, it is a one-act play divided into two irreconcilable halves, which it refuses either to synthesize or to hold completely apart as distinct theatrical works. Thus the two acts, which not only disclose entirely different worlds but which do so via distinct theatrical forms, are nonetheless performed by the same cast of four black actors and one black actress. Some characters' names even carry over from the first to the second part, but this partial, apparently arbitrary correspondence resists interpretation. This is in keeping with Lee's strategy of forcing a disorienting sense of continuity between strictly incompatible elements, statements, or discourses; it *is* this strategy, only this time writ large.

Part One of *The Shipment* is structured in reference to the nineteenth-century blackface minstrel show: in turn, it features an energetic dance, a

stand-up comedy routine, a series of dramatic sketches featuring stock characters, and concludes with a song in three-part harmony. Unsurprisingly, though, this is a minstrel show with a critical difference, one that mobilizes a politically salutary “misuse” of its own form against its (historical) original ideological investments, exposing and undermining the way this popular entertainment typically functions. Part Two of Lee’s play moves from the crude stereotypes of minstrelsy to the relatively more nuanced characterizations of a naturalistic drawing-room comedy, a farce undertaken in an uncharacteristically straightforward manner, featuring fully fleshed-out, properly “quirky” characters (some likeable, some not), a functionally complete narrative arc, even a conventionally realist acting style. This little farce even achieves the kind of prosaic mediocrity endemic to its genre—by design, it is neither a full expression of Lee’s “talent,” nor is it so conspicuously poor in quality that it slides into parody. In a rare move for Lee, Part Two *The Shipment* seems to quote a traditional dramatic form without subverting it.

But let us take a closer look at Lee’s reverse-engineered minstrel show; how, precisely, does it manage to untie minstrelsy from its old ideological moorings and accomplish its critical turn against itself? First it must be noted that, in taking minstrelsy as the object of its redoubled Brechtianism, its micro-epic aesthetic strategy, *The Shipment* suggests that, at least where theatrical technique is concern, *the traditional blackface minstrel show is in itself already a proto-Brechtian theatrical operation*, an anti-Aristotelian theater *avant la lettre*. Like the Brechtian epic, minstrelsy amounts to a conspicuously loose assemblage of heterogeneous, independent elements—the song, dance, slapstick, and dramas it comprises *always remain disjointed*. Yet whereas in Brecht, aesthetic separation ideally functions as an immediate/direct cause of political separation (of its possibility), blackface minstrelsy challenges this causality, showing that the very same techniques can lead to a conservative, essentialist, and emphatically antidialectical political effect. For the blackface minstrel show enlisted aesthetic heterogeneity, not to mention conspicuous artificiality, to consolidate a substantialist notion of race, as an intractable nature replete with positive qualities. What is most remarkable about the cultural work of minstrelsy, then, is that its gaudy, explicitly antire-

alist scenarios did not dissuade its audiences from often being seized by the conviction that what it was witnessing was the real thing.⁷ One must therefore note, and not entirely in passing, that minstrelsy gives the lie to the kind of vulgar Brechtianism, or Brechtian utopianism, that dominates contemporary “political” theater. In supposing theatrical forms that show the seams of their composition will engender critical spectators, Brecht is in a sense not yet Brechtian enough—he still retains an unavowed faith in the mimetic relation with which his theater is meant to break.⁸

By taking aesthetic separation the necessary step further, by applying it at a more basic level of the theatrical structure, Part One of *The Shipment* succeeds in shattering the specular integrity of minstrelsy’s object—that is to say, its black “types”—divesting the racial referent around which its antics circulate of its inculcated “nature.” Lee causes the epistemological certainty about race that minstrelsy traffics in (and that largely survives in present day forms of black popular entertainment) to collapse. What popular representational forms have habituated audiences to knowingly recognize as “proper” to black identity is, the spectator suddenly discovers, simply the contingent (if not fortuitous) result of a successfully concealed bricolage of normative factors: a repertoire of familiar gestures and stylizations of the body, a narrowly prescribed range of signifiers and narrative motifs—and, most crucially for Lee, a certain intonation, a *dialect* or manner of speaking.

Lee’s approach to black dialect links the critical work of *The Shipment* to an underappreciated, surreptitiously rebellious dimension of traditional minstrelsy. In *Love and Theft*, his landmark study of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott positions “‘darker’ dialect” as a kind of stylistic and ideological buffer that not infrequently allowed blackface figures to give expression to sentiments that the antebellum social link otherwise might have censored altogether, insofar as these posed a threat to the very foundations of this social link. Consider, for instance, the “black desire for freedom,” expressed in the very first published song sheet of “Jim Crow,” in an all too easy to dismiss “happy-go-lucky bravado” that, Lott argues, owes more to Davy Crockett than to the slave trickster. “Potentially subversive moments of early minstrelsy . . . are qualified by ‘darker’ dialect (in the theater) and orthographic derision (on the page); but in the mouth of the very figure who had

begun to make the question of national unity an issue [that is, the figure of the black slave], such lyrics could be dangerous, even if it was understood that the singer need not be taken seriously” (Lott 1993, 24). Just as a dream’s manifest content distorts the latent “dream thoughts” so that they may be thought by the dream without waking the dreamer, so too did the minstrel figure’s excessively clownish and, for the white spectator, categorically “other” manner of speaking allow him to introduce ideas to the discourse of the white audience without awaking it from its pleasant pastime, ideas that, we know, never entered into serious (public, political) discourse without a drawn out, violent struggle.

In the “Author’s Note” that prefaces her text, Lee remarks that, with Part One of *The Shipment*, her “goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn’t sure what they were watching or how they were supposed to respond” (Lee 2010, 5). Thus, Stand-Up Comedian delivers his routine in a stylized voice that, in its theatrical sonority, unmistakably invokes the exuberant performance styles of Murphy, Rock, and Chappelle. Under cover of this familiar sound, Stand-Up Comedian slides seamlessly from the standard thematic repertoire of African American stand-up—including, in the character’s own words, the “white people are like this, and black people are like that” leitmotif—to material that is not simply weird, but that undermines the identificatory logic that sustains the genre, bringing the comic pleasure proper to stand-up to a halt. A brief bit of mocking white people for their propensity to obsess over fitness—“that gym shit freaks me the fuck out . . . them white folks hatin’ themselves for havin’ a little bit a belly fat”—suddenly turns oddly sour as Stand-Up Comedian confesses that he prefers to “run on railroad tracks” for exercise, and asks the audience, “have you ever had the experience where you standin’ by a railroad track, and you hear the train comin,’ and you get a strong desire to step onto the railroad track, get hit by the train, and die?” (Lee 2010). The laughter that had been gradually mounting in the audience gives way to a tensed, hesitant silence—as per Lee’s wishes, the audience seems set adrift, unsure as to how to respond to the disorienting spectacle they are faced with.⁹

What does the movement from minstrelsy’s stock personae to farce’s more nuanced characterizations signify? How ought the spectator to read this

transition? One is certainly tempted to view it as a happy sign of progress, a sort of metatheatrical abridgment of the strides the black subject seems to have made on the American stage. The very same African American actors who in Part One had to negotiate the narrow confines of base stereotypes (comedians, crackheads, crack dealers, rap stars, music video sex objects) have the chance in Part Two to play complex, convincingly realized people, each with his or her own highly individualized neurosis. In her preface, Lee mentions that, whereas the minstrel show portion of the show was written “to address the stereotypes [her] cast members felt they had to deal with as black performers,” for the farcical second half she “asked the actors to come up with roles they’d always wanted to play and wrote the second half of the show in response to their requests” (2010, 5). Where the measure in question is representational verism, the “documentary” truthfulness associated with realism, *The Shipment* cannot but be construed as an allegory of representational upward mobility, the partial record of an oppressed people’s slow, yet triumphant ascent of the mimetic hierarchy.

Lee’s farce centers on a group of twenty-something friends at a cocktail party, one that goes terribly wrong when its host, Thomas, announces it is in fact his birthday, and that, moreover, he has poisoned his and his guests’ drinks and they should all expect to die before the night’s end. At the end of a tense scene during which his friends become less and less certain that Thomas would never do such a thing, he admits he has been lying and proceeds to have a violent nervous breakdown. Clocking in at forty-five minutes (half the show’s entire length), what is so alarming about this farcical scenario is the fact that, but for a single decisive moment (which I shall come to presently), *it really is just what it seems*: a conventionally light farce, à la Noël Coward, and nothing more. Coming from Lee, scarcely anything could have a more subversive effect than to so thoroughly embrace such a pleasant popular form. Still, one can sense throughout that there *is* something amiss beyond the comedy of errors the cocktail party comprises, something haunting the seemingly functional surface of Lee’s little farce. It is only at its conclusion that a traumatically ill-timed utterance discloses the extent of Lee’s misuse of conventional farce. As Part Two begins to draw to a close, Thomas and his four guests play a parlor game while they await an ambulance to take the dis-

traught host away for a psychiatric observation. Their game, called “Library,” involves selecting a book, inventing sentences that seem as though they could be drawn from it, and setting them alongside an actual sentence from the text to guess on which is the real one. In the final round, Thomas selects a book called *Black Magic: African American Religion and the Conjuring Tradition* (a real book, I was surprised to learn, by the Religious Studies scholar and Swarthmore professor Yvonne Patricia Chireau [2003]). He then instructs each of his guests to invent a sentence, following Chireau’s example, that begins with the phrase “The Negro believes.” As Thomasina, the one woman present at the party, writes her sentence down, she flashes an arch smile and murmurs, “Oh, I’m going to hell. . . . I’m so going to hell for this.” Then Thomas reads her sentence: “The Negro believes that a Negro’s hands and feet are white because the moon done touched ‘em in Africa!” This provocation is met with hearty laughter by all but one party guest, who interrupts to confess his discomfort with the direction their game has taken, saying—and here is the crucial moment of the play—“I just don’t think we’d be doing this if there were a black person in the room.” To this another guest responds, in what turns out to be the final line of the play, “I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was” (Lee 2010, 52–53).

No sooner has this final scene taken its course than stage lights abruptly fade to black; the play is over before the spectator can even begin to process the drastically belated subversion that irrupts at and as *The Shipment’s* end. In this instantaneous peripeteia, this pure coup de théâtre, the promise of representational progress *The Shipment* seemed to hold out to its audience is utterly undermined, retroactively revoking or annulling the spectator’s experience of this content and thereby, at a certain structural level, actually fulfilling Lee’s mission to *destroy the audience*. It pushes the politics of theatrical syncopation to the limit, and places the spectator in a position of impossibility with respect to what she sees, a position from which, like the subject of tragedy, she is exposed to a revelation the sudden force of which produces a rupture, a traumatic discontinuity in the subject, eclipsing her ability to effectively bear witness to it.

How ought the spectator to approach the dilemma introduced by Lee’s conclusion? Is it possible to account for the puzzling phenomenon of an all

black cast of characters sharing unambiguous laughter over a flagrantly racist remark about “the Negro,” only one among them taking issue with this—and then, only on the grounds that they would not speak of such things were there a black person in the room? It may be that these characters really do not know the skin they are in. Or perhaps this farce is “really” meant for white actors to play, and these black actors have simply trespassed into a scenario that wasn’t theirs to begin with. More unsettling still, Lee might be read as suggesting that the form of subjectivity exposed by the aesthetic logic of farce is, ultimately, the province of whiteness. Ultimately, the ambivalent and violent gesture of subtraction with which *The Shipment* concludes—which, though it belongs firmly to the ethics of subtraction, is nonetheless certainly not without its measure of destruction—must be read in strict solidarity with the radical question Genet poses at the beginning of *The Blacks*: “One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his color?” (1960, 3). Like Genet—and like Freud, for that matter—Lee would rather disorient every attempt at a final answer to the question of racial identity, whether on the side of bodies or of languages, than propose an answer herself.



NOTES

1. *Theaters of the Mind* is the title of a book by Joyce McDougall, which investigates the role of theatricality in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis (1991). In *Theatricality as Medium* (2004), Samuel Weber opens his chapter on “Psychoanalysis and Theatricality” with a brief critical reading of McDougall’s use of the concept of theater. Against the grain of most psychoanalytic criticism—of which McDougall is, in this one sense, representative—Weber argues that psychoanalysis has much more to do with comic theater, slapstick, and the figure of the clown, than with the realm of tragedy and tragic hero who has figured so prominently in the literature. “For Freud . . . tragic pretensions are only part of a more general burlesque role that the Ego plays. . . . Whereas the I thus emerges in McDougall’s account as start of the show—its hero and director at once—Freud insists on comparing the Ego to the slapstick clown in the circus, ridiculous but also theatrical in its attempt to create the appearance of being in control.” See Samuel Weber’s *Theatricality as Medium* (2004, 253–54).

2. Freud's classical elaboration locates the definitively intractable fascination the fetish object holds for its subject not in any of the object's inherent properties, but rather in its metonymic proximity to the site of a lack to which the subject has been incapable of properly acceding. The fetish must be understood a structural *inversion* of what it replaces, a presence coming to take the place of an intolerable absence (in Freud's text, the absence at stake is the mother's "absent" penis). It is thus the essential prop, in both senses of the word, in a perverse demonstration that permits the subject to function without acceding to the fact of lack that it veils. See Freud's "Fetishism" (1950, 149–57).
3. It should be noted, if only in passing, that "democratic materialism" belongs neither to the destructive nor to the subtractive orientation of the passion of the real. Rather, it is wholly other with respect to this passion; it comes into play only once the militant "sequence" of the twentieth century, as Badiou would say, is terminated.
4. In her study on the centrality of failure to the aesthetics of contemporary performance theater, Sara Jane Bailes argues that, when purposively incorporated in works of art, either in their unfolding on stage or the process of their construction, failure has the unique "power" to "[challenge] the cultural dominance of . . . the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world [and index] an alternative route or way of doing or making" (2011, 2).
5. *Songs* does not leave its audience wanting in this respect: before the lights first come up for Korean American's opening monologue, a videotaped prologue shows the playwright herself staring into the camera, tears welling in her eyes, as a hand repeatedly slaps her hard across the face to the accompaniment of a Korean *pansori* folk song. This unsettling demonstration of suffering finds a comic echo when, after Korean American's monologue, the "real" Koreans (named "Korean 1," "Korean 2," and "Korean 3") arrive on stage and, in cartoonishly high slapstick, proceed to beat Korean American nearly to death. Elsewhere, the Three Koreans and Korean American pretend to commit every imaginable form of suicide, miming everything from hara-kiri to gassing oneself in an oven. In a climactic moment that condenses the play's reflexive masochism, all four of them speak in deadpan, trancelike unison, literally possessed by the voice of the playwright. Through them, she apologizes to the audience for "all [the] racist shit" to which she has submitted them, confessing that she "want[s] to be white" and that her "whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male." She ends her ventriloquized monologue of apology by suggesting that "if enough white people hate it, [she]'ll cut it" from the play. See Lee (2010, 66). "The Hitting Video" can be found online, at youngjeanlee.org/content/video.
6. "The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience. . . . Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play . . . is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening" (Stein 1977, xxix). See Gertrude Stein's "Plays" (1977).
7. As Eric Lott points out, although blackface minstrelsy consistently maintained a knowing, quasi-metatheatrical relationship to its own hypertheatrical inauthenticity—an inauthen-

ticity literally written (painted) on the faces and bodies of its performers—this did not prevent many white audiences from mistaking the spectacles they beheld for “the real thing.” “In the minds of many, blackface singers and dancers became, simply, ‘negroes.’ How else to explain the tireless references to ‘these amusing darkies’ . . . as if the original had somehow gotten lost? Early audiences so often suspected that they were being entertained by actual Negroes that minstrel sheet music began the proto-Brechtian practice of picturing blackface performers out of costume as well as in; and there are several existing accounts of white theatergoers mistaking blackface performers for black” (1993, 20). (This kind of profound, collective mistake cannot be accounted for by mere ignorance. There is in it something of the double-structure of disavowal: *I know full well that what I see before me is a minstrel show, yet all the same—given that my (mis)understanding of blackness is already so deeply conditioned by the aesthetic logic of minstrelsy—it seems to me like the real thing.*)

8. “This is what *mimesis* means: the concordance between the complex of sensory signs through which the process of *poiesis* is displayed and the complex of the forms of perception and emotion through which it is felt and understood. . . . The stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum.” See Rancière (2009).
9. A high-resolution recording of the original cast performing *The Shipment* live in Seattle, which gives a clear sense for the “traffic between the house and the stage,” is available at ontheboards.org.

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The book begins well enough, with a retelling of minstrelsy's history, white and black (or should I say, white, then black). If the popularity of the minstrel show with its three-part structure had indeed waned by the turn of the 20th century, minstrelsy shaped that century, and our own time, whether in forms of racial parody or in the very variety-show culture that still dominates our airwaves. Any account of the blackface performer Bert Williams is a welcome one, and the authors recognize how Williams, first as part of the comedy team Walker and Williams, and later as the first black performer in the Ziegfeld Follies, transformed blackface from mere buffoonery into a genre not of bathos or pathos that was familiar but of real sorrow. Todd Phillips, the director of the comic book thriller *Joker*, has taken offense at what he deems to be "far left" criticism of his movie. Phillips rejects accusations that the film inspires white nationalism and "incel" violence, attributing these responses to political correctness and moral absolutism, which in his mind makes the "far left" as authoritarian as the "far right." Phillips claims that his film simply depicts the *Joker*'s origins in a gritty and realistic manner, and that it does not act as an endorsement of the character himself. The film has generated concerns among law enforcement. The song's title appears to be a reference to a line by Karl Marx, namely, that "history repeats itself" first as tragedy, then as farce. In the case of the narrator, it's better that we don't If the Gods are fair then I am fucked I am my father's son. My sun soaked skin It's a subtle feeling To find yourself in The place we've all been missing. My sun soaked skin It's a subtle feeling To find yourself in The place we've all been missing.