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Put Yourself in White Shoes: Race and Translation in a Korean Production of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

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Abstract

This essay examines the 2017 Korean production of Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (*Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* [용비어천가]) as a case study to consider the construction of racialized spectatorship. While the production revealed the conundrums of staging Lee's multicultural and multiracial text, the aesthetic failure allows us to rethink the construction of racialized spectatorship in modern and contemporary Korean theater. Re-enacted by Korean actors for Korean audiences, *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* inevitably created ruptures between the original text and its translation. Such ruptures, which unveil the differences between the original and its translation, help us to rethink the prevalent notion of translation as seamless and invisible. I argue that the production called for a specific kind of racialized performance on the part of the audience—namely, putting themselves in the shoes of white liberal audiences to better understand the play's original intention, and thus temporarily withholding their uneasy feelings of racial tension. This collective gesture in theater for a "universal" understanding of the play calls attention to existing processes in the Korean theater in which spectatorship has been covertly constructed in white terms, where audiences, over time, have been disciplined into "raced subjects."

Keywords: Young Jean Lee, race, translation, spectatorship, Korean, diaspora

Introduction

In the summer of 2017, under the banner of "Korean Diaspora Season," the National Theater Company of Korea invited five Korean theater companies to stage contemporary plays written by writers of Korean descent from different parts of the world, including the United States, Canada, and Britain. Written between 2000 and 2016 and representing different diasporic experiences, these theater productions highlighted affinities between Koreans overseas and South Korean audiences based on historical continuity and imagined kinship. Most of the plays appealed to young Korean audiences, whose relatively mobile sense of belonging is increasingly conditioned by their own experiences of global migration. In its celebration of diversity within the Korean diaspora, as well as shifting notions of Koreanness and cultural belonging, the theater festival appeared to inaugurate a new era for Korean theater. The intercultural, multiracial, and multilingual aspects of the featured plays, however, simultaneously posed a range of dramaturgical challenges for Korean directors and provoked questions of racial representation for young Koreans.

Focusing on the 2017 Korean production of Young Jean Lee's play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, presented with the Korean title *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* [용비어천가], this essay considers how we can develop a critical discourse on race and performance in Korea, something which has hitherto been largely absent.[1] As I will discuss later, the incongruities of embodied translation in a Korean production of Lee's play lay bare the covert workings of post-colonial theater (i.e., modern Korean theater) as a site for racial identity formation. As I examine the embodied aspects of translating multiraciality for Korean audiences, the following questions arise: How does a production with an all-Korean cast make different racial and national identities legible for Korean audiences? How do racial feelings and histories (both personal and collective) translate when they are mediated through bodies that are differently marked in the collective consciousness of the intended *and* actual audiences? What do failures (as well as successes) of translation in theater teach us? When it has become so easy for both human bodies and dramatic texts to travel across national borders, what does it mean to present Asian-American plays to

Asian audiences?

The Translator's Invisibility

In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti offers a critique of translation practices in Anglo-American culture, a tradition that has long prioritized *domesticating* foreign texts for English-speaking readers.[2] As Venuti puts it, "the aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar" to English-speaking readers.[3] Firmly grounded in a "transcendental concept of humanity," prevalent Anglocentric practices, according to Venuti, potentially erase and conceal historical specificity and cultural diversity when a text travels from one language to another.[4] Wary of the homogenizing "violence" of translation, Venuti thus proposes a "foreignizing method" as a "form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism."[5] Echoing Venuti, Sandra Bermann also proposes that translation acts as "an invitation to otherness and a means to describe an anti-essentialist self" and render visible "a relational identity" in lieu of a rigid, unchangeable identity.[6] Borrowing from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity as a strategy of critical re-iteration, Bermann understands the potentialities of contemporary translational practices as "a means to perform the complexity … of subjectivity."[7] In this way, translation can go against conventions and traditional expectations when it puts certain bodies and words in a new context and makes strange the social norms of a given community.

The foreignizing strategy of translation strikes at the core of the Korean diaspora in that it debunks the covertly hegemonic construction of Korean nationalism by trumping the easy affiliation between hyphenated Koreans on stage and the actual Koreans in the auditorium. In Lee's play, during the course of demarcating different racial and national identities, the linguistic and cultural performances of Korean actors playing characters marked in the script as "Korean," "Korean-American," and "white" (with no other references to ethnicity) challenge the audience's perception of Korean bodies as *stable* identities and allow them to see their own identities as relational in national and

racial terms. In other words, Korean audiences are transformed into racialized subjects faced with the Korean-American's experience as a racial minority and the exoticized images of Koreanness on stage. Korean spectators are pulled out of the comfortable chairs of universal audience, a cultural ideology that dominated the translation practice of Western theater in Korea throughout the twentieth century. I suggest that the production facilitates a process of critical *estrangement*, or alienation, rather than empathetic identification, which allows Korean audiences to question the ways in which they are implicated in a larger structure of white supremacy and impacted by its global reach.

While the Korean production of *Songs* exposed the limits of employing the same racial performance strategies for audiences of different racial demographics, such failures open up alternative forms of community and transform the play's intended stage-audience relationship for a trans-Pacific context. Compared to the "in-yer-face" theater of identity politics that the New York premiere, directed by Lee herself, flaunted before American audiences, the Korean production put homogeneous Korean audiences in a bifurcated position when determining their racial positionality. Re-enacted by Korean actors for Korean audiences, Lee's multicultural and multiracial text inevitably created ruptures between the original text and the translated one. Such ruptures, which unveil the differences or seams between the original and the translation, help us to rethink the prevalent notion of translation as an invisible process. If the established assumption is that translation's foremost aim is to domesticate a foreign text and make it *familiar*, the Korean production of *Songs* illustrates that failures in reproducing the original text can render the performance text *strange.* Such moments of disjuncture bring forth unintended effects, uncovering critical differences and creating "a new productive politics of translation."[8]

"Minority Rage" for Mainstream America: Asians on Stage and White Liberal Audiences

Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven was developed in workshops at the City University of New York Graduate Center's Prelude Festival (2005)

and the HERE Arts Center (2006) before its premiere in New York City in 2006. The play was generally received as a piece that played with the then-prevalent notions of post-ness, such as post-race and post-feminism, as a *New York Times* review illustrates by speaking of its themes as ones of "minority rage, mudfish in tofu, femininity's inner viciousness, and a secret Korean plot to rule the world."[9] On many occasions, Young Jean Lee has expressed that her goal is to shock mainstream American audiences and to change their perceptions. In her interview with the National Theater Company of Korea, Lee explains the context in which *Songs* was written.[10] While it was originally intended for "American audiences" and their perceptions of race, the play's ultimate aim is to make everyone—whites, Asians, and Asian-Americans in the auditorium—uncomfortable. Hopefully, she adds, this will work for Korean audiences, too. Following Lee's suggestion, my reading of *Songs* and its New York premiere envisions white liberal audiences as the target audience. While an "American audience" is not synonymous with being biologically white and potentially risks disregarding the diversity within American theatre, what is worth noting in Lee's statement is the way in which the play speaks to a mainstream consciousness constructed in white terms, regardless of each individual spectator's racial identity.

Loosely constructed out of dialogues, songs, and dances by three groups of people, *Songs* progresses through a number of seemingly discontinuous, irrelevant scenes. The closest thing to a main plot follows the interior journey of Korean-American would-be writer Myungbean (a fictional persona of the playwright) and her search for an authentic identity in a racist American society. The play evokes familiar tropes—generational conflict and reconciliation, the search for identity, and imagining Asia as a source of imagination and creativity—that have served as staples of Asian-American cultural performance, only to subvert them. Fittingly, many reviewers of the play's premiere noted the production's deliberate manipulation of the audience's expectations of exotic "Oriental" spectacles before and during the show. Karen Shimakawa discusses the elaborate decoration of the vestibule where the audience waited before they entered the seating area, which turned into a Korean Buddhist temple with painted murals and colored paper

lanterns.[11] The sounds of Buddhist chanting in Korean and trickling water also created the atmospheric effects of an "authentic" Korean cultural experience.

As soon as the house opened, however, the sound stopped, and all that the audience could see was a large, bare room made of unpainted plywood. A female voice and several male voices are then heard in the dark, before a screen on the wall emerges, showing the torso of an Asian woman (Young Jean Lee herself). In this short, pre-recorded clip, Lee looks into the camera and gives directions to her presumably male collaborators offscreen. The scene proceeds as Lee is successively slapped by an unseen hand to the brink of tears. Like many feminist performances that display female nudity deliberately and strategically, Lee is in control of the violence incessantly inflicted upon her; it is Lee who controls the male collaborators who remain unseen by the audience.[12] Each time her face is slapped, she turns her face back towards the camera. Her defiant look is mixed with inexplicable expressions of pain and sadness, self-inflicted and yet inescapable. The clip encapsulates the play's vexing performance of Asian female victimhood, which will be enacted over and over again through the words and acts of the Korean-American women. The background music, a Korean traditional narrative song titled *Sarangga*—literally translated as "Love Song"—heightens the sado-masochistic dynamic in the mainstream love for Asians and Asian submission to such love.

When the video clip ends, the stage lights up abruptly, and the female protagonist of the play, the Korean-American Myungbean, walks on stage.[13] Without an almost undetectable, enigmatic smirk, she slowly moves her gaze from one side of the auditorium to the other. In the performance recording I watched, this moment provoked awkward and unknowing laughter from some members of the audience.[14] What is happening is a subversion of the subject-object position through the gaze: An Asian woman, who is supposed to be looked at, is looking back at the audience and asserting agency. Young Jean Lee's helpless yet dominant image on the screen is thus transferred onto the stage through Myungbean's gaze. After a brief silence, Myungbean begins to talk directly to the audience in a stand-up comedy style and tells a series of

self-deprecating jokes about Asians, Asian-Americans, and white people. For instance, her very first remark is: "Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents?"[15] She continues to call Asian parents "retarded monkeys who can barely speak English" and ridicules white men dating Asian women because "they can get better-looking Asian women than they get white women and because we are easier to get and have lower self-esteem."[16] Her diatribe evokes the popular discourse around post-racial America when she asserts that minorities now "can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them, and there's nothing you can do to stop us."[17] The lack of political correctness in her words should make audiences uncomfortable, whether they are Asian-American or white. As an Asian female viewer watching from a private space and unable to see the ethnic makeup of the audience, I could not determine whether the sounds of laughter were signs of genuine fun or false laughter to perform post-racial consciousness.

Throughout the play, Myungbean's grand scheme to overturn white supremacy as a racial minority is suggested through a coalition with Koreans, clearly ahistorical and fictional figures she conjures up in her mind. However, even in her imagination, forging trans-Pacific solidarity is not easy. If Asia has often served Asian-Americans as a topos to "epitomize and embody [their] natural experience and essence" in the Asian-American literary and cultural imagination, the fact that Myungbean is initially excluded from a community of Korean women undercuts the long-standing association made between the two in imagining this Asian-American cultural citizenship.[18] Towards the end of her monologue, Myungbean raises her fist and shouts, "Let the Korean dancing begin!" and a chorus of women in the short jackets and long, high-waisted hoop skirts of traditional *hanbok* rush onto the stage.[19] However, the ensuing scenes portray the tensions and misunderstandings between Myungbean and the Koreans, rather than their affinity for each other. The confrontations are playful and comic, while also manifesting the Korean-American subject's simultaneous fascination with and repulsion toward the mythic images of Asia as a cultural reference. Such disidentification is best illustrated in Myungbean's failed attempt

to participate in the Koreans' dance sequence. Encouraged by the Koreans, Myungbean gladly joins them, but her awkward movements are dismissed and ridiculed by the Koreans. Mocked and rejected, Myungbean "makes racist faces" and "Chinese eyes" at the Koreans and "mimes eating rice," with their antagonism escalating to the point where it becomes a catfight.[20] Myungbean's convoluted relationship with the Koreans evinces anxiety about a cultural identity that oscillates between Korean and American.

Myungbean's scene with her grandmother, supposedly a first-generation immigrant, further illustrates the uneasy relationship that young Korean-Americans have to navigate. Myungbean's grandmother, a role taken up by a member of the Korean chorus, mentions the opening video clip—a metatheatrical comment that reminds the audience that Myungbean's struggle mirrors the playwright's own—and reproaches her for bringing shame to her family. Myungbean tries to articulate the self-hatred she feels in a white supremacist culture: "I walk around all day feeling like I have no idea what I'm doing and am messing everything up, and I'm constantly tortured by the thought that other people can see what an idiot I am and hate me for it."[21] The heartfelt confession is probably one of the rare moments in the play where hyperbolic ethnic and racial performances are subdued, and we seem to hear the agonizing voice of the author directly. But Myungbean's grandmother advises her to turn to God and study the Bible, an allusion to religious fervor often associated with the Korean immigrant community. Myungbean seems to accept her grandmother's suggestion only to reappropriate it: she begins a "reverse Bible study" with Koreans, where she borrows words from the Bible to reinterpret it. As she declares, "we are studying the Bible, but what it leads us to is my own personal teaching."[22] Repeatedly quoting "vanity of vanities, all is vanity," she points out the futility of working hard to create "something good and new"; instead, she preaches her "new theory" of negativity based on such axioms as "not-believing in Jesus" and "giving up."[23]

The possibility of building a coalition between these two groups of women looms larger when they are set against the white characters in the play. The differences between Myungbean and the Koreans are

temporarily forgotten, and their commonalities are emphasized. The play contains a subplot of a white heterosexual couple that interrupts the main plot concerning Myungbean. These sudden intrusions into the artificially constructed Asian/American space cast into relief how everyday performances of "whiteness" appear as naturalized and almost invisible within the modus operandi of white supremacy. Compared to the Asian women's full-blown scenes charged with racial feelings and the memories of national/gendered oppression, the white couple's conversation is marked by the banality of the subject matter and their highly naturalistic acting. Like the theater of the absurd, the purposelessness of their conversation and the feigned serious tone that they assume create a comedic effect. As the play alternates between scenes of the Korean-American characters and those of the white couple, the initial chasm between Myungbean and the Korean chorus diminishes, and the play gradually moves towards pan-Asian solidarity. One of the white couple's heated arguments about trifles ends with the woman's angry remark, "It makes me want to take those pens and jam them into the end of your penis."[24] What immediately follows this figurative statement is a chaotic dance sequence of the Korean chorus to an upbeat Christmas song by Mariah Carey. The stage direction reads, "*the Koreans and Korean-American take turns walking downstage center to mime a gruesome suicide in a confident manner*"—each woman mimes an act of self-molestation, such as committing hara-kiri, lighting herself on fire, stabbing herself in the vagina with a knife, putting her head in an oven, cradling and then shooting her imaginary baby, and even cutting off her breast and hurling it into the audience.[25] Collectively, these individual acts evoke memories of violence imposed on women—Asian women in particular.

What is noteworthy is that the Korean-American joins in this grotesque performance of shared female suffering, her body now legible as one of the subjugated bodies at the intersection of race and gender. The play's pan-Asian gesture is frequently manifested in strategic intra-ethnic casting. In many productions, actresses of different Asian nationalities have played the roles of Myungbean and the Koreans. In the New York City production, other Asian languages were used

along with Korean: For instance, one actress would say "It's fun!" in Korean, and the other would respond in Cantonese, "Yes, it's fun." [26] These multilingual exchanges recur throughout the play, leaving audience members who do not speak these languages deaf to these small differences. Since Koreanness becomes legible through various sartorial and linguistic signs, it enables these Asian female bodies to assert a pan-Asian solidarity, even if they are subsumed under one and the same racial category under the "white gaze." The collective performance of hyphenated Asian bodies has the potential to destabilize the mainstream audience's visual mastery over the spectacles of these singing and dancing Oriental female bodies. The risk of reproducing Orientalist spectacles without alerting the viewer to the critical difference between performing bodies is still there; however, the strategic pan-Asian casting can reinforce a sense of solidarity among performing bodies marked as Asian and creates a tentative community in a white-centered space.[27] As Josephine Lee suggests, if mainstream culture has frequently presented Asian-American bodies as interchangeable and exchangeable commodities, Asian-American theater reappropriates the same practice as a political gesture of building and performing inter-ethnic solidarity and shared sensibility as Asian-Americans.[28]

Considered within this context, *Songs* inherits and extends pan-Asian politics into a larger form of trans-Pacific coalition. Navigating Asian-American and imagined (or fictionalized) Asian identities, *Songs* asks how a tentative community can be forged within and beyond the Korean diaspora, and suggests the performative possibility of embodying the history shared by Asian women as a way to mend the troubled relationship between Asia and Asian-America. The play ends with the white couple's conversation, in the middle of which the Koreans and Korean-American abruptly come back onto the stage and stand before the couple, blocking the audience's view. They look straight into the audience and speak in unison as a collective "I," the "empowered Asian female" whose "whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male."[29] The seemingly self-deprecating rhetoric circles back to the opening remark made by the Korean-American, but the change is telling: the once individual, isolated voices

of the Korean diaspora—both real and imagined—now merge into one.

Performing Whiteness on and off the Stage

If prevalent racial perceptions indiscriminately lump Korean and Korean-American bodies together in a larger racial category of *Asian* bodies for an American mainstream audience, how would the play work in a Korean production where both performers and audiences are Korean nationals? While the New York production immersed the audience in a make-believe world of imagined Koreanness, *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga*, the Seoul production of *Songs*, presents a curious site to consider the precarious state of racial representation on the contemporary Korean stage. The conundrums that the production faced in staging multi-raciality will serve as a springboard to discuss the construction of racialized spectatorship in contemporary Korean theater. This is because the Korean production called for a specific kind of racialized performance on the part of the audience—namely, the spectators' performance of "whiteness," in which they are asked to imagine themselves to be a white liberal audience to understand the play's intention better. I argue that performing this ideal audience—by temporarily withholding the viewer's racial consciousness to attain a more universal understanding of the play—evokes the process in which spectatorship has been covertly constructed in white terms in Korean theater, where audiences have been disciplined into becoming "raced subjects" over time. If the intended message of the Korean Diaspora Season is to reinstate contemporary Korean theater's global status by borrowing the language of transnationality, the seemingly forward-looking gesture has only brought to light the ways in which spectatorship and production in modern Korean theatre have been constructed around the axis of white normativity.

With the increasing number of immigrants and short-term sojourners, Korea has been moving towards a multiracial society, despite its racial demographic still being mostly a homogeneous one. This social condition is mirrored in the racial and ethnic composition of both the audiences and actors in live performances. The strategic pan-Asian casting of

the New York production—where linguistic, sartorial, and cultural performances of individuals created illusory national identities—does not work for Korean audiences. When one considers the prevalence of the monoracial and monolingual practices of Korean theater, attempting to create the illusion of a multiracial play-world was doomed to fail: How could one make Korean, Korean-American, and white identities legible to the audience while not sacrificing the play's intended critique of racism? Skepticism was expressed in the early phase of planning the Korean Diaspora Season by many people, including Wonjeong Son, who served as a general dramaturg for the festival.[30] However, in his keynote lecture at the 2018 Performance Studies International conference in Daegu, South Korea, Yun-Cheol Kim, the artistic director of the National Theater Company of Korea, suggested that such concerns were muted by the more optimistic and global visions the festival promised—the forging of a new cultural identity for Korean theater based on commonalities with diasporic experience.[31]

In this respect, *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* retained the basic structure of *Songs,* beginning with the same video clip. The name of the Korean-American character was changed to Sillock, and she spoke mostly in English with Korean surtitles in order to interact with the audience and the Korean chorus. What gave Sillock an American identity was her linguistic performance, differentiated from the other actresses who all spoke in Korean. There were moments when Sillock did speak in Korean; on these occasions, however, she used a distinctive accent most Korean audiences would associate with Koreans overseas. Along with the surtitles, *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* also introduced a new character named the Interpreter, a part played by a member of the Korean chorus. Due to the language barrier, Sillock could not directly engage with the audience, and her power over the audience was greatly diminished. It was only through translation—either through surtitles or via the Interpreter's intervention—that the meaning of her words reached the audience. As the play opened, two actresses came on stage, playing Sillock and the Interpreter. Sillock was clearly aware of the presence of the Interpreter, even while she spoke to the audience directly as the original playscript dictated. The Interpreter would translate each line spoken by Sillock into

Korean almost simultaneously.

Her translations, however, were far from being mechanical reproductions of Sillock's words. When Sillock makes self-deprecating jokes about Asians and Asian-Americans as in the original script, the Interpreter is visibly taken aback, hesitates, and fumbles for politically correct words. Here, the Interpreter serves as the audience's surrogate, her reaction signaling and potentially guiding the audience as to how they should react to Sillock's remarks about Asians, although they know the meaning of Sillock's words from the surtitles. If Myungbean enjoys a form of minority power in being able to manipulate the mainstream American audience's racial guilt, Sillock in the Korean production is stripped of this privilege. Instead, she faces potential hostility with her pseudo-racist jokes about Asians, exacerbated by her dependence on English and her accented Korean. Lee's intended role for the Korean-American—a precarious play with the white liberal gaze and racial guilt—thus loses immediacy and poignancy in favor of political correctness (through the Interpreter's mediation) and linguistic economy (through the Korean surtitles).

In contrast, the Korean characters gain authenticity and empathy from the audience as their language shifts from broken English, which served as a marker of foreignness in the New York production, to fluent and unaccented Korean. While a rapport is built between these familiar and relatable Koreans on stage and the Korean audience, Sillock is left as an outsider in this newly-formed community. Ironically, it is Sillock's isolation that gradually leads to the audience's sympathy for her. In other words, the figure of the Korean-American in the Korean production suffers from a new form of racial objectification as a linguistically and culturally alienated spectacle under the sympathetic gaze of the Korean audience.

While the shifting dynamic between the (imagined) Korean-American and the Koreans (on- and off-stage) was at the center of this production, "whiteness" was seemingly absent throughout the performance. For director Oh Dong-shik, who experimented with different strategies to mark racial difference, the white couple in the original script posed the greatest challenge.[32] Lacking a theatrical device to mark "whiteness"

on Korean bodies, the final compromise he made was to turn white characters into Korean actors *playing at* "whiteness" while rehearsing the play. No visible racial indicators were added for the white characters, except for their Yuppie-like office look. This gesture presumably emphasized their normativity in contrast to Sillock's hippie-inspired vest and the Koreans' *hanbok* as well as the blond wigs they tried on toward the play's end. However, these sartorial differences were not enough to denote their racial identity. In addition, the audience could hardly make the connection between the act of trying on blond wigs and the racial identity of these characters, as racial references are absent in their aimless conversations. One could argue that the audience could focus more on the content of these characters' conversation than on their racial identity, further highlighting the absurdity of their banter. Nevertheless, it was impossible for Korean audiences to place these characters in a specific racial context.

Intriguingly, the forgotten "whiteness" was evoked by the director's intrusion from outside the frame of the play. Here, I would like to turn to my own spectating experience to illustrate the ways in which the production created alienating effects that differed from the original New York production. It is a shared belief that physical presence and a communal feeling with fellow spectators can have a great impact on forming a sense of belonging and identity in theater audiences. As such, my own racial and cultural positionality as a spectator inevitably conditions the following discussion of the Korean production. Before I went to see *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* in the summer of 2017, I was warned that some Korean audience members had been offended and outraged by the show, expressing their experiences on various websites and personal blogs. While some were deeply moved by the play's poignant critique of American racism, others confessed that they were more confounded by the Korean-American character's—if not the play's—racist attitude towards Asians, preventing them from empathizing with her minority position. Her remarks referring to Asian people from Asia as "the original monkeys," which would provoke ironic laughter from white liberal audiences, were received by Korean audiences in a more serious manner. One audience member left a terse comment on Interpark, a

Korean ticketing website, about her experience of Lee's play, expressing that she was so "disgusted" and "uncomfortable" that she wanted to stand up and leave the theater. Another blog post mentions an audience member actually leaving the play ten minutes after it began.

After reading these dismal reviews, I went into the theater with some excitement instead of my usual skepticism in believing that a production of a translated work would be inferior to the original. Naturally, I was still expecting a wider range of reactions from the Korean audience, believing that some spectators would understand the nuances and ironies embedded in Lee's original script. At the same time, if the reviews were right, I secretly hoped to see the outrage of part of the audience and wondered if such intolerance of intended misrepresentation might suggest a lack of rigorous discussion of race and multiculturalism within Korea—never mind thinking about the even more complex issue of critical racial discourses in a global context. As it turned out, my expectation was soon to be trumped. Before the show began, Oh Dong-shik, the director, came on stage and explained to the audience the significance of Lee's play in an American racial context. Reminding the audience that the play's intended audience was white, Oh asked us to "put [ourselves] in the shoes of white audiences" to understand the play's message better. He explained that his pre-show intervention had begun accidentally when a small technical problem occurred in the middle of the show one day. He had to entertain the audience for a short interval with a few words about the identity politics in *Songs*. The technical problem was soon fixed, and the play resumed. To his surprise, after this incident, the audience showed a more favorable attitude toward the play. After that, Oh's pre-show speech had become an integral part of the production, helping, as it did, to contextualize the play properly. But I myself was flustered. How should I understand this all-too-kind invitation to be empathetic by putting myself as a part of the Korean audience in the shoes of white people? Are we Koreans to perform as "an ideal audience"? Surely, the reminder that *Songs* is an American play helps Korean audiences not immersed in Lee's racially charged social atmosphere to become informed, detached observers. What complicates this call to identify with the American racial

mainstream is that such identification is anything but easy. Even without the director's suggestion, an ideal audience who would *get* the racial jokes in this play must be either white or Asian-American. In effect, the director's suggestion that we imagine ourselves "to be white" creates a self-perception akin to what W. E. B. Du Bois called "racial double-consciousness": "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," weirdly positioning the audience in a liminal space where one is caught between being Korean and being white.[33] Temporarily transformed into white subjects, a racial identity it cannot fully inhabit, a Korean audience is tacitly asked to perform a double emotional labor. We *feel* with the Koreans, objectified and fictionalized; at the same time, we constantly must remind ourselves that we are wearing the shoes of a white audience.

Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga evokes the absence of "whiteness" and the repressed racial consciousness of the Korean spectators—as well as their spectatorial position covertly constructed in white terms. As Venuti reminds us, when translated for English-speaking audiences, foreign texts that harbor cultural and racial otherness are prone to assimilation and normatization. In the Anglo-American context, these discussions offer fresh insights into rethinking the practice of translation and reception of English literary texts in South Korea. As a country with a history of colonization by Japan followed by heavy cultural influence from the United States, translation—either through Japanese or English—played a seminal role in the formative years of modern Korean literature. Similarly, European and Euro-American works, from Shakespeare to Eugene O'Neill, have long dominated the Korean stage; modern Korean theater emulated the Western dramatic tradition in order to create its own aesthetic before theater practitioners turned to alternative theatrical forms rooted in Korean traditional performances in the late twentieth century.[34] If transparency is "the authoritative discourse for translating," the embodied nature of theater demands an extra effort in order to create the illusion of transparency that is required to gain the authority of the original text.[35] As a result, in staging stories and characters mostly crafted by white male authors, "whiteness" was regarded as the racial norm; few techniques were necessary to denote

the tenor and nuances of portraying white characters. There was a tacit agreement between Korean performers and audiences with regard to the imagined racial identity of the characters on stage. With little resistance to the absence of racial markers on stage, Korean audiences embraced Korean bodies as Russian, German, Irish, or Norwegian. In this process of domesticating foreign classics, the racial identities of the Korean actors and spectators were left intact, unaffected by the "otherness" portrayed in abstraction on the stage. Instead, audiences subconsciously equated the ideas and feelings of "whiteness" with human universality. Thanks to the thematic universality and canonical status many Euro-American classics claimed in modern Korean theater and literature, both readers and audiences were safely removed from the politics of the specific racial and cultural reality each work wrestled with. Only with the emergence of contemporary ethnic theaters that portray the reality of ethnic minorities in a predominantly "white world"—and more specifically multi-ethnic theater—has Korean theater come to confront the challenges of staging a work in translation and reconsider long-held "whitewashed" casting and performance practices.

In this sense, the director's call to turn us into white subjects is tautological: We have long occupied the same seats as white spectators, without wrestling, until very recently, with the discrepancies between the human experiences represented on stage and our own lived experiences as colonial and post-colonial subjects. The director's attempt to deliver the intention of the *original* work to the audience tries to preempt the raw feelings that the play could evoke differently for Korean audiences compared to American audiences, as illustrated in some members of the Korean audience's disgust and discomfort. Despite such effort, it is Lee's provocation of Asianness that simultaneously forces us to look at the white shoes we are in, aware of the *ugly feelings* (to borrow from Sienne Ngai) lurking somewhere in our minds.[36] It is also Brechtian, in the sense that it makes familiar spectacles of the other—that is, foreign subjects that Korean audiences have domesticated in the realm of representation—*strange*. If the viewing experience of the U.S. premiere of *Songs* via video-recording left me in a racial vacuum, it was when I watched the Korean production of Lee's play sitting amidst

other Koreans that my own racial identity emerged and became visible to me. Without the director's intervention, the translated production could potentially unseat the audience from the comfortable position of detached observers of an abstract reality in the guise of universality, unsettling the persisting Euro-centrism in Korean theater.

The conundrums and failures of translating interracial encounters in *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* reveal ruptures on the illusory smooth surface of translation, as well as the interchangeable and "universal" experience of Korean (if not Asian) diasporic subjects. The production ushers in new directions of translation that honor heterogeneity and racial or cultural differences. Bermann suggests that *foreignizing* strategies of translation can keep the translated text—foreign and "othered" in the context of English translations—and its subjectivity intact, protected from simple, wholesale assimilation. Via Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, Bermann demands that we rethink translation practice as a counter-hegemonic "plea for a diasporic, non-nationalist viewpoint in which social plurality rather than cultural sameness provides the basis for a one-state solution."[37] Translation becomes a disruptive practice by creating spaces where one's sense of self is constantly challenged by encounters with otherness. The good news is that these encounters only "[expand] our capacity to imagine the human."[38] As Emily Apter beautifully describes: "Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements."[39]

The Promises of Translation Failure

When Bong Joon-ho won the Golden Globe award for best foreign-language film with *Parasite* in 2020, the South Korean director's acceptance speech excited movie fans all over the world. To quote Bong, "Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films.[40] In addition to affirming the status of film as a universal language, his words convey the promise

of the transcendent possibilities that translation can bring (confirmed through the movie's historic triumph at the Academy Awards). Can one make the same promise for theater? In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a solo performance piece about the L.A. Riots, Anna Deavere Smith played the roles of 30 to 40 people of different racial and class backgrounds, weaving a narrative of racial conflicts and reconciliation based on transcripts of her interviews with more than 300 people. In earlier stage versions, Smith enacted Korean-Americans whose stores were burned down during the riot by reproducing their Korean sentences verbatim with English surtitles hovering over the stage. Dorinne Kondo, who was the dramaturg for the world premiere, recalls the visceral, raw feelings that this moment evoked, noting the disparity between body and language that created a powerful trans-corporeal illusion. She describes the opening scene at one of the New York previews of *Twilight*, where Smith portrayed Chung Lee, head of the Korean-American Victims Association: "In deep tones she begins speaking in Korean. Yes, this is familiar. As he speaks solemnly, then passionately, we see the translation flashing above us.[41] Before Kondo *reads* the translation, she can sense the *feel* of the Korean sounds, the passion and solemnness of the subject matter: Smith-as-Lee's voice resonates as familiar to Kondo. Opposing views followed. Nancy Cho, for example, argued that the gap between Smith's visibly black body and her awkward rendering of the Korean language left the emotional distance between Smith and her performed subject even more visible. As she put it, "given the awkwardness of Smith's accent work and her pronunciation of certain lines in Korean, the audience is taken perilously close to the edge of racial caricature.[42]

The differing critical receptions of Smith's performance ask us if there is a right translation when it comes to theater, an art form where languages are mediated through human bodies. Smith's attempt shows a desire for complete identification with the object of representation by lending her body as a transparent medium. But there is a catch in this laudable gesture: her body is always already in the way. The failure to make whiteness visible in a Korean production of *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* and controversies surrounding alleged blackface in a Korean production of Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* presented in the same

festival illustrate that any attempt to ensure universality or authenticity through translation can go awry in theater, depending on who is being represented, performing, or watching. These moments of failure and misunderstanding, however, can teach us something: they ironically usher us toward gaps and differences between texts that demand our scrutiny in an uncertain territory, reminding us to be wary of our feelings of comfort, lest we miss something important.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1] "Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven" is a literal translation of a fifteenth-century Korean epic poem titled *Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga* (pronounced as "jong-bee-uh-chuhn-gah") compiled under King Sejong, the fourth King of the Chosŏn Dynasty. It is the very first official document written and published in Hangul, the Korean alphabetical system developed under King Sejong's auspices. The purpose of the poem was to legitimize the new dynasty of Chosŏn and pay tribute to its founding fathers.

[2] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*: *A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995)

[3] Ibid., 18.

[4] Ibid., 22.

[5] Ibid., 20.

[6] Sandra Bermann, "Performing Translation" in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, eds. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 285–97.

[7] Ibid., 292–93.

[8] Ibid., 294.

[9] Anita Gates, "Laugh Now. You May Not When These Women Rule the World," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2006, accessed June 10, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/27/theater/reviews/27drag.html.

[10] National Theater Company of Korea, *Korean Diaspora Season* (Seoul: National Theater Company of Korea), 12–13.

[11] Karen Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 1 (2007): 89–102.

[12] See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[13] The Korean-American character assumes different names in different productions. In the NYC production and the published script, she is called Myung Bean by her grandmother (played by one of the Koreans). In the Seoul production, she is called Sillock, the real name of the actress who plays the role. Throughout this essay, I will use each character's name instead of "the Korean-American" to differentiate their relationship to each audience group.

[14] My analysis of the play is based on both the published script and the video recording of a performance at the 2006 premiere, officially provided by the Young Jean Lee Theater Company. See Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009). See also the recording that can be found here: https://vimeo.com/165709545.

[15] Lee, *Songs of the Dragons*, 39.

[16] Ibid., 40.

[17] Ibid., 41.

[18] David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[19] Lee, *Songs of the Dragons*, 40–41.

[20] Ibid., 78.

[21] Ibid., 56.

[22] Ibid., 60–61.

[23] Ibid., 60–61.

[24] Ibid., 63.

[25] Ibid., 64.

[26] Different productions may come up with their own combinations of different nationalities and languages for the Korean and Korean-American characters.

[27] Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings," 91.

[28] Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 16–17.

[29] Quoted from an interview with the playwright. See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Script Sabotage: An Interview with Young Jean Lee about her Play 'Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven," *American Theatre*, September 1, 2007, accessed June 10, 2021, https://www.americantheatre.org/2007/09/01/script-sabotage/.

[30] Wonjeong Son, personal interview by the author, January 9, 2021.

[31] Yun-Cheol Kim, "A Long Journey to Find Koreanness [한국다움을 찾는 긴 여정]," Performance Studies International Conference (keynote lecture, Daegu, South Korea, July 3, 2018).

[32] National Theater Company of Korea, *Korean Diaspora Season*, 10–11.

[33] W. E. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897, accessed June 10, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/. As Du Bois states, "One feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—his longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self."

[34] For post-colonial theory's attention to the close relationship between colonization and translation, see Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds., introduction to *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[35] Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 6.

[36] Sienne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[37] Bermann, "Performing Translation," 294–95.

[38] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 228, qtd. in Bermann, "Performing Translation," 294.

[39] Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6.

[40] Tracy Brown, "Bong Joon Ho's 'Parasite' Speech Marks Second Year Korean Is Spoken at the Golden Globes," *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 2020, accessed July 3, 2021,

https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-01-05/golden-globes-2020-bong-joon-ho-parasite-speech-korean.

[41] Dorine Kondo, “Shades of Twilight” in *Connected: Engagement with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 313.

[42] See Nancy Cho, “Beyond Identity Politics: National and Transnational Dialogues in Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and Chay Yew’s *A Beautiful Country*,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 20, no. 1 (2005): 72. In subsequent performances, the interviews with the Koreans were translated into English and performed by Smith using an accented English often associated with immigrants, evoking a new set of ethnic stereotypes.

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