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The Performative of Ethnicity-in-Common in the Plays of David Henry Hwang and Young Jean Lee

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Abstract

In the American culture at the height of neoliberalism, ethnicity has been understood as something to be overcome and left behind in the past. Different from this trend, the question of ethnicity finds its way into the heart of performative utterances, as observed in Asian American theater and performances written in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. This essay examines the extent to which ethnicity contains plural forms of life without denying ethnic differences by focusing on David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* and Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men*. These plays do not feature Asian American characters on stage, but through a series of "likeness," they address ethnicity within a scene of plurality rather than as immanent to the individual. In the essay, such capacious thinking about ethnicity is called "ethnicity–in–common." By analyzing the instances in which the performative force of one's ethnic presentation does not work or is unintentionally at work, the essay explores a time–space yet to come in which the language of ethnicity makes us imagine and inhabit plural forms of life.

Key Words: performative, ethnicity–in–common, Asian American performance, David Henry Hwang, Young Jean Lee, nonperformance

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Ⅰ. Introduction

In a talk at New York's Asia Society in 2019, playwright David Henry Hwang pointed out that "If you look at contemporary Asian American playwrights, people do tend to write from specific ethnic communities ... so people write characters for a Korean American or Vietnamese American or Chinese or whatever."[1] The growing tendency of playwrights to bring ethnic experience into the field of performance and theater with various experiments diverges from ethnicity's place as the metropolitan liberals' "other" that was prevalent in the neoliberal era. When we recall the cliched representations of ethnicity which has been understood as "something to be overcome and left in the past" in the age of global capitalism (Chow 2002:30), an emergent trend like this deserves our attention. We may ask what are the conditions for this shift from othering ethnicity to "writ[ing] from specific ethnic communities" and whether ethnicity that appears to promise opportunity and social justice in exchange for "individual effort [and] cultural assimilation" can contain plural forms of life (R. Lee 160). This essay is concerned with these questions by focusing on two American plays written in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis: Hwang's *Chinglish*, which premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2011[2], and playwright Young Jean Lee's 2014 production *Straight White Men*.[3] In the essay I discuss these

1) The conversation between David Henry Hwang and Bartlett Sher moderated by Karen Shimakawa discusses the current state of American musical theatre with the focus on Asian representation on Broadway. It can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r5CItxv9gM.

2) After its premiere in Chicago in the summer of 2011, *Chinglish* moved to Broadway in October 2011. For a detailed production history, see Esther Kim Lee, 116-7.

two works not because Hwang and Lee are among the most influential American playwrights writing about ethnicity. Rather, the instances of unintentional performative of ethnicity[4] and nonperformance in these plays offer us a timely point of departure for thinking about shifting perceptions of ethnicity in Asian American (and other ethnic) theater and performance. Unlike many of Hwang's and Lee's other plays, which feature Asian American characters and other culturally specific identities, *Chinglish* and *Straight White Men* do not feature Asian American characters on stage, but instead present ethnicity as a "dramatic" and "non-referential" act in the context of post-financial crisis America (Butler 1988: 522).[5] Judith Butler (2015:27) calls such a characteristic of utterances "performativity" and means by that "in the moment of making the utterance [it] makes something happen or brings some phenomenon into being." In *Chinglish*, ethnicity, first mistaken in the form of a Midwestern American in China, ironically comes into being as it is considered a mask to take off, while in *Straight White Men* ethnicity is presented to us tangentially via the topic of straight-white-male privilege. In the essay, I examine the extent to which these plays expose the limits of our assumptions of ethnicity as the marking of cultural

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3) *Straight White Men*, directed by Young Jean Lee, opened at The Public Theater in New York City and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio in 2014. The play has since been performed at a number of venues, including Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago and the Hayes Theatre on Broadway. The latter was directed by Anna D. Shapiro (See Y. Lee 69-72; Sehgal).

4) On the unintentional aspect of performatives in the plays, see pages 13-14 and 17-19 of this essay, which focuses on examples of characters acting without intention.

5) *Chinglish* and *Straight White Men* can be read alongside the notion of "gender performativity" developed by Judith Butler. She writes: "Consider gender ... as ... an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' itself carries the double-meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential'" (521-22).

difference, of which we are often certain and where the aberrant moments in the plays (from the perspective of ethnic norms) stand vis-à-vis the growing interest in relationality in recent literary studies.

In *Chinglish*, the representation of an ethnic person in America is transposed to a Midwestern American in Guiyang, China. Daniel Cavanaugh, white, in his forties who has come to China to search for a business opportunity, embodies the perceptions of "ethnic" people in America. He speaks only his mother tongue (English) and is unfamiliar with Chinese culture, including *guanxi.* Regarding guanxi, Peter, the only other white man in the play, explains to Daniel that he must "take the time and trouble to build an actual relationship" (Hwang 10). Daniel also has his own assumptions about Chinese people, thinking that American businessmen such as himself can improve Chinese culture by correcting mistranslations (Scene 3). In the play, a misunderstanding of the Chinese from the American point of view and preconceived notions of American Midwesterners unfolds through translation practice. Since Daniel, the protagonist, does not speak Chinese and Cai (the cultural minister of Guiyang whom Daniel tries to impress so as to win a contract for the new arts center's signage) does not speak English, many of the scenes require a translator. What is noteworthy about *Chinglish* is that when the translator fails to transmit to others what is said in the process of translation, oppressed and isolated images of ethnicity blur in unusual ways.

In *Straight White Men*, as the title implies, no characters of Asian descent appear. Nonetheless, a number of reviews of the play and interviews with playwright Lee have introduced *Straight White Men* in connection to Lee's Asian American identity. Lee also makes an interesting comment on her relation to straight white male identity: "[the

play] was less that I was trying to create sympathy for straight white male identity, than I was trying to inhabit that identity as a woman of color" (Fasthorse and Lee). Just as Hilton Als in *The New Yorker* introduces *Straight White Men* as a naturalistic work, the play's characters stand in for typical white males. At the same time, by staging what she is not, such as maleness and whiteness, Lee leads us to attend to something else. Lee's thinking like a straight white man is delivered to the audience through a white male character who does not act like other straight white men. In this way, the play figures ethnicity more on the horizon of human interaction rather than as epistemic determination. Straight white male characters unintentionally invoking the living conditions of those ethnicized also suggest that reaching out to the "common" across ontological thresholds is not an easy task, with ethnicity at the center of dramatic forms. In the play ethnicity is not confined to what Fred Moten (141) calls "ontological drama," or in other word a situation in which ethnicized people appear ethnic for those who do not conventionally bear the sign of ethnicity.

In an interview with *American Theatre*, Hwang points out that "two somewhat contradictory ideas" constitute race: "One is the notion of a post-racial society, and the other is the idea that racist things still happen, and you have to deal with it when they do" (Viertel 61). His remark that race is both fictional and real hints at the working (or unworking) of ethnicity in these two plays. Here I hope to elucidate the double nature of ethnicity and suggest that things that dramatic characters or playwrights say about ethnicity call us to contemplate whether ethnicity can be seen as something people do rather than as immanent to the individual. Part of the difficulty in approaching ethnicity comes from the fact that ethnicity often comes into being — in other words,

the utterance of ethnicity properly works — through people who are called "ethnic," but its dependence on self-reference prevents thinking of a beginning where ethnicity emerges. In this context, I hope that readings of the scenes with a tangential relation to the performative force of ethnicity can facilitate the revelation of a site where we feel the presence of multiple others (whether they are literally present or not) who are subject to the same institution of ethnicity as we are.

In the context of America, ethnicity has to do with ambiguity. As we have observed in the countless real-life interpellations enacted by ethnic identity in 20th-century American culture, ethnicity has been "conceived as [a kind of] norm" (quoted in Chow 2002:29); at the same time, those called "ethnic" are perceived as excluded from much of the privileged mainstream and mobilization. The ambiguity embedded in ethnicity is central to Etienne Balibar's explanation of "racism without races" (21). According to Balibar, in a world where the biological concept of race was receding (in the era of decolonization), the difference between cultures built by the "combination of practices, discourses and representations" (18) has been justified on the basis of the "harmfulness of abolishing frontiers" (21). For this to take shape, Balibar notes, this new racism "reintroduces the old distinction between 'closed' and 'open', ... 'gregarious' and 'individualistic' societies — a distinction which, in its turn, brings into play all the ambiguity of the notion of culture" (25). The logic at the core of what Balibar terms a "new racism" — that is, "*culture can also function like a nature*" — is similar to how ethnicity functions in contemporary American society (22, emphasis in original). For the latter, Rey Chow points out that "ethnicity exists in modernity as a boundary — a line of exclusion — that nonetheless pretends to be a nonboundary — a framework of inclusion — only then reveal its full

persecutory and discriminatory force whenever political, economic, or ideological gains are at stake" (2002:30). For Chow (2002:32-33), ethnicity that is differentially performed in contemporary Western, especially North American, society raises the question of what ideological forces enable those ethnicized to "move beyond, or believe [they] could ever move beyond" ethnic subjection by resisting their own objectification. In a more recent book, José Esteban Muñoz (9) argues that "ethnic affect" is a useful site to "chart and theorize the utility and efficacy of different modes of struggle" and that the performance of ethnicity is connected to "the term's [in this case 'Latino'] failure to actualize embodied politics" (8).[6)]

"Ethnicity-in-common" in the title of this essay is meant to emphasize that even though the figure of ethnicity is assumed in the process of translation or other practices, the plays' characters' capacity to pretend to be what they are not or to retreat from a place they are known to be renders the question of ethnicity more capacious than we have so far imagined. The characters each relate to ethnicity differently, and the situation in which they do not share the commonness of ethnicity (or its collectivity) is, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, a condition for capacious thinking about community. According to Nancy (75), "If community is 'posited before production,' it is not in the form of a common being that would preexist works and would still have to be set to work in them, but as a being *in* common of the singular being." For "the being in common," Nancy notes, what matters is "the articulation

6) Muñoz's book *The Sense of Brown* (2020) was posthumously published by Duke University Press. According to the book's editors, his essays included in the book were written over a period of fifteen years (approximately 1998 to 2013) (Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o x).

from which community is formed and in which it is shared" (75).[7] The starting point for thinking of ethnicity in common is to realize that the ethnicity people assume to know may differ from how it appears to them.

II. *Chinglish* and *Straight White Men*

Hwang's two act play *Chinglish* premiered in 2011, a few years after the financial crisis but before the Trump era — a time before the travel ban was implemented under the Trump presidency (Sehgal 2018). Daniel from Cleveland, Ohio, seeks opportunities in Guiyang, China (geographically comparable to the American Midwest) for the small family-run company Ohio Signage. His business meetings with local officials lead to a series of humorous moments in which the protagonist and others he meets misunderstand or deceive each other in order to survive the new world after the global financial crisis. Prior to the scenes set in Guiyang, in the play we first see Daniel speaking to the Commerce League of Ohio about the difficulties of doing business in a foreign country and the frequent mistakes people make when translating the Chinese language into English. He lists examples of such mistakes in translation: The English translation "To take notice of safe: The slippery are very crafty," Daniel explains, "should be: 'Slippery

7) On the being-in-common of unique existents, Nancy adds: "[A]rticulation is doubtless essential to singular beings: there latter are what they are to the extent that they are articulated upon one another, to the extent that they are spread out and shared along lines of force, of cleavage, of twisting, of chance, whose network makes up their being-in-common" (75).

Slopes Ahead'" (7). The phrase, "Financial Affairs is Everywhere Long" means "Chief Financial Officer" (7). "When doing business in China, always bring your own translator" (8), Daniel informs the American audience at the end of the first scene. This remark, which seems to be mere practical advice, points out one's vulnerability to situations where the stable meaning of language and identity are not presupposed. Following the brief opening scene, the rest of the play, with the exception of the final scene, is set three years earlier in Guiyang.

Hwang's characters are in a liminal space in terms of their relation to authority, contract, and trust. The characters in the play are subject to party hierarchy and local customs including guanxi, but at the same time they show other personas as if they were other versions of themselves. With regard to the dual structure of the inside and the outside of the law, Kalpana Seshadri's explanation of "threshold" is helpful. According to Seshadri, "[f]undamentally, at the threshold anything is possible, for all laws — laws of physics, commonsense, and reason; juridical laws; or the structures of tradition — are suspended or interrupted. The threshold is an opening of space-time where 'anything is possible,' but this is not to be mistaken for a place or time where 'one can do anything,' which implies the redistribution of sovereignty rather than its interruption" (199).

If we consider Daniel, he acts like a respected businessman running a signage company. After having testified in America against his former bosses at the giant Texas energy company Enron in the wake of its financial scandal, Daniel tries to land a signage contract with a Chinese provincial government. Contrary to the protagonist's words, however, Ohio Signage had not been successful since the decline of Cleveland's economy (see Hwang 80). Peter, a bilingual British man Daniel meets

in Guiyang, has taught English in China for nineteen years, but now tries to pass himself off as a business consultant. Dissimulation is not limited to foreigners. Cai, the cultural minister for Guiyang City, expresses a liking for Daniel's business proposal in order to hide his hidden agenda — a plan to offer the contract to his sister-in-law. The characters' capacity to hide part of a self culminates in Xi's interactions with Daniel. Xi, the vice minister of culture, pretends to give Daniel a favor behind the back of her boss, but her real intention is to scapegoat Cai for the region's slow market reforms and help her husband get promoted. Her strategy of dissimulation, however, develops in an unexpected direction when Daniel seriously identifies with what Xi says she thinks of him ("Honest. Good man." "Good face") (Hwang 59). Inspired by Xi's compliments, Daniel begins to want to be himself rather than playing to Chinese's perceptions of American businessmen. The ethnic reversal in the role — a white actor seen as innocent — feels like a reflection of how American popular culture has represented the ethnicized until its playfulness becomes clear in Daniel's line, "I've sorta come to love the mistakes" at the end of the play (123).

In addition to the main characters, *Chinglish* features three translators who appear in three different scenes. The presence of a translator often suspends the equivalence between what one says and what the spoken words mean. In Scene 3, which shows Daniel's first meeting with Cai in the minister's office, the practice of translation leads to the displacement of the meaning of what the words Daniel or Cai speaks from the effects they intend to produce in the first place (see Searle 20). In the business meeting, the words Daniel and Cai seem to have chosen to let others think they are polite translate into expressions with airs of transparence and nakedness. For example, Daniel's self-introduction

("We're a small family firm") becomes self-mockery when the translator renders it as, "His company is tiny and insignificant," a retranslation into English from Chinese (Hwang 12).[8] When Minister Cai comments in Chinese on Daniel's proposal, "It's very impressive. Though the price — rather high, by local standards" (20), it is rendered by the translator as, "He likes your proposal, but — so expensive!" (20). As these examples suggest, nakedness in translated enunciation reminds us of the unmediated relation to language we find in children. Humorous speech that seems transparent to itself is also evident when Daniel's response to Cai, "Here's why we're worth the money," becomes "He will explain why he spends money so recklessly" (Hwang 20).[9]

With regard to the playful translations that are distinguished from the original, more formal meanings, Naoki Sakai's analysis of the place assigned to the translator in the practice of translation is noteworthy. To borrow Sakai's explanation that "it is always possible for what is translated to be conveyed as a quotation, either in direct or indirect mode" (12), the last translated sentence from the play can be restated as, "I say that he (Daniel) said that he will explain why spends money so recklessly." Using this type of formulation, Sakai explores the limits of the translator's subjectivity and contends that "at best, she can be *a subject in transit*" (13, emphasis in original) and that "her enunciation must necessarily be one of mimicry" (12). Sakai's point is that the

8) Because Daniel and Cai do not speak each other's language, their lines are translated either from English to Chinese or from Chinese to English by a translator, or sometimes by Peter and Xi who are bilingual. In the script, Chinese dialogues are written in traditional characters and romanization of the Chinese characters, and the English translation is also included. “On stage, translation happens both in dialogue and in supertitles” (See Hwang; Lei 163-4).

9) The latter from the play is spoken by the translator in Chinese and retranslated for an English-speaking audience into English supertitles.

translator's commitment to the words uttered is that of the original speaker; therefore, "the translator can make a promise, but always on behalf of somebody else" (11). Hwang invents scenes in which the agency of the subject in the first-person pronoun is displaced or becomes a mimetic one through the practice of translation. In a world where the metonymic link between geographical place and ethnicity resurges, where the linkage between people of Asian descent in America and Asianness becomes stronger than in the neoliberal era,[10] *Chinglish* addresses the not-knowing of ethnicity through Americanness seen from the point of view of the Chinese in Guiyang.

After their meeting, Xi tells Daniel that Minster Cai will not approve his proposal, but advises him to keep pushing the deal anyway until the minster rejects it explicitly. "Why are you. Helping me? Why?" (Hwang 47), Daniel asks. When he asks the second time, Xi replies: "Why? Because you are good," which in Chinese also means "credible" and "trustworthy" (59). She tells Daniel, "Honest. Good man" (59). "Your face. [...] Good face" (59). Xi goes on to say, "You still have your innocence" (60), which Daniel does not understand because she speaks this line only in Chinese and without the English translation. Xi means that Daniel is free of cunning and pretense. If we attend to those words she speaks in Chinese (and the English translation), such as "credible" and "innocent," her speech can be read as a point where ethnicity enters.

10) The metonymic link between ethnicized bodies and geographical places has to do, in part, with non-Western culture being contemporary with Western culture. A useful discussion of such linkage can be found in Elizabeth Buck's *Paradise Remade: the Politics of Culture and History in Hawai'i* (1993). In *Orientations* (2001), Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa also point out that this connection is “signaled by the growth of ‘Pacific Rim’ discourse in the latter decades of the 20th century, a rhetoric that moves the United States into, or consolidates America with, Asia” (3).

The Chinese vice minister of culture projects the desire for "an origin" (Chow 1995:22-23) onto a foreign businessman from the American Midwest, as she also says in Chinese: "I wish I had more of that in my life" (Hwang 60). However, does what Xi says mean the same things to the protagonist? Daniel does not understand everything Xi says because he does not speak Chinese, but their conversation nonetheless becomes an event in which things that have not existed before come into being. Xi's explanation not only uplifts Daniel, stranded in a new world ("I come here — all the way across and — and I feel so lost. Then you appear. And tell me ... I'm good" [60]); it also gets him to think that he wants to take off his mask and let Xi know who he really is. Having picked up a few words, such as "good" and "honest," Daniel tells Xi that "[I feel] like you can somehow see — into my heart. The me I want to be, that I can be, the real me. Honest man" (65). But Daniel's attempt to reveal his version of himself is the opposite of why Xi is helping him. Daniel is Xi's escape from thoughts of "death" (109). The play shows us that ethnicity does not exist in itself; it comes to Daniel through Xi, by Xi and other people he has met in China.

The play does not allow Daniel, a middle-aged white male, to follow the path of the subaltern[11] who enters the world of metropolitan subjects by talking about themselves. About halfway through the play, before Daniel confesses that he does not actually run the family-owned company in Cleveland, Xi discovers his lies. According to Daniel, Ohio Signage is a real company, but his association with the financial scandal at Enron prevented him from saving the family-run company and has

11) As Gayatri Spivak points out, the subaltern subject is not homogeneous. Here I use the term to emphasize "the itinerary of recognition through assimilation of the Other" (281).

ultimately led him to travel to China. Instead of being disappointed in Daniel, to his surprise, Xi tries to win over Cai by using Daniel's role at Enron as a selling point. At this point Daniel is differentiated from other white male characters in contemporary Western theater who go to a foreign country and engage in a romantic relationship that does not last. In the face of China's modernization and growing role in the global market, Daniel feels "weak" but for Xi, it is nonsense that he feels that way (Hwang 78-79). In the final scene we return to the American assembly room where Daniel is giving his presentation in the opening scene. The trace of American exceptionalism lingers in the play as Daniel appears as a successful businessman in the ending. At the same time, the realization by Daniel that even Americans like himself are not apart from Chinglish illuminates a time in which ethnicity is not a monolithic category.

If *Chinglish* addresses the issue of ethnicity through Americanness (embodied by a Midwestern American in China), *Straight White Men* stages what a variety of people think about being the straight white man. Written in a curtain speech and three acts, *Straight White Men* features a 70-something father named Ed and his three sons in their forties who gather at the family home for Christmas. Matt, the eldest, a Harvard graduate, now lives in his family home with his widowed father; Jake, the middle brother, is a successful banker; the youngest, Drew, who teaches at a university has his novel scheduled to come out soon. In addition to these four, the play also includes two people called Person in Charge 1 and 2 who are described as "transgender or nonbinary performers" (Y. Lee 74). Before the drama begins, the people in charge, wearing sleeveless jumpsuits, walk onto the stage from both ends of the theater. Person in Charge 1 introduces themselves using the non-binary

pronouns, "they or them," and acknowledges that some audience members might be uncomfortable with the pre-show music. Returning to the stage prior to each act during transitions in the play, they guide the actors to take a specific pose.[12] This composition makes the audience feel as if the actors' actions are connected to some external force. In addition, the onstage presence of the people in charge, although brief, signals a reversal in the roles conventionally assigned to white male characters. *Straight White Men* portrays the characters more as objects of the audience's sight rather than as self-affirming subjects.

The play takes place in the cream-walled living room of their family home, furnished with a similarly colored leather sofa, a wooden coffee table in the center, and a dark brown recliner to the left. The set design captures the ordinariness of white, middle-class America and of the lives of the brothers and their father. From pulling out a Monopoly game they once called "Privilege" to recollecting their high school days mocking the all-white cast of a student performance of *Oklahoma!*, the brothers remind each other of their younger selves. Matt is described as a kid who put into action what he thought was right. In this relaxing and mischievous family atmosphere, nothing unusual is likely to happen.

It takes a turn at the end of Act 1 when Matt begins to cry into the family's Christmas Eve dinner of Chinese takeout. Since the cause of Matt's outburst is not immediately articulated, the play puts us in a position where we want to know what has happened to him. Matt, seen by his family members as the smartest, most socially conscious, and son most likely to succeed, now makes copies as a temp at a community organization and helps his father with the housework. What is interesting

12) In *Straight White Men*, the People in Charge help only Jake and Drew to strike a specific pose.

in the play is that the household chores Matt does and his attitude of "trying not to take up space" and of "making [himself] invisible" (Y. Lee 123) have a strong resemblance to the ways women of color have been characterized in America. On stage Matt keeps moving between the kitchen and the living room to clear away the mess the others make and to set a variety of foods, from a pie to eggnog, on the coffee table. Jake also states that Matt is completely different from straight white men like himself who become what they are "by using up resources, taking up space, enjoying [their] privilege" (123). According to Young Jean Lee, Matt was created during her residency at Brown University to embody what a variety of students in the workshop told her they wanted to see in a desirable and ideal straight white man (see Fasthorse and Lee). But once the character in print is transposed to the stage, Lee says the students' feedback was reversed: "They hated him" for the reason that "he was a loser" (Bent and Lee). Like Lee's students at Brown, Drew (and later Ed and Jake as well) feels uncomfortable seeing Matt doing temp work and living in their family home — but for other reasons. Drew thinks Matt deserves more than making copies: "He's 'helping' by making copies as an office ... lackey! It's depressing! He could be running those places!" (Y. Lee 119). The more the other characters discuss Matt's present life, the more we get a fuller sense of what ethnicity is like.

Matt and his unwillingness to pursue the meaning and purpose of life is the consistent center of attention in Acts 2 and 3. The last two acts consist of a conversation between Matt and other family members in which he does not want to say too much about himself, while others want to find out why he has drifted away from what they perceive to be a "productive life" and from the self-actualization of happiness. The

brothers do not get an answer to what makes Matt cry on the Christmas Eve, but the audience receives a range of opinions. Jake says that Matt has the ability to be good at anything he wants (141), but deliberately chooses not to be successful (119). Drew claims that Matt "deserves to have his own life!" (119), and adds emphatically that the eldest brother should see a therapist. The play becomes Jake and Drew's quest to find out the cause of Matt's indifference to his success and commitment. By way of Jake and Drew, the meaning of straight white maleness and the sense of privilege attached to it are interrogated. On the other hand, at one point, the brothers' gestures and mimetic language are supplemented as bodies that inhabit different times in the tense atmosphere of disagreement within the family over what is (or is not) wrong with Matt's aimlessness. At the end of Act 2, when the conflict between the characters escalates, a dance scene suddenly begins. Nonetheless, Ed, Jake and Drew all still seek to assign a meaning to Matt's way of life. In Act 3, Matt's father and brothers create a mock job interview for a copyediting role for a human rights organization to prepare Matt to market himself. Things are going well until Matt says that all he wanted was to figure out "how to be useful" (146). The play suggests that for his middle-class white family members, "just trying to be useful" (146) in his life is absurd.

The conflict between the siblings culminates near the end of the play when Matt says that his current life (e.g., having a temp job, running errands for his father) is not something he planned on purpose but happened without intention (148-9). Matt's attitude that he has nothing to do with the issue of success upsets Jake and Drew. This is because their older brother, who does not assign any meaning to his aimlessness and who does not take hold of anything, disrupts the proposition that

guarantees white privilege. The connection between characters and the question of how they ought to live is expressed clearly in their father's recollection of his youth: "Back then, all we did was follow the rules" (95), says Ed, "Get a job, get married, buy a house, have kids" (95). "Unlike you boys, your mother and I didn't grow up being told we had any options" (95). But it was certain that "[n]o one ever assumed [Ed] was stupid because he was a woman or stopped his car because he was Black" in life, as Jake mentions in explaining being born "with every advantage" (121). The play tells us that Jake and Drew also feel the intense pressure to act and be productive. For instance, Jake works out on Christmas morning, even after drinking the night before. Drew has been seeing a therapist for years to "learn how to be happy" (120). In contrast, Matt engages in no activities associated with the privileged class.

Here we should ask: if Matt did the same kind of work for a living as a temp and lived with his father, but did so intentionally and believed in what he was doing, would his choices still upset his younger brothers? The idea of choice defended by Jake ("He's making a choice! Just because all we care about is our own success doesn't mean Matt has to!" [119]) suggests that the fact that Matt does not pursue a success is not a serious problem. More offensive for the family is to discover that Matt "does not believe the things" such as righteous action, freedom of choice, nobility, and sacrifice that the rest of the family assume he believes (148). This is because Matt's unintentional behavior of "not doing anything" (149) does not validate Ed, Jake, or Drew's form of life and their belief in it as a valid and right way to live. Matt's lack of intentions (in Jake's words, "Are you a loser for no reason?" [148]) works as a challenge to the other family members' commitment to

promises made by straight white maleness. In the final scene after Jake and Drew exit, Matt explains that he feels useful cooking and cleaning in his father's house and says, "I want to be here" (152). But this is a life Ed cannot bear: "It's repugnant, Matt. There's something repugnant about it" (152). The use of "repugnant" by Ed suggests that "somebody is a straight white man" is not simply a descriptive statement but assumes that he is committed to straight white maleness. As written and directed by Lee, the play encourages us to think of ethnicity by substituting for straight white male identity. As Matt repeatedly states that he does not know anything (148), the play does not say much about ethnicity, but the fear of failure is exposed by the older brother. It also becomes clear that statements associated with ethnicity are not immune to John Searle's question of how a descriptive statement ("is") unfolds into an evaluative statement ("ought").[13] Lee's explanation of the play — that she was "trying to inhabit straight white male identity" — is not simply a freakish desire, but touches us more deeply than we might first imagine when we consider the place (or non-place) of ethnicity in the play.

Ⅲ. Conclusion

The way ethnicity is written in both plays is not straightforward. Whether through the Chinese body who speaks Chinese or English with an accent on stage, or through the invocation of ethnic figures by white

13) See especially chapter 8 of *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (2005).

male characters, the plays suggest that language or other elements that are considered central to the enactment of ethnicity, such as group identities and the myth that ethnicity is visually identifiable, often don't work. In *Chinglish*, what one says often differs from what one means, and in the initial displacement of the intended meaning, the likeness of ethnicity moves stealthily towards ethnicity in the ontological realm. Daniel, as a metonymic surrogate for the Midwest, pretends to be a "regular American" (the term that, according to Esther Kim Lee [116], Hwang uses to describe another character in his other play) in Guiyang, whereas in reality, he was in much trouble in America because of his role in the financial scandal of Enron.[14] But in the eyes of the Chinese characters in the play, Daniel is similar to recent immigrants of Chinese descent who have deliberately crossed the border between China and the American Midwest and struggle to find their way into the host culture: Daniel is perceived as honest and trustworthy while also being gullible, unlike the coastal elites (see Hwang 91).[15] We see a reversal in the play's perception of Daniel at the moment when he wants to expose who he really is. At one point in the play, to Daniel who wants to tell the truth, who want to perform a speech act, Xi says, "If you do not respect your marriage, then you are a threat to mine" (Hwang 114). Daniel's identifying with what Xi thinks of him ("Honest. Good Man" [59]) is not false, since he actually does. However, he finds it difficult to act

14) In reference to Hwang, Esther Kim Lee uses the expression "regular American" to mean "a white, midwestern man from Cleveland, Ohio" (116).

15) In *Chinglish,* Daniel and the Chinese characters share a sense of being marginalized that comes from not living in a big city like Beijing or Shanghai. Feeling the loss of the people of Guiyang, Daniel replies, "You're Midwesterners!" (91). As Esther Lee also points out, in the play comparisons are made between Guiyang and the American Midwest (see 117-118).

as himself in Guiyang, without the role of a successful leader of Ohio Signage.

The suspension of the performative force of characters who enact ethnicity through a series of "likeness" (that is, acting and thinking like those who are called "ethnic") is also found in *Straight White Men*. If embodying ethnicity promised the US ethnic subject the freedom to do self-making as Aihwa Ong (738) points out in her discussion of "cultural citizenship," we can infer from *Straight White Men* that these promises are not kept.[16] In the play, Matt retreats from various kinds of white male privilege, and his refusal to act as an agent of privilege leads us to ask: what does Korean American playwright Lee do with straight white maleness without privilege? As Lee said of straight white men in an interview with the *Guardian,* "They're not default humans, they have an identity" (Maga), the play is about how our recognition of straight white male identity as a universal point of reference is to be undone. Where we perceive straight white maleness as one of many differences rather than the norm, the play suggests that we can think of ethnicity differently. As Chow (2002:27) points out that ethnicity is customarily used in the United States to refer to "nonwhite groups" including "urban ethnic minorities," the term has been understood as the opposite of white privilege. However, one of the problems with the white and non-white binary is that it obscures what Immanuel Wallerstein claims to be the function of ethnicity specific to the operation of modern capitalism: the ethnicization of populations, he argues, works in the

16) In her discussion of "cultural citizenship," Ong argues that legal citizenship alone cannot guarantee immigrants' belonging to the citizenry. She sees cultural citizenship as "a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state that civil society" (Ong 738).

service of "resolv[ing] one of the basic contradictions of historical capitalism — its simultaneous thrust for theoretical equality and practical inequality" (84). *Straight White Men* seeks to undo ethnicity's pretension to equality by staging what Lee is not — straight white male identity — without denying ethnic differences.

If the performative power of utterance connects speech with action, *Chinglish* and *Straight White Men* present several instances in which the performative force of one's ethnic presentation does not work or is unintentionally at work. A key element of this essay's thesis is that scenes of nonperformance and unintentional performatives in these plays can also be considered performative. In *Chinglish*, for example, when Daniel acts a regular American, his performance of a regular American is not fully delivered to other characters in Guiyang; rather, they see Daniel more as what Americans perceive as ethnic. The inefficacy of performative utterance is more clearly addressed at the moment when Daniel's desire for the speech act (as in "I could tell the truth" [107]) is thwarted in his conversation with Xi. In *Straight White Men*, Matt's modes of acting — retreat, crying, acrobatic movement in an extended dance scene, physical roughhousing, joking, refusal to speak — do not qualify as speech acts. His nonperformance is a refusal to reproduce the *status quo*. Or, as in the brothers' conversation about Matt's current life, when invoked, ethnicity unintentionally comes to our mind as an invisible, hard-working figure.

If ethnicity, to use the words of Balibar, causes people to be "interpellated, as an individual, *in the name of* the collectivity whose name one bears" (96), ethnicity-in-common is the expression I use to mean a desire to be social. To conceptualize and practice ethnicity-in-common is to retreat from the idea of ethnicity as the community's work[17] and

to contemplate various ways in which different people each undo (or do) the work central to the constitution of ethnic identity — work that is "social, economic, technical, and institutional" (Nancy 31). Put another way, it is a methodology that focuses on the sharing of heterogeneous responses to ethnicity, away from the myth that we all are the same in identity politics. Both plays also reflect the cruelties of ethnicity in the context of everyday life. In *Straight White Men*, for example, even though Ed tells his sons that skin color should not determine who benefits and who is disadvantaged, minority co-workers are described as highly ambitious (see Y. Lee 147).

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, more than anything else, the practice of defining someone based on a group identity has weakened in academia and theater practice, and the fluidity of identity has been recognized, especially by the younger generations. They often think a group identity is not as important as lives lived, lifestyles, and individual traits in terms of getting to know themselves and others (see Hinsliff). *Chinglish* and *Straight White Men* crystallize the current recognition that one persons's relation to ethnicity is different from another, and through the undoing of identity, the plays address ethnicity "within a scene of plurality" where the participants do not claim a collective identity (Cavarero 20). The entrance of ethnicity into a scene of plurality can be understood as a singularity of our precarious

17) I borrow the term "work" from Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*. According to Nancy, "Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourse, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects)" (31). But he also emphasizes that "[t]he work itself, in fact, should not be understood primarily as the exteriority of a product, but as the interiority of the subject's operation" (xxxix).

time, in which the concept of the individuated subject becomes less important than the past in terms of how we think about ourselves and others and in which we do not yet have the language with which to name the masses engaging in action. I read this singularity as a hint to a new direction for approaching ethnicity in the study of contemporary American theater and performance, the hope for a time-space yet to come in which the language of ethnicity moves in such a way that it does not simply depend upon the delusion of signature, but simultaneously makes us imagine and inhabit plural forms of life, even with ethnicity.

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국문초록

데이비드 헨리 황과 영진 리 드라마에 나타난 공존의 에스니시티 수행성

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신자유주의시대의 미국 문화에서 에스니시티는 극복해야 하는 대상이고 과거의 문제로 인식되었다. 이와 다르게 2008년 세계경제위기 이후의 아시아계 미국 드라마와 퍼포먼스는 말하기가 곧 행동이 되는 수행성 논의의 중심에 에스니시티가 깊숙이 들어와 있음을 보여준다. 이 논문은 데이비드 헨리 황의 *Chinglish*와 영진 리의 *Straight White Men* 작품 분석을 통해 각자 다른 복수의 사람들이 에스니시티와의 관계를 다르게 발화하는 과정에서 에스니시티가 언어와 문화 간의 차이를 부정하지 않으면서 삶의 다원적 형태와 연결되는 방식을 살펴본다. 데이비드 황과 영진 리의 이전 작품과 다르게 *Chinglish*와 *Straight White Men*에서는 아시아계 미국인 인물이 무대에 등장하지 않지만, 에스니시티를 비지시적으로 표현하는 한편 일련의 유사성을 통해서 에스니시티가 고립된 개인에게 내재된 특성이 아니라 다중 타자들이 존재하는 장면에서 드러난다는 사실을 역설적으로 보여준다. 논문은 이를 공존의 에스니시티(ethnicity-in-common) 개념으로 설명하는데, 개인화된 주체 개념이 과거와 비교해서 덜 중요해지고 행동하는 다중을 명명하는 언어가 아직 분명하지 않은 오늘날, 삶의 다원적인 형태를 상상하고 실현하는 것이 가능한 방식으로 에스니시티가 수행적이 되는 순간들을 두 작품의 분석을 통해 조명한다.

주제어 : 수행적 언어, 공존의 에스니시티, 아시아계 미국 퍼포먼스,
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