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Theoretical Analysis of A Beautiful Country

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## Theoretical Analysis of *A Beautiful Country*

Madeline Heath

### Introduction

The play, *A Beautiful Country*, is a collaboration between Chay Yew and Cornerstone Theatre, a company based in Los Angeles that according to its mission, “builds bridges between and within diverse communities” (qtd. in Yew xiv). *A Beautiful Country* chronicles the turbulent history of Asians in America through the eyes of an immigrant drag queen ironically named, Miss Visa Denied. After discovering a magazine article from 1941 titled, “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs,” Yew decided to write the play as a satirical fashion show with Miss Visa Denied as the host. As text is read from the article, models parade down the runway so that the audience can decide whether or not the models are “Japs.” Through *A Beautiful Country*, Yew examines America’s contradictory messages about identity and concurrently gender identity and orientalism using historical sources. As quoted in *Performance of America* by David Roman,

[*A Beautiful Country*] departs both from the traditional Asian American history play... and from the conventional dramatic realism of Asian American theatre.... Rather, Yew stages the various contradictions of Asian American experience, the ways in which racial and national identities are forged historically through ‘immigrant acts.’ (Roman 88)

This paper will discover and further explore the different aspects in the play that demonstrate feminist and queer theory. I will also analyze how post-colonial theory comes into play. By analyzing *A Beautiful Country*, we can better understand how people develop a sense of identity and how people may perceive the world a certain way.

### Description of Theories and Yew’s Work

“My culture is the logic by which I give order to the world...I learned to breathe this logic and to forget that I had learned it. I find it natural. Part of this logic is invisible...the premises from which we constantly draw out conclusions” (Carroll 9-10). Yew seeks to unhinge this logic that we live by, to question what we consider “normal” and our conclusions based on this premise. It is important to be able to look at culture through a critical lens, and Yew offers us this critical lens through plays such as *A Beautiful Country*. As defined by Patricia Hinchey, culture is convention, habit, custom, and we learn about our culture from everyday life and experience. We often confuse cultural beliefs for facts, which is why critical thinking is so important in maintaining a culturally competent society. “Like the fish who has trouble understanding the very sea surrounding him, we have trouble identifying the influence of our culture because we are immersed in it and are part of it” (Hinchey 15). *A Beautiful Country* offers us a chance to analyze our experiences through a new perspective and refocuses our vision of this “turbulent murky mysterious blue”: the place we’ve lived all our lives (Yew 194).

Performance offers an opportunity for critical reexamination of the widely accepted culture and provides a chance for other modes of understanding and new ways of knowing. Yew's work embodies cultural tensions, reexamines them, and provides the audience with a sense of what the world is like for the "other." Yew uses the Asian American experience to display the formation of identities, such as sexuality and race, which are interrelated and inextricably linked. Everyone's sex has a race and vice versa, just as everyone's gender identity is constructed through the social experiences of race, class, sexuality, nation, and so on. As a result, feminist critique and queer critique are grounded in the social. Queer self-understanding is always connected to the material and political world of our culture. Yew understands this and "his theatre sets out to unsettle our comfort with the normative world of Asian America" (Roman 86). Uniquely, *A Beautiful Country* explores the interrelation between queerness and diaspora, a dispersed population with a common origin. The play demands the critical analysis of race, gender, and sexuality.

Yew's work also seeks to inspect U.S. imperialism in Asia and the Pacific, address the effects of global capitalism, and the notion of the "racial frontier." Yew indirectly confronts the idea of orientalism—"a manner of regularized writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient" (Said 202)—by addressing people who live between multiple and overlapping worlds (Asia and America), the struggle that people face from colonialism, and the feeling of a need for assimilation. Yew recognizes the importance of looking at historical context in reference to the present issues. *A Beautiful Country* successfully presents the idea that queerness and diaspora help provide a better understanding of Asian American racial and sexual formation as shaped between the domestic and diaspora. The play "challenges us to consider the relationship between queerness and diaspora as a productive association, a critical alliance that puts pressure on the normative force of popular imaginations and official archives" (Roman 107).

### **Analysis of "A Beautiful Country"**

First, the term "intersectionality" and its critical role in identity formation must be addressed. Miss Visa Denied is a drag queen but also an Asian and an immigrant who identifies as queer, and there are many other facets of her identity that are not mentioned or specified in the play. Legal scholar and critical race feminist Adrien Wing explains "the theory of intersectionality as the notion that identity is 'multiplicative' rather than additive" (DeFrancisco and Palczewski 8). In other words, we cannot understand what it means to have a given gender/sex without examining these other identities of race, nationality, and so on. The analysis below will involve many interlocking parts of a whole simultaneously as they all affect each other.

"For those who attempt to resist imperialist ideology, therefore, it is necessary to work in 'betweenness', in strategies tied to fragmentation and displacement, which can be

a form of revolt against the seemingly monolithic, seemingly rational, authority of imperialism” (qtd. in Fortier 196). This quote by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha describes Yew’s strategy for addressing the plight of the Asian American in *A Beautiful Country*. The story is presented to the audience in fragmented parts of history that make up a narrative. The theme of fragmentation is further used in *Visa* with a cross-cultural and cross-gendered performance, while her character is played by three actors as her body, voice, and soul. It demonstrates the frustration that not only Asian Americans face in-between two cultures, but also a struggle in *Visa* who has a shared sense of loss and displacement in the heteronormative culture of the United States. The relationship between the mother and *Visa* represents the relationship between queerness and diaspora. When *Visa* and her mother interact, her mother responds with feelings of homesickness, not homophobia. Instead of feeling anguish for having a cross-dressing queer son, the mother accepts *Visa* and recognizes a mutual sense of displacement in present realities.

Along with questioning Asian American identity in the United States, by selecting a drag queen as the main scope from which the stories are told, Yew delves into questions of gender identity. The first scene starts with an interrogation of Miss *Visa* Denied by an American immigration officer as *Visa* tries to gain entrance into the United States. *Visa* remains mute throughout the interrogation, knowing that she would be confined to a certain performance as a queer, as well as an immigrant and person of color, and refuses to participate in these limiting conditions. People who identify as queer, along with any other group, are many times stereotyped and people project and impose their own vision of those people onto them and expect them to act in a certain way.

*Visa* is split up into three actors to show that all people possess mystery and complexity; *Visa* is not limited to one aspect of herself. A male actor represents her body and does not speak, another male actor represents her voice who speaks her inner thoughts, and a female actor represents her soul and performs only through dance. This fragmentation presents a fluidity of gender. Yew also purposefully picked actors to perform across categories of race, gender, and origin for this play not only to further the idea of gender fluidity but also to show the limited roles offered for Asian Americans.

Linda Holtzman addresses this issue in her book, *Media Messages*. Holtzman addresses the idea of the “Orient” in which people of Asian dissent are grouped together, instead of being recognized as different cultures and origins.

There is a tendency for European Americans and those in power to homogenize Asians and Asian Americans into one group rather than recognizing and understanding various countries of origin, cultures, and the differences in immigrant experiences. (Holtzman 219)

Thomas Nakayama’s essay “Dis/orientating Identities” further explores the cultural and historical constructions of the “Orient” and its relationship to his communication experiences in both domestic and international contexts. Nakayuma

emphasizes that we cannot understand the experiences of Asian Americans without the histories and context of both domestic and international contexts. Yew understood this concept and uses both present day settings, as well as, historical settings. Due to histories of discrimination, “Orientals,” which is a term Nakayama and many other critical race theorists deem should be avoided in referring to people because of its stigmatizing ideological connotations, are often categorized as the “other” in U.S. society.

Because Asian Americans are part of a nonwhite group with distinct physical differences, they have been perceived as “perpetual foreigners” who can never be considered completely American. The development of identity is very much tied to how people are perceived by others, how those people are treated by others, and the ways in which society represents that group of people. Nakayama states that Asian Americans are very diverse and that Asian American identity is heterogeneous; however, the cultural construction of the Orient is evident in film, television, and other social media outlets that represent this exotic “other,” much like the magazine article from 1941 titled, “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs.” According to Nakayama, many European Americans find it difficult to differentiate between Asians and Asian Americans, as evident by the Japanese internment camps during WWII, which is the setting for some of the scenes in *A Beautiful Country*. Assimilation to the hegemonic white society remains normative.

During the first scene in which Visa is being interrogated as she tries to gain entrance into the United States, the immigration officer is described as a Caucasian man in his thirties or forties. He represents the ultimate socialization figure. Visa, who is dressed like Madonna, with her back towards the audience, is forced into a “verbal barrage” of questions regarding her stay, her plans, and the like. The scene ends with a security guard escorting Visa away for further questioning. Further into the play, Visa describes this event through a male actor voicing her inner thoughts. It transitions from an officer with the “look of an angel, a welcome mat to the country beautiful” to Visa being put into a cell as she glimpses the city of San Francisco full of hope and vision. Visa loses track of the days that she is detained, until finally the officer “with eyes blue” says she can go. Yew uses irony in this scene when Visa is consistently optimistic about her arrival and believes in the officers claim to welcome her to the City of Los Angeles even as the officers are mistreating her. After being mistreated, Visa’s inner thoughts are unsure about this new land and the hopes that she had for coming to America as she thinks, “I see the ocean, it seems the same from this shore” (Yew 200).

The second scene is of traditional shadow play. As a traditional Chinese railroad song plays, Chinese railroad workers are portrayed behind a silk fabric screen. Their daily activities include coming to America, digging and hammering rivets on railroad tracks, prostitution, and the deaths of dynamite runners. At the end of the scene, all of the workers fall down dead. As immigrants came to America they faced isolation and discrimination. This scene represents the sense these immigrants had as they struggled to adapt, as their identities and culture are stripped away and they are reduced to their roles

as railroad workers and prostitutes. Symbolizing the death of their identity as Asian immigrants and indeed as fully-fledged human beings, they resort to menial jobs that degrade and dehumanize them. Gwendoline Yeo, a Chinese-Singaporean who tells of her experience in growing up as an immigrant and eventually winning the title of Miss Chinatown USA 1998, comments that “it was like an Academy Award for this young, dirty Chinese immigrant kid finally coming into her own” (Yew 178). Gwendoline describes, without even knowing, her own assimilation to white culture.

In another scene further along in the play, a woman says, “Everything we had we left behind. What we had was good. Now, I am afraid we will leave behind our history, our customs, our traditions” (Yew 240-241). As the scene continues, the man pulls paper boats from a gunnysack and places them on the stage. The woman also states, “We have lost our country. We have lost our fields. I am afraid our way of life is over. Whether it is good or bad, no one will know. Now we live in America and we don’t speak their language. Sometimes I feel invisible” (Yew 244). Cultural neutrality or the invisibility of others is being “oblivious to discrimination and cultural differences” (Holtzman 271). Here, Yew addresses the issue and tradition of assimilation into white culture in the United States. In order to become “American,” immigrants must give up their culture to meld with the dominant white culture and way of life. Because these individuals are invisible or considered to be on a level playing field in America, white heterosexuals may not realize their privilege as English born speakers and as American citizens.

In the next scene, Yew presents two Caucasian women played by men and in doing so, Yew plays with the fluidity of gender. One of the women, Josephine, speaks about traveling to Laos. She bought an ancient Buddha head, part of their history, and transforms and manipulates it into a “most enchanting table lamp” (Yew 249). She remarks on the paper boats that are still there from the previous scene, as “delightful” and then asks the servant to sweep them away. This scene represents the disregard and the sweeping away, as it were, of Asian culture in America. Asian culture continues to be viewed as exotic, oriental, and “other.”

Yew also suggests that labels are limiting in the José Casas testimonial. José, a Mexican American who lives in Los Angeles, says that looking at him people would not think of him as Chinese, but his grandfather was Mexican and Chinese, his “Chinese abuelito.” This testimony is meant to revise any stereotypes that the audience might hold about Asian Americans and to complicate the idea of that label. Roman states, “Casas anchors his claim to Asian Americanness in a biological genealogy of heteronormative patriarchy that has endured generational migrations across continents” (91). In José’s performance, however, he is the vehicle of his own identity and is able to choose what to emphasize in his account of his identity. He undermines the label of “Mexican American” by asserting that he is also Chinese. The next scene is based around the article, “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs,” which draws attention to cultural stereotypes.

Visa speaks of feeling torn between her two “homes.” “This theatre, this is my home, my between home, between the port of Pengang and the port of Los Angeles. Forever living in two worlds, forever, belonging to none. I only wish I wasn’t lonely” (Yew 258-259). Visa feels that she can never truly be a part of either the Asian world or the American world. She will always be halfway between these two worlds, and that is a lonely situation in which to be because she will never truly feel included. This is at the root of Yew’s consistent theme of fragmentation experienced by immigrants.

Through drag, Visa attempts to enter into the national culture. Visa’s performance of Madonna’s “Vogue” suggests that she imagines this role as not only queer, but also American and white. The performance attempts a form of passing—“my makeover life in America,” as she puts it (Yew 258). In a sense, Visa’s performance of “Vogue” is a way to disidentify (Jose Esteban Munoz) with Asian normativity and “enter into America in the full glamour and sophistication that Madonna’s song hold for her” (Roman 100), while remaining her performance of self. She uses Madonna as a way to assimilate to white culture in order to feel American, instead of a “perpetual foreigner.” Visa ends the play as it returns to the scene of her interrogation with the immigrant officer.

### **Findings of Analysis**

Based on my analysis, this sense of diaspora that Asian American immigrants felt altered their sense of identity. Fragmentation and displacement left them feeling lonely and lost in the world stuck between two cultures, neither accepted nor denied. Many tried to assimilate by disidentifying with their Asian culture, which just resulted in feeling a sense of loss. Until this issue is recognized by more Americans and resolved, Asian Americans will continue to be seen as “perpetual foreigners,” as “other American.” Asian American experiences are especially unique because they experience diaspora, displacement, and clashing cultures into which they are never fully accepted.

Yew also remarks on the limit to Asian American identity through stereotypes, labels, and limited roles. Multiple times in the play, Asian Americans are stereotyped for critique. Stereotypes limit people in their complexity and depth, not only for themselves, but for those who perceive that group of people. Yew questions the accuracy of labels and tries to complicate the label and stereotype of Asian American when he introduces the Mexican American, José, with a half Chinese grandfather. José chooses to include this fact in the way that he identifies himself, so he experiences the label “Mexican American” as problematic. Historical concerns overlap with queer concerns through the drag queen, Miss Visa Denied, who symbolizes the duality that is experienced by most immigrants by her various fragmented parts of identity: voice, soul, and body.

Yew’s play critiques and reexamines a number of interrelated hegemonic forces of oppression, including heterosexism, racism, and colonialism. Feminist theory, queer theory, and postcolonial theory all aim to “give voice to an oppressed group by understanding and critiquing the structures of oppression” (Fortier 193). Yew gave that

voice to Miss Visa Denied through her queer immigrant acts that offer alternative forms of sociality and community. Visa is the connection between queerness and diaspora as she represents the fragmentation and displacement felt by immigrants and queer people alike. Through these queer immigrant acts, racial, national, and sexual identities are forged. As the program notes state, “*A Beautiful Country* recovers a history of Asian American immigrant experience – 150 years of Asian American history – through dance, drama, and drag” (Roman 87).

By the end of the play, the viewer has accumulated knowledge of different historical circumstances to create a context by which to watch the last immigration scene of the play. The scene is now layered with context of Asian American’s historical past as immigrants and exiles. Visa is finally allowed temporary entrance with a stamp and “Welcome to America. Next.” (Yew, 275). In the end, the question remains the same: Stay or go? Stay or go?

### **Conclusion**

Works like Chay Yew’s *A Beautiful Country* offer possibility, hope, and change. By looking into historical instances, we can imagine a future in which people are aware of issues relating to gender, race, and nationality. Through Miss Visa Denied, we witness the troubles of a queer, Asian immigrant. As I’ve stated earlier, intersectionality involves all parts of identity and recognizes that people can be oppressed or privileged in various ways. Miss Visa Denied embodies multiple oppressions. It is important to recognize these different oppressed identities of Miss Visa to enable a more aware society and hopefully an audience that will resist the heteronormative and hegemonic forces of the dominant white male culture, so that as Visa wished, we can “capture the infinite possibilities of the new world, of beautiful country, of this place called America” (Yew 193-194).



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