

Queer Frontiers

Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations

Edited by

Joseph A. Boone

Martin Dupuis

Martin Meeker

Karin Quimby

Cindy Sarver

Debra Silverman

Rosemary Weatherston

16

Visa Denied

David Román

But the question is still the same. Stay or go? Stay or go?
—Chay Yew, *A Beautiful Country*

Frontiers, like borders, are understood and experienced differently depending upon one's relation to them. For many people, frontiers and borders are inextricably linked with migration and exile, with the domestic and the diasporic—that is, with the politics of home. Within the context of the United States, the history of the frontier has been written as a narrative of national expansion and progress, of Manifest Destiny and American imperialism. Within the global context, America has mythologized itself as the very frontier of possibility, a myth, as Una Chaudhuri has explained, that privileges America as “the place of both literal and metaphorical openness, where the history of the future can be worked out.”¹ In both these contexts, frontiers reveal much about transnational power relations and local negotiations of geopolitical space.

California in general, and Los Angeles in particular, occupy a specific position in relation to these issues. With Los Angeles now serving as the primary point of entry for new immigrants, and with minority populations increasingly shifting the racial demographics of the state, California has become the location where the apparatus of the nation-state is most immediately evident and most vehemently preserved. California has historically registered as a national bellwether, and as Joseph A. Boone argues in the introduction to this collection, “In the popular imagination, California has long loomed as the endpoint of the continental U.S. and the ‘final frontier’ of the mythic Old West; and Los Angeles has become the nation’s premiere psychic embodiment, unlike any other city in the U.S., of racial diversity and ethnic hybridity, of mass culture and celluloid dreams, of futurism and apocalypse, . . . of unrest and mindlessness, of sexual promiscuity and perversity, of the Pacific Rim’s meeting point of Asia and America, and, as recent

immigration controversies have highlighted, the meeting point of North and Central America.” Given the weight of these projections, we might want to consider whose imagination constitutes the “popular” in such formulations of California as frontier. The network of associations Boone lists composes the primary narratives about the region and sets the foundation for official accounts of it. In order to complicate further this dominant understanding, I would like to address what might be called the “vernacular imagination” of immigrant subjects whose experiences of California or of Los Angeles are often shaped by the very myths of America that exclude them.

My emphasis here on the social experiences of race, ethnicity, migration, and diaspora is not meant to be a corrective to, or a displacement of, the social experience of sexuality foregrounded in this anthology. Nor do I wish to set these experiences against one another. Instead, I want to identify and examine contemporary cultural work that considers the interrelation among them. In part, I am interested in naming and promoting modes of performance that provide counterpublicity to the popular myths of Los Angeles. The archive for this work remains, for the most part, undocumented and unexamined. It exists in oral history, cultural memory, social ritual, communal folklore, and local performance—media that do not rely on print culture for their preservation. Because this archive often exists outside of official culture, it is frequently undervalued or even derided. So too are most efforts to recover it. José Muñoz, writing about the archives of queer culture, explains one of the main reasons for this occurrence: “Because the archives of queerness are makeshift and randomly organized, due to the restraints historically shackled upon minoritarian cultural workers, the Right is able to question the evidentiary authority of queer inquiry.”² Muñoz goes on to argue against this critique of queer theory, in part, by advocating for the performativity of queer scholarship, or what he calls “queer acts,” and by positing “ephemera” (“all those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself”) as a kind of critical residue that enables the archives for our scholarship.

Muñoz’s efforts to expand the archive and challenge the authority of official evidence opens a critical space for scholars and activists interested in the alternative histories, memories, and performances of minority subjects. While, in this instance, Muñoz is primarily focused on defending queer theory, his basic premise extends to postcolonial and critical race studies as well. When we consider or foreground racial and ethnic minorities, the concern over the undocumented archive and the question of “evidentiary authority” often corresponds to larger

cultural anxieties concerning nation and citizenship. For the immigrant, this issue of documentation is central. Documentation determines access to citizenship. Mining the archives that preserve the interrelations between the social experiences of race and sexuality may in fact help us perceive more critically the ways in which such norms of citizenship have been constructed and enforced historically. Through this understanding, we may even find ways to respond to contemporary exclusionary forms of nationalist discourse currently in practice throughout the United States, but especially here in the state of California.

Recent work by a new generation of queer playwrights calls attention to the rich archives of memory that exist in the vernacular imagination of the queer immigrant subject. These new works thus participate in a larger cultural project, already underway, exploring histories and memories that exist as alternatives to those that circulate as the "popular imagination," or more firmly as "official history." Chay Yew's saga of Miss Visa Denied, a Malaysian immigrant and drag queen, in *A Beautiful Country* (1998) stands as a case in point. The play is a collaboration between Chay Yew, a Los Angeles-based playwright who is one of the most significant new voices in American theater, and Cornerstone Theater, a Los Angeles-based company that, according to its mission statement, "builds bridges between and within diverse communities." The play recovers a history of Asian American immigrant experience—150 years of Asian American history—through "dance, drama, and drag," as the program notes put it. A multimedia and multidisciplinary performance, *A Beautiful Country* chronicles multiple stories of pan-Asian immigration and exile to the United States, ranging from Filipino migrant workers in the 1930s to Hmong refugees in the 1970s and 1980s; from the effects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Acts to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II; from the Negro Alley Massacre in Los Angeles in 1885 (where fifteen Chinese men were hanged and four others were shot or stabbed to death during an interracial riot) to recent hate crimes against new Asian immigrants. These stories are performed by a multiracial cast composed of professional actors and community members from the Chinatown neighborhood where the play is presented.³

A Beautiful Country is neither a chronological history play nor a docudrama of Asian American history. In this sense, it departs both from the traditional Asian American history play where, as Josephine Lee explains, "the personal stories of individual valor told in these plays threaten to eclipse the larger social situation," and from the conventional dramatic realism of Asian American theater, which "promises a

coherent subjectivity, an authentic voice, a truth within the stories."⁴ Rather, Yew stages the various contradictions of Asian American experience, the ways in which racial and national identities are forged historically through—in Lisa Lowe's telling phrase—"immigrant acts," a term that at once summons forth the exclusionary practices of U.S. immigration laws and policies and the performances generated by Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who have found themselves often enmeshed within these shifting historical conditions and constraints.⁵ At the same time, *A Beautiful Country* mines the official archives of U.S. culture, including the dates of specific immigration laws and the first interventions achieved by Asian Americans, presenting this information on slides projected onto the back wall of the performance space in both English and Chinese. But other archives are also summoned forth, including the oral histories of various community members, which are interspersed throughout the performance, and the diverse cultural arts of the Asian diaspora, which are performed throughout the production. Yew enriches this fabric still further by staging earlier representations of Asian Americans in U.S. popular culture, including a scene from Henry Grimm's 1879 racist play *The Chinese Must Go!*—a theatricalization of the anti-Chinese sentiment resulting from the shifting economic conditions of U.S. labor forces in the 1870s, and a humorous dramatization of a 1941 *Time* magazine feature that attempts to distinguish, for the white majority, the difference between the Chinese and Japanese. It is precisely this tension between official and undocumented archives, between popular and vernacular imaginations, that propels the drama of the play.

Just how these historical concerns transect with queer concerns is evident in Yew's decision to place at the heart of his play the figure of Miss Visa Denied, an immigrant drag queen from Malaysia who is meant to be, according to the program, "a metaphor of duality experienced by most immigrants: a person caught between two continents, two cultures, two languages, and two homes."⁶ The play's dramatic structure, indeed, is framed by Visa's efforts to gain entrance into the United States. At first, we see Visa as a silent diva "dressed like Madonna," being interrogated by a U.S. immigration officer. This opening scene captures the official force of nationalist surveillance as Visa, unable or unwilling to speak in return, remains mute:

OFFICER: Passport please
 Passport
 Name?
 Purpose of this trip
 Purpose



Cast members of Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country* perform "The Dance of the Migrant Workers" scene. (© 1998 by Craig Schwartz Photography; used by permission)



Eric Steinberg, Chris Wells, and Page Leong perform Henry Grimm's *The Chinese Must Go!* in Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country*. (© 1998 by Craig Schwartz Photography; used by permission)



Nancy Yee performs a scene from Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country*. (© 1998 by Craig Schwartz Photography; used by permission)

Why are you here?
 Business?
 Pleasure?
 Working?
 Vacation?
 I see
 How long will you be here?
 How long?
 Days?
 Weeks?
 Months?
 You cannot stay for more than three months⁷

The scene ends with Visa being led away for further questioning. Throughout the play, Visa literally oversees the 150 year history that *A Beautiful Country's* narrative unfolds. Visa is played by three actors: a male actor who embodies Visa on stage but does not speak, another male actor who speaks Visa's inner thoughts but only from an offstage microphone, and a female actor who is meant to represent Visa's "soul" and performs only through dance. The duality assigned to Visa in the production notes is therefore misleading: while she may serve as "a metaphor for the duality experienced by most immigrants," the fact that Yew chooses three actors to perform the character suggests not simply duality but multiple fragmentation. The play thus powerfully demonstrates how the experience of immigration not only displaces immigrants geographically, but how it also enacts a kind of symbolic violence or fragmentation on the level of the individual subject.⁸ Yew dramatizes this sense of fragmentation by distributing Visa's "body," "voice," and "soul" among three different actors.

This fragmentation of subjectivity, embodied in the play by the three actors, is further echoed by the fragmentation of history that makes up the narrative: out of necessity Yew's ambitious staging of "150 years of Asian American history in dance, drama, and drag" in two hours' playing time presents only fragments from this rich history. In *A Beautiful Country*, history and subjectivity are always interrelated, positioned within a dialectical system of mutual exchange. Hence, Visa's own story unfolds simultaneously with the play's larger historical interests. Throughout the play, Yew stages aspects of Visa's subjectivity—her memories of migration, her nostalgia for home, the erotics of her desire. At no point in the play are we asked to imagine Visa as freak or fetish. One effect of this rather unremarkable presentation of Visa's sexuality is that the queer and Asian immigrant character is presented as a subject *in* history rather than *as* history's spectacle. This is important since Visa's own sense of self feels most complete when she

herself is performing, rendered in the play by Visa's full drag lip-synching rendition of Madonna's "Vogue." While this performance announces her queerness, it also forms one of her own "immigrant acts," a performance that only makes sense within the context of the other Asian immigrant acts presented throughout *A Beautiful Country*. Visa expresses this link between queerness and diaspora in an eloquent monologue that describes her subjective experience of America:

there is so much to live
 to love
 about this beautiful country

everytime
 my feet find this stage
 everytime
 the light drenches my skin
 i am strangely home
 my foundation
 my mascara
 rouge
 my new face
 my lipsynch life
 my makeover life in america

this theatre
 this is my home
 my between home
 between the port of penang
 and the port of los angeles
 forever
 living in two worlds
 forever
 belonging to none

i only wish
 i wasn't lonely

The theme of fragmentation is also brought into relief by the cross-racial and cross-gendered performances of the actors and the overt theatricality of the production. Everyone here is performing a role, a point that Yew's direction does not obscure. (In a debt to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, Yew's actors perform on a raised platform described as the "acting area"; when they are not performing they sit visibly on opposite sides of the platform along with the play's musicians and dancers.) Yew's actors perform across categories of race, gender, and national origin, and the cross-racial performances, in particu-

lar, exploit the theatrical medium's reliance on actors and role-playing to comment on the limited roles imagined and allowed for Asians in America.⁹ Within this context, Yew makes it evident that Visa's lip-synching performance of Madonna must be placed in relation to the social and historical forces that have shaped her sexual and racial subjectivity. Although Visa, as the program notes explain, "embodies and pursues the American Dream by wearing the mask of a pop icon and lip-synching words that aren't his," her performance asks to be historicized in the context of a long tradition of Asian immigrant efforts to pass through and into the national culture. That these attempts at "passing" are often tragically unsuccessful—as the dramatization unfolding before Visa and the audience shows—underscores the stakes involved in transnational and diasporic crossings. Therefore Visa's performance of Madonna's "Vogue" suggests she imagines this role not only as quintessentially queer but also—and perhaps even more so—quintessentially American.¹⁰ More to the point, Visa performs "Vogue" as a disidentification with Asian normativity.¹¹

At the end of the play, Visa returns to the stage in full drag, once again lip-synching and dancing to Madonna's "Vogue." As she works the runway in all her glamour, slides projected on the back wall convey Visa's day-to-day reality and the world through which she must maneuver. As becomes evident, Visa's performance in this scene takes place on two levels: on the literal level, she performs in the very same space as everything previously represented and staged in the play, and her lip-synching forms the final act in the playing time of *A Beautiful Country*; on the metaphoric level, Visa performs on the very same psychic and physical terrain of those who have historically passed before her, for she is the most recent immigrant in a rich history of Asians in America. All of these past performances haunt her as she enacts her own performance in present-day Los Angeles:

SLIDE: 1998

Los Angeles
 After my late shift at Starbucks at Pershing Square, I walked
 along lonely Los Angeles Street.
 On the wet street pavement, I could see a blue moon
 dancing.
 As if by command, I ventured down the same street where
 the Chinese lived more than a hundred years ago.
 When I reached the heart of the Plaza, I felt a stirring of
 collective fear the Chinese had.
 In front, a city on fire, eyes silent with hate.
 Behind, wagons, frenzied escape, a forced passage home.

It was more than a hundred years ago.
 But the question is still the same.
 Stay or go?
 Stay or go?
 I'm staying.
 I'm home.

Visa's performance ends when a technical failure stops the music. Alone and in the spotlight of bright fluorescent lights, Visa is, according to Yew's stage directions, "stunned and embarrassed by being onstage and 'voiceless.'" Left alone to improvise, she summons her other selves: the male actor who has served as her voice and the female actor who has represented her soul appear on stage and help remove her drag. If earlier Visa imagined "this theatre" as "my home, my between home, between the port of penang and the port of los angeles," Visa now questions the security of this belief. Yew cleverly detheatricalizes his central character in order to call attention to the drama inherent in Visa's material world, where the theater provides only a temporary respite from the harshness of America. Home is no longer only "this theatre" but also "the same street where the Chinese lived more than a hundred years ago, the heart of the plaza, Los Angeles." The fragmented narrative of Visa's subjective immigrant experience, which the play has interjected throughout its presentation of Asian American history, now overlaps with the play's own need for closure. It is in this moment that the onstage Visa finally speaks:

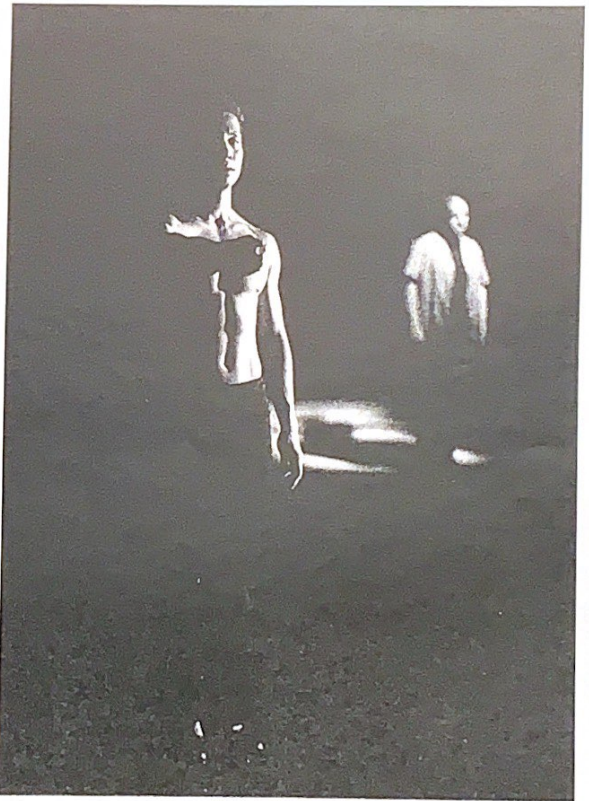
VISA: My
 name
 is
 Wong Kong Shin
 I
 come
 from
 Penang
 West Malaysia
 No
 I
 come
 from
 Los Angeles
 California
 United States of America

If "queer acts," as José Muñoz argues, "stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities," and if "immigrant acts," as Lisa Lowe

argues, "[name] . . . the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification," then perhaps "queer immigrant acts" acknowledge the alternative forms of sociality and community that these inter-related and collective efforts make possible. Queer immigrant acts make possible queer and transnational identities, transforming the social and public worlds in which these subjects travel. Although Wong Kong Shin's queer immigrant act denies Visa's centrality to his sense of self, such an act reintegrates the various fragmented parts of his identity—voice, soul, and body—that have been performed separately throughout *A Beautiful Country*.¹² He speaks now for the first time in his own voice. Such an act, at once, Asian American and queer, locates Kong Shin as a subject in history and as a subject in motion. The play ends with an epilogue that revisits the initial scene with the U.S. immigrant officer. This time, after the interrogation, the immigrant officer stamps Visa's papers and allows temporary entrance: "Welcome to America. Next." Unlike most work in Asian American theater, *A Beautiful Country* explores the interrelation between queerness and diaspora.¹³ The play presents various historical and imagined dimensions of Asian American social experience, at once expanding the representational field of Asian American theater and demanding the critical interrogation of race, gender, and sexuality.

In a recent critical project that sets out to link Asian American studies with queer theory, David Eng raises a number of interrelated questions that neither Asian American studies nor mainstream queer theory have previously prioritized. He wonders, "How might we theorize queerness and diaspora against a historical legacy that has unrelentingly configured Asian Americans as exterior or eccentric to the U.S. nation-state? How might queerness and diaspora provide a critical methodology for a more adequate understanding of Asian American racial and sexual formation as shaped in the space between the domestic and the diasporic?"¹⁴ These are also the questions that frame Yew's play and distinguish it from earlier Asian American theater, even including his own previous explorations of gay Asian lives.¹⁵ *A Beautiful Country* participates in what Eng recommends at the end of his important essay: "In the late 1990s queerness and diaspora should be used not only to reevaluate the past but to orient the future of Asian American political projects and strategies whose claims on oppositional politics can be acknowledged as such. This is a moment that should be marked by our definitive shifting away from a politics of cultural nationalism to a politics of transnational culturalism."¹⁶

This shift to transnational culturalism and a reorientation toward



"I come from Los Angeles, California, United States of America." Reggie Lee and Chris Wells perform the epilogue to Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country*. (© 1998 by Craig Schwartz Photography; used by permission)

the future through an excavation of the archives of the past seems to me to be precisely what Chay Yew's play has accomplished. It's not so much that he has "queered" the various archives of Asian America (although there's some of that, too, as the play's campy restaging of *The Chinese Must Go!* proves). Nor is it simply that he has thematized queer Asian immigration and brought a meditation on that experience into representation (although the story of Miss Visa Denied also certainly does that). *A Beautiful Country* 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. After shifting the critical framework—from the national to the transnational, from the domestic to the diasporic, from the normative to the queer—the play brings us back once again, to the politics of home. But the question is still the same: Stay or go? Stay or go?

Notes

I would like to thank Richard Meyer and Karen Shimakawa for helping me think through many of the ideas presented here. Their critical insights and intellectual generosity are much appreciated. Thanks also to Joe Boone for his helpful editorial suggestions. Thanks to Cornerstone Theater for providing me Craig Schwartz's wonderful production photos of *A Beautiful Country*. Special thanks to Chay Yew for sharing with me his work and friendship, for providing me with a copy of his play's text, and for his permission to quote the work in this chapter.

1. Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 213.

2. José Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8/2, no. 16 (1996): 7.

3. *A Beautiful Country*, written and directed by Chay Yew, was commissioned by Cornerstone Theater. The play was copresented by two other theaters in Los Angeles: East West Players, where Yew is a resident director, and the Mark Taper Forum, where Yew directs the Asian Theater Workshop. The play ran from 5 June to 21 June 1998. Admission to all performances of the production were "pay-what-you-can." For more on the history and style of Cornerstone Theatre, see Sonja Kufinec, "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre," *Theatre Topics* 6, no. 1 (March 1996): 91–104.

4. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 158–59. These are two separate thoughts from Lee's book that I have brought together to emphasize my point.

5. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996). Lowe writes: "'Immigrant acts' [name] the

agency of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification. Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have not only been 'subject to' immigration exclusion and restriction but also have been 'subjects of' the immigration process and are agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation" (9; emphasis in the original).

6. Peter Tamaribuchi and Amy Vaillancourt, "A Beautiful Country: A Brief History of Asians in America," program notes for Cornerstone Theater production, 5–21 June 1998.

7. All quotations from *A Beautiful Country* are from Chay Yew's unpublished 16 June 1998 draft, © 1998 by Chay Yew.

8. For non-English-speaking immigrants, or for those for whom English is not a primary language, this fragmentation is also experienced through language.

9. In this regard, *A Beautiful Country's* antirealist investments can also be understood as participating in what Karen Shimakawa explains as "renegotiat[ing] the process of abjection for Asian Americans in representation." See her essay, "Swallowing the Tempest: Asian American Women on Stage," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 3 (October 1995): 367–80 for a full discussion of this methodology.

10. For some audiences, "queer" is imagined as only American. During rehearsals, for example, some Asian community members were upset by the inclusion of drag and homosexuality in a play about Asian American history.

11. This idea of disidentification is theorized by José Muñoz in his book-length study on the topic, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

12. While this "denial" of Visa may appear to some people as a phobic response to drag, such a view misrepresents the impact of Wong Kong Shin's self-declaration and Chay Yew's overall point here. When I posed this issue to the playwright in conversation, Yew claimed that Wong Kong Shin wasn't abandoning drag completely and that he imagined that the character would return to drag in the very near future. While the playwright's projections for his character's future life might relieve some level of anxiety for those concerned, I think the play itself—as it is *already* written and directed—suggests that drag is much more than just a theatrical *trompe l'oeil*.

13. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, perhaps the most celebrated play in Asian American theater, for all its important cultural interventions, cannot be said to fully address this issue. Consider John Clum's comments in this context: "It is ironic that the best-known play about a gay Asian male, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, was written by a heterosexual and used a male-male relationship to comment on white men's attitudes to Asians in general and Asian women in particular." See John Clum, *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 345. In fact, *A Beautiful Country* ironically comments on *M. Butterfly's* spectacularization of the drag queen through its matter-of-fact representation of Visa. For the histor-

ical interventions achieved by Hwang's play, see Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Recently, queer Asian American playwrights and performers such as Han Ong, Denise Uyehara, and Hung Nguyen are, along with Chay Yew, more forcefully exploring the interrelation between queerness and diaspora although the critical bibliography on these and other queer Asian American artists is lacking.

14. David Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," *Social Text* 52-53 (1997): 32.

15. Chay Yew's earlier plays include *Porcelain*, *A Language of Their Own*, and *Half Lives*. These three plays comprise the *Whitelands* trilogy. For an excellent discussion of this trilogy, see Michael Reynolds's review of their production at East West Players in Los Angeles, *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 1 (March 1997): 75-79. *Half Lives*, the third play in the trilogy, has been substantially revised and is now titled *Wonderland*. In 1997, Grove Press published the first two plays of the trilogy as *Two Plays by Chay Yew*. While these three plays each can be said to explore queerness and diaspora simply by their representation of queer Asian gay men, Yew is more interested in tracing the internal dynamics between Asian gay men and their sexual partners, lovers, and families in these three plays, respectively, than in forcefully positioning these characters as subjects in history. This critique is not meant to slight these plays, but to further underline the significance of *A Beautiful Country*.

16. Eng, "Out Here," 43.