

# BERKELEY TIMES

SEPTEMBER 23, 2013  
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## Performing Asian Identity(ies) and Whiteness

**The scene:** Impact Theatre, LaVal's Subterranean, Berkeley. **The drama:** *Fortunate Daughter*. **The player:** Thao Nguyen.

On an intimate stage underneath a popular college pizza hangout, Vietnamese-American solo performer Nguyen brings to a diverse audience her experience of coming out to her Vietnamese parents as a lesbian. Her performance, supported with crisp direction by Martha Rynberg, is virtuosic. Her fantastic sense of timing and comedy allows her to discuss serious topics while having the audience in stitches.

While the story revolves around her relationship to her family, Nguyen's main objective might simply be deemed as being true to herself and her own identity. Her tactics to achieve this vary, from getting in touch with her cultural roots by spending a year with her extended family in Vietnam, to going to the Dyke March in San Francisco immediately after returning to the States (despite the obstacle of having her unwitting mother with her).

By the end of her journey, she is significantly more comfortable with expressing her full self – not just within her community, but also to her family and to the world.

As I watch, I'm aware of my positionality and privilege as a straight, white male. I even start to feel a little uncool. Even guilty, as if being a white ally isn't enough. Like, couldn't I take a decent stab at being gay? At least sport a spiky haircut?

What might the situation look like if the scene were reversed, where being of color was the norm, so that I could follow Nguyen's proposal to "interrogate my whiteness?"

**The scene:** Amed, Bali. The dock to leave for the Gilis, 3 small islands, each the size of Lake Merritt, accessible only by boat. **The drama:** Waiting to board a high-speed boat. **The players:** A few dozen tourists, all white, and the local Balinese.

This scene is ostensibly a prologue – the moments of waiting before departure to a 2-hour boat ride to paradise – yet also a play unto itself. Especially for the local Balinese, whose participation ends when the boat leaves.

Numerous Europeans, and myself as the sole American representative, arrive by shuttles as Balinese men and women carry our heavy bags. The costumes of all Caucasian people present, adorned with cute bags and iPads, are noticeably better than anyone with darker skin.

Sitting by me is a Balinese boy around fourteen. He strikes up a conversation with me, and the scene's dialogue commences with "Where are you from? Where are you going? For how long?" "America," I reply. "To Gili Air, for a few days." Our friendly protagonist then reveals his true objective, as he proceeds to pull out a series of trinkets, the sale of which he claims will help him pay for school. As I examine them and consider what friend might appreciate one, a younger boy approaches and shows me his souvenirs as well – which are similar, yet a little nicer. Our protagonist is upset: "I talk to you first! You buy from me!" Apparently, his tactic of initiating conversation means he is entitled to my money.

I struggle inside, feeling pressured. A culture based on bargaining, I know that I could get it for less and finally give the full \$5 requested – but to the second, younger boy, who has what I prefer and doesn't hassle me. Yet I feel badly for the first, who continues to try to sell to me.

And I continue to feel guilty as porters, including elderly grandmother-types, scramble take our bags to the boat, as the 25 white people and crew board. Yes, tourism makes for a better living for the Balinese, but the inequity continues.

The scene ends aboard the boat with an inner dialogue: What right do I have to be here at all? While Nguyen represented a minority viewpoint, the people of color here still are the majority yet still greatly economically disadvantaged. And, unlike Nguyen's, their story is not being told. I ride the boat to my fantasy island, guilt-ridden and without an answer as to how to rectify this disparity. And I recognize that the ending of this scene is simply not as tidy, nor as fortunate, as Nguyen's.