

Butterfly's Borders: Gender, Geography, Fantasy and Experience in David Bateman's *Lotus Blossom Special*
Larissa Lai

Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* begins with a mock marriage. This type of marriage supposedly belongs to Japanese tradition, at least, in the imagination of the librettist. The callous American sailor Pinkerton, eager for a temporary Japanese wife marries the naïve, fifteen-year-old Butterfly in a contract that binds them for nine hundred and ninety-nine years, "but with the option, at ev'ry month, to cancel the contract." Both are ecstatic at the union, but for Pinkerton, it is a frivolity, while for Butterfly, in spite of her relatives' admonitions, it is deadly serious. The opera's tragedy turns on the misunderstanding between play and reality. This is indicated in the very opening of the opera, with Pinkerton and Goro observing the mobility of the walls of the house in which Pinkerton and Butterfly are to be husband and wife. The walls and ceiling "come and will go, just/ as it may suit your fancy." Pinkerton calls the house a "fairy dwelling," which, Goro observes "Springs like a tow'r from nowhere." Like the fairy house, Butterfly, for Pinkerton, is a toy ("the age/ of playthings") to play with until he marries "a real wife from America." To Butterfly, who, in the logic of the opera, inhabits only the world of play, the marriage is serious and solemn. Those who live in fairyland experience it as "real." Tellingly, while showing Pinkerton her treasures, she throws away her pot of carmine (the stuff of artifice) but keeps the very real dagger her father used to commit suicide at the Mikado's command some years prior.

The opera draws a frame around Butterfly, her house, and indeed, Japan itself. It is self-aware, but it is not self-reflexive in the sense of seeing it's imperialist misrecognition of Asian women. It lays the error of reading at Butterfly's feet. She can not see who she is. Pinkerton might be callous, but because he is American (and real) and she is Japanese (and therefore of the imagination), he cannot be expected to stay with her. In the logic of the opera, Butterfly's tragedy lies in her own misrecognition of both herself and her lover.

Of course we, as good postcolonial readers think we know better. We understand that *Madama Butterfly* is a racist, imperialist imagining of Asian femininity. In the context of American imperialism in Asia, if one thinks of its military bases in the Phillipines, or more pointedly Vietnam (which is what makes the newer rendition of the opera, *Miss Saigon*, so appalling) the international political context in which the opera circulates is racist and offensive. The right-on stance of contemporary race politics is to read the opera as a bad Western race fantasy, and move on to produce other, better representations. However, in recent years, as myself and others have discussed elsewhere, the difficulty of producing "better representations" that do not get consumed in a newly Orientalist way, has shown itself to be difficult if not impossible.

David Bateman's performance piece *Lotus Blossom Special*, then, takes on a slightly different strategy. He re-engages the narrative of the opera to show us something about whiteness, masculinity, camp and queer sexuality. In so doing, he reveals that these may in fact be the real subjects of the original opera, and not Asian femininity at all. Puccini may have been more conscious of this than his audiences, if the framing is any indication.

Lotus Blossom Special begins, not with a mock marriage in an exotic locale, but with a fantasy divorce in a banale (though unspecified) Canadian town. Bateman's framing is even more careful than that of the Puccini opera. We are given a little context first—strains from *Madama Butterfly* including a bit of the recurring motif of the American national anthem. Thus the interracial and international marriage is invoked. But this is immediately followed by an instrumental version of Tammy Wynette's D-I-V-O-R-C-E and the first visuals of the piece, a series of slides with text from the opera and images of both "Asian" and "American" women, in which both the gender and nationality of the women are exaggerated and overdetermined to the point of obliterating any other possible reading. Except, of course, a camp one.

The fifth slide provides a quote from Chuang-Tzu, that opens the floodgate for intentional mis-interpretation, re-interpretation and recreation. It is Chuang-Tzu's famous butterfly quote: "All is an illusion. I don't know whether I am a man, dreaming I am a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I am a man." In the context of the previous slides the terms "butterfly" and "man" become not overdetermined categories at all, but rather wide open windows through which anything could fly. The next slide takes immediate transgendered advantage of the situation. The quote says: "All is an illusion. I don't know whether I have been a man, dreaming I am a woman, or a woman dreaming that I have been a man." It is attributed to "David Bateman, Ethnically Displaced Canadian Performance Artist and Bewildered Nymphomaniac." The qualifiers are necessary, since there are many David Batemans in this show—He plays all the characters in the opera except Pinkerton, who is given to us as a large, inert pink skeleton, and Cho-Cho San's child by Pinkerton, Trouble, who is played by a large, spooky-looking plastic doll.

It is in this open-ended landscape that the action of *Lotus Blossom Special* takes place. Bateman, playing a performance version of himself, adorned in a black evening gown, a high-collared Chinese-styled vest, and high heels narrates the divorce through a campy rendition of Tammy Wynette's D.I.V.O.R.C.E., now with lyrics. The marriage of Cho-Cho San and Pinkerton is transposed to the melodramatic divorce of David Bateman from his closet case lover, the producer who is his absent interlocuter over the course of the performance. This is not a real marriage either, but a self-consciously invented one, located purely in the ironic imagination of the performance artist. The metaphoric layers are multiple. One could read this divorce as the angst-ridden but still freeing divorce of *Butterfly* from Pinkerton, or the liberating separation of Asian women from hegemonic and racist representations of Asian women by Orientalist Western men. Or one could read it more literally in Tammy Wynette's terms as the divorce of a working class white country girl from her cheatin' lyin' man, or even more literally as the melodramatic abandonment of a much beloved object by the scorned lover, the producer and David Bateman respectively. None of these readings escape quotation marks, and none of the escape cultural overdetermination.

What is made present here, in an interesting way, is the performance artist's romance with and desire to inhabit the site of fantasy, the one in which he gets to have the surly straight producer, or for that matter, any of the other men who figure as temporary paramours in his narrative. While the politically liberated stance of progressive Asian Canadian women is to refuse the trope of *Butterfly* as a racist stereotype, the performance artist Bateman longs (in some measure at least) to occupy the site of fantasy in precisely the way that the *Butterfly* of Puccini's imagination does. He longs for the

borders of the fairy house to extend from its place on a Nagasaki hill all the way to America, so that Pinkerton can return, one fine day, without his American wife, to love his fantasy wife again.

This longing in many ways begs the question of contemporary, liberated queer politics that lobbies for the legitimization of gay marriage in the eyes of the law. What if the real pleasure of queerness or gayness is its connection to camp—its occupation of a fantasy world, marked by an uneasy tension between longing fantasy and its fulfillment.

If we recognize the second layer of the opera's fantasy, which is its self-recognition, as, in fact, white men's imagining of Asian femininity, Bateman is permitted to enter another fantasy space—the space of the socio-political. The opera purports to be about the tragedy of Asian women's longing for white men, when it is actually about white men's longing for Asian women. The opera projects white desire and fear on to the bodies of Asian women. It makes the Asian woman the agent of that desire, when in fact the desire is a Western patriarchal one. At some level, by framing Butterfly's house as a fairy house, as a house of fantasy, Puccini acknowledges this. For Bateman, as a white man, to acknowledge this gives him a kind of power in the "real" world. The only problem is that Bateman doesn't identify with Pinkerton. He identifies with Butterfly. Bateman is torn between the cultural power white masculinity bestows and his longing to break away from into a fluttering world of fantasy. These are precisely the conditions that send him reeling, willingly or not, into the world of camp.

If cultural overdetermination is the essence of camp, then there is no escape from the artifice. But what if the artificial and the "natural" are not as opposed to one another as early writing on camp suggests. (See Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'".) If David Bateman's work has a trademark, it is precisely in the eliding of the artificial and the natural to push both himself and his audiences into taking a serious ethical position. The tragedy of his work is that even that serious ethical position is artificial. Like Butterfly, he cannot escape the stage, and suffers mortally because of it. Nietzsche's notion of the mask might be useful here, to recognize that, while the multiple and escapable artificialities that Bateman, as performer (and as person?) inhabits, in fact exist for all of us. His performance of Butterfly only heightens the fact. The contradiction between fantasy and fact is elided; "fact" is only another fantasy, in a layered series of fantasies that never descends to essence. Depending on the distance and angle of vision, being Butterfly can be a highly pleasurable or a highly abject position.

In the second act of the performance, we are taken on a journey across Canada, as Bateman narrates an encounter between a younger version of himself and a married British man travelling with his wife. The affair is illicit—conducted in the men's room and the bar car in a moving train, in moments stolen away from the man's wife who waits, unknowing, in the couple's berth. The three of them ride the railway built earlier in the century by Chinese railroad workers, excluded from the privileges of citizenship in spite of their hard labour. Bateman acknowledges the workers through a campy sing song of "I've been working on the railroad" and through a recounting of Canada's anti-Asian history. He names specifically the Japanese Canadian Internment during World War Two, the exploitation of Chinese railway workers, the withholding of the vote from Chinese people until the fifties, the media's racialization of the SARS epidemic in Toronto in the 90s, and for that matter, his mother's infantilization of the Chinese man who ran a restaurant in Peterborough while David was growing up. Both the affair and

the racialized geography on which it occurs cannot be read by Bateman's audiences as sites of artifice in the way we might be able to read Puccini's Japan and America. Through the invocation of material history, we are called to recognize camp as deeper and more complicated than postmodern pastiche. It is not life in the simulacra; it is more than pure artifice. If it is not possible to touch essence, we touch at least, a deeper layer in the onion-like palimpsest of masks. Camp has become poignant. It is still funny, but its humour is more Freudian than Jamesian. "I've Been Working on the Railroad" masks the history of Chinese railway workers. David's identification with Butterfly masks the pain of ephemeral encounters in which he is always a love object in passing and never the eternal beloved of heterosexual romance. "I don't like love," he says. "It's distracting, an annoying social construct./ It sells greeting cards and flowers and sweets and tickets/ to the symphony and the ballet and the opera!" The desire for love is precisely what propels viewers to see things like *Madama Butterfly* in the first place, and internalize its bad stereotypes! And yet, to live in the world of camp is to accept its duplicity: "Duped, since childhood/ I liked being a little girl, in a little boy's body/I never felt trapped in a man's body, I wanted both/ I still do... (31)" One may be biological and the other social, but neither is more "real."

The question that remains is how to understand the geographies of the performance—the Japan and America of the Puccini opera, and the Canada of Bateman's performance. In a sense, they are all performance spaces—sites of fantasy, and yet real at the same time. By throwing away the pot of carmine, Butterfly dissolves, for herself at least, the distinction between sites of fantasy (Japan) and sites of "reality" (America). In her newly adopted world view, it is possible for Pinkerton to return to her, right up until the moment she is presented with the materiality of Pinkerton's American wife. To ensure that her lover does not become torn between herself and the wife, she must maintain the correct boundaries between reality and fantasy. The only way she can do this is by dying on her father's suicide knife—which is a kind of magic object belonging to both the "real" world and the world of fantasy. Through a "real" death, she the world to order as Pinkerton imagines it—one in which she can never be his "real" wife, one in which Japan remains a site of fantasy.

Bateman, on the other hand, as the butterfly in his performance, does not die. His "straight" lovers are thus free to swing through the revolving doors of gender preference with impunity, though they must deny it before they've drunk the magic bottle of bourbon, that is, while they still live, repressed, on the heterosexual, "real" side of the fence. His Canada then, is also a site of doubleness—both a nation state founded on racist exclusions and a multicultural paradise in which such race and gender-bent performances as *Lotus Blossom Special* can take place. It seems important to ask what this implies for locations at which borders are drawn more vehemently—the border between Greek and Turkish Cyprus, perhaps, or any barrier that prevents the free movement of people for the purposes of love or labour. I suspect that the opposite sides of these barriers are equally places of desire and disgust, sites at which fantasies of the other reach epic proportions precisely because of the existence of the border itself.