DECONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN THE COLLABORATIVE WORKS OF JOHN ADAMS AND PETER SELLARS

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ABSTRACT

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Opera is widely stigmatized by academics and non-academics alike as inaccessible high art, even by humanities scholars who commonly appreciate the classics in their own field. In order to overcome that stigmatization, I have chosen two seminal American operas by composer John Adams—1987’s *Nixon in China* and 2005’s *Doctor Atomic*—and examined their presentation and deconstruction of the popular ideology of American Exceptionalism. These two operas have much in common: both adapt history and mythologize it into a cultural narrative; both respond to their own historical moments in order to make statements about American culture; both elicit meaningful questions about American ideologies and traditions. In this project, I focus on the ways that these operas present American cultural identity by analyzing the operas’ portrayals of American Exceptionalism. I point out examples of Exceptionalism in practice, such as the justification for the War on Terror and U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, when spreading democracy abroad became a primary military goal. Both operas demonstrate this notion of the U.S. having a right to rule and respond to it in different ways. By examining how each of these operas address, and occasionally deconstruct, Exceptionalism, I argue that these operas help destabilize the faulty ideologies that inform U.S. foreign policy, thereby enabling civic participation and change.
To Steph and Luca, for putting up with me.
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INTRODUCTION

Why opera?

This question has been asked me numerous times at key moments in my life, from my decision to study vocal music performance and train as a soprano in college to my decision to make 20th century American opera the primary focus of my studies as a student of literary and textual analysis. Of course, the questions above are related to personal taste, but take a decidedly different hue in discussions about this particular project, in which I have chosen two seminal American operas by composer John Adams—1987’s *Nixon in China* and 2005’s *Doctor Atomic*—and examined their presentation and deconstruction of the popular ideology of American Exceptionalism. The question of why most likely derives from the fact that opera is, unfortunately, not respected in the same way that, for instance, classic novels or films are respected. Opera is widely stigmatized by academics and non-academics alike as inaccessible high art, even by humanities scholars who commonly appreciate the classics in their own field. Thus, it is necessary to address why opera is the right medium for a discussion about American ideologies. Likewise it is important to ask, why study these particular operas, and why now?

I could ask just as easily, why not opera? The long European tradition of opera notwithstanding, the genre itself is rich in opportunities for analysis. Not unlike cinematography, opera combines musical, narrative, and dramatic content to create a whole effect that can be overwhelmingly moving and provocative. While six-hour long Wagnerian operas about the Ring of Nibelung tend to scare off opera novices, such epic operatic performances are, frankly, uncommon. Many operas are quite humorous, and performances tend to be filled with social commentary. The New York Metropolitan Opera, for example, has become renowned for its innovative staging of traditional operatic favorites. In 2012 the Met staged an adaptation of
Verdi’s *Rigoletto* directed by Michael Mayer in which the plot was set in 1960s Las Vegas. Mayer felt that the opera was the perfect medium to reflect the “temptation and the sex and the drugs and the booze and the money and the organized crime and all the cultural decadence of the day—it just seemed that the story really lined up” (Brieler). Mayer used a traditional opera to make a cultural statement about the United States at a particularly significant historical moment, rendering it newly meaningful. Such interpretations are now commonplace in major opera houses, proving that opera is indeed versatile, and assumptions that it is no longer culturally relevant are plainly remiss. As with any other art form, it can be—and indeed, is—made culturally relevant by its performers, producers, composers, and directors.

On the other hand, assertions that opera can be inaccessible are not necessarily misplaced. As a tradition originating in Europe, many operas are written in Italian, German, and French. As such, performances in the original languages can be challenging for American audiences to understand, even though translations are usually provided. However, Americans tend to be unaware of the burgeoning tradition of operas made in and about the United States. Well-known composers George Gershwin, Philip Glass, and John Adams all made important contributions to that canon, producing operas that are designed for American audiences. The operas I study in this project are quintessentially American—not only are they American-produced, they are also based on American historical events. Thus, in addition to being part of a genre that tends to make political and cultural commentary, they are also written for and about the United States, rendering them more accessible than the European operas of greater fame. These qualifications are what make American opera so rich in meaning and so valuable to studies of American culture.
This project focuses on the artistic collaboration between director Peter Sellars and composer John Adams, a partnership that has spanned more than two decades. Adams and Sellars’s first collaboration was the opera *Nixon in China*, which is the focus of the first chapter of this thesis. *Nixon in China* premiered in 1987 and “carved out new territory by treating recent American history as suitably mythic operatic material” (May). The idea for the opera was Sellars’s, and he approached Adams to propose the project when they met at a music festival in 1983, four years before the opera would premiere. It would be Adams’s first foray into the genre, but certainly not the last, as the two would go on to stage several operas together, often returning to the technique of creating American historical mythology that made *Nixon* “a twentieth-century masterpiece” (May). The second chapter of this thesis focuses on Adams’s and Sellars’s 2005 opera *Doctor Atomic*, which is critically acclaimed and is second only to *Nixon* in its prestige as part of their collaborative body of work. These two operas have much in common: both adapt history and mythologize it into a cultural narrative; both respond to their own historical moments in order to make statements about American culture; both elicit meaningful questions about American ideologies and traditions. In this project, I focus on the ways that these operas present American cultural identity by examining the operas and analyzing their portrayals of American Exceptionalism.

Before delving further into the operas themselves, I will provide a brief explanation of the term American Exceptionalism and the way that I use that term in this essay. American Exceptionalism is the ideological belief that the United States is exceptional, and has a uniquely significant role in the world. Evidence of this manner of thinking among American citizens and policy-makers alike is relatively widespread, and it is also covert, with Americans more or less assuming this role is valid without requiring any underlying reasoning to support that claim.
Throughout these chapters, I point out examples of Exceptionalism in practice, such as the justification for the War on Terror and U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, when spreading democracy abroad became a primary military goal. Although largely unacknowledged, Exceptionalism has “legitimized U.S. global sovereignty by basing it upon representations of a dichotomized world order over which the United States exercised the legal power to rule” (Pease 111). Both operas demonstrate this notion of the U.S. having a right to rule and respond to it in different ways. By examining how each of these operas address, and occasionally deconstruct, Exceptionalism, I form separate conclusions about the impact that ideology has on the U.S. nation and citizen.

As its title implies, *Nixon in China* tells the story of Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to Maoist China during the height of the Cold War. The opera in three acts begins when the Nixons’ plane lands in China, staging the famed hand-shake between Nixon and Chou Enlai. While the Nixons tour China, the differences between the two cultures—economically, socially, and ideologically—are emphasized, particularly by the text of the libretto. Although the Nixons make every effort to assimilate to Chinese culture, their efforts seem forced and are not entirely successful. I ultimately question the viability of such efforts in light of the nature of diplomacy itself; while the U.S. desires partnership with other nations that involves a great deal of control and economic interaction, China does not approach diplomacy the same way, resulting in an underlying tension that the opera does not overtly address. I bring up the separation between East and West to illustrate that the differences between the two cultures evident in *Nixon* may actually be deeply ideological in nature, and may not be able to be, or even need to be, overcome. By destabilizing the notion of diplomacy as a relationship based on similarities and interactive friendship, I assert that Sellars and Adams illustrate how the ideology of American
Exceptionalism causes Americans to believe that their diplomatic efforts are driven by friendship and equality when in fact they are guided by imperialism. The U.S. desires to spread democracy abroad without considering that not all cultures are receptive to that, or even would benefit from it. Sellars and Adams show that Americans’ inability to imagine other cultures that exist happily and differently causes them to make mistakes in foreign policy without realizing or acknowledging it.

The more recent opera *Doctor Atomic* is based on the events of the Manhattan project, and depicts the personal and professional struggles of J. Robert Oppenheimer, called Oppie, in the days leading up to the testing of the atomic bomb. The scientists who worked on the bomb are dissatisfied with its proposed use against Japan, and tension develops between the military General overseeing the project and the scientists working under him. In my second chapter I draw attention to the parallels between the War on Terror, which had recently begun when the opera premiered in 2005, and the Manhattan Project, in order to point out the ways that Exceptionalism influenced both moments. I also point out the underlying power structures that are at play in the establishment and reproduction of the Exceptionalist ideology, which can be read as an implicit message of the opera. While *Nixon* is more covert in its criticism of U.S. foreign policy, *Doctor Atomic* is much more direct in displaying the shortcomings of that policy. I propose a reading of the opera that considers both the War on Terror and the Manhattan Project as simultaneously propelled by and further encouraging the myth of American Exceptionalism. The myth proves foundationless, thereby rendering its ideology ghostlike and unstable—it reinforces the U.S.’s power and right to global dominance while having no basis in reality to substantiate it.
By mythologizing real events from American history and presenting them as political statements in the form of opera, Adams and Sellars produced two distinct criticisms of American culture. The operas derive their importance not simply from the fact that they are operas or that they deal with political themes, but rather because of the impact that the Adams/Sellars collaboration has had on the genre. Operatic form has evolved tremendously since its invention during the Baroque period, with certain significant composers making contributions that have shaken up the older traditions and opened up new possibilities. These changes often reflect evolution in the cultures that produced them. For example, Georges Bizet’s famed and still widely-popular opera comique, Carmen, features the brutal death of its title character—a mezzo-soprano, which in itself was uncommon for an operatic leading lady—onstage after a series of misadventures with men, altering the way women were depicted in operas and scandalizing its French audiences at its 1875 premiere (MacDonald). However, it ushered in a new era of operas that allowed for unconventional female leads by challenging existing traditions in operatic characterization. Adams, a pioneer of the post-minimalist movement, has helped to usher in a new era of operatic form by introducing contemporary politico-mythic operas. Adams and Sellars lend new significance to the genre by using it to participate in civic debate, posing serious questions about U.S. policy but doing so in a manner that enables audiences to interpret and engage in the debate themselves. Because opera is a genre that has long been used for understated social commentary, it is an ideal forum for this discussion.

Regarding the question of why now, it is important to note that this project is strongly influenced by the sociopolitical environment that produced it. The current political situation of the United States in the post-9/11 global climate heighten the importance of the issues Adams and Sellars raise in their collaborative works. The September 11 terrorist attacks on the World...
Trade Center left the U.S. with an enemy that wasn’t directly affiliated with any one country, so the subsequent War on Terror saw the U.S. acting as a world policing agent. Official rhetoric about the War on Terror treats the U.S. as a force of global good, a position that both reinforces and is reinforced by Exceptionalism. The United States has set a precedent for international interference without UN sanctioning using the “exceptional” circumstances of the World Trade Center attacks as justification. This project shows that the U.S., influenced by Exceptionalism and a sense of moral superiority, has a dangerously unbridled impulse to rid the world of terrorism, which is so vaguely defined that the “enemy” can be projected anywhere.

Historical setting is also important to this project because both operas are set in timeframes that were fraught by public debates over U.S. imperialism and foreign policy. Nixon’s significance derives partially from its composition near the end of the Cold War, and Doctor Atomic is likewise meaningfully connected to the War on Terror, which was only two years old at the opera’s premiere. The following sections contextualize the operas in terms of their particular historical conditions, proving that their timeliness is meaningful, as well. The historical backgrounds here are useful for better understanding the arguments I make in the chapters that follow.

**Nixon in China and the Cold War**

For the past half-century, the United States has fostered a relationship with China that may be described as volatile at best. Jean Garrison, in her book *Making China Policy*, asserts that “misperceptions of China abound, with overly optimistic assessments of their friendship…on one side and inflated assessments of their hostility or threat to U.S. interests on the other” (1). This confusion over exactly what the Sino-American relationship entails happens largely due to the
many changes that relationship has undergone since World War II. While the U.S. was pointedly anti-Communist during the Cold War, it also needed peaceful allies in the East to help leverage the Soviet threat, and this made friendship with China desirable. After China’s civil war, when Mao Zedong rose to power, the U.S.’s fledgling hopes for a friendship with the other country came to a grinding halt (11). However, as the tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union increased, President Nixon began to explore the potential of China as an ally. Nixon’s visit to China cemented that friendship and initiated a new era in U.S. foreign policy (31). Margaret MacMillan, author of *Nixon and Mao*, writes that the visit was “important above else for [its] symbolism” as “an end to the long standoff where neither country had recognized the other” (xvi). Thus, the visit marked a period of renewed recognition, and stands as a seminally important event in the Cold War.

Chinese attitudes toward this visit are also extremely relevant to discussions of the opera. *Nixon* depicts Maoist China as staunchly isolationist and communist, and resistant to U.S. influence. This is in keeping with Chinese dealings with the West at the time; after the Communists won the Chinese civil war, “they had every reason to fear and hate the Americans” because the U.S. had backed the other faction, the Guomindang (MacMillan xix). In addition to harboring anti-American sentiments, Mao’s Cultural Revolution led the nation to withdraw its diplomatic presences globally, while the U.S. “plunged headlong into Vietnam” (MacMillan xix), forcing the two countries to deal with each other despite China’s desire to remain uninvolved in international affairs. At the end of the 1960s, MacMillan explains, “the times were ripe for each side to make a move toward the other. In both countries there were influential voices saying that the advantages of a relationship, even a cool one, outweighed continuing nonrecognition” (xx). Chinese attitudes toward friendship with the U.S. were clearly more
reluctant than U.S. attitudes, largely because China had made such an effort to withdraw from diplomatic relationships and foster pure communism within the country. Maoist China enjoyed isolation and saw diplomatic interaction as a necessity for peace but certainly not a catalyst for the kind of culturally interactive friendship that the U.S. hoped to forge. While the U.S. desired economic partnership with China and to stake their democratic place in the communist country, China was not open to that kind of interference; China simply wanted an ally against their shared enemy, the Soviet Union, at a point when Cold War tensions were high.

However, these tensions did eventually unravel as the Cold War wound to a close in the late 1980s, and the visit to China was rendered newly significant. Conflicts with the Soviet Union slowly defused throughout the decade, and President Ronald Reagan began to form a relationship of mutual respect with Soviet Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. President Reagan, who took office as a staunch anti-Communist in 1981, underwent a great ideological change before his 1984 re-election. His rhetoric shifted around 1983 to reflect more conciliatory attitudes toward the Soviet Union (Farnham 234). Before 1985’s Geneva Summit, “Reagan pointed to ‘misunderstandings,’ and in his speech to the nation just prior to the summit he stressed his ‘mission for peace,’ the need to reduce ‘suspicion and mistrust,’ and his belief that nuclear weapons were the real threat” (235). By the opera’s 1987 premiere date, Reagan and Gorbachev had achieved mutual respect despite their nations’ ideological differences. This attitude influenced the opera and fueled a desire for similar feelings of friendship and cooperation with China.

*Nixon* depicts the visit to China as overwhelmingly positive and makes every effort to emphasize the similarities between the two countries. The mythologized portrayals of the characters and the connections between cultures are indicative of the friendly feelings that the
U.S. felt now that the Cold War conflict was nearly past. Nonetheless, as I point out in that chapter, these expressions of friendship are not enough to override the lingering concerns the opera raises about U.S. diplomacy. Even though Nixon closes with the two countries sharing more in common than was previously believed, they still fail to acknowledge their differences in a two-directional, mutually respectful way. The U.S. in particular makes efforts to insert itself into Chinese cultural narratives in ways that suggest imperialistic underpinnings. Despite Nixon’s apparent resolutions, there is still reason to find tension in the Sino-American relationship that the opera presents.

_Doctor Atomic, the Manhattan Project, and the War on Terror_

History plays an even more important role in Doctor Atomic, in which Adams and Sellars use the Manhattan Project as a symbol of U.S. violence on a global scale. The Manhattan Project is, of course, the military code name for the “top secret project to build the first atomic bomb” which took place in an isolated part of the desert in New Mexico from 1943 to 1945 (Ward 54). University of California at Berkeley physicist Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer led the team of scientists, and his operatic representation as Oppie is closely based on descriptions of the man himself. Oppenheimer is an enigmatic character whose contemporaries described him as having “an enormous charm and charisma” which “covered a dark moodiness, melancholy, vulnerability, and self-loathing” (55). Oppie’s personal turmoil in the opera serves as a vehicle for raising questions about the moral permissibility of dropping the bomb, despite claims of the absolute goodness and authority of the government that characters—and at times, Oppie himself—make.
The opera’s major focus is the regret that the scientists experience regarding the dropping of the bomb and the government’s response to their concerns, utilizing the scientists to draw attention to flaws in U.S. foreign policy. The opera’s representation of the scientists’ resistance is also reflexive of the actual historical event. Some scientists were so disturbed by the violent weapon they had created that they became physically ill during the testing, with one physicist reportedly “vomiting in the bushes” (Oppenheimer qtd. in Ward 59). The use of the bomb itself was then vehemently protested, as over 100,000 Japanese civilian lives were lost. Although he insisted on unconditional surrender from Japan, even President Truman admitted that “he couldn’t stomach killing another 100,000 people” (Ward 60). However, although the expected casualties in U.S. troops if the bomb was not used were roughly the same, the use of the bomb still led to great controversy and protest. Some speculate that using this bomb instead of a more conventional attack dehumanized the enemy. Musicologist Karlyn Ward writes that “the dissociation from feeling…allows for killing and allows for war….Almost no consideration was given to more humanitarian alternative ideas, such as warning the Japanese leaders by inviting them to a test demonstration on an unpopulated area” (60). The atomic bomb made such quick work of incinerating thousands of Japanese that it made the U.S. a villain instead of a victim. In short, the atomic bomb revealed the way the U.S. treats enemies, reducing and subordinating them through the use of powerful, rapid violence.

The timing of the opera’s 2005 premiere, only two years after the War on Terror began and four years after the attacks on the World Trade Center, also has significant bearing on my reading. It is no coincidence that Adams and Sellars collaborated to create this opera at this particular moment in history. The War on Terror is extremely controversial for numerous reasons, but my reading focuses specifically on the faulty claims of weapons of mass destruction
(WMDs) in Iraq. While the Bush administration professed to have intelligence that made a war in the Middle East imperative to national safety, citizens were not altogether satisfied with those claims, particularly when the U.N. did not corroborate them. As I explain in more detail in that chapter, *Doctor Atomic* makes the connection between the War on Terror and the Manhattan Project very apparent. It also suggests that the impulse that leads the U.S. to violence is similar in all wars, and points to deeper ideological roots. I make connections to American Exceptionalism specifically in order to point out the way this ideology both propels U.S. foreign policy and justifies the same policy.

**Reading Nixon and Doctor Atomic as Literary Texts**

The following two chapters explore these operas in detail, offering close readings and examinations of significant scenes from each opera. What follows is not a musicological analysis; it is rather a reading that incorporates elements of narration, musicality, and staging while using minimal technical language. I chose to focus primarily on the libretto texts for these operas so that readers unfamiliar with opera would still be able to understand and appreciate these works. However, I also occasionally mention voice parts, orchestration, and staging.

The term “voice parts” refers to the singer’s vocal range and gender (not necessarily sex). For instance, a soprano is a woman who is able to sing high notes, and maintains a high tessitura throughout. A tessitura is the term for the range in which a singer is most comfortable. A soprano is most comfortable singing high notes, and is less comfortable with lower notes. Often characterization is closely tied to voicing. High soprano notes tend to signal femininity and beauty. In *Nixon*, Chiang Ch’ing is a coloratura soprano, meaning she has a high, fluid vocal part and is able to move rapidly and easily from note to note. This gives her character an exotic
element, and distinguishes her from the lyric soprano part of Pat Nixon, whose more tranquil notes signal innocence. Occasional mentions of these voice parts in the chapters that follow are always coupled with brief explanations of the specific impact that voice part has on characterization.

I also make several references to orchestration during my analysis, referring to the instrumental music played by the orchestra. Orchestra is equally important to vocal music in an opera, although I have given it considerably less attention in my analysis. I chose to approach the analysis this way in order to avoid confusion for readers, and my occasional mentions of the orchestral part are also coupled with explanations of how it impacts plot and narrative action. I also occasionally refer to music sung by the chorus. The chorus of an opera is a cast of singers who participate in select scenes but do not contribute greatly to plot action. Mentions of the chorus in this project are mostly related to setting and mood; any descriptions I provide of their parts are also accompanied by explanations of their role.

Although my musicological analysis is minimal in this project, I do focus heavily on staging. Because these operas are close collaborations between composer John Adams and director Peter Sellars, I view the stage direction as highly important to the overall impressions of the opera. I use video recordings of both operas as staged by the New York Metropolitan Opera Company as my source for analyzing staging decisions. These recordings were both made in the past five years under Sellars’s direction, and involve many members of the original casts, making them ideal models of the operas. In each chapter, I include screenshots of important scenes from the operas cut directly from these video recordings. Although I recommend watching the operas themselves as the best way to gain a greater understanding of their significance, and the only
way to truly comprehend their overall effect, I attempt to include enough details in my analysis to authentically represent the opera as a narrative work.

My goal for this analysis was to treat *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic* as literary works. Because scholars frequently believe opera to be inaccessible, they often do not consider the literary potential of opera. I feel that this oversight is unfortunate because operas offer such rich social commentary and have many layers of musical, narrative, and dramatic meaning for scholars to explore. I hope that the following chapters, and indeed this project as a whole, will help illustrate just how much potential opera has as a vehicle to study other important facets of culture and experience. I also hope to help illuminate the ways American Exceptionalism permeates culture, and highlight how these operas in particular help to draw attention to faulty ideologies, stir up discomfort, and create the potential for audiences to engage in self-examination and initiate change.
CHAPTER 1: NIXON IN CHINA AND EVOLVING NARRATIVES OF EAST AND WEST

“The Eastern Hemisphere beckoned to us, and we have flown east of the sun, west of the moon, across an ocean of distrust filled with the bodies of our lost; The earth’s Sea of Tranquility.”

-Nixon in China, Act I Scene 1, mm. 542-567

When Nixon in China premiered in 1987, it was met with mixed reviews, both for its politically-driven dramatic themes and its minimalist musical content. Nixon challenged existing notions of what an opera should be by diverging from the mythological or literary plots that traditionally characterize operas and instead portraying a contemporary political and historical moment. It was a divergence that would eventually become composer John Adams’ signature style. Adams himself has stated, “In today’s so-called classical music, we’ve lost track of the vernacular… We hardly need another opera on a Shakespeare play or a Greek Myth” (qtd. in Monsell 155). To create the modern political opera Nixon in China, Adams teamed up with then-inexperienced director Peter Sellars, initiating what would eventually become one of American opera’s most successful collaborations. While the opera’s world premiere (accompanied only by two pianos and a synthesizer) left audiences and critics alike with little to admire¹, later performances with a full orchestra led to a far more positive reception, cementing Nixon’s place in the modern operatic canon (154).

However, Nixon’s holds a greater value in American culture than simply its musicological value. The opera offers significant glimpses into American ideologies and foreign policy, lending it importance far beyond the field of opera studies. It ought therefore to be the subject of broader academic explorations. In particular, underlying themes of American

¹ Adams is considered a pioneer of the minimalist tradition in American music. Inexperienced in opera composition at the time, Adams originally envisioned a minimalist orchestration for Nixon which did not appeal to most critics of the genre. His alterations maintain technical minimalism while allowing for a fuller orchestral sound.
Exceptionalism surface in the opera as Nixon’s portrayal of the U.S.’s foray into friendship with Maoist China demonstrates the ideological beliefs that shape U.S. foreign policy. While the U.S. has an attitude of generous diplomacy, desiring to spread the democratic ideologies that we hold in the United States abroad, the unenthusiastic reception that the Nixons’s experience in the opera suggests that such diplomatic offerings are not always welcome, even when they are well-intended. While Nixon presents cultural differences as surmountable—indeed, by the Act 3, the opera argues that the two cultures are more alike than different—the significance of the culture clash ought not to be overlooked. By portraying an overeager United States and a resistant China, Nixon elicits questions regarding the effectiveness of the U.S.’s aggressive foreign policy and suggests underlying imperialist motivations.

When Nixon made his 1972 visit to Chairman Mao, the Cold War was at its height, the Vietnam War had left Americans with extremely low opinions of U.S. foreign policy, and Mao’s Cultural Revolution had remapped Eastern politics. Nixon’s visit occurred at a point when U.S. relations to China were distant at best. President Nixon is widely acknowledged as the primary proponent for the shift in Sino-American relations during the Cold War, arguing years before his visit to China that “the United States needed to come to terms with the opportunity China represented, rather than emphasizing its threat” (Garrison 11-2). Nixon’s hopes for the relationship were “to get China to help with Vietnam and to restrain Communist expansion in Asia,” and both the U.S. and China hoped to “restrain the Soviets, reduce the danger of confrontation, and guarantee a more stable Asia” (31). Thus, in terms of the diplomatic goals of the rapprochement, it seemed that both countries had a great deal to gain in terms of international stability. These stakes lent to the high-profile nature of the visit, with 98 percent of Americans polled stating that they had heard about the trip, and 58 percent anticipating its success (33-4).
The importance of Nixon’s visit to China cannot be understated; it ushered in a new era in Sino-American relations and established the tenuous diplomatic friendship that still persists today. As such, the visit is a useful vehicle for portraying U.S. foreign policy.

*Nixon in China* utilizes this important moment in U.S. history in order to indicate that the United States and China are not so terribly different at their cores, even though they subscribe to fundamentally different ideological tenets. Musicologist Timothy Johnson, whose extensive research on the opera has been published in his book *John Adams’s Nixon in China*, writes that by the opera’s conclusion it is clear that “the dignitaries…have more in common with each other than they might even have imagined” (5). *Nixon* premiered in 1987, when the Cold War was winding to a close and the moments that led up to the fall of the Soviet Union took on new significance. Therefore, it ought to be no surprise that *Nixon* depicts the visit as overwhelmingly positive, “‘an heroic opera,’ not a satire” (Goodman qtd. in Johnson 3). Its libretto is markedly optimistic in its representation of the U.S.; critic Michael Steinberg called it “a wonder of human perception, generosity, wit, and political resource” (qtd. in Johnson 3). *Nixon’s* portrayal of foreign policy shows the Nixons (and Americans, by extension) as well-meaning and proactive in their desire for peace and stability.

While traditional “Oriental” artifacts subordinate China to its Western counterparts, *Nixon* presents China as modernly powerful and dynamic, in ways that surprise the visiting Nixons. Regarding Western impressions of the Orient, Edward Said famously writes in *Orientalism* that “the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient…[reiterate] European superiority over Oriental backwardness” and “puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7). This separation from the East, also called “Orientalizing,” serves a purpose, as it enables the West to
“intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is
closer to it and what is far away” (55). However, popular Western opinions toward imperialism
and the East took a turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with depictions of the Oriental no
longer projecting a purely subjugated East and instead allowing for a more unstable, flawed
West. Edward Said comments on this change in *Culture and Imperialism*, when he states,
“though imperialism implacably advanced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,
resistance to it also advanced” (Introduction). By establishing China as solemn and historically-
minded in comparison to the United States’ youthful naivety, Adams and Sellars depict a U.S.
that is, in some ways, open to learning from China. Thus *Nixon* overtly makes a culturally
progressive gesture toward China. However, its depiction of Sino-American relations is not
purely progressive, and it reinforces imperialism at least as much as it resists it. The Nixons’s
visit to China marks an effort not only to initiate a friendship with the other nation, but also to
establish an economic relationship that promotes capitalism. The U.S. takes for granted that
economic partnership is something good for China, and takes pleasure in spreading its own
ideologies abroad. However, it does this under such heavily cloaked diplomacy as to make the
implicit imperial reaches of the visit invisible to the naked eye.

I argue that *Nixon* does more than show how Chinese and American cultures are similar
and can relate to each other; it also leads audiences to question the United States’ tendency to
commandeer other cultural narratives, and demonstrates that what appears as diplomacy in U.S.
foreign policy may in fact be thinly-disguised imperialism. The Nixons are outsiders, both
literally and metaphorically, when they make their visit to China, and although their efforts at
assimilation and friendship are clear, they only achieve this by interrupting and altering the
cultural narrative of Chinese life. Never is this clearer than when the Nixons insert themselves
into the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* in Act 2, with well-meaning intentions that indicate their desire to improve the Chinese way of life. However, this drive for improvement implies that the United States sees China as inferior, even in the midst of the strides they had made toward friendship during this trip. Thus, *Nixon* not only shows the United States and China finding common ground together; it also depicts them losing that same common ground when the United States attempts to subjugate the Chinese narrative and overwhelm it with American ideologies. This unwelcome insertion of American ideals into Chinese culture undermines the progress that they make during the visit and can be read as an indictment against the forcible spread of democracy that Americans fetishize.

In *Nixon in China*, the desire to identify with another culture is one-sided; Maoist China was not interested in relationships with other countries, needing to establish cohesion within the nation to achieve its socialist dream. During Mao’s Cultural Revolution, “China virtually ceased to have a foreign policy at all” (MacMillan xix), proving its ideologies are vastly different from a United States whose foreign policy in the same era became increasingly imperialist. Therefore, even as *Nixon* depicts the United States and China having more in common than was previously believed, the opera still dances on the precipice of making too much of that connection. The Nixons’s desire for self-identification and mutual understanding is wholly American; the Chinese do not share that desire, so even when the connection is made, it is still one-sided and favors an American approach to diplomacy. Therefore, *Nixon*’s attempts to depict progress in the U.S.-Chinese relationship are marred by the purely American nature of such progress. The opera subtly reinforces the notion that the United States has a right and an obligation to enforce world peace by spreading democracy abroad, an ideal of American Exceptionalism that subjugates other countries to an Americanized conception of peace and justice. Thus, while Adams and
Sellars intend the opera to encourage U.S. diplomacy with China, the opera actually reveals the imperialistic nature of that diplomacy.

This chapter is separated into four parts, each of which explores a different aspect of the Sino-American relationship that *Nixon* illustrates. First, I focus on the establishment of the U.S. and China as operating under separate ideologies that make them unable to understand each other, which is evident in each of the opera’s three acts. Next, I examine the opera’s efforts at illustrating the points of connection and similarity between the two countries, allowing for the fact that this depiction of the East, though un-stereotypical and innovative for its time, is still a Western portrayal of the East. I then demonstrate how the United States’ forcible insertion into the Chinese cultural narrative indicates not only a desire for relationship, but also a desire for imperial control and influence—a desire that the Chinese do not welcome. I conclude by discussing how *Nixon* means to show the connections between China and the U.S. but actually helps illuminate a problem: the U.S. takes an approach to policy that identifies with other countries by assuming “that the United States [constitutes] a model for democratic nationality that might be imitated or otherwise adapted by other nations” (Rowe 167). I posit that such a tactic is harmful because it is so discreet, and because it is incongruous with the ideological tenets that already operate within these cultures. I ultimately suggest that U.S. foreign policy requires a turn toward respect for other nations that perhaps ought to involve distance rather than interaction, as the only means of achieving true diplomacy.

*“East of the Sun, West of the Moon”: Cultural Separation in Nixon in China*

The long-standing American idiom has been: “Only Nixon could go to China.” Indeed, when Richard Nixon assumed the Presidency after having spent years negotiating Sino-
American relations, the fact that he would usher in a time of change in our relationship to the Eastern world was more or less a given. Nixon’s visit to China was historical—he was the first United States President to make such a journey—and it was built on such a tentative offering of friendship between the two nations that it seemed the eyes of the world were on Nixon and Mao. *Nixon in China* is a powerful opera for many reasons, and the significance of its setting in China cannot be overstated. Before the Nixons’ plane touches down, the chorus explicitly establishes China’s communist ideologies, and the Nixons enter into the picture as strangers and foreigners whose inability to grasp Chinese culture is not particularly surprising. The opera makes American economic values dynamic by illuminating the differences between Pat and Richard—with Pat as a poor girl who became a school teacher, and married a politician who is strikingly different from her. It likewise makes China elusive in the mysterious characters of Chairman and Madame Mao—with Madame Mao as a powerful political figure and proponent of women’s rights in China. Economic and cultural differences are a major theme of the opera, and the attempts of the United States to relate the economic and social policies of China to their own policies implicitly privilege capitalism over communism in modern Western society.

In *Nixon in China*, the political significance of the visit is not lost, as Nixon sings as soon as he lands in China, “When I shook hands with Chou Enlai on this bare field outside Peking just now, the whole world was listening” (I.1.401-9). He later sings, “We have at times been enemies, we still have differences, God knows. But let us, on these next five days, start a long march on new high-ways, in different lanes, but parallel and heading for a single goal” (I.3.599-631). This aria reflects the actual historical circumstances of the visit. Most historians hold Nixon responsible for overcoming a political climate in which Americans felt threatened by the “monolithic Communism…hostile to U.S. interests” and “returning China to the ‘friend’
category” (Garrison 11). Indeed, Nixon’s visit to China is an ideal setting for a narrative that reimagines East-West relations, because the visit itself did just that.

_Nixon_ pointedly iterates the foreignness of the Nixons by placing them within a landscape that immediately professes its differences from American ideals. Before the Nixons’ plane lands, a chorus of Chinese sing: “Divide the landlord’s property. Take nothing from the tenantry. Do not mistreat the captive foe. Respect women, it is their due. Replace doors when you leave a house. Roll up straw matting after use” (I.1.129-155). These professions of Chinese ideals are deeply indicative of the version of China Adams and Sellars create in this opera. They begin with two commands that illustrate the importance of communism in the nation, as division of land and labor benefits the worker. They also show their respect for weaker populations, both the captive and the woman, which first shows which populations are thought of as inferior and then depicts the Eastern standards for treatment of inferiors. Finally, the last two statements illustrate the personal responsibility the population generally feels. While reductive of Chinese culture, taken in their entirety, these statements show the Chinese as a principled people who hold social cooperation as a high ethical ideal. This is, of course, unlike the capitalist individualism and opportunism that the Americans espouse.

When Nixon, Mao, Premier Chou, and Kissinger meet in private, their conversation also indicates deep cultural differences. While Nixon expects his meeting to be all business, he is surprised by Mao’s formality and desire to save the business conversations for his associates:

_Nixon:_ Let us turn our talk towards Taiwan,

Vietnam and the problems there, Japan—

_Mao:_ Save that for the Premier.

My business is philosophy. (I.2.121-134)
Mao exhibits distaste for the abrupt manner in which Nixon conducts business—indeed, while Nixon clearly envisions the interaction as primarily business-oriented, Mao favors a more personal approach to their meeting—and Nixon shows some level of discomfort likewise in his efforts to relate to Mao on a personal level. This is a difference in culture; the President sees foreign relations as a business-like transaction, whereas Chairman Mao sees their roles as figureheads rather than as bureaucrats, and their meeting as one that does not necessarily translate into political favors. The meeting offers insight into the way Nixon sees diplomacy—as a means to an economic end, imperialistic in nature—versus the way Mao sees it—as a neutral and disinterested interaction.

Pat Nixon also exhibits certain personal characteristics that prove in opposition to Chinese ideals and ways of life. Nixon’s portrayal of Pat depicts the First Lady having an idealistic and individualistic worldview, through which she fails to see the East in any respect besides its relationship to the Western world she knows. To say that Pat enjoys her visit to the ghettos of Peking is to put it mildly; she is thoroughly thrilled with her tour of everyday life in China, and professes: “I think what is to be will be in spite of us. I treat each day like Christmas” (II.1.72-9). Pat sees wonder all around her, proclaiming at the sight of an elephant in the glass factory she visits that “this little elephant in glass brings back so many memories. The symbol of our party, prize of our success, our sacred cow surrounded by blind Brahmins, slow, muscle-bound, well-dressed, half awake, with Liberty upon her back” (II.1.192-224). Pat’s almost child-like reception of the country whose history is far longer than her own homeland is indeed telling; Pat cannot understand the realism and bleakness that the Chinese landscape offers her. She perceives the world through a Westernized lens, neglecting to notice the labor conditions of the workers and instead focusing on the final products their labors elicit and claiming that they
represent the Republican party and “liberty”—an ironic perspective that audiences cannot help but note in light of the truly dire economic situation visible to everyone but Pat, while Pat naturally remains oblivious.

If Richard and Pat Nixon are naïve and businesslike, Mao and Chiang are experienced and philosophical. Such a position inverts typical Orientalist views that privilege the West over the East, while still reducing the Chinese to a cultural stereotype of philosophical wisdom. The relationship represented here is one that, if anything, actually subordinates the West due to its ignorance of its own role in global politics. The East has such different principles, and enacts them so confidently, as to render the principles of the West as flawed and underdeveloped by comparison. Such is exhibited when Mao, responding to Nixon’s defense of military spending, states, “Our armies do not go abroad. Why should they? We have all we need” (I.2.493-500). Mao’s explicit rejection of imperialism strongly contrasts the U.S. way of life, as the United States strives to have diplomatic presences all over the world. Mao goes on to describe the reasons behind his country’s resistance to Westernization, to which Nixon can only respond with, “Where is the Chinese people’s faith?” (I.2.545-7), referring to their failure to engage in relationships with other countries, a detail of foreign policy that is integral to American identity. When Mao’s realism is met with Nixon’s idealism, a duel of ideologies is established. One cannot interact with the other; they are inherently opposed because they are built on such utterly dissimilar worldviews. Nixon further cements the subordination of the West in this dichotomy when he admits over dinner, “I opposed China. I was wrong” (I.3.717-724). In what is meant as a friendly gesture, Nixon establishes for the United States a position of vulnerability in relation to China, apparently challenging existing notions of U.S. superiority. Thus, even as *Nixon* separates
the U.S. from China, it destabilizes the Western-centrism that Americans frequently read into that dichotomy.

The immense differences that *Nixon* emphasizes between the United States and China are important to the opera’s overall themes for several reasons. First, they are historically accurate representations of the period, helping to iterate the political significance of the event itself. Next, they establish the opera from its opening as dealing with a deeply ingrained cultural conflicts, only to later destabilize these conflicts and even suggest the possibility of overcoming cultural barriers altogether. Finally, the opera operates within the same dichotomy of orientalism that informed previous orientalist ideals in order to better deconstruct and reinterpret outdated perceptions of East and West. While the East-West relationship that *Nixon* creates is still a facsimile of Western perceptions of the East, it undergoes changes that make its self-reflexive portrait of the West different from the former model. Whereas Western nations once proved that they saw themselves as superior by feminizing and subordinating the East, this new, more self-aware West in fact sees itself as more sensible, more relatable, and more justified in acting in its relation to the East. The West has, in short, come to acknowledge its previous mistakes, but handles them in a manner that is still very much Western-centric.

“All Patriots Were Brothers Once”: Mutual Misunderstanding

Despite the clear differences that *Nixon* establishes between the two cultures, the opera also makes obvious efforts to overcome these differences and demonstrate points of connection between the United States and China. One of the primary narrative themes of *Nixon in China* is that the Americans and the Chinese are much more similar than they appear upon first glance. While from the opera’s opening scenes, the Nixons express discomfort at their new setting, small
moments of connection occur with increasing frequency as the opera progresses. Chairman Mao seems initially unimpressed with American values, for example, but he still makes small efforts toward connection. He is good-natured toward Nixon when he compliments his book in Act I Scene 2, ending his meeting with Nixon and Kissinger with a perfunctory, “Six Crises isn’t a bad book” (I.2.974-5). Furthermore, he communicates with the assistance of three female secretaries, representing his effort to overcome the language and culture barriers that indeed separate the two parties. What is most indicative of the efforts toward friendship is the bedroom scene in Act III, in which all the opera’s principle players can be seen onstage in separate bedrooms that are staged dormitory-style and are not divided by walls, “an odd refutation of the intimacy that seems called for” in a scene “so filled with private thoughts” (Monsell 159). Here the cultures can be seen side by side and audiences are able to glimpse the competing representations of the United States and China simultaneously.

The bedroom scene portrays the Nixons in a moment of overt vulnerability, again reinforcing the position that the opera has already established for the U.S. as a naïve, youthful nation that does not recognize itself as such. The Nixons share a romantic moment dancing in their bedroom before Pat’s homesickness and discomfort overwhelm her. Richard is likewise perturbed at the negative outcomes he feels his trip has had so far. While Pat pines for the comforts of home, Nixon finds himself reminiscing about the horrors of World War II, where he was deployed as a soldier in the U.S. Navy. He shares his near-death experiences during a storm with her, saying “I said goodbye to you then, Pat” (III.1.413), with Pat answering somewhat tiredly, “Did you?...You told me, dear.” (III.1.414, 426). Their repetitions of fear and their vivid memories of World War II emphasize their vulnerability and the degree to which they depend on each other. Nixon’s fear as he lies in bed and talks to his wife is all the more poignant
considering his status as the President of the world’s most powerful nation. Despite his position, he is vulnerable, dependent, and afraid. Nixon does not present the President’s fear as a sign of weakness; it is simply a remembrance, and a reminder of his humanity. Nixon’s vocal part, as a lyric baritone, further emphasizes his status as the everyman, a participant in the American dream and a symbol of the ability of individual American citizens to achieve vast personal success and influence.

Meanwhile Chairman Mao and Chiang Ch’ing become intimate in their segment of the dormitory. Their marriage is characterized as passionate in both affectionate and violent ways. When Mao first arrives, he and Chiang dance sensuously near their bed before climbing into it together. However, after several minutes of reminiscing, Mao becomes violent toward Chiang and hostile at her outspokenness, and chokes her with his hand. She then lies in bed silently, singing repeatedly, “I can keep still, I can say nothing for a while…Nothing I fear has ever harmed me” (III.1.603-618). Mao kisses her but then shoves her away angrily again. The depiction of Mao in this scene is particularly volatile; he appears to be overwhelmed by his assorted responsibilities and desires. Chiang, on the other hand, acts very sensual and womanly, and her responses to Mao are alternately timid and eager. Nixon further cements Chiang as an exotic, sexual Chinese woman by casting her as a coloratura soprano. Chiang’s voice is light and fluid, often trilling over the top of Mao’s passages, lending eroticism and beauty to his monologues. Their vocal arrangement emphasizes Mao’s stability, and his status as the dominant member of their relationship, while Chiang’s part complements his, reiterating her subordination to him.

The beds are set up on stage in such a manner that the actors can come and go between them, with an illusion of moveable, invisible walls. From time to time Kissinger or Chou appear,
and both are able to interact with the couples and influence them, linking them together musically in as many as four voices. However, even though the two couples overlap during their singing at times, they appear unable to hear each other. At one particularly significant moment, Chiang repeats her “I can keep still” chorus while Richard continues to confess his fears from World War II. Chiang sings “Nothing I fear has ever harmed me” while Richard tells of the aftermath of the storm he had told Pat about before, explaining how he saw “a thousand coconuts like mandrill’s heads or native masks, milk oozing from their broken husks, the flooded rib of a palm frond where several centipedes had drowned” (III.1.665-673). Chiang and Richard have arrived at similar conclusions: their fears are surmountable and have not injured them. However, the natures of these discoveries are different because Chiang has an internal peace that enables her to keep still and overcome her fears, whereas Nixon sings of overcoming physical dangers not through inner peace but through military victory and individual perseverance. Thus, their conclusions are both alike and different, simultaneously overcoming and reinforcing the division between them.

Differences between the United States and China are prevalent in this scene as the domestic aspects of each relationship are displayed. To the Western eye, the most notable feature of the Mao couple’s relationship is their excessive sexuality. Chiang Ch’ing seduces Mao by touching him with her legs—she wears red high-heeled shoes—and singing to him in coloratura style (Figure 1). She and Mao flirt with one another, and when Mao suddenly becomes angry, she responds by allowing him to choke her and place her on the bed, where she lies down and waits for him to calm down. Her seduction of and submission to Mao is sharply contrasted by Pat’s responses to Nixon. Pat is irritable because of her discomfort in China and she fails to sympathize with Nixon when he reminisces about the War. The differences in the couple’s
dynamic can be read as a difference in Western and Eastern attitudes. The Americans are self-absorbed and even while they interact, they fail to truly connect. Mao and Chiang are more in sync because of Chiang’s submission, a somewhat stereotypical Western portrayal of the East that allows the woman to have a voice, but only to use that voice to profess her willingness to defer to her husband’s authority.

Notably, neither couple appears to be stronger than or superior to the other. Rather, the different dynamics are indicative of the private sides of Eastern and Western life, which are just as different as the public sides. Chiang glories in her ability to satisfy her husband’s wishes through deference and respect. Pat wants her husband to confide in her and tell her things he has not told her before, proving that she is able to assert her own voice and granting her power in her marriage. When he begins to describe his system for winning at poker, Pat eagerly encourages Richard, “Tell me more” (III.1.774-5). Their very core ideologies are apparent, and neither is stronger or greater than the other. By staging them side by side in wall-less rooms, Sellars enables audiences to envision the differences and reflect on their implications: these couples
have many outward differences, and yet they are all in the same room, participating in the same musical quartet. The possibility for common ground between them is heavily emphasized by the staging and orchestration of this scene, highlighting the cultural similarities that Sellars and Adams intend the opera to communicate.

By separating the Chinese and American couples by artificial walls, Nixon offers a portrait of both couples that encourages comparisons. There are many factors that make the couples alike. Neither is perfectly happy in this scene, and both are afraid for the prosperity of the countries they lead. Both men have responsibilities that weigh on them, and their wives respond to this, with Pat offering support through her interlocution and Chiang through her deferential silence. They also interact similarly at first, with both couples dancing together and romancing each other, and with both couples remembering the earlier days of their courtships. Nixon and Pat discuss their first apartment together, when Pat tells Nixon, “I squeezed your paycheck ‘til it screamed” (III.1.261-3) and Nixon answering, “You made that place a home” (272-4). Meanwhile, a seductively dancing Mao reminds Chiang, “We did this once before…It was the time that tasty little starlet came to infiltrate my headquarters” (III.1.312-319). The language they use is pointedly Westernized—Chiang’s language is sexualized (“tasty little starlet”) and seductive (“infiltrate my headquarters”)—but is intended to further bridge the gap between the cultures. While the Chinese couple’s relationship is more overtly sexual, both couples are loving and romantic during this moment. Sellars further highlights their similarities when both men remember wars, with Nixon’s remembrances of World War II paralleled against Mao’s and Chou’s recollections. Nixon practically screams at its audiences that these cultures have ways to share common links, even if no one onstage acknowledges it.
The similarities observable in this scene are all the more significant when one considers that neither couple notices them. The invisible walls prevent real interaction between the two sides. This mirrors the inability of capitalism to understand communism, and vice versa. While both sides in the opera derive satisfaction from their immersion into these systems, *Nixon* asserts that the Chinese find freedom in their community, while the Americans assert freedom in their independence. Sellars sets the stage so that the audience cannot ignore the parallels the way the characters can. Thus the focus of the opera shifts from the differences and misunderstandings between the two cultures to the possibility for connection and openness, a possibility mirrored by staging and musical decisions during Act III.

“Across an Ocean of Distrust”: Western Interference into Eastern Ideals

Although *Nixon* intends to depict the cultural connections between the United States and China, it cannot do so without overlooking the fact that a desire for connection comes only from the Americans. Maoist China “kept a more isolated foreign policy,” while the “United States fancied itself a world power spreading its ideals to needy nations” (Johnson 163). In keeping with the ideology of American Exceptionalism that sees the United States strive for intimacy with other countries as a means of reinforcing its own political ideologies, *Nixon* in fact demonstrates that U.S. diplomacy has a decidedly imperialistic air. In the opera, the Nixons insert themselves into Chinese cultural narratives, thereby westernizing the narratives. *Nixon* demonstrates that Western insertion in the East compromises Eastern values, and is not particularly welcome, even though it may be well-intentioned. Chinese resistance to the Nixons’ interference implies that the Chinese do not value diplomatic connection in the same way
Americans do, undermining the popular notion that U.S. interference is desired and welcomed by other nations.

While the relationship between the United States and China is not imperial in that either rules over the other, Nixon does present the societies as linked in a manner that indicates the U.S.’s attempt at imperialism. Said quotes Michael Doyle’s definition of empire as “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence” (Introduction). It is in this sense that the relations between the United States and China can be considered of an imperial nature. While neither rules the other, there is an informal effort to do so exhibited by the United States, particularly during the staging of the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* in Act 2, that serves as a catalyst for the opera’s deeper implications. The United States sees China as in need of its capitalist and democratic intervention as demonstrated by their interference in the ballet, but China neither shares this belief nor demonstrates any such need. Thus, in addition to revealing the characters of Nixon and Pat, the ballet also implicitly suggests that the interference of the United States in the West is unwanted, unnecessary, and misguided. This sentiment is also reinforced in other moments of the opera, such as Chairman Mao’s somewhat condescending yet good-natured compliments of Nixon’s book in Act I and Pat’s moving naivety as she tours China in Act II—a naivety that has been called “really American” by the opera’s first Nixon, James Maddalena (Monsell 156). Thus, although the Nixons enter China with the expressed goal of forging a friendship, they do so by interjecting their own ideologies into Chinese culture in an implicit attempt at imperial control.

There are several notable scenes in the opera when Americans attempt to understand the Chinese through an American cultural lens and come up short. While Richard Nixon handles
issues of diplomacy, Pat embarks on a tour of China’s domestic and social spheres, interacting with factory workers and children in a playground, before singing her acclaimed “This is prophetic” aria. In this aria, Pat claims she has seen the future of the United States in the details of China she witnesses here; her understanding of China is self-reflexive and shows that she understands China through the lens of her own life experiences. In addition to Pat’s admiration of the glass elephant statuette as a symbol of her party, she also claims to identify with the impoverished Chinese she meets because she “comes from a poor family” (II.1.118-22). She envisions a future in which “luxury dissolves into the atmosphere like a perfume…and everywhere the simple virtues root and branch and leaf and flower” (II.1.432-46), again showing her willingness to sympathize with Chinese Communist values as she perceives them. She concludes her aria with the declaration: “Bless this union with all its might, let it remain inviolate” (II.1. 590-3). Thus Pat indicates a strong desire for friendship, a friendship which for her is based on her perceiving a mutuality of interests and cultures between the U.S. and China. Unlike her husband, Pat’s sympathy for the Chinese and her desire for peace are purely social, and are not informed by politics. She identifies with them because she recognizes herself in them.

Pat takes this recognition a step further in Act II Scene 2, when she and her husband attend a production of Madame Mao’s ballet, The Red Detachment of Women. In the ballet, which Madame Mao wrote as a “vehicle to depict women’s struggles” (Daines 18), a young woman is raped and beaten by the man for whom she works. While this ballet in the opera is based on an actual ballet by the same name, Nixon does not reproduce that ballet but instead offers an imitation of it that is used for the purpose of revealing the character of the Americans. Briefly, the ballet scene unfolds in a dreamlike fashion, with Pat, Nixon, and Madame Mao all
interfering in the action, and with the same actor who plays Kissinger acting as the primary
villain—a resemblance which the Nixons somewhat drily note, as Kissinger’s womanizing ways
are fodder for humor throughout the opera. The scene begins with girl dancers working in the
fields, when they are interrupted by the slave-driver/Kissinger (called Lao Szu), who attacks one
of the girls (called Ching-hua) with a whip. He beats her until she is finally able to steal his whip
and escape. All action is set against a choral backdrop of “Hate Tyranny!” The scene changes
and the dancing women return, chased by Chinese troops, all eager to capture the escaped Ching-
hua. She is eventually recaptured and beaten until she loses consciousness, at which point a
visibly disturbed Pat intervenes, despite her husband’s protests that “It’s just a play” (II.2.295-6).
The ballet goes on, with a Party Representative coming and showing kindness to Ching-hua. She
joins the Red Women’s Militia in the People’s Army as a response to the tyranny of her former
captors and the kindness of the Red Party—that is, Mao’s party. She later returns with other
dancers to confront her former captors, and when she sees Lao Szu again she shoots him with her
pistol at the urging of Madame Mao (also known as Chiang Ch’ing). Chiang Ch’ing then sings
the famed “I am the wife of Mao Tsetung” aria, professing her worth and value to the Red Party.
Meanwhile Richard Nixon attempts financially assist one of the guards by pressing money into
his hand, and this action causes the guard to be rejected by Madame Mao for having given in to
Western values.

As soon as the Americans interrupt the ballet, the narrative alters and becomes about the
American interference, thus altering the focus of the narrative itself so that it is about the United
States instead of China. The depiction in Nixon is characteristic of common Western depictions
of the East, which involve “the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric
peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about flogging or death or extended punishment being
required when ‘they’ misbehaved or became rebellious, because ‘they’ mainly understood force or violence best” (Introduction). In the opera, the Nixons cannot let the Chinese cultural narrative unfold undisturbed; they are both compelled to attempt to alter the narrative. Pat actively resists the staged beating of the Chinese woman, while Richard tries to thwart her attempts at interference because he acknowledges that it is “only” a drama. He, however, later interferes in a different way by financially supporting the Women’s Militia when he sees potential in the Chinese militiaman and offers him his spare pocket change. Richard’s actions separate the militiaman from his culture and his people, as they reject him after he accepts the offering, suggesting that U.S. interference is unwanted.

Most critics agree that this scene derives its importance primarily from the interference of the Nixons in the Chinese cultural narrative. Said writes that “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism” (Introduction). The Nixons unwittingly commandeer the Chinese narrative, in what may be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to exert their dominance. When the Nixons intercede in the ballet, they make the narrative a vehicle that promotes Western values rather than the Eastern values it is meant to convey. Pat’s identification with Ching-hua is symbolic of her desire to identify with the Chinese people; indeed, Pat’s “vision of Sino-American political harmony is more profound and compelling than any of those put forward by the male characters” (Daines 14). While Pat identifies with the abused young woman, Richard does not sympathize with her—he attempts to prevent Pat’s intercession—and instead sees openings for the United States to influence China economically. He is later seen giving his spare change to another dancer, Militia leader Hung Chang-Ching (Daines 28). Hung’s entrance into business with the Westerner unseats him as a symbol of Communist values; the West has compromised his ideals (29). Thus
the ballet serves as a literal and metaphorical representation of the U.S. interfering in Maoist China in such a manner that it alters the Chinese way of life.

Although Nixon’s offer of financial support for the Militia man is well-intended, the opera represents his interference as an obstacle to China’s prosperity rather than a catalyst for it. Director Peter Sellars has stated that Madame Mao’s angry response to this exchange is meant to indicate her disapproval “because she is trying to create something that is exclusively Chinese” and the Militia man has compromised that by accepting Western influences (qtd. in Daines 29). I further posit that such interference was unwanted in Maoist China, where the Chinese were just opening up to the idea of friendship with the U.S. and had only common enmity with the Soviet Union as grounds for their new relationship (MacMillan xx). Such a depiction presents U.S. interference as unwanted and unhelpful, which is decidedly different from the post-war sentiments that saw the U.S. believing “we are number one, we are bound to lead, we stand for freedom and order, and so on” (Said Introduction). Furthermore, it reinforced the U.S.’s position as outside of China—and therefore, able to influence it—rather than in partnership with China. By undermining notions that U.S. imperialism is desirable, Adams and Sellars reimagine the West’s place in the East’s narrative. In Nixon, U.S. Americans literally shove their way into a narrative that is not meant to involve them, enacting changes that are only positive when viewed through a Western lens.

While the Nixons represent American values—capitalism, individualism, democracy—Madame Mao acts as a representative of Red Chinese values. Her characterization is purposefully unlike that of either of the Nixons, demanding that audiences view her as on a different plane from her American counterparts. In her “I am the wife” aria, she exhibits independence and strength, both as a woman and as a Chinese, declaring, “I cut my teeth upon
the land and when I walked my feet were bound on revolution” (II.2.840-6). This play on the binding of women’s feet demonstrates that she derives personal strength from weakness and sacrifice. Of her own role in the revolution, she sings, “Let me be a grain of sand in heaven’s eye and I shall taste eternal joy” (II.2.864-70). By identifying herself as organically linked to the land—that is, China—and aspiring to a place of anonymity as a “grain of sand,” Chiang-Ch’ing displays an Eastern value system—or at least, a value system that the West attributes to the East. She desires a revolution that is both grounded in Eastern values and supported by Eastern efforts, established on that land and enacted by that population. Where the U.S. values capitalism and individualism, Chiang-Ch’ing values cooperation and unity, with anonymity as her ultimate goal.

An important implication of the insertion of the West into the East’s narrative is that Western presence in the East is not only unwanted but also antagonistic to the East’s overall goals and principles. Because the two countries have such different ideologies, the democratic and capitalist values that the U.S. attempts to promote are unsuitable to the cultural value systems already established in China. Regardless of the West’s good intentions—and it can indeed be proposed that at least Pat Nixon has pure intentions in her interference in Nixon—the bottom line is that such actions are nonetheless imperialist in their privileging of the West over the East. While Nixon indeed reduces Maoist Chinese cultural principles to a Western facsimile that is best understood through comparisons, it does so while maintaining a self-reflexive knowledge that its efforts at understanding that culture are limited at best. Furthermore, Nixon shows Chinese actors both accepting Western assistance and rejecting it—while the Militia man accepts Nixon’s money, the dancers reject Pat’s offers of help. This shows that there is no singular Chinese response to the U.S.’s cultural influence, and that such influence is so forceful that it may be impossible to resist completely. As Said writes in Culture and Imperialism, “Partly
because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (Introduction). As the tenuous friendship between the United States and China began, Nixon suggests that the complicated interactions between East and West are manifestations of each culture’s attempt to cope with their new relationship. I further argue that this scene implicitly suggests that this friendship is desired only by the United States, as a participant in the overall American goal of spreading democracy, while China is resistant to their intrusion and unwilling to accept the U.S.’s insertion into its cultural narrative.

“This is Prophetic”: Nixon in China’s Imperialism

An important implication of Nixon’s portrayal of the United States’ relationship to China is its challenges to the United States’ diplomatic attitudes. While the U.S. tends to approach other cultures as in need of its intervention and influence, Nixon complicates that perspective. It offers a portrait of the East that is strong and established in its own right, even portraying the U.S. as inexperienced and naïve in comparison. Furthermore, it sees attempts at friendship as almost entirely one-sided, with the United States inserting itself into the Chinese landscape, attempting to commandeer and influence its cultural narratives, and making strides toward understanding Chinese culture that ultimately serve as reiterations of American ideologies. Nixon presents the two countries as mutually misunderstanding one another, with Act 3 encouraging audiences to focus on similarities rather than differences. However, I posit that the cultural conflicts that arise in the opera’s earlier acts that ought not to be ignored, as they illuminate problems with U.S. foreign policy that are often taken for granted. Most notably, Nixon highlights the tendency of U.S. diplomacy to double as an attempt to control and influence other cultures, all under the
guise of spreading democracy. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes that the American government promulgates rhetoric of “self-congratulation, unconcealed triumphalism, [and] grave proclamations of responsibility” (Introduction). Such an attitude is apparent as the Nixons offer their interference in Chinese culture confidently and graciously, taking for granted that American values are wanted. They quite literally comandeer Chinese cultural narratives, proving that their efforts at diplomacy actually conceal imperialistic ambitions.

I propose that *Nixon* presents not just an Orientalism—a simplification of Oriental culture to set against American identity—but an Occidentalism, as well. Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington borrow the term “Occidentalism” from James Carrier to “refer to the fact that anthropologists’ views of the West are often both central to their exposition of the other and tend to be ‘naïve and commonsensical’” (637). They propose that Occidentalism “gets both us and them wrong” by inventing our own culture just as reductively as we have other cultures (638). I argue that *Nixon*’s approach to U.S. foreign policy is Occidental in that it attempts to reduce that policy to its optimistic, positive roots while passing over its deeper, and less attractive, implications. While *Nixon* depicts a U.S. with pure diplomatic intentions, Chinese tensions against U.S. interference and the nonchalance with which the U.S. pervades the Chinese cultural narrative are too important to be ignored. I posit that these tensions in the opera do not simply indicate differences in culture, but rather ought to be read as the response to the U.S.’s imperialistic diplomatic efforts in nations where such interference is unwelcome. While the Nixons strive for friendship with China, they fail to acknowledge that their ideas of friendship are very different from what the Chinese have in mind. In the opera, while China’s desire for a relationship with the U.S. derived from their hope to keep peace in the East and nothing more, the U.S. took the visit as an opportunity to promote Western values in China. Although
Exceptionalist ideologies dictate that Americans have a special role in the world to spread democracy abroad, *Nixon* helps illustrate how unrealistic that belief truly is.

*Nixon* enables audiences to question the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy without challenging the good intentions of the U.S., making it an important tool for creating an avenue to discuss that policy. It also suggests that imperialism—the desire to influence other countries in economic, social, or political ways—still very much drives U.S. policy, although it is justified by ideologies of Exceptionalism and is therefore widely seen as permissible. This situation is apparent in *Nixon in China* when the U.S. cannot truly achieve friendship with China because each intends friendship to mean different things. Considering *Nixon* as a juxtaposition of good intentions with imperialistic tendencies in U.S. foreign policy opens up an avenue for more exploration of the U.S.’s relationships with other nations. Because different ideological models are in place, a more productive foreign policy would take these ideologies into account, rather than forcing U.S. value systems into cultures where they do not translate. This perhaps calls for a new model for foreign relations, one that recognizes and respects other nations rather than attempting to force assimilation.
CHAPTER 2: DOCTOR ATOMIC AND EXCEPTIONALISM IN A POST-9/11 UNITED STATES

“First of all, let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls.”

-Doctor Atomic, Act I, Scene 1

Critical responses to Doctor Atomic tend to have a singular focus: it is a retelling of the Faust legend updated to apply to the atomic age. This, of course, is in keeping with the narrative form that most operas take: operas tend to retell known narratives rather than creating new ones, a tactic that librettist Peter Sellars describes as a retelling of myth that “enables us to pose the right questions because we already know the ending” (Cohen 84). One reviewer even billed the opera “The Damnation of Doctor Atomic,” writing that the idea for the opera came from the head of the San Francisco Opera, Pamela Rosenberg, who “imagined an ‘American Faust’ in Oppie” (Cohen 84). Another reviewer, Karlyn Ward, who gave a pre-opera lecture before the San Francisco premiere, called the legends similar while noting that in Doctor Atomic, “both the situation and the character are much more complex than the Faust story” (Ward 51). Ward goes on to explain the legend of Faust, an ordinary man who signs an agreement with Mephistopheles in order to “experience complete satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the world” (53), but is eventually driven by his lusts to ignore all compassion, even until the death of his lover. He embraces the unnatural and as a result, “he misses the opportunity to become conscious of the “other” in himself, the whole inner world, including the feminine and the diabolical masculine” (54). The comparisons are not difficult to notice: Oppie fails to reconcile his interiority with his exteriority, chases after a singular goal, and later comes to regret his decision because he understands its consequences. Thus there are clear echoes of the Faust legend in Doctor Atomic.

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2 This is a pun on the name of the well-known opera The Damnation of Doctor Faust by Berlioz.
However, these critical responses fail to recognize that the 2005 opera adapts more than just a legend; it adapts the Manhattan Project, an event in United States history that has deeply influenced global politics and raised the stakes of national enmity in the twentieth century and thereafter. Thus, its legend is not simply one of literary origin—though comparisons to the Faust legend are not inaccurate—but one of political and historical origin, as well. While Ward alludes to this when she states that the *Doctor Atomic* legend is more complex than Faust, I take this a step further by exploring the representative nature of its characters and themes. It is important to note that Doctor Atomic does not maintain a static position examining or retelling one legend or one historical moment. It is rather a legend of modern history that unpacks events separated perhaps by time and geography but certainly by little else. Critic Mitchell Cohen points out that *Doctor Atomic* is reactionary: it responds not simply to the war it describes but to other wars that are comparable for the Exceptionalist ideologies that influence them: “Did you know that Baghdad is in Vietnam? And that Vietnam is not far from Los Alamos? This is the sense in which *Doctor Atomic* is reactionary” (79). In particular, I propose that *Doctor Atomic* responds to the myth of American Exceptionalism, a popular ideology that assumes that the United States is a globally and historically unique country with a privileged role in the world. *Doctor Atomic* is, in this sense, a depiction of the modern-day myth of twentieth-century America: a myth that is “powerful because it has the ability to remain invisible while influencing basic perceptions of the world” (Esch 30). In *Doctor Atomic*, Adams and Sellars do the important work of extracting this myth and deconstructing it as part of a larger cultural artifact of the nuclear age.

In this chapter, I examine three aspects of American Exceptionalism that *Doctor Atomic* challenges. First, I explore its treatment of the United States as a world policing figure perpetually presented as good and opposed to an inherently bad other. Next, I inspect the opera’s
deconstruction of the division between public and private that creates an illusion of absolute wisdom and authority within the U.S. government. Finally, I address the opera’s treatment of the past and the present, challenging the historical amnesia that characterizes Exceptionalism. I propose that Doctor Atomic is not only a retelling of literary legend in historical terms but also a new imagining of American Exceptionalism that utilizes historical events in the generative, contradictory space of the Manhattan project. The opera presents the Manhattan Project as being within the country and yet outside it, within the war and yet resisting it, splitting an atom and yet creating a bomb.

The particular historical moment in which Doctor Atomic was written and produced was one fraught with tensions. In the wake of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center by the Islamic radical terrorist group Al Qaeda, and the subsequent War on Terror, Americans entertained “fantasies of global omnipotence…coinciding with nightmares of impending attack” (McClintock 51). That is, the United States entered into a state of paranoia: “for it is only in paranoia that one finds simultaneously and in such condensed form both deliriums of absolute power and forebodings of perpetual threat” (51). The United States responded to the attack from Al Qaeda, a group that is not affiliated with any individual nation, by attacking Iraq and Afghanistan. Significantly, these attacks were justified with numerous claims of American Exceptionalism, including assertions that “America’s special role was to lead and transform the world by example” (Esch 268), and depictions of Americans in post-9/11 America “as a special, united people suffering a uniquely obscene tragedy” (373). Furthermore, the war was also justified by claims of impending threats to this country that were not shared with the public and were later “proved to be dubious intelligence” (Rojecki 78). Thus the War on
Terror was met with a mixture of responses, ranging from pride and affirmation to doubt and resistance.

This moment also instigated a renewed interest in the relationship between the citizen and the nation due to a fear of invasion by foreigners. Citizens expected protection and retribution from the nation, while the nation demanded blind trust from the citizen. Once more, the parallels between *Doctor Atomic* and the environment that produced it are remarkably clear. Just as the scientists in *Doctor Atomic* were called on by their superiors to trust the government blindly in its decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan, so also were American citizens told by political rhetoricians that they ought to believe the government had authority to act in the War on Terror without asking for rationale. Such a call for blind obedience did not sit well with all its citizens, and neither did it satisfy all the scientists in the opera. Regarding these sentiments Cohen points out that Dick Cheney “was not wrong to say that citizens can’t have the same information as leaders in wartime. He just doesn’t understand that a democratic citizenry must have reasons to give leaders the benefits of a doubt rather than reasons to doubt everything they do” (83). Cheney’s rhetoric at that time was almost identical to that of General Groves and Oppie in *Doctor Atomic*, both of whom point out that the citizens cannot expect to know everything the government knows. However, Oppie discontinues his belief in this principle by the end of the opera, when he realizes that perhaps the government has not been as trustworthy as he formerly believed. Again, the comparison elicits a strong message: the United States failed to respect the citizen’s role in the national identity.

While previous readings tend to fixate on *Doctor Atomic* as a political retelling of the Faust legend, it is far more important to acknowledge the opera’s treatment of America’s identity and the changes that identity has undergone historically, both on a national and a global scale.
Infused with ideals of American Exceptionalism and the historical context of the paranoia-driven War on Terror, the events of the opera ought to be examined as a critique of the myth of the presumed absolute authority and good of the United States government. I propose that *Doctor Atomic* rejects the myth of American Exceptionalism by identifying and deconstructing its weaknesses. Specifically, the opera challenges notions of dependence and independence, pointing out how a denial of one part of the self results in the failure to act morally or rationally. Oppie embodies this failure, but I argue that the opera also illuminates this power imbalance in citizen and nation, interior and exterior, and self and other. By reacting to past events, *Doctor Atomic* also challenges the temporal scope of myth: a mythical representation of war can represent both its own events and all similar events, layered historically over one another. When asked to consider *Doctor Atomic* as a deconstructed myth of U.S. Exceptionalism, audiences see how unresolved fears and conflicts from the past persist into the present in the form of new wars and new enemies, resulting in the constant perception of danger. Thus, the opera illuminates how violence characterizes U.S. cultural identity, the drastic consequences of which include mass destruction (as the opera illustrates) and general paranoia—we created the danger we fear.

In the close readings that follow, I analyze the *Doctor Atomic* myth by examining the manner in which it presents the United States as a country misguided and ignorant of its own violent history. Firstly, I explore its treatment of the enemy. While the enemy is conspicuously absent in the opera, it is essential to a U.S. identity that forms against enemies. Furthermore, the characters attempt to justify their violence so that they appear to be acting morally, with no thought of the enemy. Next, I consider the opera’s treatment of the border between interiority and exteriority—that is, public and private spaces. Excessive tension between the government and the citizen reveals that both sides are interdependent, but the government fails to
acknowledge its dependence on citizens, leading to the aforementioned power imbalance. Finally, I illuminate the opera’s implicit comparisons between the Second World War and the War on Terror, which illustrate how Exceptionalism distorts history. In this opera, the U.S. is out of balance in all its relationships, fixating on the exercise of its own violence rather than reacting appropriately to its actual circumstances. The opera utilizes the Manhattan project as one historical space where the myth of American Exceptionalism leads to unjustifiable violence, but I further posit that Adams and Sellars suggest that this is a long-standing pattern in U.S. foreign policy, one in which the U.S. uses popular ideologies to reinforce its position of power. Ultimately, my reading of the opera shows that the splitting of the atom—the permanent and irrevocable act against nature—is a self-identifying performative act that removes the possibility for redemption in the retelling of Faustian legend that is Doctor Atomic.

**U.S. as World Policing Agent**

*Doctor Atomic* depicts U.S. foreign policy as governed not by morality but by the myth of American Exceptionalism. It also implicitly suggests that such faulty principles still guide foreign policy today in the War on Terror. While political leaders often treat the U.S. as a global force of good and authority, *Doctor Atomic* challenges such views by illuminating ways in which the U.S. fails to live up to that standard. One important way that *Doctor Atomic* addresses the myth of Exceptionalism is by depicting the U.S.’s response to its enemies as inconsistent or inappropriate. It also questions the moral justifiability of the U.S.’s motivation to drop the atomic bomb. Finally the opera suggests the U.S.’s ignorance toward its enemies, destabilizing the notion that it is equipped and qualified to be a global leader.
The opera acknowledges the volatility of the enemy in *Doctor Atomic* when Wilson reads a petition from the scientists to the president. The petition addresses the scientists’ concerns over whether using the bomb could be justified:

“Until recently we have had to fear that in this war the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs, and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted, and we feel impelled to say what follows…” (Sellars 7)

Here Wilson points to the removal of Germany as a threat, which the scientists expected would mean the end of their involvement in the project, as the primary threat against which they worked had been defused. He goes on to say:

“…Atomic bombs may well be effective warfare. But attacks on Japan cannot be justified until we make clear the terms of peace
and give them a chance
to surrender.” (Sellars 7)

In this depiction, Wilson, who within the opera may be considered a representative of the ordinary American citizen working along with the other scientists, sees threats from one nation as different from the threat of another. An attack against Germany would have been justified because the United States had reason to believe Germany was preparing a similar attack against it. To alter the target to Japan and to attack without attempting to negotiate was, in the opinion of the scientists, not justifiable. Further, the language within the petition implies that the scientists see the United States as absolutely good, and they want to maintain this image by justifying any violent actions the military takes. Their priority is to do what is justifiable rather than what is moral, revealing their underlying assumption that the United States must be moral because it is exceptional. They also do not question whether the U.S. has authority to act in this circumstance, as this authority is presumed. In this way, the citizens in Doctor Atomic prove they see the United States as a global policing agent, but they also acknowledge a higher moral system to which the United States must adhere.

While the citizens conceptualize the U.S. as a member of a nuanced global society, the government agents see the U.S. as exceptional and outside of or above the world’s nameless “others.” I posit that the opera depicts the United States government, as represented by General Groves, as seeing only the existence of a threat and not regarding the circumstances that distinguish one enemy from another. This reading is reinforced by the suggestion of even more possible enemies in Doctor Atomic. Cohen posits that Adams and Sellars manipulate history slightly so that the looming threat of the Soviet Union might be considered a third, covert enemy in the strike against Japan (82). For example, Groves mentions when discussing the urgency of
carrying out the test as scheduled, “The President of the United States/ is talking to Joe Stalin in the morning/ in Potsdam” (14). While Adams and Sellars perhaps exaggerate the urgency of the event when compared with the exact historical circumstances, this depiction deconstructs the Exceptionalism myth. Here Sellars and Adams emphasize that the United States views many countries and circumstances as threatening. Thus, as long as the U.S. senses danger, any use of violence is justified. By offering several distinct positions on the presumed “absolute good” of the United States in terms of its treatment of the “other,” Doctor Atomic destabilizes both the moral code and the notion of the U.S. as an adherent to it.

The opera also challenges the myth that the United States acts as a proponent of good by challenging its motives for dropping the atomic bomb. In Act 1, Doctor Atomic strongly implies that a primary reason for dropping the bomb is to send a message of the United States’ superiority to the enemy. In Act 1, Oppie is positioned as a representative of the U.S. government by acting as the compliant citizen who echoes that voice. He tells his colleagues:

“The Secretary of War concludes—
that we cannot give the Japanese
any warning;
that we should seek
to make a profound
psychological impression
on as many inhabitants
as possible.” (Sellars 10)

This treatment of the enemy focuses not on the enemy but on the U.S. nation. The government’s primary goal is not to destroy the enemy but rather to illustrate the power of the U.S. so that the
enemy and the U.S. citizenry will see the U.S. as powerful and strong. The goal stated here is not to avoid or end violence but to “make a profound psychological impression”—an impression that audience members may assume is intended to extend the reach of American Exceptionalism. The enemy, whoever it is, ought to know who is superior in this equation. There is a pattern in U.S. history that the opera reflects of attacking enemies before they can emerge and attack us. Thus the United States appears to equate exercises of violence with expressions of strength.

There is also a notably limited view of international relations in *Doctor Atomic*, challenging the notion that the United States is equipped to act as a world policing agent. The multiple enemies named in *Doctor Atomic* never appear in any fashion: never does the audience hear a letter from Japan and Germany, for example, or view a glimpse of their political goings-on while the bomb is being tested. While a voice is given to U.S. government authorities and citizens in the characters of the scientists and General Groves, audiences neither see nor hear the enemy. Ultimately, the enemy in *Doctor Atomic* does not exist in American global politics as an autonomous entity; the enemy exists only as an arbitrary place-filler against which the U.S. nation can form its cultural identity. The nation’s military actions are statements about itself, not the enemy; the U.S. asserts its power as an antidote to perpetual perceptions of threat.

I posit that this breakdown of the U.S.’s presumed authority as a policing agent also helps *Doctor Atomic* emphasize the way that the United States adheres not to a moral code but to a set of rules governed by its desire to demonstrate of its own Exceptionalism. Countries in the West have long had a tendency to define national identity through contrasts with an Oriental other. As Edward Said famously demonstrated, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself against the Orient as a sort of surrogate or even underground self” (Said 3). Said defines Orientalism as “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and
vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (5). The West’s treatment of the East therefore tells more about the West than it does the East. It is no new phenomenon that the West may act on its preformed notions of the East without any real action from the East being necessary. *Doctor Atomic* depicts U.S. cultural identity as having formed against an Oriental other whose characteristics it underestimates or ignores. In this way the actions the U.S. takes against its enemies are not indicative of the enemy but of itself. Thus the U.S. justifies its actions not with an absolute moral code, but rather with a misconception of itself in which it has absolute power and authority regardless of moral admissibility.

As the opera progresses, *Doctor Atomic* shows audiences how insupportable Exceptionalism is as a justification for the U.S.’s actions. *Doctor Atomic*’s plot is purposefully driven by what is *not* seen: the enemy is spoken of in such terms as to multiply and ultimately intensify it, and the government intentionally withholds its justifications for using the bomb from the scientists. Again in Act 1, Oppie responds to the worries of his team of scientists by claiming that the government has reasons for pursuing nuclear attacks against Japan that are unknowable to citizens, saying:

“I think it improper for a scientist to use his prestige as a platform for political pronouncements. The nation’s fate should be left in the hands
of the best men
in Washington.

They have the information which
we do not possess.” (Sellars 5)

This evokes comparisons to the sentiments described earlier in this paper from Dick Cheney and others who maintained that the private citizen need not be informed about the details that guide government actions during war times. The opera depicts blind trust of the government, or perhaps trust in invisible or imaginary reasons that the government must or ought to have, as the justification for citizens condoning violent military action. Within Doctor Atomic, American Exceptionalism—particularly the notion that the U.S. government is good and must be right—is revealed to be the primary justification for the actions the U.S. takes even though Exceptionalism does not stand up to scrutiny against the moral concerns of the scientists. Even Oppie, who takes a strong pro-government line through most of first act, dissolves into doubt of his own decisions and of the trustworthiness of the government in his acclaimed “Batter My Heart” aria in the Act 1 finale. This shift in Oppie’s sentiments is significant because it emphasizes the failure of the U.S. to measure up to the exceptional image it almost universally enjoys among its citizenry. Doctor Atomic clearly shows that professions of Exceptionalism are not valid justifications for the U.S.’s violent demonstrations of power.

In sum, Doctor Atomic illustrates how the United States’ foreign policy is governed by assumptions of its own unconditional justification rather than by rules of absolute good and right, rules which the Exceptionalism myth simultaneously espouses and defies. Additionally, Doctor Atomic implies comparisons between World War II and the War on Terror in terms of the assumption of a global policing role. Anne McClintock writes in her article “Paranoid Empire:
Specters from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib,” that the War on Terror is “not a real war, for ‘terror is not an identifiable enemy nor a strategic, real-world target” (51). As Doctor Atomic shows, the United States no longer needs a real enemy to have a war. President Bush was quoted as saying, “We must take the battle to the enemy and confront the worst threats before they emerge” by displaying “military strengths beyond challenge” (Patman 975). When Adams and Sellars deconstruct the enemy in Doctor Atomic and reveal it to be only hypothetical rather than actual, they show that the Exceptionalism myth makes it possible for the U.S. to go to war without having an real, visible enemy. There needs only to be the perception or fear of an enemy that drives military and political action. This point is clear in the opera because so many hypothetical enemies exist—Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union—and the singular military action that the United States takes when releasing the atomic bombs against Japan is essentially an expression of U.S. power and justification intended for any or all of them. In this way, Sellars and Adams stress that the nation requires an enemy so that it can assert Exceptionalism against that which it perceives as inferior or evil. Thus, Doctor Atomic shows that while the United States presents itself as a world policing force spreading good globally, the U.S. actually acts as a proponent of its own power, transmitting fear and violence but not moral good. Furthermore, this is a perpetual rather than a historical problem, as the same faulty logic that governed the U.S.’s treatment of the enemy in WWII persists now in the War on Terror.

Separation and Elevation of U.S. Government

In addition to deconstructing the myth of American Exceptionalism as a fantasy of the U.S. as absolutely good, Doctor Atomic also displaces borders between the interior and the exterior, public and private, and citizen and nation. I posit that in doing so the opera shows that
these are false binaries that allow the myth of the U.S.’s absolute power to perpetuate. *Doctor Atomic* accomplishes this deconstruction in several ways, by dramatically, musically, and narratively undermining the artificial borders between the interiority of the home and the exteriority of the workplace established in Act 1. In Act 2 Scenes 2 and 3, an imaginary border divides private and public spaces, but is crossed both physically and musically.

In Act 1 Scene 1, we see the physicists working on the bomb begin by discussing their discontent with the direction that the project has taken. Discussions among the scientists establish that while developing weapons in a race with Germany for nuclear arms, the project seemed highly vital to the future of the western world. However, after Germany’s surrender, the scientists were not utterly convinced that Japan posed a threat requiring nuclear warfare. While Edward Teller and others confess being opposed to the use of a nuclear weapon when it is not absolutely necessary, Oppie disagrees and tells the men that it is not their place to argue with a government that knows far more than they about the situation. However, later that night at home with his wife Kitty, Oppie expresses his anxiety in poetry and Kitty shares his sorrow. The next day the men prepare for the testing of the bomb and express nervousness over the inclement weather. Left alone, Oppie breaks down and sings his “Batter my heart” aria, revealing his secret feelings of shame and dissent.

As Act 2 Scene 2 opens, viewers see the separation of private and public disintegrate. The stage is divided in half, with the Oppenheimer home on one side and the testing site on the other. A red backdrop and a dissonant chorus lend a distinct turbulence to the scene. Here General Groves expresses his impatience with those members of the team who do not fully support the United States’ decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan. A storm howls outside and Oppie’s wife, Kitty, and her Native American nurse, Pasqualita, soothe the crying children
while the men discuss the imminent testing. Notably, the mere presence of Pasqualita, whose name suggests Mexican descent and the history of U.S. imperialistic expansion in the Southeast, implies permeability of borders around the United States. Thus, the scene already implicitly invites audiences to remember how easily the walls between the interior domesticity of the U.S. and the foreignness of the other can break down. Oppie’s personal turmoil comes to a head in Scene 3, when he rushes from the test site to his house, where his wife attempts to soothe him:

“Groves: The program has been plagued from the start
by the presence of certain scientists
of doubtful discretion and uncertain loyalty.
It was agreed in Washington
that nothing can be done
about dismissing these men
until after the bomb has actually been used,
or, at best, until after the test has been made.
Oppie: O yes, Time has returned;
now Time reigns absolute;
Groves: After some publicity concerning the weapon is out,
steps should be taken
to sever these scientists from the program
and to proceed with a general weeding out
of personnel no longer needed.
Oppie: …and with the hideous old man
the whole of his demoniac retinue
has returned,

Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears,

Afflictions, Nightmares, Rages and Neuroses.

Kitty: To keep the weakness secret,

To keep it secret

To deny it and break through.

In the dream of chieftains,

the corn distinct again in gold-white tuft-feathers.

The roads all paved, stony, savage;

the knocking in the chest resumed.

Your father has a passion for freedom

Rang and rang in the small boy’s head.” (Sellars 26-7)

This scene challenges the division between private and public. Significantly, Oppie only expresses his dissent to government policies in asides or in poetry; as we see here, he keeps his feelings that do not support using the bomb private. His wife, who appears onstage solely in the domestic space of the home, points out that his wavering is a “weakness” that he must conceal, reinforcing the power dynamics that see the U.S. as absolutely authoritative and unquestioningly good. As a representative of interiority in the opera, Kitty is the one who advises Oppie as he travels back and forth between interiority and exteriority, about what must remain private and what is admissible in public. Obviously Oppie’s role in his family is one of strength and provision, but Kitty plays a role just as significant when she advises Oppie and offers him consolation from his stress about the bomb. Thus, far from being separate, the interior and the
exterior, the private and the public, the home and the office, are in complete reliance upon one another; indeed, they must be so in order for either to maintain the illusion of separation.

This scene illustrates the artificial separation of the public from the private, when the audience can see the home and the workplace as two sides of the same stage, separated only by the illusion that they ought to be separated (Figure 2). While the stage is separated visually, its actors contribute to the same musical choruses; they are united vocally although they appear separated visually. Furthermore, mutual dependency between the interior—the home—and the exterior—the workplace—is visible here to the audience, though not necessarily to the actors. Without acknowledgment of their partnership, the two sides are out of balance. However, the division in staging proves that the relationship between the home and the workplace is not acknowledged within the existing ideology.

Figure 2. Kitty and Pasqualita sing in their living room; behind them, Oppie stands in the space between their home and the bomb testing site; behind him, the outlines of the soldiers at the bomb testing site are visible.
Furthermore, this scene also emphasizes the artificial separation of government from the citizen. As Groves harshly indicates, the individual citizens who disagree with the government’s authority are expendable. The irony here is palpable: there would be no bomb to test without the labor and sacrifice of these scientists, but now that Groves has the bomb he conveniently forgets the labor of the scientists responsible for it. While the citizen-scientists are aware of the government’s control over them, the government fails to recognize its dependence on them, without whom it would have no one to govern. Again, the formation of the national identity is against an “other,” but the government fails to recognize the individual value of that other or consider it in ways besides its relation as citizen. Thus, in its conception of its own identity, it is mistaken.

Unacknowledged mutual dependency applies to both binaries of public and private, and nation and citizen. As previously described, Groves fails to understand the way the nation depends upon the citizen, and Oppie fails to understand how his public life depends on his private life. Just as there is no self without the other, and no exterior without the interior, there is no nation without the citizen. However, the prosperity of the U.S. nation requires this false binary. The nation’s authority is self-justifying, as the power interplay between the scientists and the military suggests that neither side fully comprehends the degree to which they influence each other. In *Doctor Atomic*, an examination of these binary relationships and their areas of overlap and dependency is made possible when the opera’s staging constructs artificial borders at a time of low conflict—before the testing of the bomb—and deconstructs them as conflict heightens—at the testing. Although the opera’s action essentially turns on the splitting of an atom, this unnatural separation illuminates how other artificially divided binaries—the domestic and the foreign, the private and the public, the citizen and the nation—are not and cannot be separated.
And yet, in order to maintain power and the illusion of Exceptionalism, it is absolutely essential to U.S. prosperity that these artificial binaries persist.

In *Doctor Atomic*, the avenue through which the government maintains power is visible—the government’s power derives from its relationship to the citizen—and yet the government does not acknowledge this dependency. Thus, the opera illustrates a power structure in the United States in which the government relies on its power to reinforce itself, as power reproduces power. This relationship harkens to Louis Althusser’s conception of ideological State apparatuses, by which classes maintain conditions of separation and division of power. Althusser proposes that power is maintained in social classes when a society embraces “rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labor and…the rules of the order established by class domination” and then reproduces “its submission to the rules of the established order” (1485). In other words, when a society believes that a group should be in power and reproduces the conditions of that power, the group gains a form of power that is reinforced ideologically by its own power. Such is the power structure that *Doctor Atomic* recreates and deconstructs.

**An Historically Unique War on Terror**

Rich in symbolic irony and demonstrations of the fallibility of American Exceptionalism, *Doctor Atomic* ought to be seen as a political reimagining of the very identity of the United States, not only in a post-9/11 world, but in its historical global role. Such a reading is useful because it recognizes the opera as a response to its own political moment and invites several other compelling questions about the opera. The previous two sections have examined the opera’s responses to the United States’ assertions of power and analyzed their rhetorical meaning, concluding that *Doctor Atomic* responds to a tradition of American Exceptionalism that is driven
by a failure to see the enemy (the other) properly; it criticizes power structures that such a position creates both in a national identity and in a global position. Now, I propose several applications of the Doctor Atomic myth that make it a useful and potentially influential historical artifact representing the United States as a fluid, evolving entity.

One important implication of the opera is that it encourages audiences to rethink the role of time in U.S. history. While citizens tend to consider time as a linear progression wherein events move forward, the opera treats time as an entity that can be manipulated. In the Act 2 Scene 3 passage quoted above, Oppie sings, “Time has returned; now time reigns absolute.” This passage can be interpreted in several ways. He may be simply stating that, after living on the Manhattan Project in isolation for so many months, their work has ended so “time has returned” to bring them back to ordinary life. However, approaching the opera as a statement on the history of the United States leads me to make a somewhat different, and more telling, reading. The “return of time” is a recurrence of history; again, the U.S. has taken violent action against a weaker enemy, acting in a manner inconsistent with the actual threat at hand. In this sense, Doctor Atomic suggests that all wars are repetitions of the same singular violence, an arbitrary assertion of power. This stands in contrast to the myth of American Exceptionalism, in which Americans envision their circumstances as unique and exceptional rather than natural results of Western ideologies and the systemic violence they perpetuate. More specifically, Oppie questions that WWII was so unique that the atomic bomb was necessary. By extension, the audience is asked to question the necessity of the War on Terror.

Thus, Doctor Atomic defines time as a malleable substance rather than an ordering principle. I posit that time in Doctor Atomic is in fact palimpsestic, and the return of time is another etching on the stone of U.S. history. As military power overwhelms the scientists and the
testing of the bomb, to which the scientists no longer wish to contribute, rapidly approaches, the pattern to which this event contributes is evident. Such historical amnesia has always been a problem in U.S. politics. The government’s failure to disclose its reasoning is a phenomenon not isolated to the War on Terror or to World War II; it is rather the pattern of the twentieth-century American myth. Thus, the opera illuminates the overarching political patterns that characterize not just these but all events in U.S. history.

Several notable similarities exist between the War on Terror and Doctor Atomic. These similarities illustrate the nation’s ideologically reinforced structure of power and highlight the historically conditioned presence of such ideologies in U.S. cultural identity. Firstly, the opera acknowledges an historical tendency of citizens and government officials alike to treat the U.S. government as a force of global good, an attitude that was also prevalent in War on Terror rhetoric. As has already been mentioned, Oppie publically voices his trust in the United States as exemplary, good, and just in the opera’s opening act. He reprimands those of his coworkers who oppose the bombing, stating, “The nation’s fate should be left in the hands of the best men in Washington. They have the information which we do not possess” (Sellars 5). This implies the goodness of the politicians in Washington (the “best men”), their authority to make decisions that have global impact (the “nation’s fate should be left in [their] hands”), and their assumed pseudo-omniscience (“they have the information”). The striking similarities this attitude bears to President George W. Bush’s War on Terror rhetoric speaks for itself: “Ours is the cause of human dignity; freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind…Light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it” (qtd. in Esch 376). The United States overtly claims a position of good, with President Bush even telling a group of school children, “We can overcome evil…We’re good” (qtd. Bacevich and
Prodromou). This is the attitude that *Doctor Atomic*, through implied comparisons between the two wars, pushes audiences to question.

The opera’s tension of distrust between citizen and government also evokes the War on Terror. In the opera, the matter over which the sides were divided was the political justification for using the atomic bomb. In the War on Terror, the Bush Administration’s assertion that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction caused similar conflicts. While a UN investigation concluded that no WMDs were hidden in Iraq, the Bush administration insisted that it had evidence to supersede that report. A *New York Times* editorial from 2003 asserted that “Washington should share its evidence with the public” before going to war (qtd. in Rojecki 76), but the administration refused to do so. Instead, it used rhetoric that indicted those who did not support its decisions with “corrupt motives” (78): “[German and French Presidents] have not merely disagreed with U.S. policy; they have stoked anti-Americanism” (Powell qtd. in Rojecki 78). Thus, any position that contradicted U.S. military goals was smeared by the administration as anti-American, making those who disagree with the country essentially enemies of the country. In *Doctor Atomic*, Groves similarly complains about the scientists “of doubtful discretion and uncertain loyalty” who do not support dropping the bomb. The implications are the same: one’s good standing with the United States government depends on his or her agreement with and approval of government policies.

Additionally, the invisible, transferrable enemy in *Doctor Atomic* is extremely relevant to discussions of the War on Terror. As was previously established, the enemy in *Doctor Atomic* is both instable and invisible, lending it to easy comparisons with the enemy “terror.” Official rhetoric about the War on Terror “[reinforced] America’s primary victim status at the hands of a vaguely defined enemy” and “[made] it possible for military actions that are…offensive…to be
understood as retaliatory” (Esch 373). Thus, the fact that there was no real enemy, or that the identity of the enemy was more or less irrelevant, went largely unnoticed by much of the American populace. Anne McClintock describes the role of the enemy on the American psyche by stating, “The enemy is the abject of empire: the rejected from which we cannot part. And without the barbarians the legitimacy of empire vanishes like a disappearing phantom” (28). The United States forms its identity by resisting an enemy, and the threat of such an enemy was the impetus both for the use of nuclear weapons to end WWII and for the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan that began the War on Terror. In short, the circumstances that make the War on Terror seem so exceptional are actually not exceptional; in fact, they are repeated so often throughout U.S. history, as is so obviously illustrated by *Doctor Atomic*, that they may be considered essential to U.S. government operations.

These deliberate points of comparison illustrate how the myth of American Exceptionalism perpetuates the U.S.’s assertion of power and dominance by selectively forgetting the United States’ own history. While War on Terror rhetoric treated its cultural moment as exceptional, it could only do so by blindly ignoring the nation’s past. In fact, this instance of violence that is the War on Terror occurred not as an isolated incident but as a constant feature of U.S. history. The nation’s present circumstances can only be understood totally when held in comparison with the past, as members of the same history. To privilege the present by considering it exceptional while ignoring the past leads the U.S. to repeat its mistakes, at the expense of its global neighbors and its citizenry. When *Doctor Atomic* extracts time and examines its role in the American Exceptionalism myth, it enables audiences to recognize and acknowledge the past’s significant role in the maintenance of national power.
Implications of the Deconstructed Myth

By drawing the United States as unexceptional as well as imbalanced in its power dynamics, *Doctor Atomic* boldly suggests that the U.S. cultural identity has been formed by violence against arbitrary iterations of enmity. Thus the identity of “the enemy” is negated both as part of the opera’s narrative and as a figure in the overarching myth of American Exceptionalism. As a result, the most potent effects of violent military actions are directed not at the enemies of the United States but past them, reflecting back on the United States itself. These actions may then be read as performative expressions of U.S. cultural identity—assertions of dominance that are enacted because of the unfixed other but are not necessarily directed toward it, and the implications of which ultimately return to the self. The United States performs its violence just as *Doctor Atomic* performs its myth. Likewise, it observes its own violence as an expression of its identity, and persists in constant fear of retribution for that violence.

Finally, *Doctor Atomic* shows audiences what the performance of violence as an identity looks like. In the opera’s striking closing scene, when the scientists and military officials watch for the testing of the bomb, they gaze out at the audience. Mitchell Cohen quotes Adams as saying, “audience members should ‘gradually realize that they themselves are the bomb’” (81). The violence being enacted on the stage expands to incorporate its viewers. Therefore the United States—and the citizens who comprise it—have not simply created violence; they also embody violence. The tenets of American Exceptionalism that tend to regulate ideals of national identity in the majority of citizens are here indicted as equally responsible for the violent actions that perform that identity. Having removed the border between citizen and nation, and even the wall between actor and audience, there is but one entity, the United States, containing all the violence of a ticking bomb.
Another way that *Doctor Atomic* reinforces that U.S. violence is performative and self-reflexive is that it shows how the atomic bomb was intended to send a message about the identity of the United States to possible enemies, as well as to citizens. Violence is, in this context, synonymous with strength. In War on Terror rhetoric, President Bush stated, “As long as the United States of America is *determined* and *strong*, this will not be an age of terror” (qtd. in Esch 377, emphasis mine). As previously mentioned, characters in *Doctor Atomic* state that the goal of the bombs was “to make a profound psychological impression on as many inhabitants as possible” (Sellars 10). These statements have similar core sentiments: they imply that the United States desires to demonstrate its strength by enacting violence, both as a measure of reassurance to its own citizens and as a threat to non-citizens. However, such a tactic may send more and different messages than it intends. For instance, the war in Iraq was littered with scandals and charges of abuse, drawing a less-than-rosy portrait of the absolute good the country claimed to represent. However, even criticism of the War on Terror was drawn in an Exceptionalist light: “There’s something about our venture into Iraq that is inspiringly, painfully, embarrassingly, and quintessentially American. No other nation would have been hopeful enough to try to evangelize for democracy across the Middle East” (Brooks qtd. in Rojecki 67). Perceptions of the war ranged from “disturbing” and “wounding” to “well-intentioned” and “moral[ly] exemplar[y]”(67, 68). However, few would argue in the wake of that long and expensive war that it indicated the *strength* of its purveyor in a moral sense.

The political myth that *Doctor Atomic* tells is in many ways a response to the historically reinforced and repeated violent identity that the United States enacts upon itself and its citizenry. It illustrates how unresolved fears from the past persist into the present in the form of new wars and enemies, and in the constant perception of danger—what McClintock calls a “paranoid
empire.” Furthermore, it implicates the United States in creating, participating in, and unjustly defending violence that ultimately reveals its own corruption. By setting up an unstable U.S. national identity that denies half of itself, the opera utilizes the splitting of an atom as a potent metaphor for the denial of the complicity of private citizens in global violence. *Doctor Atomic* also enables its own narrative to be applied as a palimpsest to the history of United States international relations, revealing a devastating pattern of self-promotion through violent destruction. Finally, it allows a new reading of U.S. history that sees violence as an essential piece of national identity—indeed, a piece projected onto the very body of the audience—thus refusing to allow the illusion of separation between citizen and nation or domestic and foreign to excuse its indiscriminate violence.

What is striking about this reading is its stark finality—its elimination of the possibility of redemption. Faust and Oppie can both repent of their acts of violence and their transgressions against their lives’ natural balances, but how can the United States accomplish this? The action of tearing apart an atom—violent, destructive, and permanent—is written into its identity. To withdraw from such self-identifying violence would be impossible, not only because it is part of a cycle of self-reinforcing power but also because it is written onto the nation’s history not as one incident but as part of a pattern of self-defining, destructive actions that have long characterized U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps, contrary to Sellars’s profession, the narrative’s ending is one that we in fact do not already know: the vision of the audience as the bomb at the end of the opera may signify a loss of control. The power structures in which we exist propel us forward, driven not by civic participation but rather by the ideologies that established them. Even if the audience should decry the use of violence against unknown enemies, *Doctor Atomic*
suggests that, within the existing power structures, the desires of the citizen may not make any difference at all.
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS

In Dee Brown’s well-known Indian history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Brown explains that U.S. history tends to limit itself to a Western perspective. He writes, “Americans who have always looked westward when reading about this period should read this book facing eastward” (xviii). Brown invites his readers to see U.S. imperialism from the other direction, asking how we look at the people and nations whose space we invade. In this project, I hoped to approach U.S. foreign policy in the same way. My goal was, simply, to turn around and attempt to achieve self-recognition. Instead of always looking to the East (and subjugating it), I posed an investigation into the West. Using Peter Sellars and John Adams’s operas, I questioned the motivation behind the actions the U.S. has taken, both acts of war and acts of friendship, and found that often imperialistic ambitions flavor both kinds of undertaking. I also questioned the kinds of language and rhetoric that is used to promote imperialism within U.S. national identity, and found that often good intentions mask the violence that underwrite those acts. I now discuss the findings of that project and the implications of those findings on contemporary U.S. cultural identity.

Two twentieth-century American operas facilitated this investigation: *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic*, both composed by John Adams and directed by Peter Sellars, who also brainstormed the ideas behind the operas. These operas are based on real-life political narratives from U.S. history, making them innovative in their genre simply for that fact alone. While operas based on mythologized events are not uncommon, it is uncommon to adapt contemporary history and mythologize it, and this is precisely what makes the Adams/Sellars operas so potent. Adams and Sellars also collaborated with librettist Alice Goodman (also the librettist for *Nixon*) to write the opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which portrays the hijacking of the cruise liner Achille
Lauro by Palestinian terrorists. The terrorists murder Jewish American passenger Leon Klinghoffer, but the primary focus of the opera is the terrorists themselves, who are represented not negatively but rather neutrally. The opera, which premiered in 1991 in Belgium, is seldom performed because it is so controversial, as it sympathizes both with the hostages and with the terrorists (Macy). While the most well-known and oft-performed operas can be inaccessible to audiences for a variety of reasons, these modern-day operas are immediately relevant to their audiences. They reinvigorate their genre by departing from tradition and addressing topics that have never been used for operatic material before, at least not with so soon after the events occurred.

However, the scope of these operas is greater than simply their impact on the genre; Nixon in China and Doctor Atomic also deal with prevalent ideological beliefs that most American citizens harbor about U.S. foreign policy. In this project, I chose to narrow my focus on American Exceptionalism to the belief that the U.S. is a global policing agent, enforcing good and spreading democracy abroad. This ideology is multifaceted, involving the notions that the U.S. is always on the side of the moral right, that the U.S. always has good intentions, that the interference of the U.S. in global affairs is needed and desired, and that ideologies that operate in the U.S. would also bring prosperity to other nations. While each chapter focuses on different aspects of this ideology, they both result in serious questions regarding the viability of U.S. foreign policy and the role that Exceptionalism has played in allowing and defending the U.S.’s questionable imperial actions.

In my first chapter, I demonstrate how Nixon is motivated by underlying themes of Exceptionalism. Nixon portrays how the U.S. attempts to forge friendships with seemingly good intentions that hide underlying imperialist motivations. This is particularly evident in the second
act, when the Nixons attend the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* and insert themselves into the narrative. By inserting themselves forcibly into Chinese culture and attempting to change it, the Nixons demonstrate that they are not actually seeking friendship and equality in their journey to China, but instead hope to assert economic, social, and political influence over China. While *Nixon* overtly casts the visit in a positive light, I point out that the Nixons’ disruption of Chinese culture illustrates problems with U.S. foreign policy; inserting ourselves into other cultures is not equivalent to understanding and respecting them.

In my second chapter, I further propose that this belief in the absolute good of the U.S. is perpetuated by the separation of the citizen from the nation. I read *Doctor Atomic* as a demonstration of the faulty power structures that enable the U.S. to enact violence on a global scale largely without resistance from its citizenry. I also examine the similarities that the opera presents between the War on Terror and the Manhattan Project as a vehicle to show how the ideologies that informed the military decisions of World War II resurfaced during the War on Terror, leading to more violent military actions. Because the U.S. believes itself to be exceptional and assumes the right to police the globe, its citizens are often unaware of how insupportable these actions are. I point out that there is no evidence that supports American Exceptionalism, so it essentially supports itself on ideology alone, and thus reproduces the cycle of violent global policing. I conclude by warning against a foreign policy that is propelled by its own violence and encourage audiences to read *Doctor Atomic* as a warning against the vast amounts of violence that could occur if the U.S.’s exertions of power are not kept in check.

Both of these operas are useful for analysis not only because they facilitate discussion about American Exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy, but also because they help audiences to generate questions that address some of the problems that the operas reveal. *Nixon* demonstrates
the way U.S. foreign policy is flawed in its outreach to other nations. The U.S. does not succeed in achieving true diplomacy with China because it does not attempt to understand and respect the Chinese way of life. I further propose that the way that the U.S. interacts with Eastern nations in general is problematic, and this opera merely draws attention to a pattern that has persisted in foreign policy for decades. In the eleven years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks alone, U.S. relations to the Middle East have become even more volatile. A foreign policy that imposes U.S. ideologies on Far Eastern and Middle Eastern nations clearly does not succeed in bringing about peace, and *Nixon* helps cast light on the reasons why. Although democracy and capitalism are conducive to our way of life in the U.S., there is no reason to expect that other cultures with dissimilar ideological beliefs will benefit from them the same way we do. To apply our own ideological systems to other nations under the guise of a diplomatic relationship is in fact to fail to understand and respect that nation. This failure elicits the question, how can the U.S. alter its foreign policy to improve international relations? What steps can be taken to draw attention to that problem, and to find a solution? *Nixon* takes the first step, by (covertly) showing how the U.S.’s attempts to interfere in China were fundamentally opposed to the Chinese way of life.

As a war protest opera, *Doctor Atomic* elicits somewhat more immediate questions than *Nixon* does. *Doctor Atomic* illuminates the similarities between U.S. wars, drawing attention to their common causality. It reveals the ways that the government relies on the American Exceptionalism ideology to reinforce its power, as well as to reproduce that same power. The opera ends with a powerful vision of the testing of the atomic bomb as the scientists gaze out toward the audience. The moment suggests that the violence that the U.S. uses to enforce its global policing strategy is out of control. Audiences are left with much more unsettling questions after this opera. How can the U.S. redeem itself for its actions that were disguised as good but
were actually arbitrarily violent? Is there a way to escape the American Exceptionalism ideology that reproduces itself? *Doctor Atomic* does not offer any encouraging conclusion or hope for this, but it does do the very necessary work of illuminating the problem and demonstrating that violence like the U.S. saw in WWII and the War on Terror is by no means exceptional.

Perhaps the most important work the Adams/Sellars collaboration has done is that it helps audiences question their Western perspectives. The operas suggest that the Western view of the United States is incomplete without also considering how the West looks from the East. In fact, the operas take an important step toward enabling change by showing audiences famed events from U.S. history from perspectives that are not solely Western. While these operas do not explicitly bring up American Exceptionalism, they do present U.S. foreign policy as visibly flawed and in need of reform. They offer enough ambiguity for audiences to pose their own reasons for this, but they also exhibit enough historical accuracy as to render these events in U.S. history morally questionable. Audiences who are perhaps familiar with and even adherent to the ideologies that the operas question may note that there are multiple perspectives on these events, and may even learn to question their own ideological views. By facilitating such discoveries, the operas push audiences to take the first step toward challenging their own perceptions of U.S. history, foreign policy, and citizenship. As Adams and Sellars’s operas become more politically overt over time, they create space for future study regarding not only the importance of their operas on American cultural identity, but also the changes to the genre that their operas have enabled.
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