

Blue Bayou: An adopted immigrant's cruel fate

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Written and directed by Justin Chon

Blue Bayou, written and directed by Justin Chon, is an angry, affecting film that indicts US immigration policy for its brutality and dramatizes the hell through which people are put when they fall into the clutches of the authorities in question. Chon's film makes clear to all those with eyes and ears that the current anti-immigrant mania in official circles cuts across the most elementary needs and wants.

The work takes its title from the song written by Roy Orbison and Joe Melson, and recorded by Orbison in 1961, which later became one of Linda Ronstadt's signature numbers.

Blue Bayou opens with the camera on Antonio Leblanc (played by Chon) as he urgently tries to sell himself during a job interview. He is Korean-born, but was adopted by American parents in 1988 at the age of three. Confronting a callous interviewer clearly biased against Antonio's ethnicity, the New Orleans tattoo artist, rebounding from a troubled criminal past, makes a desperate effort to find better-paying employment to support a growing family. Despite the fact that Antonio is a talented motorcycle mechanic, the interview and job search come to a disheartening dead end.

Antonio has a stable and loving marriage to Kathy (Alicia Vikander), a physical therapist pregnant with their child. (At one point, Vikander sings an impressive rendition of "Blue Bayou.") He is also the doting stepfather to young Jessie (Sydney Kowalske), who was abandoned by her biological, police officer father, Ace (Mark O'Brien), now attempting to mend a relationship that the antagonistic girl rejects. The cop is not above wielding his badge to undermine Antonio.

Ace's racist partner, Denny (Emory Cohen), utilizes a minor altercation to have Antonio arrested and placed in an ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement)

detention center, where he learns he is actually undocumented in the US because two sets of adoptive parents never filed the requisite paperwork.

In a meeting with expensive immigration attorney Barry Boucher (Vondie Curtis-Hall)—to pay for whose services Antonio resorts to motorcycle theft—Antonio and Kathy are informed that a judge has ordered Antonio's deportation. Marriage to a US citizen notwithstanding, the failure of his adoptive parents to legalize his status, along with his criminal record, gives him only two options: to depart voluntarily and file for a change in status from South Korea, or to stay and appeal, and risk a loss in the case that would forever bar him from the US.

Antonio chooses to put everything on the line. This involves asking for help from his adoptive mother, who never defended him from the daily beatings administered by her now deceased husband. He is also hindered by Kathy's hostile mother. Furthermore, on the day of the court hearing, Emory brutalizes Antonio to prevent him from showing up. When all appears hopeless, Antonio considers suicide by drowning, an act that echoes his Korean mother's attempt to drown the infant she could not afford to raise. Water is a recurring image.

A final, emotionally wrenching scene between Jessie and Antonio brings home the genuine inhumanity of the US immigration system.

A moving postscript lists only a few of its victims:

Monte Haines—adopted 1981, deported 2009

Kristopher Larsen—adopted 1975, facing deportation

Maurecio Cappelli—adopted 1986, deported 2018

Anissa E. Druessedow—adopted 1982, deported 2006

Paul F. Schreine—adopted 1990, deported 2018

Emily Warnecke—adopted 1964, facing deportation

Hyebin Schreiber—adopted 2014, facing deportation

The titles point out that no official statistics are available as to the total number of adopted people in the US facing deportation. The Adoptee Rights Campaign estimates that 25,000 to 49,000 children who were legally adopted by US citizens between 1945 and 1998 may themselves lack citizenship.

That number increases to an estimated 32,000 to 64,000 adoptees without citizenship when the period between 2015 and 2033 is also taken into consideration, as children adopted between 1999 and 2016 reach their 18th birthday.

Kristopher Larsen, executive director of Adoptees for Justice, asserts that many deported adoptees struggle to find jobs and housing. “They don’t know the country that they’re being deported to. They don’t know the language. They don’t know the culture,” Larsen says. “And a lot of times, the countries that they’re being deported to—since they were raised here in the US as US citizens, the receiving countries don’t even really acknowledge the deportee as a person of that nation.”

In an interview with Reappropriate, director Chon explains that he grew up with Korean-American adoptees as friends, “and their stories have always been a part of my sphere. When I started hearing that adoptees were being deported, I just could not believe that US citizens could adopt a child from overseas—and the child has no choice or not as to whether they go—and the US government acknowledges the adoption as legal; but then, when those adoptees become adults twenty or thirty years later, the government decides that they’re not US citizens. It makes zero sense to me.”

“These people are undocumented,” continued the filmmaker, “in the sense that they don’t even know they’re undocumented. It’s a completely different kind of experience. Immigration in this country tends to be spoken about primarily as an issue of the US-Mexico border, whereas the issue is actually so wide-reaching.”

In *Blue Bayou*, Chon has created a sincere and appropriately outraged work, despite a few rough edges and unnecessary contrivances.

Chon has come under fire from the identity politics crowd for not casting an actual adoptee as the film’s lead! Such arguments merely ignore everything about several thousand years of the dramatic representation of reality, including the art of acting.

One such critic complained that *Blue Bayou* does not allow the adoptee community to reclaim “our stories”

and choose “when, how, and if to tell them ... one of the very few ways in which we have some agency as adoptees.” The same individual argued that “adoptees’ voices and experiences [are] being overlooked or erased, even within progressive Asian American circles.”

Despite the comments of these shortsighted elements, *Blue Bayou* condemns a social order that uses terror against the vulnerable immigrant population to intimidate the working class as a whole and attack its basic rights.



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