Alternative Southern Communities: Cultural Other "Asians" in Contemporary Fiction about the American South

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ALTERNATIVE SOUTHERN COMMUNITIES:
CULTURAL OTHER “ASIANS” IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION
ABOUT THE AMERICAN SOUTH

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by
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ABSTRACT

This project explores the representation of minority groups in contemporary U.S. Southern literature, with a particular focus on Asian communities. It not only challenges the conventional perception that Asians in America are primarily associated with the West Coast but also underscores how Asian representation in literature plays a crucial role in illuminating the complexities of regional identity and social structure in the American South.

Historically, Asian immigrants have been part of the Southern landscape since the eighteenth century when Filipino sailors settled in New Orleans. Chinese immigrants also played essential roles as laborers in the post-slavery South. However, their experiences were conspicuously absent from Southern literature until the 1990s.

This dissertation examines the evolution of Southern studies from the “Southern Renascence” to “New Southern Studies.” It underscores the need to move beyond a focus on white upper-class life in Southern literature and explore narratives that transcend racial and gender boundaries.

The study examines four contemporary Southern novels that incorporate Asian perspectives: Susan Choi’s *The Foreign Student*, Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*, and Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox*. These novels explore themes like language barriers, the Korean immigrant experience during the Cold War, the Vietnamese immigrant experience, cultural identity, and the contribution of Chinese immigrants to Mississippi Delta culture.

The central argument of this dissertation is that the inclusion of Asian voices enriches
the understanding of Southern identity, literature, and culture. It also sheds light on the enduring impact of historical events like the Korean and Vietnam Wars on immigrants and their descendants. By exploring the experiences of Asian communities, this research challenges the conventional notion of a uniform Southern identity and emphasizes the region’s diversity.

Ultimately, this project aims to rectify the lack of scholarly attention given to the Asian presence in the South. It contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the U.S. South and its complex cultural tapestry, inviting readers to question established narratives and adopt a more inclusive perspective that acknowledges the diverse voices within the region.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late father and mother, Tadayuki Hiwatashi (1940-2022) and Yasuko Hiwatashi (1946-2019). Without their emphasis on education, my brother Yasushi and I would have never made it as first-generation college graduates.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my beloved niece, Yura. I hope she will never forget where we came from and where we stand now.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my dissertation director, Dr. Jaime Harker, whose guidance and mentorship kept me motivated in focusing on the new project to capture Asian representations in the writing about the U.S. South. I would not have been able to keep my motivation going without her expertise, encouragement, support, patience, and many email and zoom communications to fill the distance from Oxford, Mississippi to Fukuoka, Japan.

I am also deeply grateful to my committee members, Dr. Kathryn McKee, Dr. Ethel Young Scurlock, and Dr. Noell Wilson for their insightful comments in helping shape my dissertation to be a better one. Dr. McKee offered insightful comments that enriched the depth of my dissertation. Dr. Scurlock’s perspectives brought a unique dimension to my research. Dr. Wilson’s contributions were instrumental in shaping the narrative and strengthening the coherence of this work. Their insights and suggestions have significantly improved the quality of this dissertation. I owe so much to their collaborative mentorship.

I am indebted to Dr. Hironori Hayase and Dr. Hisao Tanaka, whose mentorship has been a beacon of inspiration throughout my academic journey. Dr. Hayase’s brilliance and boundless encouragement have instilled in me a belief in the limitless possibilities of academic exploration. His mentorship has played a pivotal role in sharing the trajectory of my academic path. Simultaneously, I extend my gratitude to Dr. Tanaka, whose insights into the challenges and hard realities of an academic career have provided me with a grounded perspective. While these mentors occupy distinct roles in my academic growth, both have significantly enriched my
understanding and appreciation of scholarly pursuits.

I am very thankful for the support and encouragement which I have received from the English Department at the University of Mississippi. It was a friendly academic sanctuary that included me for conferences, book talks, poetry readings, and social gatherings. If I could go to graduate school again, I would choose the graduate program at the University of Mississippi. I enjoyed every class I attended and learned so much from professors and classmates about Southern culture.

I am grateful for the financial support of the Fulbright Graduate Program which gave me a life-altering opportunity to join the graduate program in the University of Mississippi from 2005-2007. It was a leap of faith for me to give a halt to my teaching in Japan to become a graduate student in the U.S., which had been my dream since my time as an exchange student at the University of Michigan (1995-1996). I also appreciate the Summer Graduate Assistantship which I received from the Graduate school at the University of Mississippi. The Assistantship enabled me to travel to the Mississippi Delta to conduct research on Chinese-owned grocery stores and on Jonestown, which has been one of the underserved communities in Mississippi. I am also grateful to have been chosen as a BioKyowa Japanese scholar in 2007, which enabled me to visit the Faulkner Center at Southeast Missouri State University. I travelled there on two separate occasions: driving from Oxford right before my oral comprehension examination to be an ABD in the summer of 2007 and flying from Fukuoka, Japan in October 2007. The Director of the Faulkner Center, Dr. Robert Hamblin, provided me with rare collections regarding William Faulkner’s international trips in the 1950s.

I would also like to acknowledge that this dissertation has been financially supported by two research funds which Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
(MEXT) granted (Kakenhi Grant Number JP18K00517 “The U.S. Southern Literature and Immigration: Possibilities of the Process of Co-existence and Assimilation with Cultural Others” and JP23K00370 “Representations of Asian Laborers in the U.S. South”). The first fund made it possible for me to travel overseas and present papers and exchange ideas with scholars. Chapter One is an extended and revised version of the presentation and the subsequent monograph publication entitled “From Korea to the U.S. South in the Mid-1950s: Trauma and Race Relations in Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student” in the National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates in 2022. Chapter Three is an extensive and revised edition of the conference paper entitled “Toward Plural Souths: Immigration and Vietnamese Diaspora in Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth,” which has been published in the monograph series of the 28th National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates. As a symposium organizer for the 60th Annual Conference of the American Literature Society of Japan in 2021, I am grateful for the comments and feedback from the colleagues on my presentation entitled “Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth: Intersectionality between Queer and Vietnamese Representations in the Alternative Southern Community from 1975 to the 1980s” in the symposium of “American Literature in the U.S. Then and Now: From Faulkner to New Southern Studies.” Through the comments and feedback from colleagues, the conference presentation gave me an insight to contextualize the Vietnamese representation in the contemporary Southern literature. Furthermore, I developed my ideas on the Delta Chinese in the historical context by presenting a paper entitled “The Mississippi Delta Chinese and the Global Labor in Cynthia Shearer’s The Celestial Jukebox” at the National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates in 2021. Chapter Four is based on the presentation and subsequent publication in the conference’s monograph series, but each chapter has been
substantially extended from the original argument. Thus, the above-mentioned funding from Japanese government helped me to conduct my research for this project.

I am equally grateful for the generous support which I have received from my colleagues in the English Department, the Faculty of Humanities, and Fukuoka University for allowing me to take a leave of absence for two years and a month from August 2005 to September 2007. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Jefferson Peters for reaching out helping hands and sparing his time for me.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my parents, Yasuko and Tadayuki. Their unconditional love and profound belief in my abilities were the driving forces behind my academic career. They instilled in me a passion for learning, a joy of reading, a commitment to excellence that I carry with me in every endeavor. Though they are no longer with us, their legacy lives on in the work I present here. I am grateful for their guidance and sacrifices. This achievement is as much theirs as it is mine. I dedicate it to their loving memory with all my love.

I am deeply indebted to the late Brenda Robertson (1946-2023), whose enduring support, profound understanding, and unwavering encouragement were pivotal on this arduous journey. I am profoundly grateful for her boundless generosity and kindness. Her memory will forever hold a cherished place in my heart. Yunhee Chang and Melanie Anderson have been supportive and understanding of my self-doubt and imposter syndrome but have also illuminated my life with their stories about the various facets of joy and sorrow. Hiroki Sekiguchi has given me advice on how to maintain my mental stamina. Oscar Velazquez has helped me keep the focus of my research going. I owe so much to their generosity, kindness, and guidance.

Last but not least, this dissertation is dedicated to the countless individuals whose
stories, experiences, and voices have been underrepresented or marginalized in Southern literature. It is my hope that this work contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between culture, identity, and “a sense of place.” I believe in education and the disciplinary study of humanities. In the era of cultural and political division, I hope this study will pass a baton to the next generation of scholars and readers to have a better understanding toward culturally “unknown” peoples with open-minded curiosity and compassion.
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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for writers to write about the U.S. South? This is the starting question for this project, which opens a new space for discussion to reimagine the U.S. South by analyzing the representations of the minority groups which have been hitherto excluded from the Southern narrative.

Through the connectivity between the U.S. South and representations of multi-faceted Asian figures—this dissertation explores the imagined Asian South primarily through four contemporary Southern fictions. When we think of Asians and where they live, we usually imagine the west coast. According to Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz in “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population,” nearly half of Asians (9.8 million) live in the West (Figure 1). However, it is a little-known fact that twenty-four percent of Asians live in the South, 5.3 million Asians. Another article by Budiman and Ruiz indicates that the largest Asian origin groups by state in 2019 were the following: Vietnamese are the majority of Asians in Louisiana and Mississippi; Koreans are the majority of Asians in Alabama; Indians are the majority of Asians in the rest of the South. The statistics indicate that Asians in the South are not temporary sojourners but rather, have put down roots in the region.


Figure 1: Asian demographics based on region


Figure 2: Largest Asian origin groups by state, 2019

When traveling through the South, one notices Vietnamese-owned bakeries and restaurants scattered throughout the region. While Asian communities are often associated with the West Coast, they also exist in the South. As early as 1763, Filipino crew members arrived in New Orleans and formed a community. Additionally, after the abolition of slavery, Chinese coolies migrated to the South as replacements for black slaves and contributed to the labor force at plantations and railroads. Many Chinese immigrants, who disliked the exploitative structure of plantation farms, stayed in the Mississippi Delta region, and started small businesses for black clienteles at first. *Hortense Powdermaker’s After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (1939) provides a comprehensive account of the immigrant experiences from as early as 1939. Even if the record of Chinese presence was recorded as early as 1939, the acknowledgement of their contribution to the community had to wait until the hegemony of the Southern narrative and canon in the literary scene shifted in another fifty years. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the gradual shift of the critical trend from the master narrative of a nostalgic South to a more diverse multi-cultural representation in fiction took place.

The gap between the physical presence of Asians and their absence in fiction which is set in the South is astounding. With this respect, Jagna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi’s *Asian American in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* came out in a timely manner in 2013 to connect the absence of Asians in fiction and their presence in the geographical landscape in the South, mainly focusing on Asian’s diaspora from their homeland to the settlement in the various areas in the South and how they contribute to growing the local economy and reshaping the community. Although there have been several essays and books written about Asians in the South, the groundbreaking scholarly criticism to discuss the Asian presence in the historical/fictional South came out as recently as 2010. Leslie Bow’s *Partly Colored: Asian*
Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South (2010), in which she analyzes Asians’ racial ambiguity by focusing on the Jim Crow South. She calls attention to how the term race is a socially constructed idea and reevaluates the relationship among whites, blacks, and Asians in the segregated South. How does the romanticized South shift to a more inclusive critical analysis in literature and other academic disciplines then? Let us briefly review the shift in literary criticism in the South from the era of the “Southern Renascence” to the emergence of “New Southern Studies.”

The trajectory of scholarship on the American South has undergone a profound shift from the era of the “Southern Renascence”\(^3\) to the emergence of “New Southern Studies.” In the past, the critical focus was predominantly on the reconstruction of collective memories and historical narrative within the framework of a hegemonic master narrative that revolved around the white elite class. This narrative construction was often characterized by a racial binary that centered on the dynamics between black and white communities, seemingly ignoring the existence of marginalized racial groups.

Jack Butler’s analysis of canonical Southern writers such as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams highlighted five key elements that were integral to Southern literature. He points out: “We think of a place; we think of the darkness and

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splendor of families; we think of a way of talking; we think of the Bible; and we think of black and white locked into a mutual if inharmonious fate” (35). These elements encompassed notions of place, the complexities of familial relationships, distinctive patterns of speech, religious influences, and the entwined fate of black and white communities.

The 1990s marked a turning point in the field of Southern studies, with scholars like Michael Kreyling questioning the limited critical space afforded to relatively recent postmodern novels. He called for a more inclusive approach that transcended racial and gender boundaries, challenging the scholarship that romanticized the lost cause of the Civil War and depicted the South nostalgically. His work, *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), continued to address these issues and aimed to present the South as a place that house a multitude of cultures and traditions.

Fred Hobson, in *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991), observed a shift in the influence of past Southern literary giants on contemporary writers. He demonstrated that recent Southern writers appeared to distance themselves from the shadow of Faulkner and the celebrated qualities of Southern writing and life that were not representative of all Southerners. He also noted the changing sentiment in the South, moving away from “the lost cause” mentality to a sense of “collective guilt” stemming from the Vietnam War, a shift that required a fresh perspective on issues of racism and exploitation of human resources.

Moreover, the notion of a “sense of place,” once synonymous with a distinctive spatial

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perception of the American South, has evolved significantly in contemporary Southern studies. Scholars now recognize that there is no singular sense of place that can encapsulate the diverse topics related to the South and its culture.

Houston Baker Jr. and Dana Nelson’s proclamation in “Preface: Violence, the Body, and ‘The South’” (2001) is a pivotal moment in the evolution of Southern studies. They assert the pressing need for greater diversity in representations of race and gender in Southern fiction. Their argument calls for a departure from the historical focus on a white, male elite class and advocates for a more inclusive approach that incorporates a broader spectrum of voices and experiences.

In this respect, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer have been instrumental in expanding the horizons of Southern studies through their work. They emphasize that the American South is not an isolated enclave of hyper regionalism but a porous space where influences from other regions and cultures circulate continuously. Their critical contributions, particularly in “Preface: Global Context, Local Literature, The New Southern Studies” (2006), advocate the need to view the South as a dynamic and ever-evolving region that interacts with the broader world. In this evolving landscape, “New Southern Studies” has emerged as a critical lens through which to view the South as a region in constant flux. It seeks to redefine Southern literature by broadening its critical scope and acknowledging the multiplicity of voices and experiences within the South. In the context of Asian diaspora studies in the South, Trefzer and McKee’s perspective is crucial as it cultivates a more diverse critical space, bringing to light numerous underrepresented novels about the South. Trefzer and McKee encourage scholars to

explore the intersection of the South with other regions globally, including the Asian diaspora. Their approach allows for a more comprehensive examination of how Asian communities contribute to and are influenced by the South’s unique cultural landscape. This expanded framework aligns with the goals of Asian diaspora studies in the South, as it recognizes the interconnectedness of the region and the rest of the world, facilitating a deeper understanding of the complexities of Asian representation in the Southern context.

Therefore, this dissertation serves to shake up the traditional norm of Southern writing by adding an Asian presence to the discussion and demonstrating how Asians create a new site for the traditional view of Southern literature that enables us to compare Asian figures in fiction with their actual presence in the South. I take the position that a reader does not have to be a “Southerner” in a traditional sense to understand the culture of the American South, as Martyn Bone argues in a recent essay, “You Don’t have to Be Born There: Immigration and Contemporary Fiction of the U.S. South.” This project employs the concept of a cultural “Other” who functions as a key to contextualize the unspoken codes of manners and social behavior in the region, by selecting contemporary fiction in which each novel is set from the 1950s to the present. I agree with Bone’s positionality to expand Southern studies to a global scale by analyzing the relationship between more recent immigration patterns and labor, particularly adding new perspectives to the black experience in the South by explaining the recent immigration influx from the African continent, as we see in his paper. One of his feats

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6 Kirsten Dellinger, Jeffrey T. Jackson, Katie B. McKee, and Anette Trefzer present five interdisciplinary views for discussing the Global South as follows: “1) the Global South as inflow/outflow model, 2) the comparative hemispheric model, 3) the geopolitical model, 4) the transnational feminist model, and 5) the decentered interlocality model” (155) in “Interlocality and Interdisciplinary: Learning from Existing Models of the Global South” in Navigating South: Transdisciplinary Explosions of a U.S. Region (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2017), 153-166.

7 Martyn Bone, “Narratives of African Immigration to the U.S. South: Dave Eggers’s What Is the What and Cynthia Shearer’s The Celestial Jukebox,” in CR 46. 3 (2010): 65-76. In this article, he discusses the recent
in New Southern Studies was to start a dialectic conversation to connect the modest and conservative approach by the previous generations of scholars studying traditionally “Southern” writers and his approach to push forward the discussion of many novels by employing an interdisciplinary approach and expanding its critical arena in a global scale. However, the expansion of critical methodology and genre has also included a too-large scale spectrum of writers, many of whose immigration experiences do not seem to be exclusively regional, but rather generic. Such cases apply to the writings of Ha Jin and Lan Cao, both of whose narrative locations are set in the South, while their stories are focused on the transnational struggle between their homeland and their new locations. For example, Bone adds these two writers as representative of Asian writers in connection to the Southern regional experiences; however, the primary focus of their themes is not about the South. Bone’s inclusive selection of Asian writers writing about the South is sometimes too broad, and I have a hard time deciding where to put the boundaries on the Asian writers and their Southern experience. The same is true of Patti Kim’s novel *A Cab Called Reliable* (1997), in which the cultural conflict between the Korean way of life which the protagonist’s Korean father imposes on her and the protagonist’s assimilation process to the American way of life becomes the central theme. When analyzing Asian experiences in the South in this dissertation, I avoid choosing novels or essays that focus more on the transnational perspective between east and west. Rather, I choose novels which illuminate several different Asian experiences in different regions within the South.

I intentionally exclude Indians from my argument for the following reasons. First,

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8 Charles Reagan Wilson summarizes the shift in critical analysis from the southern studies to “a new southern studies” (52) as a departure from the Southern exceptionalism by covering the historical shift in its cultural, historical, and literary scholarship in “Reimagining Southern Studies: Time and Space, Bodies and Spirits.” See *Navigating South*, 21-54. He also adds a section of “Postsouthernist writing” in *The American South: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021), 95-99.
Indians are the most successful model minority in Asian “Model Minority” myth even though the term itself was created to show Japanese American resilience after the mass incarceration and its aftermath in the hype of the Civil Rights Movements to degrade African Americans. Indians have a long history of colonialism, and their diaspora goes hand in hand with a high command of English. Therefore, the most economically successful group among Asians has been Indians. Indian immigration to the U.S. has been characterized by a relatively high percentage of highly skilled professionals, particularly in fields like technology and medicine. This has led to a strong presence of Indian Americans in the STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). On average, Indian Americans have relatively high levels of educational attainment and income, which can facilitate their integration into various aspects of American society. Other Asian groups, on the other hand, may have varying socioeconomic backgrounds, which can impact their access to resources and opportunities for assimilation. The second reason not to include Indian Americans in the Southern trope is that their diaspora is so widespread that it is almost impossible to discuss their cultural diversity and migration history in just one chapter. One of the most discussed Indian diasporas in the South is the film *Mississippi Masala* (1991) by Mira Nair. It is a significant film in understanding the South Asian diaspora in the South because it explores identity, race, ethnicity, interracial relationships, cultural clash, racial prejudice, and diaspora. The film alone is rich in the historical context of the South Asian diaspora from India through Uganda during the political turmoil of the 1970s.

Native American studies in the South also needs more critical attention but the genre

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9 For example, Jay Watson’s essay “Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema: Three Contemporary Films” in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* offers multi-faceted ways to analyze films from a postcolonial approach. 219-252. His argument facilitates the incorporation of Homi K. Bhabha’s “cultural hybridity” (*The Location of Culture*, 5) into the discourse of Southern studies.
is explored by prominent scholars of the field, such as Annette Trefzer, Melanie Benson Taylor, and Robbie Ethridge, and the scholarly journal *Native South* has already been thriving since the launch of the project in 2008. Among all the minorities, reading African American experience into the Southern context needs to be thoroughly examined. With this respect, contemporary African American writers, such as Jesmyn Ward, Kiese Laymon, Natasha Trethewey, W. Ralph Eubanks, Tayari Jones explore African American experience in the South and add voices to the understanding of the reginal cultures and experiences. The contemporary scholars, such as Thadious Davis, Riche Richardson, and Imani Perry ferociously raise their voices to align African American experience into Southern studies. African American experiences and their stories need to be discussed for more than any other minority groups’ narrative. A lot of African American writers take their ancestral roots in the South as well. Because of that, their contribution and innovation to literature already has so much potential with massive archives.

In the 2016 publication *Keywords for Southern Studies*, a category titled “Peoples” is

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11 By placing the fictional town called Bois Sauvage, Jesmyn Ward creates the narrative of the legacy of African American families. Salvage the Bones (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011) depicts the resilience and survival of the pregnant protagonist in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In Sing, Unburied, Sing (New York: Scribner, 2017), she exhibits her complicated family histories.
12 Kiese Laymon talks about what it was like for him to grow up in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1980s in Heavy: An American Memoir (New York: Scribner, 2018). His memoir is an honest reflection of his exposure to violence, addiction, race relations, and social issues.
13 Natasha Trethewey explores her upbringing as a biracial child growing up in the 1960s in the south in Memorial Drive: A Daughter’s Memoir (New York: Harper, 2020) Although it revolves around her mother’s murder by her stepfather, this is also a memoir about personal healing.
included, which encompasses various sub-classification of individuals highly relevant to the American South, such as “Creole/Creolization, Black and White, Native, Latin, Folk, Queer/Quare.” However, this work does not address the relationship between the American South and Asians. Conversely, in the same year, The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the U.S. South published Leslie Bow’s essay titled “Asian American, Racial Latency, Southern Traces,” making a significant appearance of Asian American representation in Southern studies. This implies that the representation of Asian Americans in Southern studies is still in its formative stages.

This dissertation is indebted to Jaime Harker’s introduction in the special issue of Global South, which has opened the exciting possibility of expanding our understanding of the U.S. South within the wider context of the Pacific Rim. This project focuses on Asians in the South. The central argument of this dissertation assesses the multifaceted Asian representations in the fiction about the U.S. South by analyzing four novels: Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student (1998), Robert Olen Butler’s A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (1992), Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth (2011), and Cynthia Shearer’s The Celestial Jukebox (2005) in this order. I delved into a chronological exploration of the evolving Southern landscape through the lens of these four novels. Collectively, they intricately trace the temporal and socio-cultural transformations in the South, providing a comprehensive exploration of its dynamic tapestry by focusing on the Asian diaspora in the South.

Starting with The Foreign Student positions the reader within the historical context of Korean immigration to the American South during the 1950s. This novel serves as an

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introduction to the challenges and cultural adjustments faced by an Asian male protagonist in a predominantly Caucasian society. Themes of adaptation and transition from one’s home country to the American South come to the fore. The protagonist’s geographical mobility—Sewanee, Tennessee to the big city Chicago, New Orleans, and Sewanee back again—exemplifies the stigmatization of an Asian body as “transgression,” labeling it as “a communist” or a cultural “Other” in the hype of Cold War mentality as well as in the rise of the Civil Rights Movement.

*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* builds upon the themes of identity and cultural adaptation by presenting a series of interconnected stories from the perspectives of Vietnamese immigrants. Robert Olen Butler is not an Asian but his exposure to Vietnamese culture and its people as a counterintelligence agent for the U.S. makes him a spokesperson who gives voice to Vietnamese refugees, predominantly in New Orleans in the novel. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* serves as a poignant literary proxy for Vietnamese refugees, acting as a compelling voice when language barriers and limited mediums impede direct self-expression. In the absence of a shared language proficiency, this literary work becomes a profound advocate, effectively articulating the nuanced narratives and emotions of Vietnamese refugees who might otherwise struggle to convey their experiences. Through the artistry of Butler’s storytelling, this collection of short stories transcends linguistic constraints, offering a platform for the silenced voices of a community, allowing their stories to be heard and understood on a broader, emphatic scale. The narrative structure allows for a multifaceted examination of how different individuals and families navigate their Vietnamese identities within the American South. It also delves into the legacy of the Vietnam War and its impact on the diaspora. New Orleans is renowned for its cultural diversity, including French, Spanish, African, Vietnamese and more. The cultural mosaic provides a unique backdrop for exploring the experiences of
Vietnamese refugees and their interaction with other communities. The setting in New Orleans indicates the novel’s emphasis on multiculturalism and the idea that cultural identities are not static but rather fluid and adaptable. The characters in the novel navigate their Vietnamese heritage while also engaging with the multicultural aspects of New Orleans and reflect Butler’s own experience of having lived in New Orleans and his deep appreciation of its people.

Following with Bitter in the Mouth allows for a deeper exploration of identity, particularly through the lens of a Vietnamese American adoptee. This novel delves into the nuances of growing up Asian in the South and grappling with the complexities of one’s cultural heritage while trying to fit into the Southern social fabric.

Concluding with The Celestial Jukebox shifts the focus to Chinese Americans in Mississippi, offering a different perspective on Asian representation in the South, particularly marking the presence of the historical account on Chinese grocery stores in the Mississippi Delta. The novel explores the intersection of Chinese culture and Southern culture, highlighting the diversity of Asian experiences within the region in which rapid modernization brings immigrants as labor sources. By covering the history of Chinese grocery stores to the present time (the narrative present time ends around 9/11 in 2001), the novel places the Chinese grocer, Angus Chien, as the defender of the Agrarian South in flux. Each novel contributes to a broader understanding of how Asian individuals and communities have navigated their places in the region over time, providing a nuanced and layered perspective on Asian representation in the imagined South.

This dissertation takes the stance that anyone who has experienced or lived in the South contributes to a constantly shifting cultural definition of the South. In addition to that, it does not have an essentialist point of view regarding who has the authenticity to tell certain
ethnic communal experiences. The four authors have ties to Southern culture. Moreover, they all bring other cultural backgrounds as well.

Susan Choi, for example, reenacts his Korean father’s experience to be an international student in the 1950s in the South. She presents how it must have been for her father’s generation to assimilate in the South. She explores the fear and anxiety of the community over communism, the Civil Rights movement, and the influx of Asian immigrations.

Robert Olen Butler’s background as a Caucasian male non-Southerner who has lived in the South and Vietnam provides a distinctive narrative perspective. His experience living in the South, as well as his time spent in Vietnam, offer a unique lens through which to examine the connections and disconnections between these two distinctive worlds. His deep knowledge of both regions allows him to craft narratives that explore the experience of Vietnamese refugees in the South with nuance and sensitivity.

Monique Truong, a Vietnamese American who grew up in North Carolina, offers a particularly valuable perspective. Her upbringing in the South provides an intimate understanding of the region’s culture, history, and complicities in race relations. Truong’s personal connection to both Vietnamese and Southern identities allows her to explore the intersections and conflicts between these two worlds in her writing. Her work bridges the gap between her Vietnamese heritage and her Southern home, by incorporating her own experience of growing up in a rural town in the South in the mid-1970s.

Cynthia Shearer, a Caucasian female writer with family ties in the South, brings a blend of familiar connections to the South and its deep-rooted history in race relations. The novels provided by these versatile writers from different backgrounds all cross over racial/geographical boundaries to affirm the plural “South.” The South becomes the setting of
each novel, while each character’s inner psyche tries to reconnect herself to the country from which she immigrated.

This dissertation does not take the nativist point of view to define or give agency to the ongoing argument about the South and its regional culture as to who has the right to talk about the South. Rather, it demonstrates a variety of perspectives to showcase Asians’ experiences in the South from the historical period from the 1950s to the early 2000. These four novels collectively serve as a lens through which to examine multifarious facets of Asian representation within the South.

Through the depiction of the Asian presence in its fiction, the South becomes a trope for investigating immigration history as well as the unforgotten memory of the Korean War and the Vietnam War in the modernized South. This project opens a free space for discussion of the plural South, which shows more regional varieties and the complex history of the immigrants’ homeland and their political/socio-economic background at home. It also helps to understand the U.S. South from a global perspective as well as to demonstrate that “Asians” are not a monolithic ethnic group as temporary sojourners but have a deep-rooted connection to Southern soil as contracted plantation laborers, transcontinental workers, owners of grocery stores, farmers, fishermen, bakery owners, and restaurant owners.

Chapter One examines how *The Foreign Student* engrosses readers in the 1950s experience of a Korean student navigating the complexities of the Southern milieu. It starts with the concept of language limitation, which the main character Chuck, a Korean university student in Sewanee, Tennessee, experiences through his interaction with a fallen Southern belle figure, Kathryn. As an interpreter of information written in English to Korean, Chuck becomes a filter to exemplify some of the racist attitudes from his college roommate, for example. Through his
inability to articulate and make reasonable meaning of his experiences, the reader sees Chuck’s trauma from the Korean War (1950-1953) which has caused Korea to be divided in two. Chuck’s silence from trauma in a new home becomes a key for Kathryn to open herself up to him. Her ostracization and loneliness because of the long-standing non-committal relationship with a professor since she was underage and Chuck’s trauma from the war connect them together.

Chapter Two discusses New Orleans as a site for memory about Vietnam for Vietnamese immigrants in Robert Olen Butler’s short story collection, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. Living in an insular community, everyone is haunted by a ghost of memories. Butler’s attempt to show the inner complicated side of immigrants’ lives creates a fictional site for negotiation and recollection of traumatic memories which immigrants deal with. In this respect, in her essay, “What Is Passed On (Or, Why We Need Sweetened Condensed Milk for the Soul),” the Vietnamese American writer Brandy Liën Worrall-Soriano quotes from her father’s essay when he was enrolled in college to learn English right after the fall of Saigon:

> Considering the whole situation, I feel that the refugees can become an asset to this country of ours. While many people would disagree with me on this point, if they had a better understanding of what the Vietnamese are really like, some would certainly change their opinions. Given a fair chance, most of the refugees will prove themselves in more ways than one, and they will become proud citizens of America. Would the average American want this chance if the situation was reversed, and they were on the receiving end? Speaking for myself, the answer is definitely yes. (279)

Her father has been crushed from the defeat and loss of Saigon. The memory of war has haunted him and made it so difficult for him to adjust to his life in the new land: America. Her father’s cry for help and understanding resonates with Butler’s novel.
Chapter Three, “Alternative Southern Communities: Cultural Other/ “Asians” in the Fictional South—Reconciling with the Past: Dialectic Narrative Discourse in Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth—,” analyzes a character, Linda Hammerick, who has an Asian (Vietnamese) appearance outside and yet grew up adopting the protocol and manners of a Southern white woman by following her adoptive mother, DeAnne Hammerick, and her adoptive grandmother, Iris Burch Whatley. Set in the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese American Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth demonstrates what it is like for the protagonist Linda (Linh-Dao Nguyen) Hammerick to be alienated from the community she grew up in, the conservative Southern town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. The open secret for her and the community is that she is an adoptee from Vietnam. In the first part of the novel, her racial identity is carefully disguised to the reader as her inner thoughts run as those of “a Southern white woman,” talking about a family history of Hammerick clan from a teenager’s point of view. As the story moves on to the second part, the reader learns that Linda looks back on her childhood and narrates her life story from which she has grown as an adult and lives in New York as a lawyer. Her synesthesia—a special neurological condition which she keeps secret—serves as a gift in a positive light to make her stand out from others, and at the same time serves as a marker for her sense of displacement. A taste hits Linda every time she hears words spoken to her. The taste on her tongue is a random one which does not have any association with the spoken word itself. Her neurological condition signifies as a series of miscommunications for how the community fails to embrace her because of her physical appearance as an Asian.

Her family secrets—her favorite great-uncle Harper being gay and her father’s affection for Linda’s birth mother, Mai-Dao—are revealed over the course of the novel. I call attention to Linda’s alienation from the community she grew up in as well as to her isolation
from her homeland, Vietnam, and its cultural sensibility. She attempts to fill the void of her racial heritage by understanding her uniqueness as having a biracial/hybrid identity. She integrates herself as a cultural hybrid who understands the long courtship between her father Thomas and her Vietnamese birth mother and the aftermath and destruction of hope to be a democratic country due to the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Chapter Four discusses a larger historical range from the 1800s to the present. The Asian presence in the South has been marginalized, although quite a few Asians landed in the U.S. through New Orleans in the later 1800s to work as railroad construction laborers, as Moon-Ho Jung demonstrates in *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (2006). Not much has been discussed in the history and literature as to the lives of Chinese Americans in the South. This chapter maps out the history of Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta and explores how they have contributed to establish an alternative community which bonds kinship across gender, age, race, and class.

Set in a period spanning the early 20th century through 9/11, Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox* overturns the stereotyping of Chinese immigrants and their descendants as “marginalized” in the Mississippi Delta, as in Ellen Douglass’s interview in the documentary *Mississippi Triangle*. In Shearer’s novel, one of the main characters, Angus Chien, a proprietor of a grocery store, plays a major role in connecting people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds. The Chinese grocery store becomes a trope for multi-cultural diversity and adds a new perspective to define Southern identity, not by race or class, but by the communal heritage.

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16 In the interview, Ellen Douglass demonstrates how the community is divided based on race in the Mississippi Delta. She claims that Chinese people are marginalized. John Jung clarifies the historical account of Chinese in the region in *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton: Lives of Mississippi Delta Chinese Grocer*, 19-35. In explaining why Chinese individuals in the Mississippi Delta engaged in the grocery business rather than laundry, refer to Jung’s “Chinese Laundries in the South” section in *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain*, 64-68.
Asian representation in Southern literature gives views of immigrants in the South by connecting it to other countries as well. This dissertation helps explain the reasons why some Asians find their forever-homes in the South. It also reevaluates the literature about the U.S. South from a broader perspective by adding the wars which are still embedded in the consciousnesses of American contemporaries. This study on the significant Asian presence in the South aims to address the insufficient critical attention given to the subject. I hope that this dissertation will create a space for questioning the status quo and encourage greater involvement in understanding Asians in the South and the broader global diaspora.
CHAPTER ONE

The South and the Pacific Rim

Susan’s Choi’s 1998 novel, *The Foreign Student*,17 expands its creative horizon by strategically employing two locations: Korea and Sewanee, Tennessee in the 1950s. By juxtaposing complex race relations in the segregated South and the U.S.’s fight for democracy in the war-torn Korea, the novel skillfully questions multiple layers of issues, such as the discrepancy between the ideal and the real in the formation of the U.S. democracy in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The novel accomplishes this by placing both the 1950s South as well as the protagonist’s memories of Korea during the Korean War in the present time of the narrative. The structure of Choi’s novel resonates with the larger questioning of American democracy since the foundation of the nation, for instance, when we think of the infamous Indian Removal Act in 1830, as well as the annexation of the Kingdom of Hawaii (1959), Guam (1898) and the Philippines (1898)18 along with Puerto Rico (1898), not to mention the 400 years of subjugation and exploitation of blacks. With this respect, Heidi Kim exemplifies the contradiction the U.S. holds toward their sentiment over Asians as follows:

17 All the quotes in this chapter are taken from *The Foreign Student* (New York: Harper, 1998).
In many periods, Asia has been positioned as an Other, inscrutable foreign places and peoples, containing nations that for much of the twentieth century were openly opposed to the United States: Japan during World War II, Communist China, North Korea, or Communist Vietnam, to name only the most popularly remembered. At the same time, the increasing flow of Asian migration to the United States, in concert with the shifts in racial and national origin restrictions for US immigration and citizenship and the increasing number and generations of native-born citizenship of Asian descent, has forced a steady confrontation with the not-so-foreign within. (5)

Kim points out that Asia and Asians have often been viewed as exotic, foreign, or a cultural other. This perception has been enforced by historical events such as World War II and the Cold War, during which Asian nations were seen as adversaries of the United States. The United States has experienced a significant increase in Asian migration, along with changes in immigration policies that have allowed for a more diverse and growing Asian population. This demographic shift challenges the notion of Asians as exotic or foreign because there are many native-born Asian Americans in American society now. Kim’s argument emphasizes the need to confront the fact that what was once considered foreign is no longer foreign at all. Asian Americans are an integral part of American society, and their experiences, perspectives, and contributions are an essential aspect of the nation’s cultural formation. Kim’s statement is highly relevant when analyzing Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student. In the novel, the main character, Chang Ahn (as the story progresses, his name is Americanized as Chuck) personifies many of the themes and dynamics that Kim exemplifies. He embodies the notion of an “Other” in the segregated South during the Jim Crow Era.

Although the novel does not deliver the impact of American orientalism on the American imperialism in the Pacific Rim, nor gives much detail about the Cold War itself, the narrative structure which invokes the trauma and atrocity of the Korean War within the
protagonist’s new college life in Sewanee foreshadows how the military expansion of the U.S. had stretched to the Indo-Pacific in the 1950s. The contrast between U.S. foreign and domestic policies is also worth noting during the era because of the heightened political activism of the Civil Rights Movement and the Supreme Court’s decision on banning segregation in schools in Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. It was time for a collective national anxiety over race relations.

When it comes to the discussion of Asian immigration and progress toward assimilation in the U.S., the west has been a common ground for the creative imagination in the Asian American novel because of the Asian communities’ expansion in the west for geopolitical reasons. Despite such a trajectory of the regional arenas of the Asian American literary trend, Choi centers the South as her narrative present to illuminate how the segregated system as a community operates based on one’s race for the social hierarchy and status instead of finding the location of Asian-American community expansion in the U.S. west. However, it seems that what she enacts is not just the assimilation process of Asians in the U.S., because the dynamic interracial interaction and communication takes place in her novel by focusing on Chuck. Choi needed to employ the South as the center of discussion of race and gender, particularly because the issues of race and gender are not just the Southern regional problems, but because of the system itself having a fault.

Hence, this chapter demonstrates how the pairing of the Korean protagonist, Chang Ahn and his love interest, Katherine Monroe plays a role for the reader to reevaluate the formation of the Southern ruling class and its hetero paternalism which ostracizes the

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19 This chapter is an extended and revised version of the presentation entitled “From Korea to the U.S. South in the Mid-1950s: Trauma and Race Relations in Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student,” which the author has made in National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates 2022.
transgressors of the traditional relationship and family foundation. The chapter also goes back into the historical account of how the U.S. imperialistic gaze in the Asian pacific region during the Cold War period fostered the migration to the U.S. from many Asian countries. On the process of migrations to the U.S., the Asian face became the visible target for racialization which kept them from having access to the resources for economic advancement. More importantly, Asian racialization and exclusion was carefully maneuvered from the onset of their migration to the U.S. by U.S. politics, which saw Asians as expendable people to be exploited to compensate for the lack of cheap manual labor.

By analyzing how xenophobia, or the dehumanizing of Asian men, played a significant role in the political climate of the U.S. and how such ideas became a filter for censorship in deciding the binary framework of patriots/enemies and foreigners/Americans in the American psyche, this chapter also focuses on how the Red Scare in the Cold War era after the World War II permeated the community.

Chuck’s racial identity is caught between the binary of black and white in the South; therefore, this chapter is an attempt to question such borders to divide one from another in terms of race, gender, and nationality by exemplifying Chuck’s fluidity in his racial identity which constantly shifts depending on who he is affiliated with. Through people’s different reactions to Chuck, the definition of race is not a fixed concept but a fluid one.

By doing so, this chapter discusses the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and the process of assimilation during the 1950s. The superpower status of the U.S. in the twentieth century traces back to the nineteenth century and the expansion of their military bases in the Pacific in the 1950s. The grand design of the democratic hegemony of the U.S. over the communist Soviet Union and China in the 1950s creates the dichotomy between the pre-existing
ruling class and the relatively recent immigrants/refugees who came to the U.S. The novel depicts such an ironic system in which the crusader for democracy in the world creates the Imperialist America which keeps creating colonizing countries in the pacific rim. Such a patriotic/paternalist approach to Asian countries creates the seeming moral/cultural/material superiority of the colonizers against the colonized. The argument in this chapter concludes that the propaganda to initiate the U.S. expansion in Asia as the moral right to defend democracy in fear of communism leads to the constant censorship of people’s watchful eyes to promote the exclusion of anything “foreign” and “non-binary” as a whole.

Lastly, by adding the Korean War to the discussion as the focal point of reference in the politics of U.S. nationalism and imperialism, this chapter fills the historical void of the Cold War politics which took place in the Korean peninsula. By doing so, this chapter aims to provide a close reading of the text by analyzing the representation of a Korean male in 1950s Tennessee so that it adds more diversified interpretation on race and gender by ranging from the local U.S. South to Korea. The argument in this chapter is supported by the close reading of the text by using U.S. Foreign Policy as a broader spectrum for looking at the U.S. as the epicenter of cultural imperialism in the twentieth century. The rise of the global status as superpower affects how people in the U.S. perceive and treat the recent immigrants through a different form of paternalism which is based on the cultural and economic superiority as the defender of democracy, except for the loss of the Vietnam War.

This chapter analyzes how Chuck represents the changing demographics of Asian Americans. He is part of the wave of Asian migration to the United States. His experience as an immigrant reflects the challenges that Asians faced during this period. His role starts as instrumental filter for reader to see the societal norms and behavior on race relations; however,
his role is no longer simply the “foreign” student as the story unfolds. His choice to stay in Sewanee in various communities as well as Chinatown in Chicago and New Orleans, illustrates his transformation from the “foreign other” to someone who is part of American society.

**Susan Choi and the South**

Susan Choi reenacts Chuck’s experience in the Korean War (1950-1953) in the present narrative time in 1955 in the South by inserting Chuck’s traumatic recollection in Korea into the chronological narrative which takes place in Sewanee, Tennessee. Choi employs a Korean man as the main character as someone who is “foreign” to the customs and mannerisms of his new home.

Susan Choi was born in South Bend, Indiana to a Korean father and a Jewish mother, according to the biography in Steven Barclay Agency. Her father was a mathematician who taught at the University of Notre Dame. Her parents grew apart when she was nine. Choi and her mother moved to Houston, Texas in which she immersed herself in her mother’s Jewish side of the family. After graduating from Yale University with a B.A. in literature, she was trained professionally in the MFA program at Cornell University. She became a fact-checker for the *New Yorker* for a while and then became a writer. Now she teaches creative writing at Yale University. Her biracial background gives her a fluid identity by having as much exposure to her father’s Korean heritage as to her mother’s Eastern European Jewish background.

Choi explains the similarity between Chuck and her father in migrating to the U.S. as follows:

> My dad is an immigrant from Korea. He came to this country in 1955 from Seoul to attend the University of the South at Sewanee. He was a little older

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than most undergrads because his education has been interrupted by the Korean War. And as soon as the Korean War ended, he got himself out of the country, basically with a letter writing campaign. (Interview, *Negative Space*)

She realizes that her father never talked about his life in Korea nor encouraged her to take Korean lessons. She recalls that she is deprived of having her Korean family history. She addresses how her father was reluctant to talk about his past life in Korea, which led her to be curious about how the past makes such a strong impact on his life:

My father, I think, understandably had a lot of ambivalence about Korea. It had been a very painful childhood for him, not just because of what the family had been put through. I think the question of whether his father was a collaborator is still an open question. It's still really unsettled. I think probably my father's answer would be that his father collaborated out of necessity to protect his family and not out of a desire to, you know, uphold the Japanese regime. But those distinctions weren't really made. So it was hard to get my dad to talk about his past in Korea. And even now, he is still so obviously conflicted when he talks about the past. (*Negative Space*)

In the interview, she explains the reason why she wrote about an Asian character in her first novel: “I think that a lot of my writing has come out of real-life situations involving Asians or Asian Americans that intrigued me or provoked me or just that I wanted to know more about…. I mean, it’s obvious with my first novel because it’s based on my father’s life in Korea.” Choi chooses a Korean character to recreate the Korean immigrant’s experience by patchworking the missing parts and adding historical background. By doing so, she reimagines what might have been for her father, who had to have a fresh start when he was already deeply scarred to the point that he does not want to pass on to his daughter his cultural heritage, including the Korean language. She traces her father’s migration to Tennessee in which he caught up on his delayed

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study because of the Korean War. He was all alone with neither his family nor his Korean classmates. Choi reimagines the experience of a “foreign” student in the 1950s by exemplifying her father’s history. By doing so, she approaches a mystery of her father’s silence on his life in Korea. She also fills the missing void as to why he has made a conscious choice for his daughter not to take Korean language lessons but focuses on his daughter’s English skills in her early education.

The Southern region and its culture is diverse. Some from the South do not generally consider Texas as part of the South in its culture because of its connection to the western frontier and the big presence of Latinx communities among other features; however, Choi’s experience in Texas gives credibility to her depiction of the small town, which is the focus of the novel, Sewanee in Franklin County, Tennessee. With being familiar with Southern culture as well as being perceived as an outsider because of her Asian last name, Choi’s novels deal with questions about region, nationality, culture, and ethnicity in the United States. The Foreign Student creates a contact zone between the war distressed Korean Chang/Chuck at age twenty-five and the fallen Southern belle figure, Katherine Monroe at age twenty-eight, both of whom are social outcasts in the conservative small college town, Sewanee in Tennessee. Choi recreates the familial bond between her father’s Korean heritage and her adolescent exposure to the South. In this sense, the novel is also about Choi’s personal journey to recreate the missing link of the Korean side of her family history.

23 The regional characteristics and the ambiguity of the region’s border among the Southern states is particularly intriguing in All over the Map: Rethinking American Regions, eds. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University), 1996.
The Interracial Love Story with an Open Ending:
Kathrine Monroe and Chuck

*The Foreign Student* takes the form of a romance between a Korean man and a white Southern woman in their twenties in the segregated era of 1955 in the most racially charged area in the U.S. historically. The protagonist Chang Ahn (his first name is dubbed as Chuck for the convenience to the Western ears) migrates to the U.S. by receiving a full scholarship by the generous aid from the Episcopal council to attend the University of the South in Sewanee in 1955 after having survived traumatic atrocities in the civil war of his homeland, the Korean peninsula. Lost in the translation of his traumatic experiences, he suffers from nightmares when he meets Katherine Monroe, who lives in a summer house in Sewanee. Through the friendship with her, his past is slowly revealed to the reader by the disruptive narrative between his recollection of Korea and his new life in Sewanee.

Chuck used to work as a translator from English to Korean to propagate the U.S. democracy to his people by working for the United States Information Service (USIS), “‘overseers’ purveyor of American news and American culture, Gershwin and *Time* and democracy” (84). His occupation as a translator signifies how the two different languages generate untranslatable excesses, even if he tries to make meaning out of both.

Under the colonialization of Korea by the imperial Japanese regime, Chuck was born into the affluent elite class in which his father was the only Korean granted the status of “Professor.” Chuck grows up being surrounded by affluence: a family estate, a house maid and caretakers of the house, a good education and respectability. He nurtures his friendship with Kim Jaeson (301) who has a completely different background from Chuck. Kim joins the communist regime in the north whereas Chuck remains working for the South. By the help of
his uncle, he tries to escape to Busan. However, he is taken to Cheju Island instead and tortured after being mistaken for a communist spy. With the excruciating pain of the torture, he confesses the name of the collaborator who helps the communists hide in caves in Cheju Island for the guerrillas against Busan. He cannot find his best friend Kim and gets disillusioned about his country.

He hopes that Korea will recover from the Japanese colonization and that it will regenerate again. Instead, Korea is divided into two: the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea), both of which have the support respectively of communist countries, such as the Soviet Union and China, and the democratic U.S. The atrocity of the warfare makes people take sides and fight against each other through the intervention of the USSR and China, which back up the communist DPRK, and of the U.S., which backs up the democratic ROK. Chuck sees these interventions as another form of colonization. He leaves his war-torn country behind and lives a new life as a recluse because what he deals with internally is the unspeakable trauma which goes beyond the language limitation he struggles with. His slow and stuttering English becomes a metaphor for his unspeakable trauma through many levels of dehumanizing colonization and its impact in his homeland, Korea. At the same time, Chuck is a victim of political circumstances which involves not just his home country Korea but also the two political hegemonies of the U.S. and Soviet Union. Depending on the political climate in Korea, his identity constantly shifts. By the time when the novel introduces Chuck as a foreign student in the University of the South in Sewanee in 1950, he is psychologically numb and wounded and becomes a passive participant in his new life at college. His dissociation from the Southern mannerisms, culture, and race relations serves as a lens for a reader to experience what it is like to be a Korean “foreign” student in the
conservative elite community in Sewanee, Tennessee. Thus, Chuck plays a role as a filter for the reader to see what others acknowledge him to be in terms of gender and race.

Just like the traumatized Chuck, Katherine is portrayed as someone who lives as an outcast from the ruling class of her community. She lives with an open secret which the Sewanee community shares. On a superficial level, people in the college town are polite and friendly to her. By the time Chuck meets her, her reputation as a “ruined” woman has already permeated throughout the community. She is an affluent Southern belle who is from New Orleans. The rumor has it that she had a relationship with her father’s college best friend, the Shakespearean scholar Charles Addison when she was only fourteen years old. The age difference between them is twenty-eight years.

Although Prof. Charles Addison is a divorced man from his previous marriage, he keeps Katherine hanging and has been taking advantage of her without even committing to their relationship. Her late father set up an inheritance for her on his passing, so she does not have to work. Katherine’s mother punishes her by disowning her so the relationship between the mother and the daughter is broken. Her mother’s misogyny against her daughter for not following the protocol as a Southern lady cuts Katherine off from the maternal bond with her mother. Her mother is ashamed of Katherine for having a sexual relationship with Prof. Addison who is the best friend of Katherine’s father who was also a professor in the University of the South. In her late twenties, Katherine’s relationship with Charles grows old. From his roommate Bill Crane, Chuck learns about their affair when Chuck has developed feelings toward her. He also hears that Katherine and Charles got engaged so Chuck goes to Chicago for a summer job at a bindery for a change. Through Chuck’s stay in the boardinghouse in Chinatown, he encounters Japanese, Filipinos, and Chinese and starts thinking about starting fresh for the first time since he got to
the U.S., but he quickly packs his belongings to take a greyhound bus to see Katherine in New Orleans once he receives a letter from Charles to inform him of the whereabouts of Katherine and her mother, who is in the last stage of her ailment. The final gesture of forgiveness takes place between the mother and the daughter when Chuck joins them. The novel closes with an open ending with Chuck’s feeling of being “free,” although there is no clear suggestion that Chuck and Katherine are going to be together.

Through the open ending of the novel keeping the relationship between Katherine and Chuck suspended, The Foreign Student is not limited to an interracial relationship in the segregated South but also expands the scope of analysis on the construction of race and gender by connecting the South to the Pacific Rim. Chuck’s Korean identity illuminates the geopolitical ideology toward gender and race which is permeated through the collective consciousness of the people in the U.S. Let us take a moment to reflect on the historical context of the era in the 1950s to expand the narratives of Chuck’s experience in the U.S. and his recollection in the Korean peninsula since Chuck’s narrative goes back to his recollection in Korea.

U.S. Imperialism in the Pacific Rim as a Precursor to the Cold War in Asia in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century established the U.S. as the superpower which houses many military bases overseas. The bases of the orientalism which the U.S. imperialism withheld domestically stemmed from the expansion of the U.S. to Asia for trade in the nineteenth century. This section covers a brief history of the U.S. expansion to the Pacific both for trade and the establishment of military bases overseas.

In 1853, American Commodore Matthew Perry came to Urage with black ships and
forced Japan to open ports for trade. Japan had limited the international trade to participating only with China and the Netherlands during the seclusion of the country from 1641 to 1853. In 1854, the trade between the U.S. and Japan launched. In the meantime, the U.S. overthrew the Hawaiian Monarchy in 1893 and Queen Lili’uokalani, the last queen of the Hawaiian monarch was forced to abdicate the throne of the Kingdom of Hawaii\textsuperscript{24}. The Kamehameha clan of the Hawaiian monarch had to give up their reign. Hawaii had vast land to harvest sugar, coffee, and pineapples so that the U.S. took control of the tariff by occupying Hawaii. Then the U.S. built the Naval Station Pearl Harbor in 1887 so that it would protect the trading business in Hawaii as well as make a presence in the Pacific. Hawaii became annexed to the U.S. in 1898. As a result of the U.S. fighting against Imperialist Spain in the same year, the U.S. took over Guam first then annexed the Philippines in the same year\textsuperscript{25}. The year 1898 is considered the time when the U.S. made a prominent military presence in the Pacific. The U.S. also took hold of Puerto Rico in the same year. By juxtaposing Chuck’s memory with the story line of his present time in Sewanee, the novel takes the reader to Korea and its relation to the U.S. politics in defending the democracy against communist’s regime.

This historical understanding is crucial in the process of how Asians have been labeled as a cultural “Other” since China was the main target for the U.S. to gain control of its abundant resources initially. Through the political conflicts and the subsequent wars between the U.S. and Asian countries created the process of labeling Asians as “aliens” to the eyes of the U.S. Therefore, Chuck represents a cultural “Other” in the scheme of insider/outsider binary.

\textsuperscript{24} “Americans Overthrow Hawaiian Monarchy” (“This Day in History January 17,” \textit{History}) at https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/americans-overthrow-hawaiian-monarchy.

Chuck’s Racial Identity as the Third One

Chuck joins the University of the South on a full-scholarship program when he is twenty-five in 1955. I would like to focus on how his encounter with the following four people—Louis, his roommate Bill Crane, his Shakespeare professor Charles Addison, and Chuck’s love interest, Katherine Monroe—show the different aspects of manners and social protocols in terms of Chuck’s racial identity.

Crane is Chuck’s roommate at Sewanee. Crane is the one who warns Chuck not to shake hands with Louis, who is the black table servant. Chuck wonders:

Social protocol at Sewanee confounded him. In his first week he’d shaken hands with the colored table servant at formal Friday dinner. This man, who he had learned was named Louis, had been stationed at the end of Chuck’s table in a brass-buttoned jacket and snow-white felt gloves, and when Chuck found that the evening’s seating arrangement had him at the end of the table where Louis stood, he had greeted Louis and shaken his hand. (15-16)

Chuck’s roommate Crane tells him it is inappropriate to shake hands with Louis (16).

Although the novel does not mention Brown vs. Board of Education which made the “separate but equal” policy illegal in 1954, it was the pivotal moment in history to give justice to school integration. The Southern writer Lillian Smith, for instance, advocates for the integration in *Now Is the Time* as follows: “It took a long time for enough of us to see how wrong segregation is, how injurious it is to a whole nation for a group of its children in any state to be set apart or hidden away by law because of their differences--whatever those differences may be, real or unreal” (16). Under the historical context of segregation, Chuck’s presence becomes a buffer for the reader to reassess how the political and economic power hierarchy takes place domestically by embedding Korea’s post-colonial condition in the storyline. Choi carefully
juxtaposes war-torn Korea and Sewanee to question what democracy is.

Therefore, Crane’s remarks that Chuck should distance himself from Louis are an attempt to maintain the social inequality between whites and blacks. In 1955, the fourteen-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till was lynched in Drew, Mississippi. It was the era of turmoil on racial inequality. Even if author Choi does not write about the racially charged crime against humanity of the Emmett Till lynching, it is clear that the year 1955 as the setting of the novel places the significant meaning for the reader to witness how Chuck’s social status is not fixed. The relationship between Louis and Chuck is one of equality to Chuck until Crane preaches the social protocol, advising against a direct physical contact with the black server.

Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012), for instance, questions the myth of how economic affluence took over the U.S. in the 1950s after World War II as follows:

> I was interested in the 1950s because we associate it with the postwar Doris Day decade, when it really wasn't like that. Forty thousand Americans died in the Korean War, which wasn't called a war—it was called a police action. It was the time of the McCarthy hearings and a lot of medical apartheid, the license of [eugenics practitioners] preying on black women, the syphilis trials on black men. The '50s were a highly violent race period. Emmett Till was murdered in 1955. There were a lot of moments like that. The seeds of the '60s and '70s were already being planted. (Interview with Lisa Shea)\(^27\)

To unveil the violation of human rights during the 1950s,\(^28\) Morrison exposes medical

\(^{26}\) One of the main goals of this dissertation is to depict underrepresented people’s voices by focusing on Asian representations in the contemporary fiction written about the U.S. South. It does not mean, however, discredit or dismiss African American people’s voices in the South. Novels and documents which are written by them need to be thoroughly discussed.


\(^{28}\) Pete Daniel argues how the Civil Rights era has led African American farmers to lose their land in *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina P, 2013).
eugenics experiments on black women and Tuskegee syphilis experiments. Simultaneously, Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi also advocate how the racial conflict becomes the battleground in the legal system in the South during the 1950s:

For example, the famous Southern case of *Loving v. Virginia*, though not explicitly about Asian Americans, shows that in 1959 anxieties about racial mixing, miscegenation, and intermarriage still reference Asian Americans within discourses of Whiteness. The Lovings—Mildred, who was of Black and Native American ancestry and Richard, who was White—were charged with violating Virginia’s ban against interracial marriage. (17)

Desai and Joshi argue further: “it is also apparent that in 1959, anxiety about racial mixing, miscegenation, and intermarriage continued to dominate discourses of Whiteness” (17). This statement shows how racial mixing was a threat to the community as a potential upheaval of the societal norms and class system. They continue to demonstrate how a court case like this shows “how racialization occurred through the legal system, and also impacted how Asian Americans experienced other economic, political, educational, religious, and cultural institutions” (17).

Desai and Joshi argue how Asians’ positionality is not a fixed one but situational, particularly in the South in which the division of race and class is intertwined: they explain “(c)learly the dominant Black/White racial binary has affected the racialization of Asian Americans. Asian Americans have been seeing as in-between, partially Black and White, mediating middlemen, third race, or as part of a racial triangulation” (17). Therefore, Chuck’s racialization depends on how his company reacts and defines his identity.

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The relationship between Chuck and his roommate Bill Crane seems to be an equal friendship on the surface; however, Chuck knows that he is merely a possession to Crane: “He (Chuck) knew that for Crane he was an easy and dependable possession, as if at any time Crane might announce to someone, ‘My man Chuck’” (41). Although Chuck likes Crane, he never tells him that he spent time talking with Katherine alone; instead, he lies that he was in the library. Although Chuck’s social status is almost white by denouncing the possible friendship with the black waiter Louis, Chuck knows that his social status is situational depending on whom he deals with.

Chuck’s fluid identity becomes a subject of redefinition. Regarding this, Leslie Bow explains how the Asian presence serves as the cultural other or the third race which is a between “almost” white but “not quite” status.

The novel’s contribution lies not in expanding notions of Southern literature through immigrant addition, or expanding Asian American literature though immigrant addition, or expanding Asian American literature’s regional reach, but in understanding how borders, categories, and groupings come into being—punitive so—and how they can be remade or redefined. (176)

When Chuck is with Crane, he becomes Crane’s commodity as something unique and “foreign.” The end of the friendship which stands on the bases of Crane as the superior person comes to an end in the end of the fall semester:

Crane had done so poorly the first term that his father threatened him with disinheritance and military service and he vanished, into a new frightened seriousness, from which he only emerged when completely resourceless. These became the sole times Chuck saw him. The odd comfort came Crane had derived from Chuck’s presence in their first semester dissolved. Crane resented a foreigner’s doing better than he did, and because Crane was doing his worst work in math he grew suspicious of math for the distasteful foreignness of its appearance, which he began to see as the root cause of Chuck’s facility with it. Math was a pernicious, useless system controlled by pernicious, inscrutable
persons, like his malevolent professors and his Oriental floormate. (220)
The connection between “distasteful foreignness” of math and Chuck’s skillfulness in math creates a suspicion to Crane. It derives from a racist stereotype which Asians are good at math. “Crane came to demand Chuck’s help with algebra” but he “wasn’t interested in clumsy explanations” (220). Crane’s jealousy and chauvinism degrades Katherine just to hurt Chuck: Crane makes Chuck uncomfortable by bringing Katherine down: “I don’t care what you call her so long as you’re not swooning anymore. You were starting to embarrass me, Junior” (221). Even though Chuck is much older and experienced than Crane, Crane pushes Chuck down. Crane enjoys insulting Katherine, knowing that she is Chuck’s love interest: “A whore. She’s Addison’ whore. Everybody knows that” (221). Katherine’s identity has been reduced to be a mere sexual object for pleasure to Charles Addison by being labeled as “a whore” to Crane. Crane’s definition of Katherine indicates that she does not have any social standing in terms of her respectability. Even her sexual autonomy is controlled by the community which prioritizes the patriarchy. Charles is a divorced man so the relationship between Charles and Katherine should not cause a problem in theory. However, when they started the relationship, she was a teenager, and he was twenty-eight seniors to her. A white woman’s body and sexuality is owned by the dominant ruling men’s gaze as well as women’s who benefit from the patronizing patriarchy which functions only by excluding transgressors who violates the protocols. Katherine has been seduced by him at the very young age and remained his lover by being faithful to him. Nonetheless, the blame for the sexual transgression is laid on her, not on him.

Charles Addison, Chuck’s professor/Katherine’s lover also patronizes Chuck just as he approaches his black help as follows: “It was another well-known eccentricity of Addison’s that he was friendly with the colored help. He often made an irritating display of shaking hands with
the table-servers at university functions” (30). This patronizing behavior is really “racist love,”[^32] as defined by Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan. “Racist love” displays racial or cultural superiority by projecting docility onto the Oriental. Bow further develops this concept into Southern paternalism toward people of color (171). Bow explains the similarity between colonial paternalism and Southern race relations: “Colonialist paternalism is easily recognizable within the Southern legacy of race relations, the mythology of faded gentry notwithstanding. In the case of the “Oriental,” difference can be “charming” insofar as it does not disturb” (171). The relationship between Charles Addison and Chuck never departs this framework of thwarted colonial racist love which reduces Chuck to a racial commodity without personality. Charles Addison’s relationship with Katherine also displays a disturbing paternalism which controls her sexuality and takes away her autonomy.

Let us look at Katherine’s relationship with Charles and examine the process of how she leaves him by having Chuck as someone with whom she truly connects. Perhaps one of the striking aspects of the novel is the depiction of interracial dating between Chuck and Katherine. Another shocking episode is that of pedophiliac Charles Addison taking Katherine’s virginity when she was only fourteen years old, and he was forty-two. Katherine stays with him in Sewanee and her mother disowns her because of the incident. To the community’s eyes, she is “ruined,” and she is his “whore” (221), and this is an open secret.

Leslie Bow comments that “Southern tolerance of eccentricity seems only to extend to white men; thus, Addison is not a former pedophile, but a charming rake” (174). The anxiety of race-mixing is a recurring literary topic, as we observe in William Faulkner’s *Absalom,*

Absalom! (1936), in which Henry Sutpen shot his half-brother Charles Bon who is Sutpen’s shadow family. The interracial dating between Katherine and Chuck is exposed to the public surveillance and gaze in fear of the sexual transgression. Bow also comments on this as follows: “the racialization of a Korean man in Jim Crow culture engages both a racial continuum and other processes of assigning social status as well, both gendered and sexual” (178). She also summarizes how the Chuck-Katherine relationship will create a safe alternative community which deviates from the existing norms of the community of the Jim Crow South:

“Foreignness,” the novel proposes, is something that a Southern white woman and Asian man share; in doing so, it creates an alternative community through the intimacy of two. However romanticized, this recasting of a basis for alliance and belonging asks us to reconsider the criteria for patriotism and the irrationality of racial divisions, and to explore the potentially punitive boundaries we place around affiliation, loyalty, and identity. (179)

As Bow mentions here, over the course of the novel the meaning of the “foreignness” changes meaning from a target for scrutiny and racialization to the key to exemplify freedom. After going through so many labels of racial identity imposed on him by others, Chuck finds peace within himself when he thinks of his family estate in North Korea: “He himself never saw the North again, or his family’s country estate, for as long as he lived. The estate could not possibly exist anymore. But that memory, of that place, was sealed like a globe within him” (317). In the end of the novel, he loses his scholarship and works with Louis and his crew in the university kitchen, and yet, he finds peace in himself. *The Foreign Student* depicts the process of resilience and healing through the embedding of the two different cultural landscapes, Korea, and Sewanee.
Chuck’s Mobility from Sewanee to Chicago

Chuck decides to leave for Chicago to work for the summer after Katherine announces her engagement with Charles Addison. Out of the novel’s fourteen chapters, chapter ten is the crucial vantage point to observe the process how Chuck is racialized by people around him. In the greyhound bus, Chuck meets with a white boy of ten or eleven. He tells Chuck that his brother has been to the war. He offers gum to Chuck, innocently commenting that “My brother says gooks are nuts about gum” (229). The boy uses the derogatory racial slur “gook” to Chuck. The boy continues to share his passion for Chinatown in Chicago to Chuck as a gesture of friendliness:

“There’s a big old Chinaman town in Chi where they’ve got a place where they’ve got sharks and giant snakes and monkeys hung in the windows to eat and you can go and they take the head off with an ax and cook it and then you can go and there’s a big assortment,” he said with incongruous maturity, “of throwing knives and they’ve also got kung fu stuff and airplanes.” (229)

The boy’s description of Chinatown is filled with barbaric imagery such as “big snakes” and “monkeys.” Here, Chinatown represents an “excess” which goes beyond the realm of the western culture. As well as the boy owns his fantasized Chinatown in Chicago, he embraces what Chuck represents to him—the oriental curio—and this is also a different type of “racist love” which the boy withholds love and hate toward “orient” through the imperialistic gaze. The boy asks Chuck to read a comic on the bus because he has a motion sickness. Even in the comic, a figure of Chinese villain appears with the usual, and over-used interjection, “Aiee!” (230). The stereotyping of racialized Asian male figure prevails through popular culture and media. The boy consumes the stereotypes to create a biased image of Asians. The boy’s innocent racist talk is consistent: “My brother says you can’t tell the difference between gooks and chinks so I’m getting a good look at you and when he takes me to Chinatown with him I’ll bet I can tell. Can
you tell?” (232). He quotes the two racial slurs, “gooks” and “chinks” from his brother and is not sensitive to how derogatory these words mean.

Chuck, on the other hand, is indifferent to the casual insults which have been made by the boy. What Chuck has gone through is much more than this personal insult. When he worked for the State Department, the conversation between his boss Peterfield and the British journalist Langston shows how Chuck’s state of subjugation is systematic through the colonialism from Japan, the Cold War domination by the U.S. and Soviet Union/China. Langston and Peterfield talks about the truce of Korean War by mentioning an atomic bomb:

“Last week Truman said he thought he might drop the atom bomb. That was a terrible gaffe. Attlee flew to Washington and ripped hell out of everyone.” Langston was grinning. He was always enlivened by the spectacle of British rationality confronting American stupidity.

“The point is that the Americans will not waste an atom bomb on Korea. They’ll sooner leave.” (192)

In front of Chuck, Langston and Peterfield talk about an atomic bomb to see if the U.S. drops it or not by concluding the truce of the war is approaching. The way they talk about an atomic bomb sounds casual as if they are talking about a game. The insults from the boy on the bus to Chicago and the insults from Langston and Peterfield both stem from the U.S. expansion of the Cold War Politics. In both cases, Chuck functions as a filter to the reader to see through their versions of Chuck, not Chuck himself. His identity is reduced to be an “Asian” who does not have the same capacity and humanity as the Westerners think they only possess.

**Epiphany in Chinatown—A Road to Self-Enactment**

Chuck stays in a boarding house in Chinatown, surrounded by so many Asians with

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33 For more information on racial slurs and their origin, see *The Racial Slur Database* at http://www.rsdb.org/race/vietnamese.
different ethnic backgrounds: “Lakeview Hotel was a regular boardinghouse occupied entirely by Japanese men who lined the narrow stoop, smoking, and filled the broken armchairs in the lobby” (241). He also meets people who just got out of the relocation center by Japanese incarceration: “Many of the families in the neighborhood who weren’t new immigrants had lived in California before being interned during World War II, and their only loyalty now was to the generous Midwest, where it seemed that anyone could do anything” (244-245). Chuck witnesses Japanese Americans being robbed of opportunities, their land, and resources because they are labeled as enemy citizens. Chinatown in Chicago in the 1950s in The Foreign Student is filled with displaced people not just of Chinese origin but of many different ethnic groups’ diaspora. From 1942-1945 with the president’s Executive Order 9066, Japanese Americans were sent to the internment camps. It is crucial for Chuck to witness the displaced Japanese Americans in Chinatown to question the formation of national identity in the U.S. and its citizenship. Mae M. Ngai explains how the forced assimilation policy led to the relocation of Japanese Americans: “Internment was a crisis of citizenship, in which citizenship was first nullified on grounds of race and then reconstructed by means of internment, forced cultural assimilations, and ethnic dispersal” (201). Ngai explains how the myth of the U.S. as an Immigrants’ Country derives from the first wave of immigration boom from the European counties so that the success of the immigrant story mostly applies to those of Anglo-Saxons. Ngai emphasizes that in the formation of national identity and citizenship, Asians and people of color were systematically excluded. In illustrating this exclusion, Ngai highlights how the U.S. government hindered Japanese assimilation by categorizing them as unfit for American society:

Assimilationist thinking was inherently flawed by racist presumptions. The WRA viewed Japanese Americans as racial children in need of democratic tutelage, infantilizing them in much the same way that the government constructed Filipino colonial subjects and Native American Indians as dependent wards not yet fit for democratic citizenship. Seen in this light, the nullification of Japanese Americans’ citizenship was a constitutive element of the project. (179)

Japanese citizens were the only people who had been to send to the internment camps among other enemy citizens who resided in the U.S., such as Italians or Germans. Displaced Japanese who had lost everything drifted to Chinatown in the Midwest, rather than going back to California. By witnessing so many displaced people from the former colonial Asian countries, Chuck suddenly have a moment of realization about his freedom: “It occurred to him, for the first time in his entire life, that he didn’t have to be a student. There were endless other ways to live, endless other lives he could take, without waiting for church councils or Dean Bowers or a gracious invitation. He could stay here and get another job, in a restaurant, even at a casino” (245). The Great Migration attracted many people to Chicago from the South, not only blacks but also many white sharecroppers in the South. The depiction of Chicago as a diasporic haven for Asians from many different backgrounds indicates that Chuck has a new opportunity to start a new life by being surrounded by Asians from different background as well as by other ethnic minorities. In fact, the Chinatown becomes a site for reclaiming his own freedom and the process of healing from the trauma of Korean War. However, a moment of epiphany strikes him in the middle of Chinatown, surrounded by many Asians: “Even among them, he felt suddenly incurably alone” (248). Even if he is surrounded by many Asians, he finds himself not wanting stay in Chinatown: “He had known, at the back of his intoxicating happiness here, that he would never really stay. He already saw this room as he would in the future, remembering it” (250). In a profound realization, Chuck comes to understand that his race does not encompass his entire
identity. Specifically, being Asian, and more precisely Korean, does not serve as a defining factor for his entire being. He recognizes that race functions as a convenient construct wielded by those in power—the suppressors or ruling class—to exert control by emphasizing marked differences, including language, skin color, and carrying value systems. Consequently, Chicago transforms into a space where Chuck can assert autonomy over his own life.

“Are you a spy?”: Red Scare Both in Korea and New Orleans

During Chuck’s summer job at a bindery in Chicago, his boss, Fran, insists that he must surrender any money found between the book leaves during the binding process. Fran, who openly expresses racist remarks by calling Chuck a “Slanty-eyed son of a bitch!” (237), is the epitome of blatant racism. When Chuck discovers a hundred-dollar bill, he decides to defy Fran’s unjust demand. Despite Fran being the one wrongfully confiscating bills in the book leaves, she defines Chuck as a thief.

This incident marks a turning point for Chuck as he chooses to challenge societal expectations. He quits his summer job, takes the money, and heads to New Orleans to see Katherine. She is caring for her mother, Glee, in the last stage of cancer. This act of defiance represents Chuck’s first step in pursuing his desires. However, the scrutiny over Chuck’s identity persists not only in Chicago but also in New Orleans. In both places, he is constantly under surveillance, forcing him to confront the judgments and expectations imposed upon him.

A recurring motif in the novel is the question “Are you a spy?” directed at Chuck both in Korea and New Orleans. His identity becomes a subject of constant scrutiny and is often misconstrued as Chinese: “Speak English? Speakee English?” (274) or “Are you a Chinese national?” and “Are you familiar with the Port Security Program? Are you an able-bodied
seaman?” (275). Upon arriving in New Orleans, he is immediately mistaken for a Chinese communist. The Cold War and Red Scare politics fuel domestic fears of communism, leading to widespread xenophobia. Unfortunately, Asians bear the brunt of this xenophobia: “Are you or have you ever been associated with a known member of the Communist party? Do you have family or friends in New Orleans? Is someone expecting you here?” (275).

The phrase “Are you a spy?” echoes in a later torture scene on pages 306 and 309 in chapter thirteen, Chuck’s recollection of a harrowing event. Here, he is mistakenly captured and tortured by his allies who share his belief in democracy. The repetition of this question in both Korean and American contexts emphasizes a central theme of the novel. The Foreign Student probes the fundamental question of identity—questioning who we are as individuals, as human beings, and as citizens in the complex landscape of 1950s America.

**Asians and Xenophobia in the 1950s**

Katherine is aware of the biased view of the church community against Korea as a barbaric place and against Chuck as a foreign student from the far orient. Katherine acknowledges the gap between Chuck as a person whom she bonds with and the community’s versions of him as a reduced symbol as something “foreign” so that they can pity him. The paring of Chuck and Katherine creates an alternative community formation inside the larger community in which the patronizing paternalism dominates. Chuck agrees to lose the full scholarship and complies to pay back the debt by working with Louis and black helpers in the kitchen. The ending does not promise anything about the progress of the interracial couple of Chuck and Katherine nor the progress of Louis’s social status on the rise of the Civil Rights movements yet. However, he finds solace and embraces his new life:
He got along with these men (who work at the kitchen). They never peered into his thoughtful silences, but they accepter him with humor, and their company sheltered him…and even at the end of their workday, eight o’clock in the evening, the sun was still with them, guttering through the trees. He turns his face toward it. There are moments like this, rare instances of certainty and self-possession. (324)

Lisa Lowe summarizes how Asian American novels become a site for questioning of one’s origin, place, nationality, and race.

Asian-American literary texts often reveal heterogeneity or integration. On one level, this heterogeneity is expressed in the unfixed, unclosed field of texts written by authors at different distances and generations from cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Philippine, Indian, Vietnamese, and Lao—or, as in the case of Hawaiian and Pacific Islander cultures, not immigrants at all but colonized, dispossessed, and deracinated. The Asian American constituency is composed of men and women of exclusively Asian parents and or mixed race, of refugees and nonrefugees, of the English speaking and the non-English speaking, of people of urban, rural, and different class backgrounds, and of heterosexuals as well as gays and lesbians. (43)35

*The Foreign Student* aligns with Lisa Lowe’s observation that Asian American literary texts often serve as a platform for questioning one’s origin, place, nationality, and race. The novel delves into the heterogeneity within the Asian American community as we observed in Chuck’s boardinghouse in Chicago, showcasing various backgrounds, including the differences in distance from their ancestral cultures, generational gaps, national origins, linguistic diversity, urban or rural upbringing, class backgrounds, and sexual orientations.

*The Foreign Student* represents a search for freedom, survival in the face of social isolation, and the stigmatization of race and gender roles in a rigid society where paternalism hiders progress and the inclusion of alternative social forms. The introduction of Asian-led

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novels or novels with Asian characters is indeed a valuable addition to the literary canon, not only for the diverse representation of Asian ethnic groups but also its potential to unearth buried personal accounts of history. The novel skillfully combines Cold War politics and U.S. expansion into Asia during the 1950s with domestic Asian phobia, creating a multi-layered narrative that speaks to the U.S. South’s complexities and the way in which personal histories can reflect broader historical narratives.

Lowe concludes:

The crisis of U.S. national identity during the period of war in Asia, coupled with the imperatives of racializing and proletarianizing the Asian populations immigrating to the United States from a variety of national origins, has necessitated a complex and variegated discourse for managing “oriental otherness.” A racialized and gendered anti-Asian discourse produces and manages a “double front” of Asian threat and encroachment: on the other hand, as external rivals in overseas imperial war and global economy and, on the other, as a needed labor force for the domestic economy. (102)

Lowe’s insight into the crisis of U.S. national identity during the period of war in Asia and the racialized and gendered anti-Asian discourse’s management of “oriental otherness” underscores the complex dynamics at play. The diverse experiences of Asians in the context of 1950s U.S. foreign policy exemplify the complex narratives and challenges faced by various immigrant groups. With this respect, Kim once again articulates the relationship between the politics in the 1950s and the representation of Asians as follows:

The place of Asian Americans in American social formations has often been characterized as middleman, triangular, or other such designations that have become increasingly vague as yet other mixed-race or non-black, non-white minorities, especially Latina/os, become politically visible and active. I believe we need to be specific about how Asian Americans were uniquely affected by American litigation and policy during the 1950s, and in turn came to represent in canonical literature new anxieties about race in both society at large and in the literary imagination. (17)
Kim suggests that “middleman” status of Asians has become less clear over time especially as more mixed-race and non-black, non-white minority groups gained visibility and became politically active. The historical labels used for Asian American may no longer accurately capture the diversity and complexity of their experience. She emphasizes the importance of understanding how specific historical periods, such as the 1950s, shaped the experiences of Asian Americans and how their experiences contributed to discussions about race and identity in literature and society. Therefore, in The Foreign Student, it is Chuck’s role which readers examines and experiences what it must have been like to be Asians during that period.

The ending of the novel indicates that Chuck’s agency is regained through the healing by immersing himself in the Southern landscape. His decision to stay represents a commitment to his education, a determination to bridge cultural divides, and a refusal to be driven away by racial hatred. Chuck’s choice to stay in the Southern soil represents resilience and the power of personal agency. Because of the accusation which his boss had made in the bindery job in Chicago for stealing money, he was expelled from the university. As a punishment, he takes a job in the dining hall kitchen for the summer to pay off the debt. He chooses to work for the summer and be readmitted to the university on his own. His time with the kitchen crew gives him a moment of serenity and peace:

They put off cleaning up for quite a while, lingering to smoke, gaze, exchange well-work comments on the beauty of the day. The kind of talk that carried nothing but their feeling for each other, which was reflexive, and affirming. Yes, I’m here, it said. I see it, too. He got along well these men. They never peered into his thoughtful silences, but they accepted him with humor, and their company sheltered him. (324)

Ironically, Chuck’s autonomy to choose to stay in Sewanee and work in the kitchen gives him a sense of freedom. There is a juxtaposition of the evening sun light on the bus and Chuck’s sense
of security in the scene: “He rode the bus with them, back to his small rented room in Monteagle, and even at the end of their workday, eight o’clock in the evening, the sun was still with them, guttering through the trees. He turns his face toward it. There are moments like this, rare instances of certainty and self-possession” (324). This last scene indicates Chuck’s sense of autonomy and freedom. His identity has constantly shifted and defined by people around him toward the end of the novel. He creates his alternative community other than the predominantly white community he used to belong to. In this new community, he works with African American staff. *The Foreign Student* ends with an open ending, especially about the relationship between Chuck and Kathrine, although their close friendship is implied. Through Chuck’s geographic and cultural exposure, readers also gain insight into the nationwide xenophobia toward Asians in the 1950s. Chuck’s language limitation functions as a narrative device to give readers a wide spectrum of historical concept and the relationship between the U.S. expansion to Asian and the formation of anxiety over Asians. Chuck’s finding sense of self in the South is crucial and it may not reflect the reality of racial injustice in play back in the 1950s. However, his healing from the trauma of Korean War, takes place in the fictional South, Chuck’s freedom and healing is achieved through his joining in an alternative community and finding solace in the Southern land.
CHAPTER TWO
FROM VIETNAM TO NEW ORLEANS: MEMORY OF THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA IN ROBERT OLEN BUTLER’S *A GOOD SCENT FROM A STRANGE MOUNTAIN* (1992)

In Chapter One, we discussed how the political conflict in Asia might be one of the many reasons for U.S. citizens feeling fear and anxiety over Asians as cultural “Others.” Simultaneously, the presence of Asians and their descendants become visible in the U.S. during the 1950s. The 1950s becomes the site for a battle over civil rights for ethnic minorities, whereas the portrayal of whites in the same period tends to be an affluent and technology-driven. Chapter One highlights this discrepancy and uses Susan Choi’s *The Foreign Student* as an example of textual negotiation over racial issues. Chapter Two focuses on the 1970s and the migration of Vietnamese refugees and their experiences of diaspora by analyzing Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. His novel takes a different approach to that of Choi’s. His articulation of Vietnamese experience in New Orleans successfully humanizes them by giving voices to Vietnamese people.

Robert Olen Butler’s collection of short stories, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* 36, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 due to his creative craftsmanship in connecting Vietnam 37 and New Orleans as two sites for memory, reconciliation, and cultural practices.

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36 All the quotes which are used in this chapter is taken from Grove Press edition (New York, 2001). This edition includes the additional two stories, “Salem” and “Missing,” in the end. First published in 1992 by Henry Holt (New York), the book contains fourteen short stories and one novella. The main discussion of the book excludes the additional two stories which is added to Grove Press edition.

37 The official name of the country is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As for all the reference to the country’s name in this chapter, the shortened name “Vietnam” is employed. The former capital of the Republic of Vietnam is
between Asia and the U.S. Set in the pre- and post-Vietnam War era, the fourteen short stories and one novella depict the human experiences of the first generation of Vietnamese refugees to New Orleans and its vicinity, as well as the American GIs who suffer from the trauma and atrocity of the war. This collection of stories does not follow a chronological order, nor does the sequence of events within each story progress chronologically; however, Butler’s poignant prose thematically unites each story in a cohesive structural unit by evoking the voice of the Vietnamese immigrants and their resilience in their transnational diaspora.

*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* consists of the following fourteen short stories and a novella: “Open Arms,” “Mr. Green,” “The Trip Back,” “Fairy Tale,” “Crickets,” “Letters from My Father,” “Love,” “Mid-Autumn,” “In the Clearing,” “A Ghost Story,” “Snow,” “Relic,” “Preparation,” “The American Couple,” and “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.” Each story has a different setting and a different character as narrator. One of the striking features of the novella is that Butler skillfully portrays the diverse characters in multiple settings, while his depiction of Vietnamese people and their diaspora successfully gives voices to the marginalized people’s culture by shifting the focus from them as victims of the traumatic Vietnam War, which tore their country in two for political reasons in the cold war, to people from all walks of life. Critic George Packer titled his review of Butler’s book “From Mekong to the Bayous” in *The New York Times* (June 7, 1992) which indicates how Butler’s stories connect Vietnam and the U.S. South.

The triangular colonial history of Vietnam dominated by France and the U.S. is revealed through the first-person narratives. Each story demonstrates the complex history of

Saigon before the fall of Saigon in 1975; however, now Hanoi (in the north) is the capital city of Vietnam and the name of Saigon (the largest city which is in the South) is changed into Ho Chi Minh City to celebrate his nationalism to win the country independence.

Vietnam from the colonial Vietnam as French Indochina to the Vietnamese diaspora through the Vietnam War. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* challenges the reader’s limited notions of Vietnam and its people, especially for the English-speaking reader whose association with the country is limited to the media coverage of the Vietnam War. Hence, the representations of Vietnamese have been associated with the neocolonial gaze from the oppressors (France and the U.S.) at the oppressed even when Butler’s book was published in the 1990s.

The text helps expand the broader understanding of Vietnam through the view of the colonial pasts in which French and American influence dominates. Therefore, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* serves to fill the gap between the representation of the Vietnamese who are reduced to be the oppressed victims from the neocolonial gaze and the diverse Vietnamese representation with humanity and dignity. This chapter discusses how Butler’s book contributes to opening a creative space for discussion on the complex lives of Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans by employing first-person narratives which let the reader see their ideas, conflicts, and struggles through their voices. Robert Olen Butler is a contemporary novelist who is not a native Southerner. As a Vietnam War veteran who had worked as a translator, he chose New Orleans as a place to enact Vietnamese experiences by depicting their narrative voices so that the reader dives into the minds of the Vietnamese people. His choice of New Orleans invites the reader to reevaluate the historical connection between New Orleans and Vietnam through the influence of the French and then of the U.S. The American South has been stigmatized by the loss of the Civil War (1861-65) so that New Orleans becomes the site for dealing with collective memory of traumatic loss for Vietnamese as well as reevaluating the positionality of the South in terms of racial relations and politics. Before discussing the stories, let us conduct an overview of the Vietnamese representation in the media and the print culture at
the end of the twentieth century.

An Overview of the Representation of the Vietnamese

The twenty-first century is the blossoming era for Vietnamese American writers’ creations since the emergence of second- and third-generation of Vietnamese descendants after the Vietnam War. Viet Thanh Nguyen, for instance, is one of the prominent Vietnamese American writers who has won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with his novel, The Sympathizer (2015). He is a refugee from Vietnam, growing up hearing stories about the war and how people live through trauma. “Memories” play a crucial part in his creation as well as delivering a more accurate depiction of Vietnamese history which the Western media tends to ignore. The protagonist of the novel is a communist sympathizer who is biracial (having a French pastor as his father and a Vietnamese maid as his mother). Because of the protagonist’s biracial identity, he becomes the agent enabling the reader to access both the western and eastern worlds and their political stances.

Nguyen’s novel indicates the complicated history of Vietnam and how the Cold War ideology plays a crucial role between the Soviet Union and the U.S. The novel contributes to the depiction of diverse Vietnamese representations which are not reduced to war victims but show their inner conflicts under the domination of the French colonialism and the intervention of the Vietnam war by the U.S. Nguyen depicts the diaspora of Vietnamese people in the U.S. as well and how the political dispute over communism versus capitalism keeps erupting on U.S. soil among Vietnamese there even after the war.

Nguyen advocates voicing diversified Vietnamese representations in the media, including novels. In Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War (2016), he points out
that the memories of the Vietnam War is used as a commodity by capitalism and advocates how
the American version of it is widely circulated and mass-produced in different media outlets. He
claims, “American memories of the war usually forget or obscure the Vietnamese, not to
mention the Cambodians and Laotians” (10). He continues his argument by inserting the
involvement of capitalism:

Capitalism can turn anything into a commodity, including memories and amnesia. Thus, memory amateurs fashion souvenirs and memorabilia; nostalgic hobbyists dress up in period costume and reenact battles; tourists visit battlefields, historical sites, and museums; and television channels air documentaries and entertainments that are visually high definition and mnemonically low resolution. (13)

He also points out that “emotion and ethnocentrism” are key factors in the manipulative memory industry as follows:

Emotion and ethnocentrism are key to the memory industry as it turns wars and experiences into sacred objects and soldiers into untouchable mascots of memory, as found in the American fetish for the so-called Greatest Generation who fought the so-called Good War. …Industrializing memory proceeds in parallel with how warfare is industrialized as part and parcel of capitalist society, where the actual firepower exercised in a war is matched by the firepower of memory that defines and refines that war’s identity. (13)

Now looking back over the last few decades at the popular image of Vietnam, we see that Hollywood movies have played a major role in creating the image of Vietnamese as mere third world victims. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is a prime example of creating the neocolonial gaze of American soldiers who exploit the dispossessed Vietnamese. Such dehumanizing representations of Vietnamese as enemies justify killing and exploiting them.

The shift in Vietnamese American literature takes place at the end of the 1980s. In 1988, *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* was published, the first collection of stories and poems which Vietnamese Americans created. Importantly, three Vietnamese
American women\textsuperscript{39} were involved as editors for the collection. In 1989, Le Ly Hayslip’s \textit{When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman’s Journey from War to Peace}\textsuperscript{40} gave justice to the atrocity of Vietnam War from the perspective of a Vietnamese woman. In 1997, Lan Cao published \textit{Monkey Bridge}, a novel unfolding the secret of generational trauma after the war through the Vietnamese perspective. In the same year, King-Kok Cheung published \textit{An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature} in which the genre of Vietnamese American literature was first introduced in English. Monique Truong, another versatile Vietnamese American writer, contributed to the publication of the genre. In 2010, Truong published \textit{Bitter in the Mouth}, employing a Vietnamese adoptee who grew up in the American South as a narrative device to demonstrate what it must have been like to grow up as a social alien in the South in the 1980s. The underlying plot highlights the protagonist’s Vietnamese parents, who had suffered from the displacement as refugees in the South. Lan Cao published \textit{The Lotus and the Storm} in 2014 by employing the trope of the memories of the war and its generational trauma. In 2019, Ocean Vuong published \textit{On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous}, a novel about coming-of-age that also depicts the issues of generational trauma after the war, poverty, drug abuse, and sexuality. Eric Nguyen also discusses the adjustment issues from Vietnam to New Orleans by depicting cultural conflicts in \textit{Things We Lost to the Water} in 2021.

As mentioned above, many Vietnamese American writers attempt to grasp the historical connotation of the war itself as well as the generational impact which the war caused to them. In an interview with David Nimon, Viet Thanh Nguyen praises non-Vietnamese writers whose focus of the genre is on Vietnam and the war. He mentions Tim O’Brien, Robert Olen Butler,

\textsuperscript{39} There editors are Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi.
\textsuperscript{40} The memoir is made into a movie and released as \textit{Heaven and Earth} by Oliver Stone in 1993.
and Karl Marlantes: “I give enormous recognition to those American authors for even trying to cope with a very difficult history (of Vietnam).” An issue of authenticity arises when it comes to the ethnic/racial representations involved. Some essentialists completely dismiss the literary creation about themselves if it is written by other people. For example, William Styron, a Caucasian writer, published *The Confession of Nat Turner* in 1967 in the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He was criticized for profiting off depicting Nat Turner’s rebellion against white oppression in slavery. James Baldwin mitigated the dispute by supporting Styron. Who has the right/agency to write about a certain historical event or person has been a topic of debate when it comes to the ethnic representations? To respond to such an issue, this chapter takes the stand of Viet Thanh Nguyen for praising non-Vietnamese writing on account of Vietnam and its memories.

As discussed above, the media has mass-marketed the reduced representation of Vietnam and its people, only circling around the images of the war and its victims from the third world (in the Occidental/Oriental discourse, non-Occidental cultures are considered as inferior, not just Vietnam, but Korea, the Philippines, Kingdom of Hawaii, China, to name a few) until quite recently. However, around the late 1980s, a new generation of Vietnamese Americans emerged and became spokespersons for the Vietnamese diaspora. Coincidentally, American writers who served in the Vietnam war have helped elevate the difficult subject matter into an artform in writing. Now in the twenty-first century, younger generations of Vietnamese Americans mix a more culturally relevant topic in the U.S. and the generational trauma which Vietnamese families endure. Robert Olen Butler chooses New Orleans as a multicultural hub for

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41 This is the transcript from “Between the Covers Viet Thanh Nguyen Interview,” *Tin House*, https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-viet-thanh-nguyen-interview/.
people from different background and creates the resilience of the Vietnamese community as early as in 1992. He is a predecessor who chooses New Orleans as a site for cultural negotiation and resilience. Now let us look into “Preparation” in Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.

**A Moment of Epiphany:**

**Burying the Post-Colonial Jealousy in “Preparation”**

“Preparation” takes place in a funeral home in the Vietnamese community in Versailles, New Orleans, as the interior monologue of the anonymous protagonist recounts her preparation of her deceased best friend for the final viewing for the funeral. The protagonist is forty-nine years old and recollects her life story from her happy childhood with her best friend Thuy, who suddenly passed away from ovarian cancer recently, to her current life in the Vietnamese community as a refugee and widow in Versailles. Not much action takes place in this short story except the protagonist applies makeup to Thuy and combs her hair one last time to prepare her for the final viewing; however, the protagonist’s reminiscence over their time together evokes the rich history of Vietnam’s colonial past and folklore. The narrative proceeds in a James Joycean stream of consciousness way by amplifying the inner drama of the protagonist. Composed of her interior monologue, the story begins with her recollection of her childhood, admiring Thuy’s biracial body, hair, and poise that attracted the attention of her love interest, Le Van Ly, whom Thuy married. The protagonist distances herself from other girls by commenting on her Catholic background: “We were not common girls, the ones who worked the field and seemed so casual about their bodies. And more than that, we were Catholics, and Mother Mary was very modest, covered from her throat to her ankles, and we made up our toes beautifully,
like the statue of Mary in the church, and we were very modest about all the rest” (143). The French influence of practicing Catholicism serves as a class marker to indicate that the two belonged to the affluent upper class in Vietnam. The protagonist takes pride in being Catholic and raised to become a respectable woman. The difference between the protagonist and her best friend Thuy is that Thuy was biracial. The protagonist’s first love, Le Van Ly, fell for Thuy instantly: “Thuy had a beautiful figure and breasts that were so tempting in the tight bodices of our ao dais that Ly could not resist her” (143). Ao dai is the traditional long-shirt for men and women, which symbolizes grace and elegance for women with a tight-fitted top and matching pants. Ly married Thuy and the narrator married another man, and they started new lives in New Orleans because of the fall of Saigon in 1975. The narrator’s secret from Thuy was that she has been in love with Thuy’s husband and has been jealous of Thuy.

A moment of epiphany comes to the protagonist when she prepares Thuy’s body for the funeral and finds that she had a secret: “And one of her breasts was gone. The right breast was lovely even now, even in death, the nipple large and the color of cinnamon, but the left breast was gone, and a large crescent scar began there in its place and curved out of sight under her arm” (154). The epitome of postcolonial beauty, which was Thuy’s biracial body, which the narrator has been so jealous of—is missing a breast. In response to that, the narrator confesses: “I could not draw breath at this, as if the scar was in my own chest where my lungs had been yanked out, and I could see that her scar was old, years, old, and I thought of her three years in California and how she had never spoken at all about this, how her smile had hidden all that she must have suffered” (154). The narrator realizes that Thuy has been fighting for her life with the battle with cancer without sharing that pain with her. “Preparation” expresses a moment of the protagonist’s emotional shift from jealousy to compassion toward Thuy in a Joycean narrative.
Having explored the poignant moment of epiphany in “Preparation,” we can now turn our attention to “Snow” which depicts New Orleans as a site for mutual understanding beyond the boundary of race, gender, and age.

Finding Common Ground:

A Moment of Emotional Intimacy in “Snow”

“Snow” portrays a newer vision of the American South, acknowledging its diverse residents who hail from various countries. It unfolds as a narrative of two kindred spirits sharing memories of loss and death, transcending boundaries of race, religion, culture, and geo-political background. Giau, a single thirty-four-year-old Vietnamese woman residing with her mother in Lake Charles, Louisiana, engages in a significant conversation with Mr. Cohen, a customer at the restaurant where she works as a waitress. Narrated from her point of view, her conversation with Mr. Cohen plays a significant role in pinpointing the moment of mutual understanding beyond the differences in cultures and backgrounds between Giau and Mr. Cohen. “Snow” questions what attributes make humans bond together and opens an honest conversation about us. “Snow” describes a moment of mutual understanding by sharing the experiences of loss and the process of a moment when empathy permeates. Butler captures the moment of an epiphany when the two people from completely different cultures and backgrounds take a leap from an apathetic mental numbness to finding solace in each other’s company. What snow represents for them reveals Giau’s refugee experience and Mr. Cohen’s loss of his father in the Holocaust. Because of their mutual losses, they experience a magical moment of understanding why they are displaced in their new homeland, New Orleans.

The name of the restaurant, “Plantation Hunan,” is a symbolic reminder that the setting
of the story takes place in the South in which the plantation system used to exploit human beings by the institution of slavery. Although there is no use of the plantation system anymore, the word “Hunan” becomes a signifier to mark the change of the time from the slavery to the labor of Asian immigrants. Giau describes the interior of the restaurant as follows: “The Plantation Hunan does not look like a restaurant, though. No one would give it a name like that unless it really was an old plantation house. It’s very large and full of antiques” (126). Among all the antiques, the grandfather clock is the only witness to have seen the change by which the laborers have become of foreign origins. This “foreignness” is presented through the scents of Asian spices: “This plantation house must feel like a refugee. It is full of foreign smells, ginger and Chinese pepper and fried shells for wonton, and there’s a motel on one side and a gas station on the other, not like the life the house once knew” (126). This diasporic setting of the restaurant, as the word “refugee” indicates, becomes the suitable site to deliver the narrator’s isolation from the rest of the world as a social outcast or a bystander. “Plantation Hunan” is the modern wasteland in which the old way of exploiting the human laborers does not serve the same purpose; however, the similar system of exploiting a refugee as a replaceable/expandable source of income for the Chinese owner perpetuates a similar structure to that of slavery. The lack of structural unity (the former plantation house, a Vietnamese waitress, the smell of Chinese spices) foreshadows the hollowness of the narrator’s daily routine and her existential feeling of fear as a refugee.

The narrator expresses how she is isolated from the owner of the restaurant. First, she introduces the owner as kind, but she soon separates herself from Chinese people:

The house sits on a busy street and the Chinese family who owns it changed it from Plantation Seafood into a place that could hire a Vietnamese woman like me to be a waitress. They are very kind, this family, though we know we are
different from each other. They are Chinese and I am Vietnamese and they are very kind, but we are bother here in Louisiana and they go somewhere with the other Chinese in town—there are four restaurants and two laundries and some people, I think, who work as engineers at the oil refinery. They go off to themselves and they don’t seem to even notice where they are. (126)

She confesses that she was blessed to have been employed by the Chinese owner of the Plantation Hunan restaurant. At the same time, she clearly marks the difference between herself and the Chinese community and feels isolated from her “Asian” ties. She identifies the Chinese as the people who “go off to themselves.” Here, other than the work relations, the narrator finds herself apart from the Chinese community. The coined Chinese word “Hunan” and the marker of the Southern heritage “plantation” indicate that New Orleans is a much more eclectic and multicultural place; however, the narrator’s confession emphasizes her “uprooted-ness.”

Her mother and her friends pity her since “they know that once I might have been married, but the fiancé I had in my town in Vietnam went away in the Army and though he is still alive in Vietnam, the last I heard, he is driving a cab in Ho Chi Minh City and he is married to someone else” (127). The narrator does not feel that she belongs to the community in which her mother and her friends consider her a failure. She becomes a reminder of the lost opportunities for her mother, and all the narrator receives from her is pity. Her mother and her peers cannot be role models for the narrator.

She also mentions that the Vietnamese community in Lake Charles does not serve as a haven to unite the community, either: “There are other Vietnamese here in Lake Charles, Louisiana, but we are not a community. We are all too sad, perhaps, or too tired. But maybe not. Maybe that’s just me saying that. Maybe the others are real Americans already” (126-127). Her comment on the people in Lake Charles shows there is a cultural divide between the Vietnamese and Americans so that the Vietnamese are caught between the old Vietnamese traditions and the
new homeland. People are “too sad” and “too tired” after going through generational exploitation of human resources and labor through colonialism—first from France, then Japan, and the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The displaced situation makes her life hard.

Her fear roots from the existential crisis after the evacuation from Vietnam and her new start in life having no resources or role model. Such a sentiment is expressed in her description of the first snow she saw:

I remembered my first Christmas Eve in America. I slept and woke just like this, in a Chinese restaurant. I was working there. But it was in a distant place, in St. Louis. And I woke to snow. The first snow I had ever seen. It scared me. Many Vietnamese love to see their first snow, but it frightened me in some very deep way that I could not explain, and even remembering that moment—especially as I woke from sleep at the front of another restaurant—frightened me. (127)

She confesses to Mr. Cohen who comes to the restaurant to pick up his order on Christmas Eve that snow and its whiteness frightens her. Then she learns that he does not celebrate Christmas because he is Jewish. Mr. Cohen shares with her the story about his life through a moment of loss in snow. This is a long quote but worth mentioning since it indicates how the memory of snow is deeply connected with the loss of his father for Mr. Cohen.

My first home and my second one. Poland and then England. My father was a professor in Warsaw. It was early in 1939. I was eight years old and my father knew something was going wrong. All the talk about the corridor to the sea was just the beginning. He had ears. He knew. So he send me and my mother to England. He had good friends there. I left that February and there was snow everywhere and I had my own instincts, even at eight. I cried in the courtyard of our apartment building. I threw myself into the snow there and I would not move. I cried like he was sending us away from him forever. He and my mother said it was only for some months, but I didn’t believe it. And I was right. That had to life me bodily and carry me to the taxi. But the snow was in my clothes and as we pulled away and I scrambled up to look out the back window at my father, the snow was melting against my skin and I began to
shake. It was as much from my fear as from the cold. The snow was telling me he would die. And he did. (132)

Mr. Cohen does not mention the Holocaust, but his father was killed by Nazis or their sympathizers. The cold sensation of snow and his physical sensation of shaking are all part of the sad symbolism of his traumatic separation from his father. In reply to his confession about the connection between snow and the loss of his father, Giau also decides to share the fear which snow represents:

I think it’s because the snow came so quietly and everything was underneath it, like this white surface was the real earth and everything had died—all the trees and the grass and the streets and the houses—everything had died and was buried. It was all lost. I know there was snow above me, on the roof, and I was dead, too. (134)

Whiteness is associated with death and loss for Giau. Traditionally, “whiteness” is associated with death in Vietnam in the funeral rituals. The family members of the deceased are supposed to wear white. The use of “whiteness” here illustrates the degree of fear for the pressure to adopt a new life in the U.S. since Giau’s internalized fear functions as a collective sorrow and pain of the Vietnamese people’s transnational diaspora. It is because Giau’s description of her existential fear at making a living solely in a new homeland is so limited that the degree of her fear is amplified. Mr. Cohen comments to her: “Your own country was very different” (134). Mr. Cohen’s line gives Giau solace because it also comes from a person who has gone through a diasporic experience for survival. The brief conversation between Giau and Mr. Cohen as a waitress and a customer of the restaurant connects the two because of the shared experiences of trauma and loss which snow symbolizes. At the same time, snow represents a sudden change in people’s life and how transient one’s life is and yet how complicated and hard it can be.

“Snow” demonstrates a moment of emotional intimacy of the two people—one Vietnamese and the other Jewish—by employing whiteness as a symbol of death and loss.
However, the whiteness also reflects hope for the two because the act of sharing creates a magical moment of bonding between the two isolated individuals. Giau finds a kindred spirit beyond the boundary of nationality.

**Absolution through Forgiveness:**

“A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain”

Butler does not glorify the heroism of the Vietnam War; rather, he exemplifies the complicated history of Vietnam by depicting the national divide of communism in northern Vietnam and the democracy in southern Vietnam, emulating the historical documentation in the stories. One such example of bringing out a historical figure into the imaginary fictional space will be the signature story of the collection, “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,” in which the protagonist Dao is a dying, hundred-year-old Hoa Hao Buddhist who has migrated to New Orleans with his family. On his deathbed, he recounts his time back in 1917 in Paris and London with his best friend, Nguyen Ai Quoc, who later changed his name to Ho Chi Minh. Ho Chi Minh’s spirit visits Dao three times on separate occasions. Through conversation with the departed, Dao comes to terms with his life by forgiving his former best friend for dividing the country in two. The dialogue between the deceased Uncle Ho (Ho Chi Minh’s nation-wide nickname) and Dao reinforces his subjectivity as a life-long pacifist. The story functions as Dao’s absolution before passing away. As observed above, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* is filled with many anecdotes from the Vietnamese history and its myth-making process, the fall of Saigon in 1975, and Vietnamese diaspora in New Orleans.

Memory plays a crucial part to explain the political conflicts among the Vietnamese community in New Orleans even after the Vietnam War. Butler employs the old man’s final
moment to unfold the historical account of Vietnam as well as the close family connections of the Vietnamese in New Orleans. He explains the Vietnamese ritual before one’s passing:

> When you are very old, you put aside a week or two to receive the people of your life so that you can tell one another your feelings, or try at last to understand one another, or simply say good-bye. It is a formal leave-taking, and with good luck you can do this before you have your final illness. (236)

On his deathbed, Ho Chi Minh’s ghost visits him with his hands covered with sugar and its sweet scent. The scent brings Dao back his memory of when they had been best friends working in London and then in Paris together. Ho Chi Minh used to work for the pastry chef in London, and his apparition in front of Dao seems lost. The idea that death is part of life, and the souls of the deceased are with us is quite common in a lot of Asian countries, and Vietnam is no exception, as we observe in Giau’s internal monologue in “Snow”: “In Vietnam we believe that our ancestors are always close to us” (133). By communicating with Ho Chi Minh’s ghost and sorting through the unresolved issues between them, Dao is ready to be welcomed in the Buddhist Nirvana.

The contrast between Ho Chi Minh’s political decision to turn Vietnam into a communist regime and Dao’s choice to be a pacifist by practicing Hoa Hao Buddhism marks the end of their friendship in their youth. Ho Chi Minh’s ghost comes to Dao, saying “I am not at peace” (245), and “There are no countries here” (245). In Ho’s confession, he tells Dao that he is with many communist sympathizers: “There are a million souls here with me, the young men of our country, and they are all dressed in black suits and bowler hats, In the mirrors they are made ten million, as a hundred million” (246). He looks at Dao “with a kind sadness” (236).

The paralleling plot recounts how Thang, Dao’s son-in-law, and Thang’s son get involved in the murder of a local newspaper man, Mr. Le. Mr. Le published an article to make peace with communist Vietnam, asking for a coalition. In response to that, Thang and his son
shot him to death. Dao recalls: “The father and son had been airborne rangers and I had several times heard them talk bitterly of the exile of our people. We were fools for trusting the Americans all along, they said” (246). Then they apologize to Dao: “We’re sorry, Grandfather. Old times often bring old anger. We are happy our family is living a new life” (247). They are supporters of Southern Vietnam and cannot stand Mr. Le asking for a coalition with the communist Vietnam. This puts a strain on Dao, because his religion teaches him to make peace within himself and his family members: “The Hoa Hao believes that the maintenance of our spirits is very simple, and the mystery of joy is simple, too. The four characters mean ‘A good scent from a strange mountain’” (242). 芳香奇山 might be the expression in Chinese characters. This religious mantra connects a pungent aroma with a peaceful state of mind. In fact, Dao is happy to “smell the dogwood tree or even smell the coffee plant across the highway,” since “these things had come to be the new smells of our family” (247). He tries to mitigate his pain by remembering a good scent which reminds him of his lost family members. However, the smell also haunts him in different ways:

I would smell the rich blood smells of the afterbirth and I would hold our first son, still slippery in my arms, and there was the smell of dust from the square and the smell of the South China Sea just over the ruse of the hill and there was the smell of the blood and of the inner flesh from my wife as my son’s own private sea flowed from this woman that I loved, flowed and carried him into the life that would disappear from him so soon. (247)

He is tormented by the memory of his baby’s death.

Scent plays a crucial role in Dao’s absolution. Because of Ho’s choice to be involved in politics, Dao’s family had to find a new life in New Orleans. Through the process of absolution, Dao forgives Ho Chi Minh so that Dao would be at peace.
New Orleans as a Site for Memory

Robert Olen Butler gives humanity to the underrepresented Vietnamese. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* demonstrates how New Orleans serves as the place to reenact memories of the war. Maureen Ryan sees the connection between Vietnamese and Southerners as follows: “The centrality of place, family, and the past in the lives of the traditional Vietnamese almost eerily parallels the similar obsessions of Southerners in countless imaginative and critical texts about the South and Southern culture.\(^{42}\)” (237). Ryan’s argument is plausible since the Vietnamese diaspora in New Orleans in Butler’s text connects Vietnam and New Orleans as sites for recollection of French colonization, the political divide between communism and capitalism during the Cold War, American intervention in the war, the diaspora of boat people with two opposite political stances, and the ongoing issues of generational trauma after the war and displacement in the new homeland.

Regarding narrating the trauma and memory of the war, Viet Thanh Nguyen uses the term “ethical memory” and explains that we need to acknowledge the broader view of grasping human errors as well as humanity:

> A just memory demands instead a final step in the dialectics of ethical memory—not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one’s own and remembering others, but also a shift toward and ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human. (19)

*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* connects the U.S. South to Vietnam. By doing so, New Orleans becomes a site to illuminate the complex history of Vietnam through colonialism. Leslie Bow\(^{43}\) clarifies how the South functions as a key to examine the race,


power, economy, on a global scale.

“Asian in the South” is a seemingly anomalous topic, one perhaps all too readily incorporated into newer versions of the imagined South: multicultural, cosmopolitan, globally connected. The Asian American might well serve as a symbol of inclusiveness heralding the felicitous erosion of the historically sedimented black-white binary. For scholars, Asian Americans bear with them global investments that may serve to rebrand Southern studies; for politicians, that demographic might simply represent a pluralist add-on to business as usual. Nevertheless, the interstitial position of Asians in the South suggests potentially more nuanced avenues of racial inquiry: particularly, how epistemological uncertainty becomes resolved. (493)

By discussing the Vietnamese diaspora in the South, we also learn about the South through race relations and global history. The novel brings the humanity to the Vietnamese immigrants’ struggle to relocate themselves in the South, particularly in New Orleans.

Both Vietnamese and Southerners share a deep attachment to place, family and the past. The Vietnamese diaspora in New Orleans, as depicted in the novel, parallels the Southern obsession with these themes. New Orleans is not only a setting for Vietnamese memories but also a site to illuminate the complex history of Vietnam, particularly the impact of French colonization, the political divide between communism and capitalism during the Cold War, and the subsequent American intervention in the Vietnam War. The diaspora of boat people, who held contrasting political stances, further adds to the historical richness of the setting. By connecting the U.S. South to Vietnam, the novel highlights the interconnected histories of these regions. The Vietnamese diaspora sheds light on the interstitial position of Asians in the South and how epistemological uncertainty is resolved, as Bow emphasizes. The novel allows readers to consider the nuances of racial inquiry, especially in the context of a region with a historically sedimented black-white binary. The novel also portrays the concept of “ethical memory” to ask readers for acknowledging the broader view of understanding human errors and humanity. The
characters in the novel have experienced the traumas of war and displacement, and their memories serve as a bridge between the inhumanity of the conflict and the humanity that persists in their struggles to adapt to a new homeland. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* focuses on connecting the Southern experience with the Vietnamese one and serves to add a perspective on race relations and global history in the South.
CHAPTER THREE


This chapter demonstrates how the representation of the American South shapes form in recent fiction to fill the gap between the American Southern literary tradition and the actual physical presence of the Asian community, focusing on the presence of the Vietnamese after the Vietnam War described in Monique Truong’s second novel, Bitter in the Mouth. Published in 2010, her novel aptly demonstrates the inner conflict of a Vietnamese adoptee growing up in the South in the late 1970s in the context of the actual historical timeline of the massive immigration of the Vietnamese refugees to the U.S. The novel opens a creative space to speculate on multiple layers of topics, such as a transnational migration and its mobility in the South on a global scale, a transnational and transracial adoption, a historiography of refugee acceptance in the South, and race relations in the South. Among these topics, to reexamine how the Asian physical presence plays a role in recent Southern fiction, this chapter particularly focuses on the anomalous racial status of an Asian, especially on the role an Asian woman’s body plays through the gaze of the Southern hegemonic communal eyes, as we observe in Julia

44 This chapter is an extensive and revised edition of my previous paper entitled “Toward Plural Souths: Immigration and Vietnamese Diaspora in Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth,” which has been published in the monograph series of the 28th Joint National Conference of National Association of African American Studies and Its Affiliates.
Kristeva’s term “abject,” to illuminate how the small Southern community reacts to the representation of “Asian-ness” in the protagonist’s body. As an example of a critical gaze to speculate on what a body symbolizes under a different cultural context, Patricia Yaeger calls such a body in Southern fiction “Southern grotesque” in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990*. Yaeger connects “Southern grotesque” to Southern women’s writing by pointing out how the representation of the “grotesque body” in their writings contests the notion of race and gender. Tracing how the representation of a body shifts depending on the trajectory of public/private space, this chapter helps to reveal the racial relations in the South after Jim Crow when refugees (the word “immigrant” is used to categorize people who want to come to the U.S. for a better economic opportunities whereas the word “refugee” refers to someone who has no choice but moves to the U.S. for the political conflict, war, or economic collapse in their home country) settled in the U.S., particularly in the South, which I examine in Truong’s biographical sketch and in how her experience growing up in North Carolina is demonstrated in the narrative of the novel. Additionally, this chapter expands the monolithic “Asian” categorization in the occidental globe and dissects it into multiple layers of history by shedding a light on the Vietnamese diaspora in the South. In doing so, this chapter not only challenges the notion that “Asian” is a singular concept solely signifying “foreignness” in contrast to the hegemonic power force of non-Asians but also provides a platform for the Vietnamese community to voice their political concerns, particularly in seeking asylum in the U.S. Additionally, it highlights the trauma experienced by individuals as they attempted to rebuild their lives in a new land where their familiar ways of life no longer served them well. It

46 For example, Yaeger exemplifies how “the theme of Fats Waller” shows the ambiguous racial stance Powerhouse plays to the eyes of the white audience during his performance and after in Eudora Welty’s “Powerhouse” (1941). See Yaeger, 262. This is not an example of “female grotesque,” but it shows the grotesque effect on racism.
is also important to add, however, that *Bitter in the Mouth* is not a story focusing on the refugee experience itself which many Vietnamese had to go through. Rather, the ethnic marker of Truong’s protagonist Linda as Vietnamese functions as a narrative device to clarify the race relations and Linda’s discovery on how to relate herself to others.

This chapter argues how the novel demonstrates the racial dynamics in the South and reexamines the color line in the social protocols in the Southern community via the Vietnamese adoptee, Linh-Dao (Linda) Nguyen Hammerick, particularly focusing on the time frame from the 1970s to the 1990s. In addition to that, the novel contests the traditional narrative of Southern fiction and shows us as a mirror in which to confront our own shortcomings on how we fail to understand a person in front of us as a human being and instead reduce their humanity to racialized stereotypes through the postcolonial gaze. In that sense, through empathy and intellectual curiosity, we are constantly evolving our understanding of others who come from different cultures from ours. Where does this idea of dehumanizing migrants come from? Who are citizens to be qualified to lead a safe life on the U.S. soil? These are primal yet fundamental questions in discussing the Asian presence in more recent Southern fictions, especially after the post war era.

By contrasting the two narrative schemes as color-blinded and non-color-blinded, the novel starts from the seemingly innocent white Southern bildungsroman on the first look, then gradually unfolds the secrets and unspoken protocols of mannerisms in the conservative small Southern town in the 1970s to 1980s once Linda reveals herself as an “Asian” in the latter half.

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of the narrative. As the narrative moves forward, the multiple layers of Linda’s upbringing are revealed. The framework of narrative reminds readers of Toni Morrison’s *Recitatif*, in which the narrative structure is made intentionally color-blind so that readers question critically about our own assumptions and prejudices. The first half of the narrative in *Bitter in the Mouth* also employs a similar narrative device to make Linda’s racial identity is kept unclear. Morrison explores how the characters’ lives are influenced by race without explicitly revealing their racial backgrounds. Their racial ambiguity is central to the story in indicating the nature of racial identify in the modern world.

This chapter reveals how the racial construct is a man-made system which is coded in the social hierarchy and status by demonstrating how Linda gets eliminated as the social “other” in the tight-knit white side of the Southern community in which the dominant hegemony plays the crucial role in deciding the community’s behavior toward race. This novel pinpoints what it means to be an Asian, especially a Vietnamese, in the Cold War period, particularly in the conservative South as a target of racial othering and how it contradicts the national narrative of the fixated “model minority myth” about Asians which we see so often in the media in an almost caricatured good citizen stereotype. At the same time, the “secrets” which Linda reveals to the reader as an unreliable narrator embody not just how the community sees Linda as an “Asian” but also her family’s secrets as to why they are so dissociated from each other.

With her racial identity disguised as white, the narrative voice starts with Linda’s recollection of her childhood being raised in an affluent white family in the South in the 1970s from her stream of consciousness interior monologue, which is narrated on August 3 in 1998 as the first section entitled “Confession.” The narration takes place only in two days since the next section “Revelation” is narrated the subsequent day, which is August 4 in 1998. The disrupted
narrative structure which only takes place in two days reminds the reader of the modernist predecessor William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in which the four narratives are broken into four days and each segment is narrated from different perspectives on Candace Compson’s loss of virginity as a metaphorical center to reveal the fall of the aristocratic Southern ruling family, the Compsons. By disrupting the narrative into four different non-chronological perspectives, Faulkner intentionally demonstrates the end of the patriarchal Old Southern order of the family and community in a structurally visual form as one of the many modernist narrative devices. As with Faulkner’s narrative device, Truong also exemplifies Linda’s disrupted psyche in two different sections: one being portrayed as a white Southern woman, the other as her body is racialized as “Vietnamese” while the family secrets are revealed. Her identity is torn in two: her as white inside and her as Asian outside. In *Bitter in the Mouth*, the narrative voice is consistently Linda’s throughout the novel, but Linda’s delayed revelation of her racial identity as Vietnamese in the “Revelation” section effectively echoes the first section of Linda’s narrative on her dysfunctional “white” family and her childhood, but only after the reader goes back to the first part by putting together the segments of information which relates Linda’s body as racialized. Because of the contrast between the first and second sections regarding Linda’s racial background as revealed or not, the novel becomes a quintessentially Southern narrative to reevaluate the Southern racial relations as we observe in Linda’s recollection of multiple incidents of verbal bullying and how white and black classmates reacted to her differently.

Linda’s rare neurological condition, synesthesia, indicates her cultural “otherness” from the rest of her community as well her from her biological parents, her home country Vietnam, and her adopted family, the Hammericks, except for her great-uncle Harper, who is portrayed as
outside the Southern cultural space because he is gay. Her best friend Kelly is over-weight and an outcast of the community to which they belong. Linda does not have allies except them. Linda serves as a vehicle to indicate her experience to grow up in the South as someone who grew up in the mainstream white community as well as an outsider who constantly faces the obstacles to be excluded from the community.

The American South Encounters Vietnam:

Monique Truong and Her Estrangement as a Refugee

Monique Truong’s biography syncopates with the timeline of the traumatic diaspora of the Vietnamese people in Saigon, the Southern part of Vietnam. Her writing does not necessarily place the Vietnam war (1955-1975) as its traumatic focal point but reclaims voices from the undocumented Vietnamese diaspora through many continents all over the world. Tracing Truong’s geographical mobility from Saigon to the South, therefore, helps the reader to grasp the experience of Vietnamese refugees to the region and expands our understanding of the South not just as a region in the U.S. but as one of the many places in which the post-colonial mobility of people takes place on a more global scale. The first part of this section introduces the biographical sketch about Monique Truong’s experience living in the South. Subsequently, the next part also exemplifies the several waves of Vietnamese refugee’s migration to the U.S. and demonstrates that the time of their diaspora indicates different social and economic status for Vietnamese refugees in each era. It was not the government but the voluntary role of the Catholic church which played a major role in helping Vietnamese communities resettle in the

48 “Interview with Monique Truong” by Houston Asian American Archive—Oral History Collection, Nov. 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS10JLfSQKQ. Truong’s biography in this section is taken from the interview.

South in areas such as Dallas, Houston, and New Orleans, but there is no description of the Vietnamese communities as a group in *Bitter in the Mouth*. The reason is related to how Truong employs Linda’s Vietnamese physical features as a contact zone between the white community in Boiling Springs and Vietnamese communities in which people are rather isolated. Therefore, *Bitter in the Mouth* does not share similarities in narrative theme and structures with works like Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992) or Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014) or Eric Nguyen’s *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021). Unlike *Bitter in the Mouth*, these novels focus on war and displacement; as Anh Thang Dao-Shar and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud mention, Truong’s novel “uses a different strategy to speak against the expectation placed on Vietnamese American writers to tell a story of war and displacement” (476).

Born on May 13 in 1968 in Saigon (present day Ho Chi Minh City in Southern Vietnam), Monique Truong was a daughter of affluent parents. Her father worked for Shell, so he used a connection to airlift his wife and daughter by the U.S. military cargo plane just before the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese communist forces in 1975. Monique was presumably seven back then. Her father left there by a boat and settled in a relocation camp, Fort Chaffee, in Arkansas, while Monique and her mother stayed at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California for five to six weeks. The timing of their departure from Saigon indicates that the Truongs were among the luckiest group of refugees who had powerful connections with the U.S., because the first wave of migratory refugee groups is considered upper-class people who can arrange the flight to the U.S. Even with the privileged opportunity to land in the U.S. early, their

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settlement was not easy. To escape from the relocation camp, Vietnamese had to find an American sponsor. The Truongs got a sponsorship by her father’s American acquaintance, who owned a rabbit farm, and the Truongs settled in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Truong recalls how her parents struggled to survive in the new land in which they had to start all over again:

“They (her parents) were truly shell-shocked, they were desperately trying to get their life together.” She recalls in an interview her lack of emotional support from her parents, who had been struggling to adjust to the lifestyle of their new country. She reminisces on the hard process of adjustment in the South in the 1970s:

There were no Asian Americans in my elementary school, Boiling Springs Elementary School. And, it was an exceedingly difficult and emotionally brutal place to grow up, because of the daily bullying that I went through—you imagine that, for the first six years of my life, I’m living—I understand myself as being a little girl. You know. And then all of a sudden, it did feel like this, all of a sudden, I am in this little town where I go to school and there was nothing about me that was normal, you know. Everything was a problem. (In a video interview)

She witnesses her identity as a little girl being transformed into something grotesque and monstrous to the eyes of the beholder. Her straight black hair, the shape of her eyes became something to be made fun of. Her experience for being estranged from the rest of her classmates is well documented in Bitter in the Mouth as a hardship to relinquish the mother tongue and learn English to survive in the new home. And yet, her writing itself is the symbol of her resilience as a one point five generation of Vietnamese refugees, being in the generation of having a parent who was born in Vietnam while being familiar with the life in their homeland.

The family moved to Centerville, Ohio in which she attended middle school. They moved to Houston, Texas in which a lot of Vietnamese communities resided. She attended Yale University and exposed herself to Asian American Studies, in which she nurtured her political consciousness. She practiced law for four years after having studied in Columbia Law School.
She followed the career path that refugee parents wished for her and became a lawyer to help immigrants. Her life was a conflict between her inner desire to express herself in words and the brutality of the competitive and inhumane work environments that consumed her spirit. She joined the workshop for the Asian Americans in New York to find solace in giving shape to her creative voice in words. She collaborated with Barbara Tran and Luu Truong Khoi and edited *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* in 1998. This is the first collection of prose and poetry done by Vietnamese Americans. The same career pattern is observed in one of her contemporaries, Lan Cao, who is a law professor as well as a writer who equipped herself with financial means before going into writing. Truong moved back to Texas and became a full-time writer, crossing over various genres of writing. She thrived by reclaiming the voices of undocumented people, not necessarily about Vietnamese nor the Vietnam War. She also claims that she wants to “remind readers that the Vietnam War doesn’t define Vietnam, that our history is far longer and far more complicated” by dealing with colonizers of many different countries” (Interview). She adamantly rejects the reduction of her writing career to that of an ethnic writer solely concerned with representing her own people. Instead, she directs her focus towards giving a voice to undocumented individuals whose stories often remain in the shadows of history. It makes sense when Truong chooses the South as the site of a discussion about race and gender and fabricates the South and Vietnamese refugees’ experiences together to create humanity in racial tolerance and people’s resilience.

Although Truong’s refugee experiences resonate with so many other Vietnamese plights,

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51 The year 1998 marks as the crucial year for Vietnamese Americans because *Watermark* is the first creative writing collections which are done by Vietnamese American writers.

52 Cao and Truong are called the “1.5 generation of writers.” What it means that they migrated to the U.S. when they were young, knowing both Vietnamese and American cultures well. Their role as a storyteller is crucial since they are considered the bridge between the old and the new generations.
her family had connections overseas so that they could escape before the fall of Saigon. Truong belongs to the very first generation of Vietnamese refugees who didn’t have to resort to boats for transportation. Laura Harhanto and Jeanne Batalova summarize the massive mobilization of Vietnamese as follows: “The arrival of 125,000 Vietnamese refugees to the United States in 1975 was among the most dramatic evacuations undertaken by the U.S. government, matched only recently by the chaotic flight from Afghanistan following the U.S. military’s withdrawal”53 (Online). They also estimate that “(t)his initial group of Vietnamese immigrants was followed by more refugees and their families, and the Vietnamese foreign-born population in the United States roughly doubled every decade between 1980 and 2000.” The entry to the U.S. and the era were traumatic for the Vietnamese community which was on the side of the U.S and fought against the communist regime which dominated the northern part of Vietnam. Vietnam is a country which has gone through so much colonial past with France and the U.S. As for the U.S., not only did it lose the war, but it also accepted Vietnamese refugees. Lan Cao explains the sentiment and climate of the stigma as a refugee as follows: “Besides, I knew from my own reading that refugees were a burden to the economy. Hadn’t our local paper warned of the consequences when thousands of Indochinese began settling in Virginia in 1975? We were, after all, a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget54” (15). Therefore, there is no coincidence when Truong sets her novel in 1975 and describes the ethno-racial conflict in the South around the 1980s. This is the time for trauma and racial intolerance for rather new immigrants.

However, Truong refuses to trace the collective memory of traumatic experience from

54 Cao, Lan. Monkey Bridge (New York: Viking, 1997), 15. Mai’s mother is also fearful that Americans would “jump at the chance to send us all back. Nomads, that’s what we’ve all become” (15).
the Vietnam War that many Vietnamese Americans would expect her to write about. She employs “an adoptee” as a fictional device to illuminate the Southern class society which is dominated by whites. In her first novel, The Book of Salt (2003), she employed a character whose identity is gay to question multiple ways of association and dissociation of people instead of using the character’s Vietnamese-ness as the focal point of his diaspora in Paris. Just as in her first book, in Bitter in the Mouth Truong employs an interracial/international adoptee” as a tool to open a discussion about Southern culture, politics and gender performance. Similarly, in her memoir a Korean-adoptee Nicole Chung expresses her identity being torn in two:

I believe my adoptive family, for the most part, wanted to ignore the fact that I was the produce of people from the other side of the world, unknown foreigners turned Americans. To them, I was not the daughter of these immigrants at all: by adopting me, my parents had made me one of them. (15)

Chung indicates the complexity for international/interracial adoptees who embrace their biological appearance as Asians when their upbringing and internalization belong to those of whites. In Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture, Jennifer Ann Ho also exemplifies how international/interracial adoptees face the dilemma of their identity being torn in two:

The sense of internalizing the ethos off colorblindness, of being seen as racially flexible and ambiguous, has resulted in a cognitive dissonance between what these Asian American adult adoptees believed themselves to be and tried to adapt to while growing up—namely being white—versus the reality of the image that stared back at them from the mirror—being Asian American. (53)

This internal conflict highlights the challenges faced by adoptees who grapple with divergent cultural and racial identities. Therefore, it only makes sense for Truong to employ a character who is an international/interracial adoptee who grows up in a Southern affluent family to

55 Nicole Chung also expresses her “in-between-ness” of her racial identity which leads to her to feel an “obvious alien to the family” (21).
exemplify how Linda’s Asian appearance and her mentality as white play out in the community.

**The Story in a Linear Line of History**

Before we go into an analysis of the novel, let us grasp the story in chronological order, since the novel intentionally disrupts the chronological story line so that the reader has no choice but to follow along with Linda’s unreliable narration. This section explains the key features of the story which involve the process of Linda’s adoption and why Truong chooses the narrative form which is led by the unreliable narrator.

*Bitter in the Mouth* is a novel in which the narrator, Linda Hammerick, regains love and resilience in the actual small town, Boiling Springs, North Carolina where she grew up as an international/interracial adoptee in an affluent white family. This is a story of love in many forms which proceeds by unfolding the family secrets revolving around Linda’s “Asian” representation on the surface and by revealing the Southern mannerisms focusing on many aspects of one’s life, such as one’s partner, class, and race. Not knowing the reason for her adoption, the identity of her biological parents, and the nature of her homeland Vietnam, she survives the harsh reality of being ostracized from the community she thought she belonged to by the emotional stability and support from her great-uncle, “Baby” Harper, who embraces her for who she is. Her adoptive father Thomas died because of heart failure at his secretary’s place when Linda was just seventeen. Her adoptive mother DeAnne cannot perform her role as a mother to Linda, so Linda thinks it is because she is not lovable. In addition to that, when she was ten Linda got raped by her best friend’s cousin Bobby, and DeAnne’s inability to understand the crime makes Linda numb to the relationship with DeAnne even after Linda was in her thirties. She does not even want to call her name, not to mention calling her “mom,” so she calls
her mother “DWH” as her name being shortened from DeAnne Whatley Hammerick. The narrative starts when Linda is already in her thirties, and she regains her resilience and love after learning about her Vietnamese biological parents and after having experienced the deaths of her adopted grandmother Iris Burch Whatley, of her father Thomas, and of her beloved great-uncle Harper. Following Thomas’s career path, Linda went to the North and studied at Yale University and then studied law at Columbia University. She got out of the South to become assimilated with many Asians in the North but finds herself standing out more as “an Asian with a Southern accent,” as her then fiancé Leo calls her. As a part of the prenuptial agreement, Linda’s medical examination has found an ovarian cancer, and her subsequent chemotherapy has made her barren, for which Leo terminates the engagement with her by claiming that his family would want to have a biological heir. Linda sees emotional stability and finds comfort in Leo but the termination of the engagement because of her inability to bear a biological child to him has made her reconsider the concept of a family, especially because she is from a family which she claims to be “dysfunctional,” and she takes this as a chance to reconceptualize her family which she has left behind. Baby Harper’s passing from a plane crash with his partner Cecil has taken Linda back to her roots to conduct the funeral ceremony for him. The narrative takes place in these two days when she faces DeAnne, and DeAnne finally confesses the family secret that Thomas loved Linda’s mother (Mai-Dao) when Thomas and Mai-Dao were students at Columbia. He adopted Linda when Mai-Dao and her husband died from the fire in the trailer house in which they lived. The titular taste “bitter in the mouth” (280) stems from Linda’s childhood memory of the last words from her parent in the fire: “The last word that this man or this woman had said to me was the only thing that remained, as a taste of bitter in my mouth. A fire had made everything else about them disappear” (279-280). Because of the affection
Thomas felt for Mai-Dao, it turns out that Linda’s adoption by the Hammericks was not a random adoption. It was instead a consequence of the long-term courtship from Thomas to Mai-Dao across the ocean even when Thomas had already married DeAnne. Linda was welcomed by the Hammericks out of love and friendship between Thomas and Mai-Dao. DeAnne had a hard time raising Linda deriving from her refusal to become just like her mother, Iris Burch Wheatley, who fits into the Southern belle role as the wife of a respectable judge in the community. Not knowing how to be a mother to Linda, DeAnne could not cope with the girl because she felt shortchanged to have learned that Thomas had been in contact with Linda’s biological mother, Mai-Dao, even after she got married in Vietnam and came to the U.S. for her husband’s research for his postgraduate study at the University of North Carolina. Talking about Mai-Dao became a taboo topic for the Hammericks, especially after DeAnne found that Thomas never mentioned DeAnne nor his marriage to her in his letters to Mai-Dao. Since then, Linda’s past becomes the taboo subject which DeAnne forbids Thomas to disclose to Linda. All the secrets revolving around Linda’s adoption have made Linda unaware of the missing link between her “Southern” self and her past relationship with her biological Vietnamese parents. The letters were in Baby Harper’s hands waiting for the family secret about Linda’s parents to be revealed finally.

*Bitter in the Mouth* is not just a novel portraying the Asian character in the Southern setting, but it also demonstrates the role of a family and what a family is by combining many narrative devices. Linda’s understanding of who she is aided by reconciling her relationship with DeAnne and understanding her mother as a woman in a different phase of life in different circumstances for the first time toward the end of the novel. Linda’s understanding of her mother as a woman who has been through many difficult moments in her life expands her
horizon as a compassionate human being. The reconciliation takes place only when Linda embraces DeAnne’s vulnerability and insecurity as a person and Linda is in DeAnne’s shoes. In the end, her racial marker being an Asian becomes just part of Linda’s characteristics and her racialized body is transformed into a temple of hermeneutical love rather than the stigma from traumatic experiences.

The story employs Linda’s unique racial identity as a “Vietnamese adoptee” to signal her isolation from the community she grew up in and leads to her reconciliation with the past. She blossoms without being stigmatized as “a racialized other” but embraces her uniqueness as a part of her many characteristics in the end. Why then, does Truong’s narrative technique create a parallel between “the Southern bildungsroman” and Linda’s experience being raised in the white household? Why does her experience looking Asian evoke To Kill a Mockingbird as Martyn Bone says? And what about the narrative tone in Bitter in the Mouth enables us to claim that it IS a Southern fiction? The next section exemplifies the narrative framework and demonstrates how the narrative device helps the reader see the two-dimensional side of the story: a white side of the story and the story of someone who is stigmatized as having a “racial appearance.” Bitter in the Mouth takes the reader to the waves of abundant Southern narrative traditions and functions as a key to test the reader’s understanding of Southern culture itself by demonstrating the history of North Carolina from the historical point of view and by showcasing undocumented people, not necessarily minorities, but people whose voices are taken away and lost in the historical void.

To do that, the narrative devices must be non-conventional so that Linda’s experience is going to be marked as a white one in the first section and the next one as a racialized one to have a clear contrast of experiences between two races. Thus, the next section exemplifies the
reason why the narratives need to be disrupted even as the Southern gothic/bildungsroman framework is employed. By employing the intertextuality of the Southern narrative frameworks, the novel easily tricks the reader into the realms of Southern fiction, which is mainly dominated by whites. This phenomenon making the reader locate this novel in the Southern framework of narrative as narrated by “whites” needs closer analysis in the next section.

**Intertextuality of Southern Bildungsroman and Gothic Elements**

According to the survey published in 2009 by *The Oxford American: A Magazine of the South*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is ranked no. 5 in “The Best Southern Novels of All Time.” *The Oxford American* asked 134 scholars and writers to vote for the ten best Southern novels. One of them, Hope Coulter, mentions that the novel is exquisite in “its explorations not only of race in the South but also of femininity and class” (*The Oxford American*). Michael Kreyling, the author of *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), on the other hand, shows a reserved attitude toward the novel when he claims it as one of the best Southern novels: “(e)ven though it simplifies race relations in the South, and even though Atticus really could have done more to save an innocent man’s life, almost every American remembers reading this book as a watershed moment” (*The Oxford American*). Kreyling has been the earliest advocate to create a new pathway for the literary history of Southern literature after the Southern Renascence, so his praise of the novel is worth mentioning, especially when he asks for a vibrant conversation among scholars about the redefinition of evolving Southern literature. Thus, for Kreyling, even with its limitations, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an “approved” Southern

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novel for the era after the agrarian/new criticism faceted Southern Renascence novels. Kreyling demands that critics keep the dialogue going about the definition of what Southern literature could be in the future by always going back to the past generation’s literary criticism. In *Inventing Southern Literature*, he also quotes Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in which Quentin Compson tells his Canadian roommate Shreve that he has to be born in the South to understand the place.57 Kreyling points out: “Against heavy odds I continue to resist the verdict of Quentin Compson. If one must be born in the South to participate meaningfully in its dialogue, then there is in fact only a monologue” (“Introduction,” XVII).58 As Kreyling suggests, the Southern literary landscape is a constantly evolving battle over cultural hegemony, class, and language as any other culture goes through. Then, what does it mean for the reexamination of the literary South to have an Asian protagonist in *Bitter in the Mouth* which employs the traditional trajectory of the Southern narrative? Kreyling’s argument which asks of Southern literature more space for diversity and inclusion is worth noting. From the Asian American point of view, at the same time, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, claim that “Asian American and other people of color” experience “suspended assimilation into mainstream culture” (38). The suspended status “constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a collective national haunting, with destructive effects” (38). It’s worth asking about the ambiguous racial status of Asians in the eyes of the beholder in the U.S., how does the racial ambiguity limit the Asians in the South?

An innovative feature of *Bitter in the Mouth* is the employment of a Vietnamese adoptee

58 With this respect, Martyn Bone also agrees with Kreyling’s argument. Bone’s “You Don’t Have to be Born There: Immigration and Contemporary Fiction of the U.S. South” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the U.S. South* (Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd, eds., New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 273-292, extensively introduces writers of immigrant origin, such as Ha Jin.
who grows up as white in the Southern community. Because of that, the novel takes the reader to the comfort zone of the Southern narrative about the family drama, and then it becomes a story about Linda’s embrace of her own Vietnamese appearance as a sign of love from her biological parents. It is also a story of accepting and understanding the people around Linda. Here, I would like to argue that *Bitter in the Mouth* combines a two-dimensional viewpoint in one novel, starting from describing a white elite class person’s bildungsroman, then adding the perspective of Linda’s experience growing up in the South as an Asian. There is the double consciousness of a white person as well as of a “cultural alien” fabricated in one novel. In this respect, Ho also points out Asians’ racial ambiguity as follows: “There Asian American adoptees can be raised believing themselves to be American, even though the term ‘American’ has always signaled white normativity for full enfranchisement and citizenship, particularly given the history of immigration and naturalization restrictions that Asians have faced in the United States” (53). Therefore, examining Asian adoptees should open space for discussion as to what citizenship is and who qualifies for it.

*Bitter in the Month* opens with an epigraph from the classic Southern novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to set the narrative framework on the Southern trope, as if the protagonist, Linda Hammerick, assumes the role of Scout Finch by revealing the burden of Southern history by focusing on socio-economic racial divides set in the existing small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina in the 1970s. The conversation between Scout and Atticus in the epigraph seems to create a parallel between the father and daughter relationship in the novel and Linda’s father Thomas Hammerick as Atticus and Linda as Scout. The epigraph quote from the ending of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is employed by Truong to demonstrate the harmonious peace in Scout’s bedtime in which Atticus is her moral protector. The quote is taken from the scene in *To Kill a
*Mockingbird* in which Scout explains her discovery about her neighbor Boo (Arthur) Radley to Atticus, telling him that Boo is not a monstrous man as Scout’s brother Jem thought he was, and that he was a gentle soul who happens to be a socially reclusive for being underdeveloped mentally after an accident as a child. Scout explains to Atticus how people’s preconceived notions of others and events are based on the lack of empathy. She points out the example of Boo that “*he* (Boo Radley) *was real nice*” when they (people) “*finally saw him*.” In response to her, Atticus confirms that “*(m)ost people are, Scout, when you finally see them*” while pulling up the covers and putting Scout in bed. The scene creates a sense of security and comfort between Atticus and Scout. Here, Scout is the one who learns that compassion and empathy are the keys toward transcending racism in which she is in a safety zone as a white. Because of the setting in the epigraph in *Bitter in the Mouth*, it is easy to assume that the scene generates between Scout-Atticus and Linda-Thomas a parallel in which Linda plays a role as white on the surface. The author intentionally misguides the reader to identify Linda as white by creating the framework of the traditional Southern narrative in which the perspective is often from the white point of view. By doing so, the agency who will experience the racial conflict in the South seemingly is given to Linda as white, and it creates a narrative structure as if Linda Hammerick is a white Southerner. This point of view, by which a white person becomes the overseer of Southern history through the shift in economic structure through the agrarian tradition, belongs to the all-too familiar Southern narrative starting from Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Because of the author’s attempt to hide Linda’s ethnic origin as Vietnamese, the reader at first sees the novel as narrated by a white character as in other Southern narratives.

Therefore, the careful maneuvering of the epigraph makes the reader believe that the first
part of the novel takes the form of Linda’s coming-of-age story as a white version of bildungsroman. Because of the epigraph from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author introduces the reader to the world of the Hammerick clan who are presumably a white family. Many layers of storylines are embedded in the story, and it is easily mistaken at a first glance as a white Southern girl’s interior monologue bildungsroman from the timeline from the mid 1970s to 1980s, because the first half of the narration traces Linda’s childhood to her adulthood through her view of the aloofness of her mother toward her. Only in the second half of the story does the reader finally have a revelation that the protagonist’s identity is that of a Vietnamese adoptee. Linda’s real name Linh-Dao is not mentioned until Linda’s commencement ceremony at Yale, which takes place in the middle of the story. Truong skillfully presents the Hammerick family’s story through Linda to have a broader spectrum of audiences so that they will reflect on what a family is. Why does Truong lay the framework of the novel as if it is narrated by a white? To answer the question, she once explained to an interviewer as follows: “part of my project especially with this book, was to ask of every single reader to question their definition of what makes a family… Families can be constructed from adopted children, from people of different races and ethnicity” (Interview). *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Southern gothic which unfolds the truth about race relations in the South and finally overturns the assumption of racial stigmas. By seeming to use the narrative framework of the classic novel, Truong also employs the technique in which the ending of her own narrative reveals the racial issues in the South. Let us look more deeply at the narrative structure by which Truong misguides the reader to think they are reading a white protagonist’s bildungsroman.

So many literary devices manipulate the reader to mistake Linda as white. For the “Confession section,” which takes up chapter one to thirteen of the novel, Linda’s given name
“Linh-Dao” is changed into a western-sounding name, Linda. The first and foremost indicator is her last name, Hammerick and how she describes her family as having a long history including owning a plantation in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Linda explains how the Hammericks accumulated a fortune by owning slaves: “The Hammericks had made their money in cotton, which was another way of saying that they had made money in slaves. (55)” The Hammericks, then, are the ruling class in the town. This establishes Linda as having a white privileged status in the first half of the novel. The lives of the Hammerick men are tied to the land which they own and profit from when Linda tells the life of her adopted father, Thomas:

His afterbirth and his body were buried in the same land that had received his father’s and forefathers’ bodies. Ashes to Ashes, dust to dust, Carolina to Carolina. In that way, my father belonged to an ancient order of men. In all other ways, my father was a modern man. He had traveled far from his home to educate himself among the race of men known as Yankees. He was never afraid, because his father and grandfather had commingled with these same folks and returned home to Charlotte, North Carolina, more or less unchanged. (53)

From the description above, all Hammerick men come back to North Carolina. Thomas is no exception. After having studied at Columbia, he came back to his hometown and married DeAnne, who is also a Southerner. DeAnne’s mother (Linda’s grandmother), Iris Wheatley Burch assumed the role as a Southern Belle figure, which indicates that Linda’s family is a traditional white Southern family: “While Walter Wendell was still alive, she stayed away from sweets, particularly the doughy and fried variety, to keep his eyes on her figure. Her dress size, a respectable eight, and her hairdo, a shoulder-length froth that required twice-weekly visits to Miss Cora’s Beauty Emporium, had remained unchanged from the day that she had met Walter Wendell” (9). Walter is Judge in the community and Iris’ husband. When Iris says to Linda, “What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two” (12), an enigma in Linda’s past becomes the key to understand Linda and her family’s dysfunctional relationship.
Truong adds the history of Southern folk music into the plotline to create a Southern regional space in Linda’s narrative. Linda and her best friend Kelly idolize Dolly Parton so they call her DP. Their adoration of DP is frowned upon by DeAnne. DeAnne tells Linda that “Dolly Parton had a beautiful voice but that she was trashy” (19). James C. Cobb points out that the 1970s saw the start of the success of Dolly Parton’s music career: “the 1970 saw that potential more than realized by singers like Dolly Parton, who revamped her homey east Tennessee mountain style into something a bit more uptown in songs such as ‘I Will Always Love You’ (1974) and ‘Here You Come Again’ (1977)” (162) in The South and America Since World War II (2001). Linda also mentions Dolly Parton’s famous song, “Coat of Many Colors” (23), explaining that music stops her from experiencing the bitter taste on her tongue and helping her: “When strapped to music, words fired blanks. This was one of the mystery’s earliest revelations. So as Dolly sang, I experienced no incomings, nothing but a slight lifting sensation in my head” (23).

These familiar Southern music memorabilia indicate Linda’s full emersion in the Southern culture. Among these, she quotes from the Southern classic gothic/bildungsroman, To Kill a Mockingbird and identifies herself with Scout as follows: “To Kill a Mockingbird, I thought my father was Atticus Finch. That meant I was Scout. That meant my mother was beautiful but dead, and my great-uncle Harper could be my older brother, Jem. When Kelly heard about my new family, she asked me who would be Boo Radley” (28). This statement seems to affirm the novel to be a story told by a white person.

However, this framework is overturned about two thirds of the way into the story when Linda’s name is revealed as “Linh-Dao” Hammerick in the commencement at Yale. From then on, Linda’s narrative reveals more of her being “Asian” in the South: “Instead of invisibility,
Boiling Springs made an open secret of me. I was the town’s pariah, but no one was allowed to
tell me so. In Boiling Springs, I was never Scout, I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in
plain sight” (171). The revelation of Linda’s racial identity brings into view the emotional scar
she received in her childhood. For example, Linda describes how her Church communities went
color-blind on her: “The Southern Baptists, the Episcopalians, and the small band of Catholics
were all in on the pact. They vowed to make themselves color-blind on my behalf” (170).
Linda’s Asian identity became an open secret for the community, and they felt safe not to
acknowledge the cultural “other” by pretending that Linda was one of them, which meant that
she passed as white. Her white communities do not quite accept her for who she is but let her
assume an honorable white status by the grace of her sponsor—her adoptive parents. With this
respect, Ho explains: “Asian American adult adoptees can pass as white and achieve honorary
whiteness in a neoliberal and colorblind American melting pot because her race does not
matter,” and then “the love and culture of her adoptive family will form the basis of her new
American identity” (52). The community welcomes her but with limitations:

They heard my voice—it helped that I came to them already speaking English
with a Southern accent, which was the best and only clue that I had about my
whereabouts before Boiling Springs—but they learned never to see me. It was an
act of selective blindness that was meant to protect me from them, or perhaps it
was the other way round. (170-171)

On the other hand, the black community’s gaze is more direct and understanding. Linda
reminiscences over the encounter with them: “These women actually saw me, and what they
wondered about me—why one of my own hadn’t taken me in—made their hearts tender” (170).
Linda learns not to meet their eyes: “If I saw them, I would have to see myself. I didn’t want a
mirror. I wanted a blank slate” (170). Black women see Linda’s otherness and acknowledge it.
There is no interaction between her white world and the black community which pitsies Linda.
This lack of interaction shows the social norm of separate social scenes.

Linda experiences being called names in many varieties from “Chink,” “Jap,” and “Gook” in her childhood:

At recess, when fewer teachers were around, my classmates would pull up the outer corners of their eyes for “Chink” and pull down the corners for “Jap.” Precise and systematic, these children were. There was also a rhyme that they recited that intertwined foreignness with an unclean and sexualized body. ‘Chinese, Japanese/Dirty knees, /Look at these!’ Their choreography, albeit communicative, was also pedestrian. They accompanied the second line of their rhyme with fingers pointed at their knees, and with the last line they used their small hands to pull out two tents from their shirts, at the loci of their own nonexistent breasts. (172)

In contrast to boys’ racialization and sexualization of Linda’s “Asian” body,” Linda proclaims that she is foreign to the categorization of herself as “Asian”: “How could I explain to them that from the age of seven to eighteen, there was nothing Asian about me except my body, which I had willed away and few in Boiling Springs seemed to see anyway” (169-170). Through the Chinese Exclusion Act, Pearl Harbor attacks, the Vietnam War, the images and representation of Asians and their bodies had been reduced to “sojourners,” “forever foreign,” and “cultural others” to the western gaze. They represent the “abject” as Kristeva names it—they are outside the Southern social norms. Linda continues her monologue, reminiscing over how these boys’ parents speak of her behind her back since the ethnic slurs come from boys’ homes:

Who taught you these words? I had to figure it out for myself—because no one in my family ever told me—that your parents must have been your teachers. You, their darling little parrots, had become the mouthpieces for all that their men and women couldn’t say aloud to me or to Thomas or DeAnne or Iris or Baby Harper but were free to say in front of their own children within the high walls of their own houses. (172)

This quote indicates the same scenario of racial discrimination which has ever been done to each
previous generation. Children learn about “race” and what it means in the social setting. This shows not only “race” becoming a component of creating social hierarchy but also “gender” playing a crucial role as well. Black girls are sympathetic toward Linda: they “never called me a name other than ‘Linda.’ They knew that the other names were meant to insult me, to punch holes into me, and make me fall down” (171-172). Black girls know what it is like to be “racialized” and “sexualized” as Linda experiences. There is a silent understanding and bond between Linda and them. As we observed above, Linda’s “Asian body” becomes a vessel to negotiating with gender, race, power, and citizenship. Linda also explores historical realms to explain the process of ostracizing others by their race and gender: “If I hadn’t come to Boiling Springs, whom would you have said these words to? When hard-pressed, you might have even used these words against a Cherokee, a Lumbee, or a Croatan” (172-173). Linda points out the perpetuation of the same pattern which excludes others by race and gender.

In terms of race and gender, especially a stigmatized body—a body as a tool for pleasure by a capital of economic exchanges, adult males’ gaze at Linda’s body symbolizes how race and gender play a role in the social hierarchy of dominance and control by paternalism:

If they saw my unformed breasts, the twigs that were my arms and legs, the hands and feet small enough to fit inside their mouths, how many of the men would remember the young female bodies that they bought by the half hour while wearing their country’s uniform in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, or South Vietnam? Complicit, because they would rather not know the answer to that question, the mothers and sisters and wives of these men looked right through me as well. (171)

It is fascinating to mention how the power dynamics of the male gaze—the male desire for instant pleasure in exchange for money and the sense of shame for exercising such an act is all transferred to Linda’s body as a stigma for them. It is not up to Linda to define who she is in her community but up to the gaze of paternalism. The women in her community conveniently
uphold a definition of Linda that aligns with the social norm, restricting them from deviating outside the comfort zone. Her body functions as a contact zone to test the limitations and flexibility of the racial dynamics in the South.

During the first part of Linda’s recollection of her childhood, she suffers from the neurological condition called “synesthesia,” which causes her to experience tastes on her tongue whenever she hears words. As is often discussed in the case of Vladimir Nabokov’s famous synesthesia in which he sees colors in written alphabet, the types of synesthesia come in different ways. As for Linda, her taste buds receive random tastes whenever she hears utterances from others. The connection between her taste, which she calls “incomings” and the word itself has no connection in meaning. Deprived of being focused on conversations, she becomes the silent observer of her Southern environment from which she feels so isolated. Synesthesia functions as a metaphorical signifier to demonstrate Linda’s isolation from the community she grew up in as well as from her family.

*Bitter in the Mouth* employs *To Kill a Mockingbird* to establish a framework of Southern bildungsroman and adds a gothic taste which revolves around Linda’s ethnicity. By doing so, the novel highlights how racial stereotypes make us fail to understand each other. It vividly portrays numerous life instances that encourage meaningful engagement with others, transcending barriers of gender, race, or social status.

**Evolving South**

This chapter demonstrates two main ideas—one is to reveal the historiographical connection between the Vietnamese migration and the South, another is to fill the gap between the sheer lack of their representations in the genre of the Southern fiction and to pinpoint how
the international/transracial identity plays a role as a filter to indicate the norms of gender and race.

The social landscape of the South is constantly evolving. There was a new ethnic group which joins the geography, especially after 1975—Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. This section employs New Southern Studies, which challenges the norms of canonical Southern literature and shuffles them and adds new writings to evolve into a new era.

*Bitter in the Mouth* traces how Linda’s understanding of herself transformed from negative to positive by disclosing each member of Linda’s family’s secrets: Linda’s grandmother Iris Burch Whatley died from diabetes because she could not cope well with the death of her spouse, Wendell Whatley, who served the community as Judge. Before her husband’s death, her life revolved around him as part of her role as a traditional Southern Belle. Since her life has been confined to fulfill the role, she lives in a void and drinks herself to death with alcohol and excessive sugar intake. Iris’s daughter DeAnne, Linda’s mother, marries Thomas because he does not force her into having children. Her life is a reaction to what her mother Iris has imposed on her to fit into the traditional way of wealthy Southern white women—by getting married, having children, and becoming a nurturer without working. DeAnne marries Thomas because he respects DeAnne’s choice not to have their own children. Toward the end of the novel, Linda finally comes to understand that her mother DeAnne is also a social outcast who chooses not to have children. The dysfunctionality of the Hammerick family does not happen just because Linda is an Asian adoptee but because of an inability to see beyond the construction of race and gender. For example, Linda thinks her first love interest, Wade, left her because she was Asian. However, it was Kelly who intervened between them out of jealousy and teenage rivalry. Baby Harper’s social life with gay communities comes alive only when Linda finds her
great-uncle’s picture collections after his funeral. It was Baby Harper who is the guardian of keeping the letters from Mai-Dao to Thomas after Thomas has gone. Linda is just about to read the letters in the end of the novel.

*Bitter in the Mouth* is a new type of Southern novel which focuses on the Southern history of race, gender, and class by incorporating “Asian-ness” as a device to illuminate how the 1970s South coped with the societal tension among different races. Truong intentionally employs the traditional Southern narrative in unveiling Linda’s identity as a Vietnamese adoptee. By doing so, she questions the race relations and readers assumptions what the traditional way of reading the novel which is set in the South. Southern fiction is evolving and moving toward more discoveries about humanity. Linda says: “We all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay” (282). By narrating her own struggle growing up in the South, Linda gains resilience and embraces a new discovery about the mystery of her being from love and compassion. Anh Thang Dao-Shar and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud remark that “the moment of belonging takes places when they find other people who are also marked by their difference in the society” (477). Linda comes to term with her divided selves, white and Asian, and accepts who she is as a person as well as understanding DeAnne as a woman who struggles to resist social conventions. Linda also comes to understand that DeAnne also struggled raising Linda because she looked more like Mai-Dao whom Thomas was in love with. *Bitter in the Mouth* is a happy combination of the Vietnamese diaspora as well as the Southern family novel.

Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* stands as a groundbreaking addition to Southern literature, pushing the boundaries of traditional Southern fiction by incorporating themes of race, gender, class, family, and “Asian-ness.” By telling the story of Linda, a Vietnamese
adoptee in the 1970s South, Truong forces readers to question conventional assumptions about the South and its complex history. As the narrative evolves, readers witness Linda’s journey of self-discovery and acceptance, a process that reflects a broader evolution in Southern fiction toward deeper understanding and empathy. The novel illuminates the power of embracing one’s unique identity and the profound impact of love and compassion, both in individual lives and within the intricate structure of the Southern family. In the quest of belonging, what matters is the recognition of shared humanity and understanding across differences.
Cynthia Shearer’s second novel, *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005), invented a creative space for a possible alternative community by placing Angus Chien’s “Celestial Grocery” in the fictional town Madagascar in the Mississippi Delta region. The novel covers the long historical period from 1938 to 2001, including 9/11.

Karyn H. Anderson’s59 summarizes the inclusive aspects of the novel as follows:

Indeed, Shearer’s novel moves beyond recent inroads to recovering the voices of African Americans and women in Southern literature to further assert the importance of other minorities in the historical and contemporary US South, demonstrating that a multicultural South has existed for some time; she also explores the current transformations taking place as new migrants settle in the fictional Mississippi Delta town of Madagascar. (199)

One of the main reasons for the novel to be claimed as “multicultural” is the fact that during the narrative Shearer gives a shine to the presence of the Chinese grocery store and its proprietor Angus Chien as the contact zone for people around the Delta. The grocery store, called “Celestial Grocery,” with the aged Rock-ola jukebox which has been in the store since 1939, becomes the landmark constellation with which each character connects and intertwines on different levels. With its fragmented structure spanning thirty-seven chapters, the narrative’s disrupted chronological order has the effect of slowing down readers and delaying their comprehension of the novel. However, this deliberate narrative technique serves a purpose. By

inserting names or lyrics of blues, country music, folksongs, and international music as titles for chapters, the author showcases an affinity for various musical backgrounds. The intentional slow pace in reaching the conclusion can be seen as Shearer’s craft in physically recreating, on paper, the unhurried lifestyle of the Delta. Music plays an important role to connect people by invoking memories, so the jukebox serves as the key mainstay for people’s emotional need to stay connected to their community as the Celestial Grocery serves as a universe in the Mississippi Delta.

Shearer helps us expand our political awareness of nationalism, political hegemony, and capitalism by employing characters who come from all over the world—new immigrants, such as Boubacar from Mauritania, Consuela Ramirez from Honduras and her Honduran workers, and Mexican construction workers—as well as locals, such as the second generation Chinese, Angus Chien, the white farmer Dean Fondren, the black farmer Aubrey Ellerbee, who was Dean’s protégé, and Marie Abide, whose grandfather was the planter in Abide Plantation. From the local South to the global historical context, the novel opens a creative space for a transnational trope, especially the postcolonial gaze including new immigrants in the South for the Casino business and other manual labor. Futuristics—the casino realtor, constantly wants to buy the land in the Delta. There are no planters nor plantations. Farmers cultivate their lands on a smaller scale than in the past. Lucky Leaf Casino hires Mauritanians as an inexpensive labor exploitation.

This chapter \(^{60}\) discusses the migration in the South, particularly focusing on the Delta Chinese and their history as a source for Shearer’s fictional South. She successfully creates a

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\(^{60}\) This chapter is an extensive and revised version of the conference presentation and its publication entitled “The Mississippi Delta Chinese and the Global Labor in Cynthia Shearer’s The Celestial Jukebox,” in the 29th Joint National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates Conference on Feb. 19, 2021. The paper was published in a CD-ROM as a monograph on Nov. 2021.
haven for immigrants by placing Angus’s grocery store as the place for multicultural and multinational empathy and understanding in the novel. However, at the same time, she enacts the racial tension in the Mississippi Delta in the binary of black and white in the historical context as well. *The Celestial Jukebox* is a new type of novel which shakes the preexisting Southern novels through race, gender, economy, and labor. The first section introduces why Angus Chien must be the mediator of all the stories which revolve around him and his community by demonstrating the historical documentation of the long Chinese presence in the Mississippi Delta. Although the Chinese have a long history of being residents in the Delta, until recently not much has been documented or discussed about them when scholars talk about “the South.” Given that lack of acknowledgement of their historical presence in the formation of the modern South, one of the triumphs of the novel is its employment of a Chinese character with a Southern drawl. Chinese people with a Southern drawl seems to be unusual in the eyes of the public who have not been to the region. However, Chinese have been in the area for more than a hundred years. That’s why it makes sense to have a character who is not a stereotypical fresh off the boat Asian figure and who fills in the perceived historical void of Chinese in the South, acknowledging their contribution to the region. Angus Chien, the Chinese owner of the Celestial Grocery, plays the role of a mediator who transcends the boundary of racial constraints and social networks.

My question is what happens to contemporary Southern literature? Many novels which don’t necessarily fit into the category of what Rubin calls “Southern Literature” need to be thoroughly introduced to better understand the region. This stance of reevaluating the novels which are set in the South will help us understand the race relations in the Black Lives Matter movement and other minority movements. Thus, this chapter aims to give a voice to the Asians
who have been marginalized and silenced in the master narrative of the formation of the South. This chapter also aims to fill the void between the historical documentation on the Asian immigration in the South and the role played by immigrants to highlight the modern version of the issues of the South. One of the issues is, for example, the global labor force which has come from all over the world to replace the existing system of labor in the South. By depicting that, I hope this chapter will help to decipher the Asians in the South, not with a collective sense of “oneness,” but with the scope to understand them as individuals so that we will embrace differences as we come closer to understand where they have come from and why they have come to the South.

At the same time, this chapter aims to showcase the limitation of this seemingly “harmonious” alternative community which is more inclusive and diverse in the gesture of reconciling with the brutal past of economic suppression against blacks under Jim Crow. This chapter does not discuss what Southern literature is and what it is not because it constantly changes depending on race, gender, and socio-economic condition as well as on how we view the Southern history. Rather, it aims to open a discussion on the possibility of novels like *The Celestial Jukebox* to explore different cultural issues and on how the literary tradition is transformed from the that of the past to that of the present.

**Structure of the Novel**

*The Celestial Jukebox* is not an easy read because of its disrupted narrative structure along with its complicated narrative comprised of thirty-seven segments among its 431 pages, each section focusing on characters who are visitors to the Celestial Grocery store. Regarding the narrative framework and the setting, the novel reminds the reader of Sherwood Anderson’s
Winesburg, Ohio (1919), which focuses on the lives of the residents of the community by placing them around the central figure, George Willard. The Celestial Jukebox, just like Winesburg, Ohio, places the Celestial Grocery and its Rocka-ola jukebox as the central contact zone for multicultural hub, along with the proprietor of the store, Angus Chien, the second-generation Chinese American who has been living in the Delta since 1938. He came to the Delta with his father Solomon to escape from the Japanese invasion of China in 1938. There is no main plot to follow, and each character’s life story in the Mississippi Delta crosses over and influences each other with understanding and empathy. This is a story which transcends the racial binary between blacks and whites in the South.

The Celestial Grocery in the Mississippi Delta becomes a trope for intersectionality in which people around Angus Chien, the proprietor, interact among themselves. This section of the novel illuminates the Chinese presence as a third category in the history of Mississippi Delta, which goes beyond the white and black binary from a historical context. This section attempts to grasp the categorization of Chinese as possessing an anomalous position. The section also challenges the norm of the myth of Southern exceptionalism which focuses on regionalism as a reason for the social hierarchy. By focusing on the Chinese presence in the Delta, this section connects the South to other regions through the transnational connection.

“Manilamen” in the South

The first Asian presence in the American South goes back to 1763. According to Veltisezar Bautista, there were people who settled in New Orleans. They are called “Manilamen.”

Although some Filipinos visited America many, many years ago, it was only in 1763 that Filipinos started to live in the United States. Seamen, called
Manilamen, jumped ship off New Orleans, Louisiana, and Acapulco, Mexico, during the Spanish galleon trade and settled in the bayous of Louisiana. (Preface)61

Kirby Araullo also explains that the settlement is called St. Malo in which the escaped maroons and indentured servants took refuge along with Filipino sailors in the marshlands.62 This happened, however, before the area became the part of the U.S. soil. Because of that, there is still a debate as to whether we should call “Manilamen” as the first Asian settlers. However, descendants of Manilamen live in New Orleans so this proves the connection between the South and the Asians much earlier than what we might expect. Including the presence of Manilamen as a part of Southern history opens a gate for further discussion about the dynamism of racial construction in the region.

Manilamen are the first Asians who settled in that region. Next came the Chinese. China’s defeat in the Opium War in 1842 led to the exploitation of Chinese labor in the western hemisphere. In Cuba, for example, Chinese indentured labor was introduced as an alternative labor source to take the place of African slaves because England and Spain had decided to abolish the African slave trade.63 Moises Sio Wong exemplifies how the exploitation of Chinese labor began: “(t)he English started the contract Chinese labor for exploitation in their colonies

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61 Veltisezar Bautista, The Filipino Americans from 1763 to the Present: Their History, Culture, and Traditions (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Bookhaus, 1998). He also comments that the “The Filipinos are expected to become the largest Asian American ethnic group by the year 2000. And yet, when many Americans refer to Asian Americans, they know more about the Japanese and the Chinese, than about the Filipinos.” He also laments how Filipinos are “a little-know ethnic group, as far as the American mainstream is concerned” (Preface).
63 Moises Sio Wong, et al., Our History Is Still Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2006), 57. The color-line in Cuba was ambiguous: it says “(t)he 1841 census conducted by the Spanish indicated there were 1,017,000 people in Cuba, of whom only 418,000 were classified as white. There were 150,000 people in the category of free mestizos, and 432,000 slaves. That is, there were substantially more slaves and free men and women of mixed blood than there were whites” (51). Racial categorization and Cuban citizenship before Cuban Revolution questions what makes people “white.”
here in the Western Hemisphere: Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados. The Spanish Crown saw that this could be an alternative to African slaves, to develop the sugar industry here in Cuba above all” (51). From the example of Cuba, the “racialization” of a person had a strong connection to colonialism. To summarize the Chinese diaspora, the defeat of the Opium War in China made it possible to transport Chinese laborers to the countries in the western hemisphere. Second, the Chinese became an alternative labor source after the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Gold Rush attracted many immigrants, including Chinese around 1851-52 (Cohen, 16), and the Chinese teacher and preacher from the First Baptist Church in Shanghai stayed in Richmond, Virginia in 1845-46 (Cohen, 13). Cohen explains the diverse ways of Chinese entry into the U.S., and one of them was as entertainers (16-17). Cohen explains the reason for Chinese being called “Celestials” as follows: “The term Celestial was used, often humorously, to refer to the Chinese people as members of the former Chinese Empire, which in China was referred to as the Heavenly Dynasty” (18). This clarifies why Angus Chien’s grocery store is called the “Celestial Grocery,” while the “Celestial Jukebox” in the title of the novel implies the involvement of the Chinese as a focal point as well as signifying the type of jukebox.

Shearer’s depiction of the Chinese proprietor of the general store in the Mississippi Delta is historically accurate, although the actual interaction of Chinese with locals might have been limited. Angus Chien is Sherer’s homage to the Chinese store owners in the Delta by recreating them in a fictional setting. However, Shearer employs the Chinese general store proprietor not just to inscribe the historical documentation of the Delta Chinese but also gives an agency to him to be the protector of the region’s changing landscape and the community.

The categorization of the race was ambiguous for Chinese since most of them came as
indentured servants to the South. In *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, Moon-Ho Jung\(^6^4\) explains the coolie trade and its nature after emancipation: “coolies represented something between and beyond slaves and immigration, an ideal no citizen, migrant labor force for the age of emancipation, allowed to enter the United States for decades as tenuous ‘immigrants’ and racially excluded from naturalization and then immigration” (223). Asians became disposable manual laborers whom the employers could replace with other groups of Asians, as Jung describes Asians being stigmatized as “coolies” through the postcolonial gaze even in the United States (4). According to Cohen, “the failure of the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad resulted in the dispersion of the largest single group of Chinese brought to the South. There was a demand for their labor, however, and during 1871, several hundred were resettled” (95). The post-Civil War era brought many Chinese laborers in the railroad construction, and then they were sent to the sugar plantations with the assumption of them replacing slaves.\(^6^5\) In this respect, Lisa Lowe theorizes how the formation of American civilization and the idea of democracy sacrificed so many “non-citizens” by exploiting their free labor: “(c)onceiving ‘new world modernity’ as comprising transatlantic and transpacific relations, the emergence of the United States can be reframed within a global setting that includes the British, European, and U.S. American slave and ‘coolie’ trades” (80). The racialized non-citizen status of an Asian coolie (Indians and Chinese) was a product of economic needs from the western countries. The origin of the connection between the Delta and China can be traced back to the post-Civil War

\(^6^4\) Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 4. Jung states, “No one, in the United States, or the Caribbean, was really a coolie, but Asian workers were surely racialized as coolies across the world, including in the United States.”

\(^6^5\) Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1984), 59. She also argues how Chinese rebelled against the plantation owners over wages and labor conditions. Because of that, they were considered “unfit” to work in the plantations. Planters also discovered the notorious “sharecropping” system which robs sharecroppers of any financial advancement forever (107).
era, with various critics actively shaping narratives about this historical relationship. Richard Schweid, for instance, explains as follows:

There have been Chinese in the Delta since 1867, when the first Chinese laborers were shipped in from Cuba to see how they would do as replacements for the recently emancipated slaves. Everything Delta planters had heard about “coolie” labor building railroads in the West made it sound like the Chinese might fit the bill. Words also spread among the Chinese in California that there was work in Mississippi clearing and planting land, and a number of them made the journey. (147)

Schweid also exemplifies how they were treated as black under Jim Crow laws. Chinese workers stayed in the Delta and served black clienteles by owning stores.66 James Lowen, in The Mississippi Chinese, also explains that the first Chinese grocery store might have been established in “1872, or 1873.”67 He states that “(b)y 1881, Chinese names appear as landowners in tax records of the business district Rosedale, in Bolivar County” (32). Hortense Powdermaker conducted a survey of the race relations after emancipation in Indianola (she calls it “Cottonville” to protect the privacy of the town), Mississippi in her 1939 book, After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South, in which she says: “(t)he 1930 census…listed eleven members of ‘other races,’ chiefly Chinese” (7). She acknowledges “another half-dozen or so grocery stores, of which one is owned by a Chinese” (9) as early as in the 1930s.68

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66 Richard Schweid, Catfish and the Delta: Confederate Fish Farming in the Mississippi Delta (Berkley: Ten Speed Press, 1992), 147. He explained the process of how Chinese bachelors eventually married black women. Some Chinese families were accepted white schools while others were denied. As for the racial rivalry in the catfish farming industry to replace cotton farming in the Delta, see Julian Rankin’s Catfish Dream: Ed Scott’s Fight for His Family Farm and Racial Justice in the Mississippi Delta (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2018).


68 Hortense Powdermaker, After Freedom: A Critical Study in the Deep South (New York, Viking, 1939), 7 and 9. John Dollard also conducted a research on the caste and class in the Delta during the 1930s, but he did not mention anything about Chinese. John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York: Doubleday, 1957). These are sociology studies. For a more detailed view of the Delta Chinese, see Robert Seto Quan, Lotus Among the
As Jung explains that Chinese are considered “non-citizens,” how were the Chinese grocery and Chinese people perceived by the mainstream Southern community? Here is an example from the literary memoir by William Alexander Percy. His reflection on the Chinese and their grocery stores did not find much meaning in their existence, as follows:

Small Chinese storekeepers are almost as ubiquitous as in the South Seas. Barred from social intercourse with the whites, they smuggle through wives from China or, more frequently, breed lawfully or otherwise with the Negro. They are not numerous enough to present a problem—except to the small white store-keeper—but in so far as I can judge, they serve no useful purpose in the community life. (18)

Percy is the last generation of the plantation elite.69 His paternalism and responsibility as an owner in the plantation community is described in his memoir. To him, the Chinese are an insular people who have nothing essential to do with his “white elite” community. It shows that the rigid social caste system was embedded in the Delta, which was primarily an agrarian society. Because the Chinese were so insular, and their social status was not possible to classify, Percy labels them as having “no useful purpose in the community life.”

Among fictional creations, William Faulkner’s *The Town* (1957)70 depicts a Chinese laundry man who is feminized and isolated from the Jefferson community in Mississippi. Charles Mallison’s narration about the Chinese evokes not just Faulkner’s imagination but also the communal understanding of the Chinese as categorized as “racial other,” as “a mule.”

Charles explains the racial ambiguity of a Chinese laundryman in town:

Because ours was a town founded by Aryan Baptists and Methodists, for Aryan Baptists and Methodists. We had a Chinese laundryman and two Jews,

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...and the other Jewish brother and his family and the Chinese all attended, were members of, the Methodist church and so they didn’t count either, being in our eyes merely non-white people, not actually colored. (306)

He continues:

And although the Chinese was a colored may even if not a Negro, he was only he, single peculiar man and barren; not just kinless but even kindless, half the world or anyway half the continent (we all knew about San Francisco’s Chinatown) sundered from his like and therefore as threatless as a mule. (306)

Chuck’s description of a Chinese laundry man categorizes him as “colored,” but he is safe as long as he is “barren”—this signals that the Chinese man signifies as the opposite of what “Southern masculinity” is. The passage reflects the racial and cultural attitudes prevalent during the time the novel was written. The description of the Chinese laundryman emphasizes his singularity and perceived lack of familial and cultural connections, portraying him as an isolated and “threatless” figure. The mention of being “colored” but “not a Negro” underscores the racial categorization of individuals and the hierarchical nature of racial prejudices during that era. The comparison to a mule further reinforces the notion of the Chinese laundryman as an outsider, emphasizing his perceived lack of influence within the societal context depicted in the novel.

The Chinese have a longstanding history of residing in the Delta. Because the U.S. economy required their labor, they settled in. However, despite their contributions, they were not granted citizenship based on this premise. In this respect, Lisa Lowe summarizes the in-betweenness of Asians’ racial status: “Asians have been admitted into the U.S. nation in terms of national economic imperatives, while the state has estranged Asian immigrants through racialization and bars to citizenship, thus distancing Asian Americans, even as citizens, from the terrain of national culture. (176)

The word “coolie” does not refer to Chinese labor forces in plantation field labor such as cane and cotton, but rather marks their social status started as “racialized.’ This explains Leslie Bow’s argument in her *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South*, which was published in 2010 and in which she demonstrates examples of school segregation in the Delta and how American-born Chinese shifted from one white academy to another as a product of “a palimpsest of caste systems” (13). By shifting the historical focus in the region, this new perspective helps illuminate the complexity of racial issues and social hierarchy in the Delta, both in the past and present. Through the fictional void of the Chinese presence in the Southern fiction, then, what does it mean to have Angus as the center of the novel?

**Consuela, Honduras, Sex Trafficking**

Angus functions as a contact zone of race and gender in the community. For example, he hires Consuela Ramirez, who is from Honduras, to work at his grocery store. He is infatuated with her, and his attraction to her leads to his understanding of the politics of Honduras. One of the topics which constantly comes up is a new type of slavery—sex trafficking—in the new era. Consuela confesses that the reason for her coming to Mississippi was to look for her niece, who has been a victim of sex trafficking: “I come to here to get my sister’s girl. My sister pay to send her to me, so she can work and, send money back, and she don’t ever come, not for ten month” (133). It turns out Tomas Tulia and his gangs have been forcing Consuela’s niece into prostitution and she was about to have a baby. She adds: “Some men were selling her (my niece)

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every night” (134). Consuela’s cry resonates with the current social problem of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking: “They got many girls. Nobody cares about them” (134). The Delta itself has a long history of slavery. Consuela’s search for her niece implicates the capitalist society in modern slavery. Consuela’s search for her niece implicates the modern slavery in the capitalism society. At the same time, the reader speculates the political and economic deprivation of Honduras. Honduras is notoriously known as the most dangerous countries in Latin America as a continuous “femicide” because of the gang violence. By having Angus as Consuela’s employer, the reader reaches to a better understanding of Consuela and her niece and of the violation of basic human rights.

Angus serves as a crucial contact zone in Madagascar of the Mississippi Delta, where the complexities of race, gender, and community issues intersect in the modernized society. This is exemplified through his employment of Consuela. His infatuation with her and his growing interest in her background provide him with a perspective of the political and social challenges faced by her home country, Honduras.

Consuela represents one of the various groups of people who comes from Latin America and the Caribbean in the novel. She is a character of Honduran origin who is naturalized as an American citizen. Her experiences and background shed light on the challenges and issues faced by immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean in the Mississippi Delta. Her story serves as a focal point of exploring themes related to immigration, identity, and the hardships that many individuals from these regions might encounter when seeking a better life or searching for loved ones in a new and unfamiliar environment.
Boubacar, Slavery, Mauritania

Another kind of slavery is depicted through Boubacar. Mauritania is in the west of Africa and the last country in the world to ban slavery as recent as in 1981. Boubacar was born into slavery, and his family’s master, the Wastrel, and Boubacar’s uncles also live with him in the trailer house in the abandoned gas station which is located next to Angus’s store. They work in Lucky Leaf Casino. Boubacar wonders if a person he sees is free or not. He arrives in Memphis International Airport with optimism: “All are bizan (free) in America” (23). He recalls slavery in Mauritania: “There was not word for it, harutine, in English. It was far too complicated to explain to a stranger. His mother had warned him not to try to explain to strangers. In Mauritania, people had gone to jail for trying to explain it to French television crews” (22). A white Quaker from Harvard University bought Boubacar’s freedom and arranged for his ticket to Mississippi. During the process, Boubacar witnesses the perpetuation of slavery through his mother, who was also a slave: “his mother had used the money to purchase a little Sudanese refugee girl to fetch the water every day” (22). Even if slavery was abolished in 1981 in Mauritania, his mother’s buying a slave indicates that it takes a long time to change the ingrained habit as a social norm. Shearer pinpoints the slavery in Mauritania and chooses the Mississippi Delta as a site to speculate on different types of human exploitation.

When Boubacar first arrives at the Memphis International Airport, he gets a ride from an African American soldier from Memphis to Madagascar. The soldier explains that the levee is filled with black bodies:

That’s the levee. That’s what hold the river back, keep it from flooding everybody out. Got the bodies of black men in it. White men took ’em out there and helt the gun on them while they dug it and built the level. Black man fall, shovel the dirt over him where he fall. Some of them bodies had bullets in ’em when they fell. That was a long time ago. (24)
The contrast between the casual talk and the seriousness of the content about the exploitation of labor dramatizes the horrendous nature of racism.

Seeking solace in Angus’s store, Boubacar found refuge in the Jukebox, his love for music evident through a cherished “collection of cassette tapes containing the entire musical history of Africa” (18). This deep connection to music transcended geographic boundaries, manifesting in the form of a cultural artifact he promptly adopted in the South. One such instance was his recognition of a bottle tree:

The small trees around the boathouse were cobwebbed with gold lights strung in a disorderly way. Silver disks made from pie pans reflected the sun, and shards of colored glass dangled from strings and clinked dully together. On the bare branches of a dead tree, bottles of many colors were upended. The boy knew instantly what he was seeing: the bottle would detain whatever spirits meant harm to the household. He theorized that the neighbors could be from Senegal, and this reassured him. No village should be without its sorciere. (29)

Boubacar functions as a key to connect the missing link between Africanism and the Southern culture. Boubacar’s comment reminds the reader where a bottle tree as a custom came from originally.

Boubacar’s name is linked to Malian musician, Boubacar Traoré.73 Boubacar’s former master, the Westrel, tells the origin of Boubacar’s name: “You were named after Boubacar Traoré, you know. Your father and I named you the night you were born, when Boubacar Traoré had been forgotten by the world. He was a tailor in Mali, making suits for fat Englishmen. So we gave you his name” (148-149). Boubacar Traoré, an artist also known as Kar Kar, became the symbol of the Mandingo music. He is a type of musician who crosses over many genres of music and connects Mandingo music to the Blues. Therefore, metaphorically, Boubacar assumes

73 Boubacar Traoré’s music career, see “Boubacar Traoré” at https://www.boubacartraore.com/home.
a sense of mission and is characterized as someone who will integrate the barrier of nationality and race through his music. His affinity to music is frequently mentioned in the text. For example, he is obsessed with “an odd guitar made of silver steel, with elegant chrysanthemums etched into its side” (50). He sees it as “the most beautiful thing he had seen in all American, more than the jukebox, more than the Chevrolet” (50). Boubacar’s departure from Madagascar to New York City implies the obstacles which he might face being a foreigner amid the terrorist attack on 9/11, however, his exposure to many genres of music in Beale Street in Memphis before his departure gives him a sense of unity: “The living and the dead were all here, in this place that was like a jukebox of all spirits” (418). Boubacar is a modern oracle who put people—living or dead—together through music. And it is through Angus that readers observe Boubacar’s story. Boubacar enjoys listening to music at Angus’s store.

The Celestial Grocery as a Trope for a Safe Haven

Mississippi introduced the casino business in the Delta and on the gulf coast to increase the tax revenue to mend the economic impediment. People like the Hondurans, the Mauritanians, and the Mexicans illuminate the issues revolving around the modern South, such as human trafficking, drug dealing, gambling addiction, along with the preexisting threat and pressure from the northern urbanization and globalization. They all visit Angus’s store and play the jukebox:

The jukebox was a Rock-ola that had come all the way from St. Louis the following year (1939) … It had not been serviced since the riots in Memphis the night Martin Luther King died,…customers could choose almost anything they wanted, as long as it had been released before April of 1968. Johnny Cash, Otis Redding, Carl Perkins, Percy Sledge, Slim Harpo, Wilson Pickett. (33)
The time of the jukebox halted in 1968. The music from the past is out of order; it does not play the exact song a person wants to hear. The alternative community to help each other is there; however, it also shows the limitation of the alternative community which transcends the boundary of the countries from which they came. The economic and cultural pressure is still perpetuating, and the pattern is the same as in the time of the agrarian tradition. Forms of labor have shifted, but this global labor also causes the dehumanization of people who are underpaid and underserved. Dena C. Wittmann expresses concerns over the long-term impact of the casino operations to the community as well as the workers as follows:

(T)he social impact of the gaming industry on the region has been largely overlooked by legislators, public officials, and community agencies. While industry opponents and interested academics have focused on increased crime, bankruptcy, suicide, and divorce, all largely due to compulsive gambling, other equally important issues for the communities that have adopted gaming have been neglected. Among those issues are those pertinent to employee themselves and of the impact of shift work on the lives of the workers and on the community at large. (139)

Wittman’s report highlights the addictive nature of instant gratification which gambling makes us feel. The black farmer Aubrey constantly visits Lucky Leaf Casino. This indicates that the casino is another form of exploitation which is caused by capitalism. On the other hand, Angus’s Jukebox recycles red-inked quarter to play music. There is a contrast between the fast-paced modern capitalism and harmonious place to build a haven by enjoying music before 1968.

*The Celestial Jukebox* covers the old Southern race tension, and its victim through Marie Abide, who is the granddaughter of the plantation owner. She got disoriented mentally after having had to give up her biracial baby for adoption in the 1950s. It is Angus Chien, the

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Chinese proprietor, who becomes the center for the immigrant community. He is the one who watches over Miss Marie who denounced living in the family estate, the Abide Plantation, but lives in a boathouse nearby.

Martyn Bone points out “the Celestial Grocery symbolizes a shift in local land use” (157-158). Angus’s father, Solomon, bought the commissary which once had been used as a commissary in the Abide Plantation. Behind the store’s opening, there is a hidden history about the decline of the plantation system and the displacement of blacks. As the text indicates that “The Celestial was the last of the constellation of Chinese-run country stores that used to exist in almost every river town between Memphis and New Orleans” (31), the grocery store could be the marker to indicate the former plantation sites as well. The Chinese grocery store in the Mississippi Delta fills the gap between the agrarian South, where the plantation economy supported the ideology of the ruling class in the community, and the vision of a modern South that embraces polyglot and multi-ethnic diversity.

*The Celestial Jukebox* intertwines the past legacy of the Southern literary tradition with the modern version of the South to connect the South across borders. It provides a multifaceted perspective of the American South, transcending the traditional boundaries of Southern literature. By placing Angus Chien’s “Celestial Grocery” in the fictional town of Madagascar in the Mississippi Delta, Shearer weaves a complex narrative that spans decades and encompasses various immigrant experiences, from the Chinese presence dating back to the nineteenth century to more recent arrivals like Boubacar from Mauritania and Consuela from Honduras. Through this rich tapestry of characters and their interconnected stories, the novel explores themes of

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race, gender, economics, and labor, shedding light on the multicultural and multinational dynamics at play in the South. The Celestial Grocery store itself serves as a symbolic contact zone where diverse individuals come together, fostering empathy and understanding while reflecting the slow pace of Delta life. Moreover, the novel demonstrates contemporary issues such as human trafficking, casino capitalism and tourism, and the impact of globalization on the South’s workforce. It challenges traditional notions of Southern literature and invites readers to reevaluate the region’s complexity, adaptability, and historical transformation. The Celestial Jukebox is a powerful testament to the ever-evolving nature of the American South and its ability to embrace diversity and change by placing the Chinese American proprietor as the protector of the community.
CONCLUSION

The intersectional representation of Asians in Southern literature has been made possible by New Southern Studies, which celebrates the depiction of diverse communities and ethnic minorities by connecting their diaspora to the Southern soil. For Chuck in *The Foreign Student*, he negotiates the dominant binary cultural system of black and white and finds peace just being himself in the end. The last scene in which the vast landscape with lush green in the Southern soil heals his trauma. The agrarian landscape incorporates his memories from Korea with the nature before him. His inability to communicate well enough in English as a newcomer has made it possible for him to be an observant witness to exemplify how his position in Southern society is constantly challenged based on who he interacts with. His language limitation—his inability to make meaning out of social conflicts, such as prejudices, racial profiling, and constant surveillance of his behavior from the white gaze—becomes a tool for the reader to detect the complex racial issues and societal norms during the period of the Jim Crow South. Chuck is a “foreign” cultural other to the people in the Sewanee community in which the University of the South he entered was predominantly white; on the same note, Chuck makes a conscious choice not to leave the community in Sewanee even though his scholarship had been taken away by the racial hate of the boss in the bindery summer job in Chicago. Through Chuck’s exposure to different locations in the U.S.—from the predominantly white community of Sewanee in Tennessee to the melting pot of ethnic diversity in Chinatown in Chicago and New Orleans—readers observe the nation-wide xenophobia toward Asians.
Robert Olen Butler’s portrayal of New Orleans’ Vietnamese refugees offers a unique window into the cultural and historical dynamics of the South during the 1970s. By humanizing these refugees, Butler challenges stereotypes and prejudices that often surround immigrant communities. Monique Truong’s narrative device to employ Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a framework for her novel invites readers to view the Southern social landscape from a different vantage point. By juxtaposing her Vietnamese American protagonist with the classic narrative, Truong prompts readers to reexamine issues of race, identity, and belonging in the South. Her choice of narrative framework allows readers to see the evolution of Southern society from the perspective of a Vietnamese American protagonist. Her approach encourages readers to reflect on both the progress gained and challenges faced by marginalized communities in the South. Cynthia Shearer’s novel *The Celestial Jukebox* stands out for its portrayal of the harmonious “imagined” community in the fictional Madagascar of the Mississippi Delta. The role of the Chinese proprietor, Angus Chien, as a protector of agrarian tradition and his connections to various immigrant communities emphasize the modernized multicultural aspect of the South. Angus’s efforts to protect a victim like Miss Marie from societal prejudices and the banning of interracial relationships demonstrates the complex and nuanced regional history and the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Moving beyond literature, contemporary cinematic expressions like *Minari* (2020) and *Blue Bayou* (2021) have extended the purview of New Southern Studies, ushering in fresh perspectives in the intersectionality of Asian representations in the South. *Minari* weaves a semiautobiographical tale of a Korean immigrant family’s resilience in and adaptation to rural Arkansas. By accentuating their journey toward assimilation and economic stability in the face of hardships, it introduces a new layer of diversity to Southern culture, challenging stereotypes
and expanding the notion of Southern identity.

*Minari* (2020) is the semiautobiographical work done by the Korean American director, Lee Isaac Chung. The title “Minari” refers to a plant (Oenanthe Javanica) which has its roots in East Asia. It tells a story about a Korean immigrant family’s new life in the rural Arkansas of the 1980s. Monica and Jacob used to work at a sexing job to sort baby chicks by gender in a hatchery in California. The film exemplifies their pursuit of the American dream by relocating from California to Arkansas to farm Korean crops. The title refers to the type of herb that the grandmother of the family from Korea has brought with her and planted by the creek. The plant is known for its robust nature to grow in any hard conditions. When the storage for crops catches fire, the abundance of minari plants by the creek becomes the catalyst to save the family financially. Therefore, the title of the film metaphorically symbolizes the resilience of the Korean family and their slow process of assimilation to Southern culture. Although the film perpetuates the stereotype of the subservient and patient wife who follows her husband, Jacob, in his pursuit of his dream to be successful in the U.S., the struggle of Korean immigrants as potential farmers in the rural South creates an intersectionality of narrative to take the Korean immigration story from an urban space to a rural space. *Minari* introduces a new layer of diversity to the Southern culture and regional identity formation by exploring the immigrant experience of the Korean family in the region. By doing so, this adds depth and complexity to the narrative of Southern identity and regionalism. It challenges stereotypes and redefines the notion of what it means to be a Southerner. It indicates that the South is not a monolithic entity but a place where various cultures and identities coexist and contribute to the region’s richness. Through the family’s interaction with the local community, the South in the film becomes a place for a potential cross-cultural understanding.
Blue Bayou (2021) is a film written and directed by Justin Chon, who also plays the protagonist, Antonio LeBlanc, a Korean American adoptee who has grown up in Louisiana in the present day. Antonio fights for his family in the face of deportation, and the film indicates that home is not just a physical place but also a sense of emotional and cultural attachment. It depicts the complex immigration laws in the U.S. as well as the systemic racism in his Louisiana home. By highlighting the strong bond of the family, Blue Bayou expands its creative horizon to show rich cultural diversity in the region. Both films help expand the consciousness of cultural diversity in the region.

In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic spa shooting in Atlanta in 2021, these narratives take on heightened significance. They invite us to reevaluate and extend our understanding of the South’s cultural diversity and the pressing need for cross-cultural understanding. The more diverse Asian representations in the imagined South are created and gain attention, the more changes of cultural convergence in the real world will occur. The analysis of the four novels and the introduction of the recent cinematic expressions of the relationship between Asians and the South invite more critical attention.

These narratives foster a sense of cultural convergence as they highlight the multifaceted nature of the South. The diverse Asian representations within these works emphasize that the South is not a monolithic entity but a dynamic space where various cultures and identities coexist. The experiences of the characters, whether they are Korean immigrants farming crops in rural Arkansas or a Korean American adoptee navigating Louisiana’s complex immigration laws, demonstrate the resilience, adaptability, and enduring sense of attachment to the South. The Asian presence in Southern literature and cinema transcends the realm of storytelling to become a potent force for cultural transformation. These narratives challenge
preconceived notions and serve as a powerful catalyst for cultural convergence and cross-cultural understanding. As these representations continue to gain attention and expand, they inspire us to reevaluate and extend our appreciation of the South’s cultural diversity, promoting a more inclusive and vibrant Southern identity. The analysis of the four novels and the introduction recent cinematic expressions demonstrates the significance of the relationship between Asians and the South, inviting critical attention to this ongoing narrative of cultural exchange and growth.


Dellinger, Kirsten, Jeffery T. Jackson, Katie B. McKee, and Annette Trefzer. “Interlocality and


Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.* Princeton:


VITA

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EDUCATION

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Comprehensive exam fields: 20th and 21st century U.S. literature (1900-present)

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2005-present Ph.D. Program in English, University of Mississippi

1995-1998 Graduate School of Letters, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan
Major: English (American Literature)
earned all the credits for a Doctorate

1995-1996 Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, U.S. (funded by the Ministry of Education) (Non-degree program)

1993-1995 M.A. in English, Graduate School of Letters, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

1991-1992  Ball State University, Muncie, IN, U.S. (funded by the Ministry of Education),
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1988-1993  B.E. in English Education, Department of Education, Saga University, Saga,
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EMPLOYMENT
Oct.1, 2003-Present
  Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University, Fukuoka, Japan

April 1, 1998-Sept. 30, 2003
  Full-time lecturer (tenured), English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka
  University, Fukuoka, Japan
  Duties: teaching general English courses for all students and English
           Composition and American Literature for English majors

1998-2005  Part-time lecturer, Saga University, Saga, Japan
           Duties: taught general English courses

1996-1998  Part-time lecturer, Hiroshima University of Economics, Hiroshima, Japan
           Duties: taught general English courses

PUBLICATIONS
JOURNAL ARTICLES
2022  “From Korea to the U.S. South in the Mid-1950s: Trauma and Race Relations in Susan
      Choi’s The Foreign Student.” NAAAS and Affiliates 2022 Monograph Series, 437-445.

2021  “The Mississippi Delta Chinese and the Global Labor in Cynthia Shearer’s The
      Celestial Jukebox.” NAAAS and Affiliates 2021 Monograph Series, 681-694.

2021  “Toward Plural ‘Souths’: Immigration and Vietnamese Diaspora in Monique Truong’s
      Bitter in the Mouth.” NAAAS and Affiliates 2020 Monograph Series, 730-739.

2020  “The South in the 1950s in Toni Morrison’s Home.” The William Faulkner Journal of
2013 “Reading Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’.” The 83rd Conference Proceedings. The 83rd General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan:132-134.


BOOK CHAPTERS


1998 “Idealizing Lena Grove: A Problem of Female Subjectivity in Light in August.” In Search of the Ethos of the English Language—A Festschrift in Honour of Takeshi
ENCYCLOPEDIA AND REFERENCE BOOK ENTRIES


BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY


ANNOTATION


ENGLISH TEXTBOOK FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

LITERARY ESSAYS IN ACADEMIC JOURNALS


2004  “Facts as Literary Works.” “News from Overseas (Column No.3).” *The Rising Generation* 150.6 (2004): 44.


BOOK REVIEWS


SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

TRANSLATIONS OF ACADEMIC ARTICLES


CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
2022  “From Korea to the U.S. South in the Mid-1950s: Trauma and Race Relations in Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student.” The 30th Joint National Conference (National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates) Virtual meeting.


1998  “The Female Characters in The Sound and the Fury.” (Presented in English) Kyushu American Literature Society Meeting. Ropponmatsu Campus, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, December 1998


SESSIONS ORGANIZED

TEACHING
Fukuoka University 1998-present (Undergraduate)
General English
Global English
Interactive English
English Writing I
English Writing II
English Reading Comprehension
Introduction to American Literature and Culture
American Literature and Culture I
American Literature and Culture II
Area Studies of English-Speaking Countries
American Literature and Culture Seminar I
American Literature and Culture Seminar II
Environment and Literature (Innovation for Sustainability)
Literature and Gender (Culture and Education)

Saga University (1998-2005)
General English (Undergraduate)

Hiroshima University of Economics (1996-1998)
General English (Undergraduate)

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

2021-2022  Mentor in Girls Unlimited Program in Fukuoka 2021 (funded by the U.S. Embassy in Japan), GUP Network, virtual zoom meetings, November 4, 2021- March 5, 2022

2019-2020  Mentor in TOMODACHI MetLife Women’s Leadership Program (TMWLP) 2019-2020 in the Kyushu Region, the U.S.-Japan Council, U.S. Embassy in Japan, MetLife Insurance (Sponsor), Fukuoka American Center and zoom conferences, September 2019-May 2020

2020  Gave two demonstration English lessons in English for Moji Gwakuen High School Students (online lectures conducted by Zoom), October 16, 2020

2019  Coordinator to facilitate all-English “Diplomat’s Course,” (hosted by the Fukuoka U.S. Consulate, Fukuoka University), April-June 2019

2017  Judge in the 68th Intercollegiate Oratorical Contest (hosted by English Speaking Society, Seinan Gwakuin University),
Fukuoka, Nov. 25, 2017

2017 Judge in the 12th Saga Prefectural High School English Debate Contest (hosted by Saga Prefecture Senior High School English Teachers’ Association, Saga University), Saga, October 29, 2017

2017 Judge in the 18th Saga Prefectural High School English Speech Contest, (hosted by Saga Prefecture Senior High School English Teachers’ Association, Saga University), Saga, October 1, 2017

2012 Judge in the 13th Saga Prefectural High School English Speech Contest, (hosted by Saga Prefecture Senior High School English Teachers’ Association, Kashima High School), Saga, October 28, 2012

2007-2023 Examiner in English conversation skills in National Maritime Pilot Exams (organized by Kyushu Transportation Bureau), Fukuoka

2009 Resource Person at 2009 Study U.S.A. (Study Abroad to the U.S. Fair hosted by Fulbright Japan), Fukuoka, November 8, 2009

2008 Resource Person at 2008 Study U.S.A. (Study Abroad to the U.S. Fair hosted by Fulbright Japan), Fukuoka, November 8, 2008

2007 Guest Lecturer on William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* in Prof. Douglass Branch’s American Literature class at Tennessee Southwest Community College, Memphis, TN, February 7, 2007

2006 Guest Speaker on Japanese culture at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, Bethesda, MD. Hosted by Educational and Cultural Affairs, Department of State, February 10, 2006

2004 Facilitator of the group discussion in English, Educational Exchange
between the U.S. delegates and Japanese teachers, Fulbright Memorial Fund’s “Teacher Program,” Saga University, Saga, June 21, 2004

2003  Gave a demonstration English lesson for Ohori High School students (as a part of the recruiting program), Fukuoka University, Fukuoka, May 31, 2003

2002  Judge in the 12th Annual All-Kyushu High School Speech Contest, (hosted by Saga Prefecture Senior High School English Teachers’ Association, Kyushu Area Federation of English Education Research Groups), Saga University, November 2, 2002

2002  Judge in the JAMSA All Kyushu Speech Contest for Medical Students, (hosted by Japan International Medical English-Speaking Society Students’ Association) Fukuoka University, May 2002

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2023-present  “Representations of Asian Laborers in the U.S. South.”
Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C)
(MEXT KAKENHI Grant Number JP23K00370)

Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C)
(MEXT KAKENHI Grant Number JP18K00517)

2006  A Summer Graduate Assistantship for Research, University of Mississippi

2007  A Summer Graduate Assistantship for Research, University of Mississippi

2007  BioKyowa Japanese Visiting Scholar Award, BioKyowa, Inc., Center for Faulkner Studies, Southeast Missouri State University

2005-2007  A Fulbright grant for graduate studies

1995-1996  A grant for an exchange program from the Ministry of Education (ten months),
Ball State University, IN.

1991-1992 A grant for an exchange program from the Ministry of Education (ten months), University of Michigan, Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, MI.

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION
2014-2019 Publication List Compiler and Paper Reviewer
Collaborators: Hirono Hayase and Setsuko Ohno
Responsibilities:
・Generated the annual publication list on William Faulkner and Southern Studies by the members of the William Faulkner Society of Japan.
・Conducted thorough reviews of publications on the list to identity and nominate the best paper of the year for re-publication and recognition.
・Contributed to the promotion of quality research in the Faulkner and Southern Studies.

2014 Coordinator of the Kyushu American Literature Society’s September and December meetings

2005-2014 First Website Committee Member of the Kyushu American Literature Society
Responsibilities:
・Responsible for selecting service providers and scrutinizing content for publication.
・Collaborated with team members to ensure the effective launch of the organization’s website.

2003-2004 Assistance for Dr. Koji Kotani in compiling annual publication list on William Faulkner and the Southern Studies by the members of the William Faulkner Society of Japan

2000 Editor of KALS Newsletter (No.21 and No. 22), Kyushu American Literature Society

SERVICE AT FUKUOKA UNIVERSITY
2023-present International Partnerships Team member, Carbon Neutral Promotion Center,
Fukuoka University

2017
Language School Evaluator
Location: EF English First International Language Campus in Auckland, New Zealand
Date: February 7-9, 2017
Collaborator: Reiko Akiyoshi
Responsibilities:
・ Conducted a comprehensive site visit to EF to evaluate the facilities, teaching methodologies, and overall quality of education provided to our students.
・ Collaborated with school administrators and teachers to gather feedback and recommendations for improvement.
・ Compiled a detailed report highlighting strength in the language school’s programs by interviewing students and attending classes.
・ Presented findings and suggestions to our university’s Language Center.
・ Contributed to the school’s ongoing efforts to enhance the learning experience for students.

2017
Language School Evaluator
Location: EF English First International Language Campus in Brisbane, Australia
Date: February 9-14, 2017
Collaborator: Reiko Akiyoshi

2017
Language School Evaluator
Location: EF English First International Language Campus in Boston, U.S.
Date: August 22-26, 2017

2015-2020
External Advisor, Career Center Board Meeting (2015-March 2020)

2013
International Internship On-site Coordinator (February 21-26) at Hatchando (Vietnam) Co., LTD (15 Road, Tan Thuan EPZ, Dist. 7., Ho Chi Minh City)
Responsibilities:
・ Successfully launched and managed an international internship program in Vietnam.
• Coordinated all aspects of the program, including student screening, preliminary video-conference calls to discuss logistics and on-site support.
• Led a group of six Japanese students throughout their internship experience, ensuring their smooth integration and cultural immersion.
• Played a key role in fostering international relationships and enhancing the overall quality of the internship program.

2012-2014  Harassment Prevention Committee member

2009-2011  Vice Director, Career Center (Dec. 2009-Nov. 2011)

2009-present  Editor/Proofreader of *Fukuoka University Guidebook* (in English), worked with John Hatcher (2009-2016) and Jefferson Peters (2017-present) (Jan. 2009-present)

2007-2013  Faculty Representative, Career Center (December 2007-November 2013)

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

2020-present  The Toni Morrison Society (Lifetime member)
2011-present  English Literary Society of Japan
2004-present  The William Faulkner Society (Lifetime member)
1998-present  The William Faulkner Society of Japan
1997-present  The Kyushu American Literature Society
1993-present  The Chu-Shikoku American Literature Society
1993-present  The American Literature Society of Japan