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Across Global Souths

**Asian Migrations through the U.S. South
and the Circum-Caribbean**

VOLUME 61 ISSUE 3

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Introduction
**Across Global Souths: Asian Migrations
through the U.S. South and the
Circum-Caribbean**

A Special Issue of the American Studies Journal

Guest Editors Joo Ok Kim and Giselle Liza Anatol

Across Global Souths: Asian Migrations through the U.S. South and the Circum-Caribbean investigates Asian/American cultures, politics, and relationships across multiple Souths, with an emphasis on the U.S. South and the Caribbean. Edward Said's foundational *Orientalism* (1978) has been expanded and extrapolated to multiple frameworks that situate Asian peoples and populations in terms of the East versus the West; this concept continues to circulate in the United States, where "Asian America" is largely envisioned as only populating the East and West coasts. The *Across Global Souths* project reframes the conversation with an emphasis on journeys to and from multiple Souths. The guest editors consider the broader geopolitical designation of "South" in the United States, including Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, and the U.S. Gulf Coast as a region in and of itself. *Asian Americans in Dixie* provides a critical reference point, defining the South as "a region of the United States and a space connected to and part of other transnational spaces" (Joshi and Desai, 2013, 4). Grounded within recent scholarly developments in the field of American Studies, we have invited further reflections on the diasporic condition of the category "Asian," as well as the diasporic condition of the category "Southerner," simultaneously challenging notions of an exclusively white, Euro-American U.S.

citizenry. A more inclusive, diverse conceptualization of what it means to be “American” subverts common racial identifications, which frequently fail to address the critical role that adopted cultural and ethnic traditions have played in the development of the U.S. national landscape; it also undermines notions of an unchanging, fixed identity. Furthermore, “American” is used expansively to consider migrations to and from different locations across the Americas. Framed this way, Brazil—the home to the largest population of Japanese people outside of Japan—and Cuba’s Havana Chinatown emerge as rich sites for exploration.

What distinguishes this special issue, firmly ensconced within both American Studies and current Global South frameworks, is the comparative focus on Asians in the U.S. South and the Caribbean and Caribbean diasporas. Although Global South Studies has raised important questions on “south/south” and hemispheric discourses, and Caribbean Studies has long foregrounded archipelagic and transnational critiques of colonialism, an interdisciplinary examination of Asian migrations within two locations that share centuries of overlapping histories has been understudied. For instance, the troubling “John Chinaman” stereotype of the nineteenth century, which depicted Chinese immigrants to the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and Australia as “sinister, crafty, dirty, diseased, inscrutable, economically threatening, and, of course, strangely inassimilable,” is commonly framed as “widespread *in the West*” (Lee Loy 1, 2010, emphasis added), resulting from migratory routes that traversed longitudinal, rather than latitudinal, lines. But even as we, the editors and contributors to *Across Global Souths*, foreground the geographical spaces of the U.S. South and the Caribbean in this special issue, we are inspired by broader theorizations of “south” that assemble other underexamined geographies and a range of methodologies, such as ethnographies that allow inquiry within unexpected sites of cultural formations, like restaurants, motels, and fishing-folk circles. This project thus convenes scholars working “across” different fields, disciplinary approaches, and research methods to foster greater understanding of the U.S. South–circum–Caribbean network. We feel compelled by stories like that of writer Cristina García, whose novel *Monkey Hunting* (2003) was partially inspired by a visit to a Chinese Cuban restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and a plate of black beans and pork fried rice. The novel’s publication and circulation animate histories of Asian migration to the Americas, and it implicitly critiques the loss of these histories; it also illuminates the scores of lost narratives about North–South crossings, including recipes, and patterns of movement engendered by the Vietnam War. In other words, even as it activates chronicles of the “coolie” trade, García’s narrative engages texts that conventionally have been elided from constructions of historical archives (e.g., family recipes) and memories of a war that has been made illegible and obscure in current

knowledge regimes. The novel induces temporal and spatial tensions, connecting the journeys of indentured servants to the Caribbean with a multitude of recollections ignored by national histories and twining together Western European and U.S. colonial oppressions and capitalist aggressions. The compounded histories evident in the encounters depicted in *Monkey Hunting* serve as emblems of the colonial intersections of China, the Caribbean, and the United States, spanning four generations and “ultimately a 120-year dialogue between Cuba and Asia” (García, 2003, 259), allowing the author to craft Asian experiences as fundamental to Cuban history, despite largely being considered unevenly constitutive when viewed alongside the dynamics between European, African, and Indigenous subjects in the region.

Existing scholarship on Asian diasporas makes great strides as single nation and regional studies. Notable recent works include Manu Goswami’s *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (2004), which investigates the relationship between nation–state and economy, infrastructure, and global empire building; Eric Tang’s *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (2015), which frames the legacies of African American slavery and life in urban space to the workings of U.S. empire and the refugee experiences of Cambodians; *Global Intimacies: China and/in the Global South* (Rofel and Sweeney, 2021), a special issue of the *Feminist Studies* journal inspired by the rising cultural influence of China in recent years and the nation’s central position in global markets; and *Redefining Multicultural Families in South Korea: Reflections and Future Directions*, a rich collection of essays edited by Minjeong Kim and Hyeyoung Woo (2022).

Other studies focus on the Asian diaspora in terms of global culture. *Gendering the Trans-Pacific World: Diaspora, Empire, and Race* (Choy and Wu, 2017), for example, brings together social scientists and historians, literary scholars and poets, and several interdisciplinary scholars for investigations of worldwide infrastructures that perpetuate gender oppression and the disparities of empire. In their 2022 call for papers for a special issue of *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, editors Nicolai Volland and Leo Ching focus on “Archipelagic Asias,” noting that the study of “Asia” is typically “fragmented along the lines of nations, histories, ethnicities, languages, and disciplines—all concepts that are rooted, epistemologically and pragmatically, on terra firma, on the supposedly sound conceptual ground of a continental Enlightenment tradition.” They ask, in turn: “What happens, however, when we shift our point of view, and instead adopt an oceanic perspective? How do our understandings of Asia(s) change when viewed from ashore?” Their proposed reconsideration acknowledges Édouard Glissant’s formulations of the archipelagic, as well as Hamashita Takeshi, Rob Wilson, and Kären Wigen’s development of “rim” studies to critique maritime traffic, “American militarization

across the Pacific, and oceanic modes of spatial knowledge production.” The reference to Glissant also provides an ideological connection to Caribbean spaces—one that we seek to tease out more cogently in our collection. Furthermore, rather than again pursuing the east–west orientation inherent in terms such as transpacific and transatlantic, we aim to be more intentional about north–south journeys and orientation when it comes to Asian American and diasporic identities.

Outside the scope of our project, but useful for our contemplations, Nafisa Essop Sheik’s “Words on Black Water: Setting South African ‘Plantation Literature’ Afloat on the *Kala Pani*” (2021) contests the land-focused historiography of Indian indentureship in South Africa, which she claims insufficiently attends to “the opacity and fluidity that crossing the *Kala Pani*” (literally, the “Black Water”). Sheik spotlights the ways that crossing of the “opaque” Indian Ocean allowed lower- and middle-class/ caste subjects to transform themselves, engaging in radical social mobility during the literal mobility of the voyage. Important for our considerations here is the geographical north–south journey that parallels the migrations of Indian laborers to the Caribbean.

In Caribbean Studies, several scholars have taken up the transatlantic *Kala Pani* crossing in their work (see, for example, selections from Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s anthology *Coolitude* [2002]; Brinda Mehta’s *Diasporic (Dis)Locations* [2004]; the 2010 special issue of the journal *Anthurium*, “The Asian Experience in the Caribbean”; Alison Klein’s “Tangled Up: Gendered Nationhood in Indo-Caribbean Indenture Narratives” [2015]; and Lisa Outar’s “Touching the Shores of Home: Guyana, Indo-Caribbeaness, Feminism and Return” [2018] and editorial collaboration with Gabrielle Hosein, *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments* [2016], which brings together three generations of scholars, artists, and activists). Contributors to the field have investigated themes such as globalization and migration, gender and sexuality, identity and belonging, and performance culture in materials from anglophone, francophone, and hispanophone spaces, tending to concentrate their interrogations on the east–west voyages from China and India, as well as cultural syncretism involving peoples from Asia (typically framed as East), Africa (typically framed as West Africa, although enslaved Africans were forcibly taken from myriad sites on the continent), and Europe (also framed as West).

In that trajectory, in the United States, numerous studies interrogate the injustices of Japanese relocation in and from Hawaii, California, Oregon, and Washington State—locations associated with the “West” and “coastal” communities—but many fewer historians have tackled Asian migrations to the “South,” such as those described by Japanese American writer Cynthia Kadohata, who moved from Chicago to Georgia and then Arkansas as a child in the 1950s and 1960s. She pulls from these

experiences in crafting the fictional Takeshimas, who move from Iowa to rural Georgia post–World War II (WWII) to participate in the chick-sexing industry (see Anatol, “Ghosts of Japanese/American History in *Kira-Kira*,” 2021). The Asian American presence in the South dates back to the late eighteenth century, with the Filipino Saint Malo settlement in Louisiana; Chinese workers from both California and Cuba arrived to the Mississippi Delta in the nineteenth century. In 1905, just months before Korea was formalized as a protectorate of imperial Japan, more than 1,000 Koreans boarded a cargo ship headed for Mexico, eager to believe labor brokers’ stories promising milk and honey and four years of labor that would ensure enough money to return home to Korea and live prosperously. In striking contrast, Yuri Doolan’s “Transpacific Camptowns: Korean Women, U.S. Army Bases, and Military Prostitution in America” (2019) details how the reduction of U.S. military personnel in South Korea in the 1970s resulted in large numbers of sex workers arriving in the U.S. South, given the preponderance of troops residing in places like Fort Bragg (Fayetteville, North Carolina), Fort Campbell (Clarksville, Tennessee), and Fort Hood (Killeen, Texas). His exploration of transpacific circuits across these two Souths represents much of the work we hope to continue in *Across Global Souths*, as we seek to expand critical discussions about the Global South in a transnational framework that foregrounds new relationships among American Studies, Asian American Studies, U.S. Southern Studies, and Caribbean Studies.

Across Global Souths: Asian Migrations through the U.S. South and the Circum-Caribbean is further inspired by the growing body of scholarship on Latinx relationships emerging from the as-yet-unended Korean War. Alongside scholars such as A.J. Yumi Lee and Daniel Kim, Joo Ok Kim’s emphasis on Chicano narratives of the war in her book *Warring Genealogies* (2022) and her work on this special issue offer ways to engage the problematics of thinking about the temporalities and to probe how culture and geopolitics overlap and converge in multiple Souths—South Korea, the U.S.–Mexico border, the larger U.S. Southwest, and various cultural contact zones. **Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi’s** article for this special issue, **“Afro-Asian Intimacies across Southern Cartographies: Race, Sex, and Gender in Toni Morrison’s *Home* and Yusef Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dao*,”** queries other racialized affinities emerging from the Korean War and Vietnam War, alongside scholars like Lee and Sunny Yang in their existing work centering Black and Asian relationalities. These ideas find purchase in the unending war of colonialism, deeply embedded into the socioeconomic and political designs of many post-independence spaces in the South of the Caribbean. We join scholars Junyoung Verónica Kim and Andrea Mendoza, who organized a session for the 2022 Latin American Studies Association Conference titled “Race, Capital and the Afterlives of Area Studies: A Transpacific Perspective,”

wrestling with these concepts to facilitate better comprehension of the complex systems of racialization operating across geographically, historically, and linguistically distinct Asian/American diasporas.

Several years ago, discovering that we (the guest editors) had both worked with Patricia Powell's 1998 novel *The Pagoda* in our teaching, we decided to co-write a scholarly piece, which became the foundation for our larger project. Since that time, a growing number of novels, short fiction, memoirs, and films have received increased critical and popular attention for their attempts to capture the experiences of Asians in southern spaces: although contemporary mainstream audiences may not yet have found their way to cultural productions such as Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), there has been significant buzz around the Oscar award-winning *Minari* (2020), the documentary *Jeronimo: The Untold Tale of Koreans in Cuba* (2019), and Steven Yeun's role as Ricky "Jupe" Park in Jordan Peele's 2022 horror film *Nope*. *Mississippi Masala* (1991), one of the earliest feature films to take up the transnational complexities of gender, sexuality, and racialization across the U.S. South, Uganda, and India, was rereleased in 2022. The lived experiences of scholars across global Souths has also surfaced in the June 2022 issue of *American Quarterly*, which features both Dylan Rodríguez's (American Studies Association [ASA] president, 2020–2021) and Cathy Schlund-Vials's (ASA president, 2021–2022) presidential addresses. Rodríguez's address on reformist counterinsurgency closes in on "two geographically disparate sites": Manila, Philippines, and Alexandria, Virginia. Schlund-Vials's address narrates her family's military relocation to Valdosta, Georgia, at age eight, "thoroughly unaware that there was such a thing as 'the American South'" where she and her brother, "two mixed-race Cambodian American adoptees... learned what it meant to be different, unwanted, and othered." Taken together, these creative and academic engagements theorize the tensions, legacies, and possibilities of Asian racialization across global Souths.

In 2021, we participated in the Association for Asian American Studies Conference, *Unsettling Transpacific Ecologies*, and were excited to find that the innovative research of our fellow panelists on "Transpacific Engagements with the 'Southern Question'" fit squarely into our conceptualizations of this special issue. Anatol's paper, "Haunting Histories: Japanese American Ecologies in Cynthia Kadohata's *Kira-Kira*," and Joo Ok Kim's "Gendered Southern Imaginaries in Toni Morrison's *Home* and Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student*" came into conversation with Gandhi's "Transpacific Southern Translations: Representing South Vietnam through the American South," Marguerite Nguyen's "Refugee Ecologies in Louisiana: The South as America's Future," and commentary from Christine Mok and members of the virtual audience. Not all were able to contribute in the end, but we thank them for the robust dialogue. It was

intellectually stimulating and generative for our future work.

We sought more essays that articulate the transregional, comparative U.S. South/Caribbean emphasis and interdisciplinary approaches, reflected in the articles of this special issue.

The first piece in the volume considers translations of people, concepts, and practices from South Asia to the rest of the world, but southern California in particular. **Hareem Khan's "Producing Ayurveda: Authenticity and Race in the Beauty and Wellness Industries"** concentrates attention on one of the oldest Indigenous medical systems of India, dating back thousands of years, as it has become increasingly visible across global beauty and wellness industries. Focusing on communities in Los Angeles, Khan ruminates on the processes of racialization that underscore the popularity of Ayurveda in recent years: unlike other forms of alternative medicine—particularly in the United States—Ayurveda features strong associations with India, Indians, and Hinduism. Khan argues that these connections warrant a critical analysis of race-making and constructions of "authenticity" in regions outside Ayurveda's South Asian origins.

The workings of identity construction are also key to **Simi Kang's "What is Refugee Resilience?: Reframing Survival under Environmental Sacrifice,"** here in conjunction with socio-economic class and environmental politics. Kang elaborates upon how the experiences of southeast Asian American "fisherfolk" along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana reflect a number of inequitable power dynamics. With personal interviews placed alongside the historical record, the piece lays forth the ways that Asian American fishing communities in the New Orleans area are forced to endure as "resilient refugees" rather than allowed to flourish—primarily because they have been marginalized from decision-making spaces and disregarded as possessing any expertise about the ecosystems they live in. Kang's careful ethnographic research provides a robust analysis of short-term and long-lasting familial, social, and ecological impacts of governmental neglect. The piece is a significant contribution in the present moment, when Southeast Asian refugee, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in Louisiana and around the nation are repeatedly imperiled by forced displacement and constructions of them as disposable. In addition, Kang's discussion indicates the racialized foundations of state—and by extension, federal—projects that seem to alleviate environmental damage but perpetuate environmental racism and myriad social injustices.

Davorn Sisavath also engages with Asian communities of Louisiana's Gulf Coast as she charts the placemaking moves of refugees in **"Lane Xang Village: Place-making in Louisiana's Iberia Parish."** Approaching the concept of place as a fluid category that is imbued with purpose, the continual activity required of constructing identity and ne-

gotiating various contestations, Sisavath contemplates how residents of Lane Xang Village navigate histories of forced displacement—including the temporal dimension of environmental displacement—to create a grounded sense of place. She employs census data, newspaper articles, and YouTube videos alongside Mike Tidwell’s book *Bayou Farewell* to ground her analyses. Sisavath articulates how everyday practices are crucial to elaborating upon the ways “Laotians negotiate their spatial practices and experiences in a region entrenched in racial segregation and economic hierarchies.” The significance of theorizing “Across Global Souths” in Sisavath’s essay is evident in the limited scholarship centering Lao immigrants in the region, and in the ways that Southeast Asian populations and their experiences have historically been subsumed into studies focusing on Vietnamese subjects. Furthermore, “Lane Xang Village” prioritizes a critical humanist approach that moves beyond the social science quantitative data about its subjects.

Gandhi brings Vietnam and also South Korea into conversation with African American Studies in her investigation of **“Afro-Asian Intimacies Across Southern Cartographies”** in the works of two prolific U.S. writers: the novel *Home*, by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, is read alongside Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry collection *Dien Cai Dao* for examples of interracial relationships resulting from the Korean and the Vietnam Wars. Gandhi employs the literary texts to illustrate examples of antiblackness, the policing of gender and sexuality during wartime conflicts, and the militarism and surveillance of U.S. imperial movements across three distinct geopolitical spaces: the U.S. South, South Korea, and South Vietnam. In doing so, the article effectively expands upon existing scholarship to complicate what “the South” means, pushing beyond a U.S. framework to urge for a more expansive “global southscape” without homogenizing or oversimplifying the subjects, cultures, or politics of each location.

The co-editors’ essay, **“Queering/Querying the Text in Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda* and Sui Sin Far’s Jamaica Works,”** also employs literary analysis and assessments of imperial power dynamics as it takes up writing by African Jamaican author Patricia Powell and Chinese Canadian writer Sui Sin Far, born a century apart but both bringing forceful critiques of the British Empire and colonial knowledge production to their texts. Concentrating on representations of reading, writing, documentation, accounting, and literacy in Powell’s novel of a Chinese/Jamaican community and in Far’s Jamaica stories—particularly “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian” and “The Sugar-Cane Baby”—enables Anatol and Kim to narrate the complex ways that composing and deciphering all kinds of texts can contribute to and subvert empire building. That both Far and Powell contest the imperial project by imposing their own forms of (il)legibility on their bodies also functions as a “queer” form of textuality addressed in the article.

Rosanne Sia further theorizes sexuality and gender in **“Transpacific Exoticisms: Performing Asia across the U.S. Southern Border,”** which traces the careers of several traveling nightclub entertainers, both Asian and multiracial, as she explicates the transpacific linkages that connected the U.S. South with the circum-Caribbean and the U.S.–Mexico borderlands in the mid-twentieth century. Focusing on the experiences of Florence Ahn, Estela, Jadin Wong, and Su Muy Key, who performed in Havana, New York, Miami, Monterey, and the Rio Grande Valley, as well as in Hollywood films from the early 1940s into the Cold War era, Sia traces an Asian presence that transformed as it journeyed through the U.S. South, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Featuring biographical, historical, and ethnographic details, “Transpacific Exoticisms” interrogates how perceptions of Asian identity, and particularly the trope of the exotic Asian woman, were accommodated, vexed, and constantly shifting in an array of Southern spaces. Sia’s exploration of these transnational post-WWII figures, now largely forgotten, combats the erasure of the Asian presence in certain U.S. geographical landscapes, in the music and dance that came to be called “Latin,” and in the shaping of a mestizo citizenry in the national projects in Cuba and Mexico. This critical attention to the construction of complicated racial, cultural, geographical, and gender imaginaries shows how the entertainers “disturbed the Black and White binary in the U.S. South” and illuminates readers’ understanding of the cultural and demographic flows of multiple American Souths.

Future volumes might include comparative research into the politics and politicians of Asian heritage across the U.S. South and Caribbean, such as Bobby Jindal, Cheddi Jagan, Nikki Haley, and Kamala Persad-Bissessar; Asian American grassroots politics, such as the work of the Asian American Advocacy Fund; radical political cultures, such as blackdesisecrethistory.org; the experiences and contributions of Asians in the nineteenth-century history of the Americas, such as Chinese workers relocating from Cuba and California to the Mississippi Delta and Asians involved in the building of the Panama Canal; overlapping legacies of food and colonialism across the U.S. South and Caribbean; the literary production of more recent writers, like Stacey-Ann Chin, put into conversations with authors of older generations, like V.S. Naipaul; television sitcoms and series such as *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Lovecraft Country*; and alternate kinships and genealogies, especially in the context of Asian adoptees in the U.S. South and the implications of DNA ancestry testing on Asian/American populations.

As we compose this introduction in the summer of 2022, we see how history has cycled back on itself to engender distressing repetitions. In 1870s California, as Chinese/American cigar manufacturers revealed themselves to be a competitive market force, Euro-American business-

es began to claim that Chinese cigars had been crafted by “Mongolian leprous hands” and then “sealed with black spit” (Brown and Philips, 1996, 71). The Page Act of 1875 framed Chinese women in particular as synonymous with diseased morals, corrupting the (white) American males with whom they came into contact. The strict immigration quotas of the 1924 National Origins Act in the United States did nothing to ease the identification of Asian immigrants with illness and contamination, nor did the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (the McCarran-Walter Act). Family reunification policies put into place starting in 1965 encouraged greater Asian migration to the United States, but Donald Trump’s insistence on calling COVID-19 the “Kung Flu” and “China Virus” during his presidency and run for reelection contributed to increased physical violence against people of Asian heritage. The October 2020 *Journal of Asian American Studies* special issue highlighted anti-Asian violence and xenophobia as a pandemic alongside the coronavirus pandemic; the March 2021 Atlanta shooting, targeting working-class Asian women, brought into stark relief how far we have not come.

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Producing Ayurveda: Authenticity and Race in the Beauty and Wellness Industries

Hareem Khan

Introduction

In a 2021 article titled, "The Beauty Brands Placing Cultural Appreciation Over Appropriation," Roberta Schroeder described "plenty of promising brands... stepping in to fill" what she called an "authenticity void." In her view, "these niche brands are bringing ancient beauty rituals alive, connecting consumers to their heritage in a way that can't be imitated."¹ The depths of this "authenticity void" raise the specter of contemporary global capitalism and reveal the constitutive ways racialized narratives around the consumption of beauty and wellness claim to be the antidote to this void. Ayurveda, as one manifestation of the "ancient" beauty and wellness rituals to which Schroeder alluded, is the overarching site for this study of authenticity. It is one of the oldest indigenous medical traditions of the Indian subcontinent, dating back thousands of years. Today it is often articulated as a set of practices, diets, applications, and regimens geared toward longevity and holistic health that has been made more visible by the burgeoning of Ayurvedic wellness and beauty industries represented by spas, clinics, credentialing courses, and skincare and makeup lines.² Although integrated with the American wellness landscape for decades, Ayurveda has recently launched to the forefront of beauty and wellness discourses that draw on racialized conceptions of culture, identity, and authenticity.

Unlike other forms of alternative medicine, Ayurveda is often

authenticated by its tethering to a particular understanding of India, Indians, and to some degree Hinduism. The early reception of Ayurveda in the United States also differs from other racialized medical systems due to its popularity among non-South Asian clients. Traditional Chinese medicine, for example, emerged out of “ethnic enclaves” and circulated via diasporic routes. Ayurveda, on the other hand, was disseminated through the language and embodiment of universality even while securing its links to India. As a result, its marketing as a “cultural commodity” activates unique forms of authenticity such that Ayurveda gets located to a racialized tradition while simultaneously deeming itself an inclusive ideology.³ These constructed proximities warrant a critical analysis of race-making, which underlies the production, circulation, and consumption of transnational wellness and aesthetic practices alongside producing the conditions of their global palatability. As one Ayurvedic practitioner I interviewed opined, “Ayurveda may have had its origins over there [India], but it belongs everywhere.” Thus, what are the particular racialized narratives surrounding Ayurveda that allow it to be both specifically “over there” and generally “everywhere”?

This article focuses on the accelerated growth of Ayurveda, its linkages to—and migrations from—the Global South, and its contemporary productions in the United States. Specifically, I am curious about the processes of racialization that structure the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries, which rely on an imagining of the Global South to bolster Ayurveda’s legitimacy in the West. Scholarship on the visibility of Ayurveda in the West often focuses on its role as a cultural alternative to Western or allopathic medicine.⁴ Other studies explore Ayurveda’s expansion into the wellness industries and the proliferation of Ayurvedic spas and resorts in India and globally.⁵ My work is shaped by this scholarship; however, it takes race as a central logic to understand how authenticity is given value in the global marketplace. Borrowing from Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant’s definition of global raciality as a network of “contextual relations of power,” I analyze how racialized discourses utilized within the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries can be strategically invoked to secure the project of contemporary global capitalism.⁶ I explore multiple sites in these industries, set within and against the backdrop of Los Angeles, where the desire for authenticity is used to repudiate hegemonic institutions and values even while it simultaneously concretizes its commitment to the values and desires of neoliberal autonomy. The sites I explore include clinics where Ayurvedic treatments, consultations, and therapies are offered as well as Ayurvedic beauty and skincare companies that market and sell their products online and vis-à-vis social media. The authenticity that is commodified and sold at these sites affirms not

simply an authenticated practice or production of Ayurveda, but also an aspirational ideal of the authenticated and racialized self affirmed through the consumption of these products and services. I argue that processes of racialization in this market are simultaneously overt *and* subtle due to the boundaries they demarcate between proper global citizens and those on the outside, thereby activating forms of inclusion and exclusion endemic to the current global order.

Throughout my fieldwork in the beauty and wellness industries, categories of difference designed to authenticate services and products presented themselves all around me, including the projection of identifiers, such as Ayurvedic, Ethnic, Eastern, and Indian, which serve as not simply a means to critique Orientalism but, rather, as a register through which I can understand the production and circulation of racialized Otherness. These genealogies of racialized aesthetic practices and commodities deserve further examining as evident logics of multicultural belonging and neoliberal consumer citizenship. I begin this piece with a theoretical intervention in the study of Ayurveda by drawing attention to the mechanisms of racialized authenticity that give it form. Borrowing from Gyanendra Pandey's discussion of the universal prejudice of modernity, I argue that the ways authenticity is racialized by Ayurvedic practitioners and Ayurvedic beauty business owners activates the "universal prejudice of authenticity," thereby obfuscating the racial mechanisms of exclusion and enacting homogenous and reductive South Asian representations of racial and ethnic inclusion.⁷ From there, I position this universal prejudice of authenticity as a central modality through which to understand the functioning of neoliberal multiculturalism, which requires the overall synthesis of universalist discourse alongside the specificity of racial and ethnic difference.⁸ To further support these arguments, I incorporate interviews with practitioners of Ayurveda alongside an examination of burgeoning Ayurvedic beauty companies that are premised around desires for South Asian representation, which together configure relationships between power, knowledge, and identity that ultimately rest on racializing Ayurveda through processes of authentication. These examples draw together divergent discourses of racialization in the beauty and wellness industries to exhibit their compatibilities and their ultimate inability to integrate a conceptualization of race that considers how differential values are attributed to groups of people marked by class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender to sustain global capitalism.

While this special issue seeks to address the registers of racialization across Global Souths, in this work, I examine how dimensions of the "Global South" are themselves racialized as authentic. Consequently, this article seeks to address two central questions: 1) What are the processes of racialization that differentially locate South Asia as well as participants in the beauty and wellness industries along a spectrum

of authenticity? 2) How do these patterns of race-making define and disrupt the boundaries between inclusion and obfuscation that valorize particular forms of belonging and citizenship? These questions inform my analysis of the place (or places) of differently racialized groups under neoliberal multiculturalism offering openings to understand seemingly paradoxical registers of racialization. Ultimately, this work highlights the relational processes of racialization that place the “authentic” subject into histories of racial formations that extend Western liberal discourses of multiculturalism and inclusion.

The Universal Prejudice of Authenticity

Authenticity, its productions and negotiations, is studied extensively within cultural anthropology.⁹ Often, the anthropological interrogation of authenticity is understood through its generation of value for the global consumer market.¹⁰ This generation of “authentic” value can be enacted vis-à-vis authentication processes enmeshed with particular ethnic and racial groups that allow it transportability as a global commodity.¹¹ Racially authenticated products and services are then encountered by consumers in ways that contest or legitimize their place in the consumer imagination as authentic. In the case of Ayurveda, authenticity is produced through the practitioner’s or entrepreneur’s *claims* to authenticity either through prioritizing the racial genealogy of Ayurveda as in the case of the non-South Asian practitioners I interviewed or an explicit identification with racial and ethnic identity as in the case of the South Asian entrepreneurs featured here.¹² I argue that, despite their claims to authenticity, these efforts rely on a discourse of multiculturalism, albeit in different forms, that draws strategically upon racial sameness or distinction to make the commodity in question accessible within global markets.

Ayurveda circulates as a medium through which authenticity gains value and legitimacy, which is uniquely exhibited by the interviews as well as the content analyses of social media marketing and advertising presented in this article. Cavanaugh and Shankar explore these linkages between values tied to particular ethnic groups and regions and the production practices that yield economic value through their research on local food production in Bergamo, Italy, and advertising agencies catering to Asian American consumers, respectively. They introduce “linguistic materiality” to examine the ways linguistic practices and representations of authenticity are attached to material objects during the production process.¹³ This framing informs my study of the commercialization of Ayurvedic products and services in the ways racialized claims to authenticity as well as representations of authenticity are linked to the products and services practitioners and entrepreneurs sell in the market. I am interested in these claims and the ways racial genealogies and racial identities are deployed to generate value for a multiracial and multiethnic

consumer base. Presently, knowledge production around Ayurveda is still strongly facilitated by an understanding of India as the originating site of a set of ancient traditions and practices. Yet it is in this articulation of India as the authenticated origin that activates and strengthens patterns of racialization configuring the identities of a wide spectrum of industry participants.

My own interests in Ayurveda are influenced by scholarship on South Asian beauty aesthetics in South Asian and diasporic contexts.¹⁴ While Ayurveda was reaching American audiences throughout the twentieth century, it was mostly associated with the realm of spiritual liberation and enlightenment. It has only recently been incorporated into the beauty and wellness industries as a commodifiable object, treatment, or service. Beyond Ayurveda, South Asian aesthetic forms found other avenues of entry into these industries through, for example, the introduction of "Indo chic" in Western and Asian markets that reached an apex of popularity during the 1990s facilitated by mainstream, often white, artists and celebrities. While Indo chic has waned in terms of its legibility, the production and consumption of Ayurveda offers a site from which to continue the study of race, authenticity, and commodification enacted by racialized goods and practices and consumed by South Asian and non-South Asian consumers around the world.

I have previously used "racializing authenticity" to situate the authentication processes women employed in the beauty industry navigate through their own embodiment of race, class, gender, and sexuality.¹⁵ In this study on Ayurveda, I argue that evocations of authenticity are activated by race that effectively bolster de/racialized narratives of multiculturalism. To explore this further, I draw from Gyanendra Pandey's text, *The History of Prejudice*. In it, Pandey theorizes the universal prejudice of the modern in relation to the particular prejudice of the vernacular specifically in reference to the relationality of Black histories in the United States with Dalit histories in India. Vernacular prejudice is what he refers to as "localizable, relatively visible, and sometimes acknowledged," prejudice that includes racism, casteism, heterosexism, and so on.¹⁶ "Universal prejudice" is what Pandey describes as the "language of law and state" that passes for common sense, making it difficult to acknowledge as prejudice. In his discussion of the "prejudice of the modern," focusing on post-WWII political discourse, Pandey locates the history of the word "modern" as an attribute or quality that was generally preferred or desirable in the ways it activated a self motivated by rationality, secularity, and liberalism. The premise on which the racialized beauty and wellness industries are built is an extension of the universal prejudice of modernity.

Interestingly, in these industries, something different from modernity is articulated, encapsulated, in this case, by the search for authenticity.

Authenticity, thus, serves as an antidote to the unquestioned secularization of modernity through the consumption and production of “Othered” practices and skills, not as a form of whitewashing, but rather as a form and mechanism of race-making. As an example, one South Asian woman-owned company explained that its brand, “fuses the cultural richness, rituals, and spirituality of India with the contemporary energy and technologies of the West to create a first-of-its-kind hybrid beauty brand.”¹⁷ This complex interpellation of the imagined “East” and the “West” is not at all new; however, its contemporary utilization by Ayurvedic beauty brands demonstrates the new forms this articulation takes under neoliberal multiculturalism. It presents the consumption of Ayurveda as the most authentic and fulfilling cure to the ills of contemporary globalization, paradoxically strengthening the very foundations upon which this criticized rationality rests. Consequently, authenticity, in the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries, shores up its own universal prejudices animated by discourses of post-raciality and multicultural inclusivity. Next, I conduct a closer examination of the ways this universal prejudice of authenticity enshrines the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Authenticating Ayurveda Under Neoliberal Multiculturalism

The popularity of Ayurveda has further deepened the visual, symbolic, and discursive markers of India in the Western imagination that extend and depart from previous articulations of the racialized subcontinent. Historically, the popularization and professionalization of Ayurveda in India was entangled with its nationalist project, which sought to craft Ayurveda as indigenous and uniquely Hindu and, therefore, a counter to British colonialism and other medical traditions in the region.¹⁸ Interestingly, efforts today, due in part to the growing consumption of Ayurveda in the West, continue to further locate Ayurveda and other practices such as Yoga as inherently Indian, fueled in part by Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism as well as Ayurveda’s and yoga’s recognition on global platforms such as the United Nations.¹⁹ Ayurveda can, thus, be seen to entrench particular narratives of India’s global significance that rely on selective modes of inclusivity while also resting on the realities of exclusivity sanctioned by the state itself.

While it is true that the proliferation of Ayurveda has been used to envision an ahistorical and monolithic set of traditions and practices inextricable from the Hindu state, I am particularly interested in the ways it also activates a logic of racial and ethnic belonging that is central to a state-sanctioned systematization of multiculturalism dominant in the West.²⁰ In other words, the universal prejudice of authenticity encapsulated by the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries is itself a product of a global capitalist modernity, which buttresses the construed rationality of what Jodi Melamed terms, “neoliberal multiculturalism.”²¹

In this construction, the continued success of neoliberal capitalism is its ability to detach understandings of racialization from its material conditions, ultimately affirming that the contemporary mode of multiculturalism is best when in service to the spirit of neoliberalism that exists today.

When I was conducting my research, India's representation globally was one of inconsistency and incongruity. Akin to the American Orientalism examined in the 1990s, Indians and India today are thrust into mainstream media and left to reconcile contrasting images: that of an India replete with ancient traditions and cultures that could cure the ills of modernity through the register of representation, appreciation, and celebration alongside less mainstream but still visible images of India as the site of some of the world's largest protests in repudiation of the Hindu nationalist government that routinely enacts violence directed at its marginalized and subjugated populations.²² The Ayurvedic practitioners I interviewed along with the observations I made on social media platforms such as Instagram overwhelmingly align with the former rendering of India such that Ayurveda now stands in for an ancient solution to today's problems. For example, neither the practitioners nor the entrepreneurs included in this study acknowledged the roots of casteism that are central to the history of practices such as yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda, which eliminate caste altogether from imaginings of India.²³ Curiously, some of these individuals did acknowledge or used their platform to uplift the racial justice issues located within the boundaries of the United States, such as vocal support for the Black Lives Matter uprisings following the killing of George Floyd. Melamed argues that neoliberal multiculturalism is powerful precisely because of its ability to "justify inequality using codes that can signify as nonracial or even antiracist."²⁴ Excluding caste from discussions of Ayurveda alongside using state-sanctified antiracist language to condemn violence directed at racialized groups are technologies of the same system. The horizons of practitioners' and entrepreneurs' activism stopped at the level of the U.S. state given their relative silence on matters related to caste, Islamophobia, and classism—all of which require a transnational interpellation of struggle and make essential an understanding of identity and belonging that would ultimately condemn the neoliberal multiculturalism upon which they, along with their businesses and practices, are dependent.

I argue that the integral nature of neoliberal multiculturalism and the universal prejudice of authenticity give what some have called "New Age Ayurveda" its form and salience.²⁵ It allows for a mode of production and consumption that heralds an autonomous, liberal, rational self that refuses to be homogenized by the forces of modernity and instead can pursue an authenticated self that continues to benefit from and uphold the national and global institutions that give this self legitimacy.

The Ayurvedic practitioners and entrepreneurs are, thus, relying on authenticated narratives to bolster their positions in the market. These authentication practices—even if located within the realm of antiracist discourse—are strategically inept at addressing the market as the site and instrumental factor in the creation of differential value based on race. Next, I draw on two disparate and entangled sites to argue how the utilization of *seemingly different* racial narratives of authenticity can still bolster the same racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism either through an emphasis on racial genealogy or racial and ethnic identity.

Post-racial Inclusivity and Racialized Representation: Notes from Fieldwork

As shown, the productions of Ayurveda find their locations in both the beauty and wellness industries. For example, there is a proliferation of Ayurvedic clinics and spas where Ayurveda-trained practitioners serve a growing clientele of regulars as well as newcomers seeking alternative therapies and remedies for a spectrum of aesthetic, physical, and mental healing and rejuvenation. Los Angeles is one locale where this growth can be observed due to the nearby California College of Ayurveda that graduates practitioners each year as well as the ubiquitous climate of wellness that structures this city landscape. In addition to wellness, Ayurveda has gained a presence in the beauty industry exhibited by the visibility of Ayurvedic skincare brands that sell products such as facial masks, body oils, and hair treatments. Through my conversations with Ayurvedic practitioners and the content analyses I carried out examining media circulation of Ayurvedic beauty brands, I observed the ways racial discourses were strategically incorporated in both contexts to either deracialize Ayurveda or explicitly racialize Ayurveda, both through productions of authenticity. The following sections discuss each of these sites separately and then in conjunction to emphasize how they form the constitutive elements of neoliberal multiculturalism that rely on both deracialized inclusivity *and* racial and ethnic representation as its instrumental elements.

Ayurvedic Practitioners

During the initial stages of this research, I had the opportunity to interview two Ayurvedic practitioners from a clinic in Los Angeles. These practitioners offer treatments including Panchakarma, biomagnetic therapies, astrology readings, Abhyanga massages, and general Ayurvedic consultations to a racially and ethnically diverse mix of clients, a majority of whom were initially unfamiliar with Ayurveda and were introduced to it through attending yoga classes or word of mouth.²⁶ I interviewed one of these practitioners, Daniel, over Zoom. As the video image went from hazy to sharp, I observed Daniel seated in a cozy, tightly

packed room that had a large tapestry of a Hindu goddess hung on the back wall. To start things off, I asked him to share how he identified, to which he replied, "Mexican-American," followed by "I guess that's the *correct term*." Later in the interview, Daniel shared his observations of what he called an "identity crisis" afflicting many around him, particularly in the wellness space. He went on to explain, "... in reality, we tend to gravitate towards all these attachments—to these identities—but they don't really define us, right? I've done so much work to get rid of all these attachments; I'd like to keep it simple."

Interestingly, in the same conversation, Daniel also acknowledged the historical authenticity of Ayurvedic practice by Othering it as inherently Indian. Aware of this linkage, he attempted to deracialize this authentication effort by stating, "[Ayurveda] tend[s] to originate from India, but not everybody in India believes it, right? Not everybody in India practices it. So I don't link it to the people of India; I link it to India itself." While he made an effort to remove the racialized category of "Indians" from the authentication of Ayurveda, he instead tied it to an imagined Orient, devoid of people but replete with ancient texts and practices through which the truth of Ayurveda is revealed. He put this in dialogue with the corporatized nature of social media that profits off identity politics to further its aims of making profit and nurturing the ego, both of which he finds faults with. Furthermore, Daniel is an observer of Hinduism and has studied Vedic texts that he integrates with the services he offers at the clinic. His own experiences and observations in the industry are telling because they reveal his own articulations of boundary-setting even while he claims to deconstruct boundaries for the sake of accessibility. For him, courses taught in English that make Ayurvedic knowledge easily digestible are necessary for people in the West to find meaning in the practices. At the same time, however, he draws a line that dictates how diluted these practices can and have become through the ubiquity of Ayurvedic knowledge in the form of bite-sized social media pieces that circulate through the networks of influencers, founders, and self-made CEOs. In addition to Daniel, I also had the opportunity to interview Jessica, another practitioner at this site who arrived at Ayurveda after being diagnosed with a serious medical condition. After finding no success within Western medical paradigms, she began to explore wellness through the lens of alternative therapies and solutions. Like with Daniel, I began by asking Jessica how she identified, to which she replied, "My identity has gone through many different transformations." She then described herself as both "mixed" and "half Asian." Both Daniel and Jessica's simultaneous submission to, and repudiation of, race compliments the post-racial inclusivity and individual autonomy heralded by many in the wellness industry.

As Jessica explained, "I'm so not into these boxes anymore. And I

think it's because I lived this life of not feeling like I'm in a box racially. [And] I'm like, 'I don't categorize myself.' In addition to acknowledging their identities while simultaneously expressing a desire to jettison them, these practitioners emphasized that their individual implementation of Ayurveda was a counter to the elitism and capitalism of the medical industrial complex as well as a challenge to the categorical emphasis they feel is placed on individuals to express their identities rigidly within racial and ethnic boxes. In the case of the Ayurvedic industry, then, difference becomes a marker of value, and difference in this case is a self unmarked by racial difference.

But despite largely avoiding the topic of racial identity, both Daniel and Jessica went on to authenticate their practice and business of Ayurveda by either highlighting their training by South Asian practitioners of Ayurveda or through their own individual encounters with South Asia. Jessica elaborated, "I've never been to India, but we've been trained by all these doctors from India. So it's not that we're not getting the authentic training. Whereas you know, there's other schools that have, like, no faculty from India at all." While deemphasizing racial and ethnic categories when it comes to personal identification, Jessica and Daniel are analyzing their positionalities on a spectrum of authenticity situated somewhere in between Ayurvedic practice by South Asian individuals and those who are jumping on an Ayurvedic bandwagon to reap quick profits.

Drawing from these interviews, I argue that race is an operating logic where India and Hinduism are imagined to be the origin of traditional Ayurvedic practices and are consequently used to authenticate an individual's practice of Ayurveda while deemphasizing the relevance of their own racial and ethnic identities. For Daniel, Jessica, and other likeminded practitioners, there is something unsettling about the co-optation of Ayurveda and its oversimplification on social media platforms. For them, Ayurveda is intimately intertwined with Hinduism even while it simultaneously can function to serve the needs of anyone. This is evidenced by the fact that Daniel and Jessica offer these services to a wide range of clientele with varying degrees of familiarity with Ayurveda and its origins.

Both Daniel and Jessica uplift a counternarrative to identity politics, one in which identity is itself one of the root problems that results in general confusion about one's body and health. While this might run counter to the ways beauty entrepreneurs in this study approach the practice of Ayurveda, it does not offer a counter to the mechanisms of neoliberal multiculturalism and, in fact, strengthens it. By advocating for open accessibility to Ayurveda in the marketplace—even if expressed as a counter to the medical industrial complex endemic to the United States—these two practitioners regurgitate a post-racial envisioning of individuality, transcendent of racial and ethnic categorization, and also

negligent of the differential ways race and ethnicity together mark value in the global market.

A similar practice of authentication is explored next; it focuses, however, on Ayurvedic beauty brands and their digital advertising efforts. In this context, authentication in the marketplace is pursued not through the irrelevance of racial identities, but rather through their inherent importance.

Cultural Productions of Ayurvedic Beauty Brands

Shahnaz Husain, an Indian beauty entrepreneur often credited with globalizing Ayurveda, stated in a 2021 interview with the Indian publication *PinkVilla*, “It is a dream come true to see the worldwide recognition of Ayurveda. I strongly believe that Indian plant power will lead the international cosmetic industry within the next decade. It has been tested by the most exacting test of all... the Test of Time!”²⁷ Husain is not the only entrepreneur who is convinced of the potential of Ayurveda’s successes in the beauty and wellness space. In recent years Ayurvedic skincare and makeup lines have catapulted into the consumer’s purview and are available in major cosmetic supply stores and easily accessible across social media sites such as Instagram. Prior to this age of popularity, Ayurveda had gained significance as an alternative dietary system of restraint, a rejuvenation system, and a regimen incorporating asceticism and spiritual advancement. While there is a continuation with these representations in what is visible today, I am especially interested in social media sites where crafted Ayurvedic knowledge and products/services are sold and where an accelerated growth of beauty and skincare companies that center a South Asian individual as an entrepreneur and founder are made visible. I observed across these sites a number of business owners and influencers who also activate and engage with aesthetic practices coded as Indian/Ayurvedic.

For example, as Arjun Sampath, founder of Soma Ayurvedic skin care, explained to *Beauty Independent*, “I believe Ayurveda is where yoga was in America 20 years ago, when it was known in some niche pockets, but wasn’t that popular. It’s going to grow exponentially over the next five to 10 years.”²⁸ Soma Ayurveda anchors its identity as an authentically Indian company rooted in and inspired by Ayurvedic practice and tradition while also projecting exponential growth—even in an increasingly saturated market—due precisely to its universal marketability.

Soma Ayurveda is not the only brand following this formula. Previously, there may have been Ayurvedic skincare products in the market, but they were seldom accompanied by a narrative of someone such as Sampath or one of the other entrepreneurs featured below. These narratives around racialized acceptance, belonging, and identification become central to their branding strategy by linking a

founder's personal connection to Ayurveda—often through introduction to it as a young person by a South Asian elder or family member—to their desire to “introduce” their specific brand to Western markets.

Authenticity and representation are the most dominant discourses that serve as the registers through which South Asian–owned Ayurvedic businesses market and sell their products and services. For example, Ranavat, an Ayurvedic beauty company launched in 2017, was described in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine as a brand, “featur[ing] Ayurvedic ingredients or rituals, creating products for those who've used the practices and opening the door to newcomers.”²⁹ Others have dubbed this niche market as “Ayurvedistry” that fuses prepackaged Ayurvedic tips with discourses of empowerment directed at all consumers through the image and representation of the liberated South Asian woman.

In an interview with *InStyle* magazine, beauty influencer and self-proclaimed “Global Indian” Diipa Büller-Khosla described how she “developed the concept of Ayurvedistry—the combination of Ayurvedic studies and chemistry—to create the world's first ever Ayurvedistry beauty brand, which will carry quality products made from superfoods used in Ayurveda that are catered towards those with brown skin, but is still safe for all skin types.”³⁰ These Ayurvedic companies are just a sampling of many that capitalize on discourses of empowerment, “BIPOC representation,” and environmental consciousness to authenticate their brands to the contemporary needs of consumers. They illustrate how influencing and the brand management of global Indian aesthetic practices can serve as a mechanism of neoliberal self-governance that consumers and producers enact through a discourse of self-discovery, agency, and autonomy. For many of these beauty business owners, influencing has also become a means to engage with their racialized identities that are directly used to authenticate the products and services they sell.

For instance, some of these South Asian influencers have created short trendy videos in which they highlight the contradiction between being ridiculed when they were younger for certain practices, such as oiling their hair, and now being asked to share their healthy hair secrets. The subject of this is not only the South Asian influencer, but also the presumably non–South Asian or white subject who now wants in on the practice. Ayurvedic beauty companies, thus, capitalize on collective experiences of cultural appropriation and racism. As Vanita Reddy states in her book *Fashioning Diaspora*, these interactions “produce embodied practices of citizenship and belonging” by boiling down individual experiences of racism, making them devoid of any systemic or structural analysis.³¹ This piecemeal extraction of racialized narratives bolsters these companies' claims to authenticity in the global marketplace further enhanced by the visibility of a racially marked subject as the key

figure in their branding.

But what does it signify for a consumer to witness this heightened visibility of South Asians as authenticators of Ayurveda? Bakirathi Mani's understanding of "diasporic mimesis" helps situate this desire to represent and be represented within the medium of fine art photography.³² Building on this work, I believe the carefully crafted and curated images and videos these beauty brands circulate also center a desire for representation while simultaneously raising questions about the *impossibilities* of representation. For example, many of these beauty companies that distinguish themselves on the basis of being South Asian-owned are vocal about ensuring that the employees at their companies are racially and ethnically diverse. The discourse of representation in the Ayurvedic beauty industry, then, encourages us to celebrate a corporation otherwise abiding by the rules of neoliberalism that perhaps just *looks* different. Through this, we can follow Mani's invitation to reflect on the unfulfilling nature of representation.

Alongside this, South Asian business owners, observing an authenticity as well as a representation void, offer products that specifically cater to "brown skin." Even in popular accounts of the history of the beauty industry, there is an association between the dominant beauty industry and its catering to a largely white clientele, thereby excluding women of color. As a result, women of color-led branding offers an antidote to these exclusions through the register of visibility.³³ Consequently, beauty businesses launched by South Asian women focus on "inclusive products" and use the language of decolonization, radical innovation, diversity, inclusion, and representation as token markers of their viability in the global marketplace. As Adhikari explains, there has been a growth in the number of women of color "tapping into their heritage, their culture, their skin, and their hair, decentralizing and individualizing the beauty industry."³⁴ When this discourse on representation is always set against the hypervisibility of white women in these industries, I argue that we lose sight of processes of racialization that allow for the politics of representation to thrive as well as drive the consumption of authenticity, which together fit in very neatly with neoliberal and capitalist projections of business growth. For example, rather than a counter to systemic racism, South Asian influencers rely on an understanding of multicultural citizenship that ignores (intentionally) the class, caste, and religious dynamics of South Asian communities as well as their material conditions. In the following section, I explore this further by discussing the convergences of the processes of authenticity utilized by both Ayurvedic practitioners and beauty entrepreneurs.

Convergences of the Universal Prejudice of Authenticity

One cannot simply criticize the popularity and perhaps dilution of

Ayurveda as resulting from its increasing ubiquity without acknowledging that its projected growth is following a formulaic global capitalist trajectory. The commodification of Ayurveda is greatly facilitated by the racial and ethnic discourses heralded by both practitioners as well as entrepreneurs and further legitimized by neoliberal multiculturalism, which relies on a confluence of representation, diversity, autonomy, and authenticity to validate its operations.

Thuy Linh Tu's research on Asian American fashion designers focuses on the convergence of these designers with a global "taste for Asian chic."³⁵ Specifically, Tu writes, "...the sartorial imagination produced Asianness as a fashionable commodity and how Asian American designers were, as a result, able to access Asianness as a resource... to be utilized for instrumental ends."³⁶ While the commodities, services, products, and practices I observe transcend the category of "Asian chic" focused on in Tu's work, I argue that they are instead rooted specifically to India and Hinduism even while simultaneously marketed as universally accessible. These discourses of origin, preservation, and distribution are used by both Ayurvedic practitioners as well as consumers and beauty business owners in their private and public reflections on the significance of Ayurveda.

As discussed, the Ayurvedic practitioners whom I interviewed did not simply whitewash the practice of Ayurveda. They repudiated racial categories while simultaneously claiming an authenticated genealogy either by way of their training or religious or spiritual practice. Similarly, the South Asian beauty entrepreneurs also claim authenticity through a shared experience of invisibility and a desire for branded visibility in the marketplace. By claiming a BIPOC, South Asian, Indian, or woman of color identity, these entrepreneurs legitimize the cultural products they sell, thereby activating a commodification of diversity and difference that can be celebrated as well as bought. Taken together, both examples serve as sites where negotiations around racialized authenticity occur and universal prejudices of the authentic subject are inscribed either through a rejection of race or through an affirmation of race by means of representation.

To note, both practitioners and entrepreneurs embody authenticity in seemingly divergent ways. For example, the two practitioners I interviewed did not identify as South Asian and distanced themselves from any "boxes" that could potentially constrain their identities; however, their embodiments of Ayurvedic practice through deep study and training, extensive certification, and spiritual practice relegated them as authentic. In other words, they relied on a discourse of post-raciality that advocated for a transcendence of race even while authorizing the particular racial genealogy of their practice. This served to simultaneously authenticate their practice in that it still had links to an "authentic"

Ayurveda practiced by Indians in India, and it allowed for a deracializing of their identities that justified their own consumption of an Othered practice. In a seeming contrast, beauty business entrepreneurs literally embodied authenticity through their racial and ethnic subjectivities and highlighted these embodiments through visual representation and linguistic markers. Ayurvedic beauty entrepreneurs and practitioners are, thus, brand ambassadors for neoliberal multiculturalism, where their specific uses of the rhetoric of empowerment, identity, and racial and ethnic solidarity ultimately serves to strengthen the supposed rationality of neoliberalism while ignoring the material conditions that have resulted in racialized differences in value. Capital is accrued for the producers of Ayurvedic products, services, and knowledges, an accumulation that does very little to denaturalize the power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South. Ultimately both efforts serve to strengthen the same networks of capital, labor, production, and consumption that epitomize our contemporary moment.

Conclusion

In this piece, I explore how Ayurvedic services and products have a particular salience in the global beauty and wellness industries such that their value is often based on a perceived Otherness that is mediated by workers, business owners, practitioners, entrepreneurs, consumers, and other industry participants. Additionally, transnational aesthetic practices are often presented as vehicles for a set of values tied to an ideal racialized and gendered subject. This subject is attuned to racial and ethnic difference only to the degree it justifies their investment in the idea that striving for individuated authenticity in the marketplace is a resolution in and of itself. In turn, Ayurvedic products and services serve as a means for the subject to achieve modernity—or in this case a modern authenticity—within the realm of production and consumption. While I situate this work in the global city of Los Angeles, the industry is inherently transnational and informed by the networks of mobilities, capital, and labor that shape the more recent popularity and growth of businesses offering racialized services and products.

The sites I examine demonstrate how the productions of Ayurveda can provide a context for understanding the logics of the universal prejudice of authenticity as well as analyze the modalities of racialization perpetuated by the facilitation of state and economic policies. The racialized subjects as presented here are not depicted as manifestations and acculturations of Western values and ideals, but instead are viewed as being concurrently global and authentic, transgressing and deconstructing the bounded categories of the traditional and modern in ways that suit capitalist needs. By drawing from Pandey's work on universal and vernacular prejudices, I situate racialized authenticity in the

Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries as a universalizing discourse that draws on neoliberal codes of belonging, such as individuality sans categorization alongside multiculturalism, which work to gloss over the materiality of vernacular prejudices. I examined the convergences and divergences of two production sites: interviews with Ayurvedic practitioners and media content produced by Ayurvedic beauty business owners. I argue that both of these sites, while resting on contrasting formulations of race, are necessary and inherent to the requirements of neoliberal multiculturalism, where diversity and inclusion are strategically configured so as to mask its inherent exclusions. The underlying processes of racialization in both instances, whether centering India or Indians, makes invisible the ways the universal prejudice of authenticity uplifts a hegemonic and homogenous India, one that is reliant on exclusions of class, regional, religious, and caste intonations that would ironically make it more authentic, however, less legible for markets.

Notes

1. Roberta Schroeder, "The Beauty Brands Placing Cultural Appreciation over Appropriation," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/beauty/a35613683/best-niche-beauty-brands/>.

2. Ayurveda dates back at least 2,000 years and has existed alongside other medical traditions in the region, including Unani, generalized as Islamic medicine, and Siddha, generalized as Tamilian medicine. For more, see Rachel Berger, *Ayurveda Made Modern: Political Histories of Indigenous Medicine in North India, 1900-1955* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

3. See Sita Reddy, "Asian Medicine in America: The Ayurvedic Case," *The Annals of the American Academy* 583 (2002): 97-121.

4. See Berger, *Ayurveda Made Modern*; Sita Reddy, "Reinventing Medical Traditions: The Professionalization of Ayurveda in Contemporary America" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2000); Dagmar Wujastyk and Frederick M. Smith, eds., *Modern and Global Ayurveda: Pluralism and Paradigms* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

5. Nazrul Islam, "New Age Orientalism: Ayurvedic 'Wellness and Spa Culture,'" *Health Sociology Review* 21, no. 2 (2012): 220-231.

6. Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant, eds., *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 9.

7. Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

9. There has been significant work on authenticity within sociocultural and linguistic anthropology. For more, see Jillian R. Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar, "Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism: Language, Materiality, and Value,"

American Anthropologist 116, no. 1 (2014): 51-64; Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-360. For approaches to authenticity within the anthropology of tourism, see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Mengpi Wang, "The Social Life of Scripts: Staging Authenticity in China's Ethno-Tourism Industry," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 41, no. 2/3/4 (2012): 419-455. And, for approaches to authenticity from the lens of material culture, see Siân Jones, "Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves," *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 2 (2010): 181-203.

10. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

11. Cavanaugh and Shankar, *Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism*, 54.

12. I acknowledge that these boundaries are in constant states of negotiation and adjustment. I happened to interview Ayurvedic practitioners that emphasized the racial genealogy of Ayurveda as opposed to centering their own racial and ethnic identities; however, as this study expands to include a more diverse set of practitioners, this observation is subject to evolve.

13. Cavanaugh and Shankar, *Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism*, 54.

14. Sunaina Maira, "Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2000): 329-369; Anita Mannur and Pia K. Sahni, "'What can brown do for you?' Indo Chic and the Fashionability of South Asian Inspired Styles," *South Asian Popular Cultures* 9, no. 2 (2011): 177-190.

15. Hareem Khan, "Racialized Authenticity: South Asian Migrant Women in the Ethnic Beauty Market," *Ethnicities* 22, no. 1 (2022): 42-65.

16. Pandey, *A History of Prejudice*, 1.

17. This is the description that appears on the website for Prakti Beauty: a South Asian-owned beauty brand selling a range of cosmetic products branded as Ayurvedic. For more information, visit <https://praktibeauty.com/pages/our-story>.

18. For more on the history of Hindu nationalist discourse representative of Ayurveda in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries please see Saurav Kumar Rai, "Brahmanizing Ayurveda: Caste and Class Dimensions of Late Colonial Ayurvedic Movement in Upper India," *Summerhill* 25, no. 2 (2019): 4-9; and Saurav Kumar Rai, "Invoking 'Hindu' Ayurveda: Communalisation of the late colonial Ayurvedic discourse," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 56, no. 4 (2019): 411-426.

19. This is made evident in the inauguration of the United Nations International Day of Yoga as a result of a draft resolution proposed by India and 175 other member states. For a detailed description of the International Day of Yoga launched by the United Nations, see "2021 Theme: Yoga for Well-Being," United Nations, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/yoga-day>. For more on India's prime minister's efforts to claim yoga, please see, Morgan Baker, "Root to Rise? Hindutva and the Propaganda of Yoga's Origins," *The Yale Historical Review*, May 2021, <https://www.yalehistoricalreview.org/root-to-rise/>; Tanya Basu,

"Who Owns Yoga?" *The Atlantic*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/who-owns-yoga/384350/>. For a critical examination of the International Day of Yoga, see Anusha Kedhar's insightful article "Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day," *Race and Yoga* 5, no. 1 (2010): 43-55.

20. It is worthwhile to note that the processes of authentication that make Ayurveda legible in sites such as the United States and India translate in other regional contexts, such as the Caribbean, where there is also a significant South Asian population.

21. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

22. I draw this discussion of American Orientalism from Vivek Bald's essay on the topic focusing on "desirable" and "undesirable" forms of brownness. Please see Vivek Bald, "American Orientalism," *Dissent Magazine* (Spring 2015). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/american-orientalism>.

23. In her powerful and personal interrogation of the wellness industrial complex, writer Fariha Róisín examines the links between caste and meditation to critique the invisibilities inherent in the practices of South Asian traditions today. Fariha Róisín, *Who is Wellness For? An Examination of Wellness Culture and Who It Leaves Behind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022).

24. Jodi Melamed, "Reading Tehran in *Lolita*," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, eds. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 87.

25. Scholars have termed Ayurveda's presence in the West as a form of "New Age Ayurveda" due to its entanglements with New Age counterculture movements alongside a growing suspicion of Western biomedicine. See Reddy, "Reinventing Medical Traditions"; Kenneth G. Zysk, "New Age Ayurveda or What Happens to Indian Medicine When It Comes to America," *Traditional South Asian Medicine* 6 (2001): 10-26.

26. Panchakarma, an Ayurvedic purification remedy, is made up of treatments and therapies designed to eliminate the body of toxins. Abhyanga, often included in Panchakarma treatments, is an oil massage using curated mixes of oils adjusted to each body type. Abhyanga massages are commonly found in Ayurvedic spas and clinics, whereas Panchakarma is usually provided by an Ayurvedic practitioner and is significantly more involved than the massages. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/home-remedies/everything-you-need-to-know-about-panchakarma-therapy/articleshow/70510360.cms>.

27. "Exclusive: Shahnaz Husain on Completing 50 Years in the Beauty Industry, Her Journey so Far and More," *Pinkvilla*, August 24, 2021. <https://www.pinkvilla.com/fashion/interview/exclusive-shahnaz-husain-completing-50-years-beauty-industry-her-journey-so-far-more-869146>.

28. Rachel Brown, "From Ancient India to the Present Day: Soma Ayurvedic Turns to Time-Tested Ingredients to Tackle Contemporary Skin Concerns," *Beauty Independent*, July 31, 2019. <https://www.beautyindependent.com/soma-ayurvedic-skincare/>.

29. Madge Maril, "17 Asian-Owned Beauty Brands We Love," *Harper's Bazaar*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/beauty/makeup/g36077180/asian-owned>
30. Tessa Petak, "Influencer and Activist Diipa Khosla Launches the First Ever Ayurvedistry Beauty Brand," *InStyle*, October 5, 2021. <https://www.instyle.com/beauty/diipa-khosla-ayurvedic-beauty-inde-wilde>.
31. Vanita Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 3.
32. Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
33. Sadichchha Adhikari, *Beautiful People: Women of Color Centralizing Innovation in Beauty* (Potomac: New Degree Press, 2021).
34. Adhikari, *Beautiful People*, 3.
35. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *The Beautiful Generation: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 100.
36. Tu, *The Beautiful Generation*, 101.

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What Is Refugee Resilience? Reframing Survival under Environmental Sacrifice

Simi Kang

Introduction

When Hurricane Ida struck southeast Louisiana on the sixteenth anniversary of Katrina's landfall, the region was deep in crisis. At the time, both state and community resources were already stretched thin. Severe and consistent COVID-19 spikes, decades of disaster, and a sociopolitical landscape whose bedrock of environmental racism and expendability made it nearly impossible for racialized residents to prepare for, let alone manage, yet another crisis. From my temporary home in Coast Salish territories,¹ itself blanketed in wildfire smoke, I tried to contact the community-based organizations (CBOs) I work with as Ida overwhelmed coast-dependent communities within and outside of the Army Corps' levee system. For four days, I couldn't reach anyone. Forced to watch Bvlbancha^{2,3}-based media reports on the storm's violence—tabulating potential fatalities, road closures, and structural losses—I was left to hope that folks I knew and cared about were able to navigate and survive this latest 500-year storm.⁴

In those four days, some vulnerable coastal residents who didn't receive mandatory evacuation orders (e.g., in parts of the West Bank of Plaquemines Parish⁵) were forced to manage a 500-year storm with few resources.⁶ Others were struggling to find alternative shelter that was safe and affordable. Some, like many commercial fisherfolk, made themselves acutely vulnerable to save their businesses, staying on their boats and steering into the harsh winds. Their families could not

reach them to determine their safety. As cell service was restored in the days following Ida, I was told by many that, as with Katrina, no one was coming to help in hurricane's immediate aftermath.⁷ But even two and three weeks into power and water outages and in intense heat, federal agencies were still mostly silent along the coast. What "help" there was proved aggressively insufficient: a few hundred homes received state help putting tarps on their roofs, and base camps were erected by the National Guard to serve as temporary shelter, but, according to locals, they were used mostly for laundry because most folks didn't want to leave their homes unattended.

Sandy Nguyen, the executive director of Coastal Communities Consulting, Inc. (CCC), an all-women-of-color-run nonprofit that supports Vietnamese and Cambodian American fishing-dependent families, made this clear. On a call, she told me, "The [fisherfolk] know how to deal with hurricanes... We have to do it ourselves—no one else is coming to help." After talking more about how difficult it would be to get damaged boats out of the bayous and what it would take for deckhands to find work when their bosses were dealing with repairs, Sandy got mad. She entreated, "We *are* resilient, Simi. But how much longer can they expect us to be resilient? You can only bend so much before you break." She was pointing to prior conversations where we discussed how the idea of resilience has been weaponized against Southeast Asian American commercial fishing families and their neighbors. If fisherfolk and other racialized residents were expected to be resilient—or to withstand disaster after disaster without reliable, timely, or sufficient support and other infrastructure to make healthy lives—now we knew it didn't just mean that no one was coming now; it meant that no one was coming in the future, either.

I begin with a recent disaster and the dearth of governmental/structural support it garnered to highlight how the term "resilience" is, first, used differently by structurally underserved communities, politicians, and policymakers and, second, how the latter two deploy the term to relegate some communities to the role of "necessary sacrifice" in the longue durée disaster that constitutes southeast Louisiana. As a feminist ethnographer, I am interested in how Vietnamese American residents of southeast Louisiana are made structurally expendable at the intersections of race, environmental injustice, and immigration policy. For me, these intersections are productively animated through the racializing formation I call *refugee resilience*, the central conceit and analytic of this article. A deeply violent approach to disaster policy, refugee resilience demands that Vietnamese Americans—seen exclusively as survivors of war and displacement who excelled at being refugees—bootstrap their way through ongoing and compounding disaster while concurrently being made expendable⁸ to environmental sacrifice.

Throughout, I argue that the conditions that engender refugee resilience explicitly meet Robert D. Bullard's definition of environmental racism, which is "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color."⁹ In a policy landscape articulated through refugee resilience, some places and, by extension, people are imperative to keep safe and/or rebuild quickly in a disaster timeline—overwhelmingly, spaces dedicated to oil production, shipping, and tourism revenue and economically, racially, and regionally privileged landowners. Others, like coast-dependent fishing communities, however, are interpolated into disaster storytelling as unfortunate but necessary sacrifices in the larger project of protecting southeast Louisiana's economic and physical infrastructure. To be made perpetually resilient in service to state economic interests, which in turn require the environmental expendability of some communities over others, is insidious, blatant, and, critically, political.

In addition to the lack of support that refugees and the community they have established receive, being made expendable under environmental racism looks like Vietnamese Americans and other racialized residents living on the front lines of increasingly devastating hurricanes, oil spills, polluted Mississippi deposits, and warming oceans; having their homes and communities zoned for toxic waste deposits, oil production, and other forms of environmental racism and sacrifice; and being understood as self-sufficient by decision makers and the broader public, storytelling that reinforces their expendability as precedent, present, and future. This reinforces arguments made by Asian Americanists and critical refugee scholars that refugees and their children will never be fully included in the biopolitical project of the nation; instead, they shall remain "forever foreign,"¹⁰ or always consumed as racialized "other," and targeted for blatant environmental racism.¹¹ Under regionally specific refugee resilience, Vietnamese American residents are always already expendable in service to economic accumulation/environmental extraction.

The racializing and environmental violence of resilience, however, does not happen exclusively to Vietnamese Americans, nor does it happen to them in a vacuum. The fishing-dependent families I learn from share histories, presents, and futures with Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and white folks whose experiences of race, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and class all contribute to heterogeneous and intertwined ways of cohabitating in a sacrifice zone.¹² To think through the Global South–U.S. South transits that make this possible, I bring Asian American studies critiques of structural violence and immigration policy into conversation with Black feminist analyses of disaster and critical environmental justice frameworks of sacrifice and racialized abandonment. I begin with

an abbreviated history of Vietnamese American fishers' experiences of disaster and attendant racialization as well as the community's resettlement in Bvlbancha and the surrounding area. While my inquiry is limited in scope to the experiences of Vietnamese Americans, I believe that to forward a robust analysis of Vietnamese American refugee resilience and environmental expendability, it is imperative to understand how that racializing formation is acutely co-constituted by and with the expendability of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in the present, historically, and in decision makers' visions for the future.¹³ I do this, albeit briefly, by unpacking the ways in which 2005's Hurricane Katrina allowed decision makers to embed anti-Black, settler colonial resilience into disaster policy. This establishes the ways in which anti-Blackness and settler colonial policies are the foundation for and are co-constituted by refugee resilience. After articulating what refugee resilience is, I conclude by turning to what it does, reading its impacts across Vietnamese American fishing families' experiences of disaster and disaster policy. I believe that this work is particularly imperative at such a critical juncture in global and local foci on climate change, environmental policy, and disaster response. While incredibly robust in some areas, much of this scholarship excludes Asian Americans in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular, among other racialized and colonized communities.¹⁴

Significantly, this project is not mine alone. It is the explicit result of collaboration with Indigenous, Black, and Southeast Asian American community members, leaders, and organizers who have given their time and knowledge to teach me better ways of knowing and doing. For over five years, I have learned from a constellation of regional CBOs and organizers whose generational and cultural expertise of place, people, and structural violence is unparalleled. My closest collaborators in this work are the staff of the aforementioned CCC, a nonprofit and community-based organization that provides business, social, and intergenerational support to thousands of fishing-dependent families, overwhelmingly Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans, in southeast Louisiana. Since I began this work with two years of situated fieldwork (2015–2017), CCC's staff have been my primary teachers in terms of what it means to be coast dependent first-, 1.5-, and second-generation Vietnamese Americans who have been made expendable to environmental sacrifice. In addition to CCC, I have worked with community organizers, including historically Black church-based organizations, Indigenous elders, labor organizers, and educators, and environmentally focused colleagues whose scientific knowledge strengthens my own work on environmental justice. While I am incredibly lucky to benefit from these folks' wisdom, I want to be clear that I do not speak for CCC or any other Louisiana community-based organization in this or any other piece of academic

scholarship I produce.¹⁵

Disaster, Refugeeism, and Commercial Fishing

Over many years of conversations, almost all the Vietnamese American fishers I have spoken with told me stories that painfully trace how their work and personal lives have been shaped by the constancy of disaster and the environmental expendability that produces and follows it. These stories of disaster follow a fairly prescriptive arc: they always start with hurricanes. List them off: Katrina and Rita (2005), Gustav and Ike (2008), Laura and Delta (2020), and Ida (2021). They almost always talk about the BP oil catastrophe in 2010 next, after which all fishing-dependent workers and business owners lost a full year of income, developed trauma and anxiety responses and, for those exposed to oil dispersant, have terminal health conditions.¹⁶ After telling you that shrimp have been getting smaller and less abundant since their coastline was coated in oil,¹⁷ they'll mention 2019's Mississippi River flooding and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers redirecting the swollen river into their shrimping and oyster grounds, suffocating all marine life with farm runoff—dense fresh water.¹⁸

Then they will likely tell you about the Mississippi River diversions the state of Louisiana is planning to run into key brown shrimp and oyster grounds in Barataria Bay and Breton Sound starting sometime after 2025. These diversions¹⁹—quite literally structures that divert the Mississippi's water and sediment from its fixed flow path into saline marsh ecosystems—will bring the same polluted water into similar areas as the 2019 flooding event. In so doing, they will likely cut brown shrimpers' and oyster harvesters' already BP-depleted yields down to nothing for five years or more.²⁰ While the state has been working on these diversions since 2007, the coastal and fishing communities most likely to suffer under them have not been included in the decision-making process, are often called reactionary, and are otherwise silenced as they watch their futures grow more opaque by the day. I will return to diversions at this article's end but want to mark them as a spectacularly visible and persistent piece of resilience policy that pivots on the racialized expendability of every family with whom CCC works. First conceived of as a response to Katrina, the diversions are two looming disasters that will come in the wake of over two decades of uninterrupted decision maker-produced²¹ environmental disaster. Vietnamese American fishers and their coast-dependent neighbors know that they can expect only more and worse when the diversions go into effect alongside ongoing shipping, tourism-related development, and oil extraction and refining.²²

In spite of such persistent environmental racism, however, the families I work with see not only their towns but also their industry and the ecosystems it relies on as home. This is because commercial fishing has

always been imperative to the community's economic, and thus social, stability. Following a complicated resettlement process by the Catholic Church from 1975 to the early 1980s, many Vietnamese refugees found themselves isolated, under-resourced, and in need of support.²³ As I have discussed elsewhere,²⁴ Catholic Charities of New Orleans resettled this community differently than others across the United States. Refugees who were brought to Bvlbancha were placed in a single apartment complex in the Michoud neighborhood of New Orleans East, which is cut off from the metro by a shipping canal. The complex, called Versailles Arms, "[was] considered undesirable by most New Orleanians since they were provided with inadequate bus service."^{25,26} This isolation was not only physical but social as well—it was difficult to find jobs that didn't require English fluency, setting up lines of credit and getting loans was nearly impossible, and accessing medical and other forms of care was similarly opaque or barriered. In addition to a lack of extant cultural and language-accessible support, Michoud has and continues to face regular advisories to boil water and hosts several production facilities that impact residents' health.²⁷

This dearth of infra/structural support, while specific to the region, was rooted in national ideas about the role of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, which scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen articulates through a socioeconomic and political formation called "the gift of freedom." While its domesticating mission failed, producing decades of disruption and violence across Southeast Asia and leading to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, Nguyen unpacks how the U.S. government saw and still sees itself as a magnanimous benefactor of Vietnamese refugees and their kin. She argues that governmental, nonprofit, and church-run resettlement processes and the subsequent dearth of social services relied on decades of U.S. storytelling about "saving" Vietnamese people from communism and all Southeast Asians from oppression.²⁸ According to Nguyen, having granted refugees asylum, the federal government believes it bestowed the "gift of freedom" on all Southeast Asian refugees by taking them in after making war in their countries for decades.²⁹ This, she explains, ensures that refugees will forever be in debt to the United States while, significantly, being marked as perpetual foreigners³⁰ by decision makers and other residents. Given the presumption of what Nguyen calls refugee debt—or an irreparable, generational debt that refugees owe the United States for "saving" their lives—newly arrived families had to make do, building their own networks of financial, linguistic, and social support.³¹ This included children translating for parents in public, more financially secure community members sharing what they had so that others could pay rent or establish new businesses, and folks sharing the bounty of their skills,

from gardening to construction, across local and regional communities. The imperative for and value of such interdependence was particularly visible in southeast Louisiana's commercial shrimping industry, where a whole U.S.-wide network of Vietnamese people in diaspora mobilized funds and other resources to help local Vietnamese families start and maintain fishing businesses.³²

In a 2018 interview, I asked now-shrimp boat captain Chú Anh³³ about the role that commercial shrimping played in his early life in the United States. After seeking asylum in the United States in 1981, he spent a few months learning English. Anh was quick to explain that he didn't know anything about shrimping but had heard that commercial fishing was one of the few jobs where he didn't need to be fully proficient in English and didn't need to know the business beforehand.³⁴ With this knowledge, Anh began working as a deckhand to learn the trade. His captain at the time sold Anh an older shrimp boat he wasn't using for a third of the list price. While this was kind, buying a boat was tough for new refugees because "when we come [to the United States] with nothing, that was very hard for us. We don't have no credit [to] buy a car [or] anything."³⁵ But there was one way around this problem: reach out to a network of other Vietnamese folks who had been living in the United States longer and who, because of this, had more economic stability than recent refugees: "When I came, I had a cousin [in California, and] he knew people.... [Here in Louisiana, to] buy the boat, we ask around, find a friend, [and ask], will you borrow me money?...[We don't talk about when] we'll pay it back, but in our heart, we know we will." As shrimpers and other fishers (oyster, finfish, tuna and swordfish, and crab, among others) established their small businesses, they paid earlier loans forward, lending seed money for friends in Michoud and other small delta towns³⁶ to establish corner stores, nail salons, restaurants, pharmacies, and myriad other businesses necessary to address community needs.

In the thirty years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, Vietnamese Americans came to represent a third of Louisiana's commercial shrimping industry,³⁷ among many other immigrants, migrants, and refugees who shape the Gulf of Mexico's fisheries. With this increased presence along the coast came exposure to coastal environmental injustices. Early in my fieldwork, Happy Vuong,³⁸ a Vietnamese American shrimping dock owner, told me that no matter how many times his business was blown away by hurricanes and shut down by oil catastrophes, he would rebuild. "We are strong, you know? We come here with nothing and we made a business out here."³⁹ As Happy said this, his wife—the family accountant and grounding force—stepped out of the office. She told me that they had to keep the business going because they had made it from scratch, and they weren't leaving: "He wanted to give up and buy a corner store

but I said no; this is what we do. This is what we know." At the time of this conversation in 2014, they had rebuilt their dock, nuts to bolts, four times: after hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike. They had also lost an entire year's income in 2010 when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, leading to the BP oil catastrophe. Although all of these disasters are typically seen as discrete events with a beginning and an end, the ways that they impact residents are not temporally contained.

Each storm, spill, and other disaster marked as "natural" along the coast builds on the last. Collectively, they produce dense, long-ranging, and overwhelmingly ignored effects, from poor regional health to individuals' economic instability and narcotics dependence. Rob Nixon calls these phenomena and their attendant effects slow violence, or violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction, that is dispersed across time and space." As such, it is "an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."⁴⁰ Only the people who are directly impacted by slow violence can name it, which all but erases said violence from public consciousness and policy. This erasure, in turn, gives coast-dependent and other vulnerable communities no recourse but to make their own way through the acute yet invisibilized violences they experience in the best way they know how. This is the foundation of resilience: people like Happy and his wife, whose business employs several dozen people, worked hard to maintain their business for their employees, community, and children,⁴¹ all in spite of the conditions they live with and under. To stay in the place they have made a home, rebuilding over and over was not simply a desire but an imperative.

For many decision makers, extractive industry executives, and developers, this imperative has been doubly useful: stripped of the concern to make conditions better prior to or in the face of disaster and relieved of the responsibility to support people suffering disasters' impacts, they can celebrate residents' survival without sacrificing business as usual. For them, the willingness of families like Happy's to stay even as threats to their ways of life and communities grow has been rearticulated from vulnerability into consent—consent to be extracted from, to be told that disaster's impacts are their own burdens to bear, and to be deliberately excluded from receiving resources as decision maker-produced disasters, from pipeline leaks to warming ocean-induced hurricanes, grow more persistent and constant. This, paired with Nguyen's formulation of gift and debt, ensures that fishing families are particularly environmentally expendable.

The confluence of Vietnamese Americans' histories of being refugees and ongoing slow environmental violence establishes the foundation for refugees resilience in southeast Louisiana. As I briefly articulated above and will explore in more depth later in this article, refugee resilience is the notion that Southeast Asian Americans are

more capable of surviving persistent decision maker–produced disaster because of their experiences of refugeeism from Việt Nam to the United States. This refugee resilience edict is specific to Southeast Asians in that it hews to Nguyen’s gift and debt formulation in another way: not only are resilient refugees presumed to be particularly good at survival, but no matter the conditions of the violence they face, policymakers tacitly believe that they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make their way in disaster without economic, social, linguistic, or other forms of governmental aid and support.

Critically, while the next few sections of this paper focus on Bvlbancha, my larger interest is on how resilience policy impacts Vietnamese American residents across southeast Louisiana and particularly those who depend on the coast economically and for work. To understand refugee resilience, it is important to establish the foundation of Louisiana’s resilience policy: anti-Black racism and settler colonial extraction. As many Vietnamese American commercial fisherfolk live in Bvlbancha and in light of this article’s focus on environmental racism and resilience-as-policy, the storm and resulting levee failures are imperative to read closely.

Katrina: Refugees and Resilience

While Indigenous and Black communities’ resilience has been exploited for millennia in what is called Louisiana,⁴² the hyper-visible commodification of resilience in state policy emerged in the wake of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina and resulting levee failures. As water subsumed over 85 percent of Bvlbancha following levee failures and areas south of the city were devastated by the hurricane’s water and wind, city planners were already deciding how to build back a better city. This barely coded racial language and the resulting gutting of Bvlbancha’s schools, subsidized housing, intercommunity capital, and other social infrastructure have been parsed by myriad scholars who have concluded that, as Neil Smith emphasized, “disaster reconstruction invariably cuts deeper the ruts and grooves of social oppression and exploitation.”⁴³

One of the most complicated examples of this happened immediately following the storm when media outlets began calling displaced residents Katrina “refugees.”⁴⁴ Black residents particularly felt that being called refugees discursively stripped them of the right to return and rebuild even as they were evacuating. It did this by marking them as not citizens.⁴⁵ Clement Alexander Price explains that “the media actually contributed to the radicalized way in which Americans view black people, especially those in trouble and in need of aid. Early in the crisis, poor blacks were curiously referred to as ‘refugees’ in the media, as if they were from another country.”⁴⁶ While this sentiment has been echoed across a great deal of Katrina scholarship, it’s complicated by

the presence of Michoud, the aforementioned refugee-descended Vietnamese American community in so-called New Orleans East. While they did not take on as much water as some sections of Bvlbancha, all Michoud's homes and businesses were devastated by Katrina, displacing residents for weeks and months. For YẾN Lê Espiritu, the post-Katrina reification of a citizen–refugee binary was incredibly dangerous because “the term ‘refugee’ triggers associations with highly charged images of Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness. These associations reflect the transnationally circulated representations of refugees as... an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries.”⁴⁷ By abstracting “refugee” in this way, press coverage at once alienated Black Bvlbancha residents from inclusion in the body politic of the nation *and* reinforced that the thousands of Vietnamese American refugees of the U.S. war living in Bvlbancha were never going to be fully “American.”

As many have said before me, rather than being a spectacular moment of concerted violence, Katrina simply exposed how much racism, xenophobia, class violence, and white supremacy was already embedded in the sociopolitical landscape of southeast Louisiana. Although neither discrete nor singular, the levee failures amplified and grossly exacerbated the slow violence of life under environmental racism and in an extractive sacrifice zone. The act of distancing Black and other racialized residents from citizenship and the rights it indexes rearticulated a long-cultivated break between those who are meant to survive environmental racism and those who are not. As Katrina's impacts became clearer over time, this exclusionary language shifted tact: no longer refugees, Bvlbancha residents were all, according to Mayor C. Ray Nagin's administration and developers, “resilient” for the foreseeable future.

Ten years after Katrina's landfall, community organizer and lawyer Tracie Washington explicated how the term “resilience” had been weaponized against Black community members following Katrina:

I evacuated as a single mom with a 12-year-old and a jacked-up car, and an American Express and a law degree. So that was an awful combination for the evil ones who didn't want Black folk back, cuz that law degree meant that I could get in any court and fight for anybody... I'm sick and tired of people saying “y'all are so resilient”; resilient means you can do something to me. No! I'm not resilient. I have a right not to be resilient.⁴⁸

Washington's resistance to resilience makes clear that Bvlbancha's immediate and long-term use of the term was not just a celebration of residents' survival—when applied to Black residents, it was a biopolitically

disciplinary mechanism. For many, this looked like being subjected to dehumanizing racial violence both in person and in the press—from people seeking lifesaving food and pantry items famously being called looters⁴⁹ and being murdered by the New Orleans Police Department⁵⁰ to experiencing abject violence as they tried and failed to return to homes that were already slated for redevelopment. Fifteen years after the storm, scholars found that nearly 29 percent of Bvibanacha's Black residents were forced out of the city,⁵¹ most of whom were unable to return, be it because of failed insurance claims, skyrocketing rent, or inaccessible and racist health and education policies.⁵² While these examples emerge from a Katrina-specific set of impacts and timelines, it is important to understand that for them to happen, the political and racial landscape had to be such that Black sacrifice was not just expected during disaster but also, under the auspice of resilience, tolerated and even seen as imperative.⁵³ Abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore offers organized abandonment to articulate how racialized management—in this case, environmental racism—is folded into the structure of U.S. social and political decision making:

organized abandonment has to do with the way that people, households, communities, neighborhoods do not have equal levels of support and protection... [it is] not only abandonment by the state, it's also abandonment by capital... [for example,] tourism capital, that pushes certain kinds of people out of certain areas of the city and only welcomes them in if they work as workers in the service industry, delivering, serving, taking care of and cleaning. There are many, many ways for us to think about organized abandonment, but that thinking should bring us to consider both how capital—large and small—and state—municipal or greater—work together to raise barriers to some kinds of people and lower them for others.⁵⁴

Using this logic, regional policy seized on the usefulness of intercommunal survival and turned it into a political advantage that has reverberated into the present. Converting places like southeast Louisiana into blank slates ripe for exploitation⁵⁵ through organized abandonment has allowed Western, neoliberal elites to build back to suit their capital-centric goals.⁵⁶ They do this by recycling the violently colonial, terra nullius-dependent policies that produced the notion of property in the first place,⁵⁷ forcing people from their homes, their cities, and their lives under the guise of "rebuilding." Katrina was used by decision makers to, as Naomi Klein says, "engage in radical social and economic engineering"⁵⁸ that produced

environmental expendability in a region already understood to be the nation's environmental sacrifice zone.

While organized abandonment is not explicitly racialized, it does, on the whole, impact structurally underserved and excluded communities, their lifeways and mores, and their complex approaches to making life. Following Katrina, Bvlbancha and Louisiana's message to all racialized and economically vulnerable residents was effectively that they were fine because they had survived. This basic survival made them resilient, and resilience made them unnecessary to support, whether at home or in the Katrina-produced diaspora. In this way, Bvlbancha became the regional leader in embedding the resilience of poor and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American communities into city budgets, disaster rebuilding plans, and development policy,⁵⁹ the results of which I explore in the rest of this article. In her meticulous interrogation of resilience and development, Kathleen Tierney corroborates the ways that resilience is imbricated into policy, saying that "resilience discourse frames members of at-risk populations as increasingly pressured to adapt to depredations that are the direct result of the historic and contemporary forces of neoliberalization."⁶⁰ This depredation took shape in myriad ways, from an ongoing dearth of reliable infrastructure in Michoud and historically Black neighborhoods to the decline of key industries and spaces of intercommunity labor across southeast Louisiana.

Refugee Resilience

Southeast Asian American-specific *refugee resilience* emerged alongside the anti-Black resilience I have articulated above and was reified in local discourse at the intersection of post-Katrina urban resilience policy and settler colonial racism.

Within a few months of Katrina and the resulting levee failures, over 92 percent of Vietnamese American Michoud residents had returned home and began rebuilding their neighborhoods.⁶¹ Between a month and a year following the levee failures, 39 percent of Black residents and 63 percent of white residents had returned to their homes throughout Bvlbancha.⁶² As I addressed earlier, the spatial and economic isolation that Vietnamese American families were forced to navigate prior to Katrina led them to create interfamily networks that made it possible for the majority of Michoud's families to both come back and share in the process of making home again. This looked like families gutting and cleaning each other's houses, craftspeople sharing skills like roofing and plumbing with neighbors, and everyone using the community church as a support and relief center.⁶³ As in most disasters, extant mutual aid efforts⁶⁴—most at the scale of interpersonal and family networks—were rendered visible. Community members' insistence on keeping one another alive and at home was not just a kindness but also an imperative under the organized abandonment of refugeeism in the United States.

This “unprecedented” return quickly received media and scholarly attention.⁶⁵ It felt as though Bvlbancha suddenly remembered that Vietnamese American families were a part of their community—that Vietnamese Americans were a part of the social and economic fabric of the region. In their fervor to explicate the community’s response to Katrina, scholars of public health leaned heavily on both the mythos of refugee debt and Vietnamese Americans’ perpetual foreignness: these refugees were “resilient” not just because they survived but also because they were actively “better” at navigating disaster given their forced displacement within and from Việt Nam. In a 2015 *New York Times* piece about the tenth anniversary of Katrina, sociologist Mark Vanlandingham draws on pre- and post-Katrina research to argue that the community rebuilt with “grit, self-reliance, and efficiency based on their perseverance following internal and transnational displacement due to US military intervention, self-sufficiency, and Confucian embrace of hierarchy.”⁶⁶ A year later, doctor of social work Qingwen Xu simply said, “The Vietnamese community’s resilience is derived from the history of refuge and resettlement.”⁶⁷ Rather than understanding that the community had developed the interdependence needed for this kind of rebuilding throughout resettlement, post-Katrina storytelling about Bvlbancha’s Vietnamese American residents focused on their refugee “bootstrap” work ethic and resilience. I call this specific xenophobic and racialized formulation of Vietnamese American perseverance *refugee resilience*. I explicitly use two terms that have already been critiqued in this article—by Espiritu and Washington, respectively—to point to the dangerous ways that post-disaster city and state discourse and policy overwhelmingly produce more, not less, vulnerability for Vietnamese American residents, reinforcing their biopolitical, environmental expendability.

Resilient refugee discourse was quickly integrated into Bvlbancha’s post-Katrina already resilience-dense rebuilding policies. Unlike primarily white and affluent neighborhoods Uptown or in the French Quarter, Michoud’s largely Vietnamese and Black residents found that the city took longer to repair and rebuild the area’s infrastructure, including water, waste, electric, and social infrastructure.⁶⁸ It also led to a yearslong fight between city administrators and Michoud residents, who then-mayor Nagin marked as expendable by designating an area one mile upstream from their groundwater supply as a site of a landfill, which, despite technically being closed, still contains incredibly toxic Katrina debris.⁶⁹ Marguerite Nguyen’s work articulated the real threat of such environmental racism: many Michoud residents grow kitchen gardens and thus rely on a healthy and safe water supply to feed their families or supplement other groceries.⁷⁰ Poisoning this water supply with the toxic debris of an acute environmental disaster reinforced the fact not only that Michoud residents were resilient but also that, as

such, they were easily sacrificeable to the needs of the city in its own quest for urban infrastructural resilience. In this way, environmental racism and expendability became a secondary condition of Nguyen's original formulation of refugee debt: as perpetual debtors to the nation, Vietnamese Americans must also bear an overdetermination of environmental violence.

Refugee resilience also reinforced the racial divides that were an ongoing part of Michoud's role in the city. Vanlandingham and Xu show us that refugee resilience explicitly relies on U.S. immigration logics that demand Vietnamese Americans' fealty to the myth of the American Dream⁷¹ and attendant gift of freedom rhetoric as well as urban and development resilience policy that requires them to be exemplary survivors of disaster. This is particularly clear given the ways that refugee resilience was used to deny support to Vietnamese Americans. However, refugee resilience was also weaponized against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous residents of the region. If Vietnamese Americans' rebuilding was evidence of their excellence at resilience, then the Black residents who never returned were to blame for their own failure to be properly resilient. Then the Indigenous communities whose homes are first hit and least resourced should reconsider their approach to survival. Then the Central American families who arrived as refugees of other kinds of political and economic disaster should also pull themselves up by their bootstraps and figure out how to live in the United States.

The story here is one of socioeconomic success, historically the mode by which immigrants, migrants, refugees, and other "new" Americans are expected to show achievement—or assimilate—in the United States. This pivots on the model minority myth,⁷² which Edith Wen-Chu Chen and Grace J. Yoo explain is predicated on the assumption that Asian Americans are economically and educationally more successful than other marginalized peoples.⁷³ Historically, the label of "model minority" has been imposed on Asian laborers and immigrants to the United States as a socioeconomic and cultural expectation. For Southeast Asian Americans, the model minority myth is both a condition of their refugee debt—that, as refugees who owe their lives to the nation, they use the gift of survival to become exemplary minorities—and impossible to achieve given the same.⁷⁴ In spite of this, governmentally instituted refugee resilience relies on the model minority myth to reinforce distance between Vietnamese Americans, white citizens, and other U.S. residents of color. Briefly, I call the way that Vietnamese American residents are at once made models of resilience and expendable noncitizens *environmental model minoritization*. As environmental model minorities, Vietnamese American residents of southeast Louisiana are racialized as a standard of survival *and* sacrifice to which other environmentally expendable communities must aspire.

This individuation of structural and racialized environmental violence reinforces extant racialized, temporal, and intercommunal divides. As more and more disasters hit Louisiana's racialized and environmentally vulnerable communities, environmental model minoritization, among other technologies of organized abandonment, ensure that regional resistance and interdependence continue to be as difficult as possible.

In the remainder of this article, I examine the disaster-bound experiences of Vietnamese American commercial fishers and their families by focusing on the proposed Mid-Barataria Bay Sediment Diversion. This allows me to show how fishing families' reliance on the state's most vulnerable and disaster-prone ecosystems shapes their refugee resilience and environmental expendability in very particular ways.

Infrastructure, Disaster, and "Repair"

Given the role that commercial fishing plays in southeast Louisiana's Vietnamese American communities, environmental violence, be it oil spills and unhealthy air or disasters like Katrina, BP, and now Ida, devastate them at home and work but also across their communities. When commercial fishing is impacted—as it always is—by wind and water, oil, and extraction, the economic and interpersonal stability of many Vietnamese American families is immediately thrown into question. This looks like small businesses closing within the community after the BP oil disaster, dwindling populations in Vietnamese American neighborhoods along the Mississippi River and Gulf coastline, and intimate partner violence and substance abuse spiking in the months and years following Katrina and BP. By placing the burden of surviving compounding disaster on communities already marked for sacrifice by decades of racism, geographic isolation, and linguistic and social exclusion, policymakers can maintain both settler colonial resource extraction and environmental sacrifice.⁷⁵ Such organized abandonment explicitly allows decision makers to cede responsibility for the life *and the death* of resilient refugees: it is up to individuals, not the state, to *not die*.⁷⁶ As one historical geographer of the region told me at a conference, resilience is FEMA's promise not to show up first.⁷⁷

Significantly, to invoke Smith and Nixon again, it is rarely just the disaster but more often the disaster policy and "rebuilding" that is devastating already structurally vulnerable communities—the slow violence embedded therein. Just as disaster hyper-visibility community interdependence and mutual aid, it throws just what goes into organized abandonment into sharp relief. In the six years I have been doing this work, I have learned from fishers that it can take up to three years to receive even a portion of disaster mitigation payments—all rebuilding happens at an individual's own expense. However, the cost

of not rebuilding fast enough is incredibly high: more rot, more decay, and more water; higher insurance premiums; and a reduction in the size of insurance claims. It is also incredibly difficult to find language-accessible state or federal support infrastructure; even when FEMA does show up, they don't bring Vietnamese-, Khmer-, Spanish-, Arabic-, or French-language documents, nor do they provide skilled interpreters to help residents whose first language is not English get resourced. This is in addition to the vast and complex disaster aid and loan processes each small business and individual must undergo. Without support from community-based organizations like CCC, which immediately opens its doors for interpretation, translation, and submission support after every disaster, many give up. Add to this the fact that 70 to 80 percent of southeast Louisiana's coastal communities have access to only dial-up internet and have low computer literacy, and it becomes clear how impossible it feels for most coast-dependent residents to get support during disaster. And as each disaster's impacts build on the last over space and time, the next, inevitable disaster feels both temporally closer and materially less easy to prepare for.

One example of how refugee resilience has become embedded in environmental policy is the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, a structural project that fisherfolk across southeast Louisiana have assured me will be catastrophic to the ecosystems and brown shrimp and oysters they depend on. First conceived of in 2007 as a response to the gross land loss coastal Louisiana has experienced since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers channelized the Mississippi River in 1929, the diversion will reintroduce fresh, toxic Mississippi River water to brackish Barataria Bay. Commercial shrimpers have been fighting Barataria for years. They believe that although it is meant to rebuild imperative coastal land, the diversion's most immediate effect will be to drastically change the salinity and oxygen levels in Barataria Bay,⁷⁸ a major shrimping ground that's also highly populated with oyster leases. As planned, the project will create a controlled canal connecting the river to the marsh, allowing Mississippi River water and land-building sediment to be released into Barataria Bay, one of the most critical ecosystems for commercial fishing.

The diversion's environmental impact statement (EIS), which is being finalized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) at the time of this writing, details how Mid-Barataria will directly impact commercial fisheries. Therein, USACE identified likely impacts of the project, including sunny day flooding in areas outside of levee protection, changes to river infrastructure, and, most important to fisherfolk, clear evidence that the diversion will drastically deplete the brown shrimp and oysters they rely on. These findings come fourteen years after the project was first forwarded in the 2007 Coastal Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast, which explicitly explained that "possibly within just 25 years, the habitat

may deteriorate to the point that important fisheries are no longer viable. In a very real sense therefore, we must accept that fishing locations will need to change in order to provide a sustainable landscape over the long-term."⁷⁹

From its earliest iteration, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), the state agency in charge of the diversion, knew that it would sacrifice key fisheries and, thus, fisherfolk. As the project moves closer to approval—during a global pandemic that closed restaurants, fisheries' key market, following two massively destructive hurricane seasons, and in the middle of a diesel price hike that has forced many boats to stay off the water, no less—residents are worried. Unlike hurricanes and oil spills, they know that this disaster is coming. It has a timeline and robust blueprints, and contractors are being vetted. And like other decision maker-produced disasters, fisherfolk and other residents effectively have no way to prepare for the diversion unless the state itself produces the provisions of their survival. This is refugee resilience policy in practice.

I developed a better sense of how Mid-Barataria demands environmental expendability at several online public meetings held by the USACE and the CPRA in April 2021. After they logged on to Microsoft Teams, representatives from both agencies explained the value of the project—largely its ability to maintain land as a storm barrier. Following their presentation, the meeting was opened for Q&A. Stakeholders used both the chat feature and the option to unmute and speak to voice their support of or opposition to the project. In the two meetings I was present for, most speakers were residents highlighting their concerns about the diversion's impacts on their homes, businesses, and futures along the Birdfoot Delta. One resident of Myrtle Grove, a town outside the federal levee system and thus particularly vulnerable, articulated the fear that many were feeling: "When I built [my house] down here I accepted the fact that we... would be affected by 'natural disasters.' I cannot accept the fact that my investment and way of life will be totally altered for a 'man-made project.'"⁸⁰ She was followed by a white shrimp boat captain who knew that the draft EIS reported that the project would have "a major, adverse permanent impact on the brown shrimp resource... [and] a moderate to major permanent adverse impact to the commercial shrimp fishery."⁸¹

In addition, "the EIS identified the potential for the Project to result in disproportionate impacts to some low income and minority shrimp fishers."⁸² This is because many of the Southeast Asian American, Black, and Indigenous shrimpers in the region depend on brown shrimp, a species that is found much closer to Louisiana's coastline than more saltwater-dependent white shrimp. Brown shrimp grow to full adults in the protection of Barataria's brackish water, so close to land that small

changes in salinity directly impact their numbers and size. One must have U.S. citizenship to shrimp farther than three miles from shore (or in federal versus state waters),⁸³ where white shrimp are more abundant and robust. In addition to these barriers to keeping the industry healthy, the cost of taking a large boat out to shrimp for weeks at a time—from purchasing fuel to paying several deckhands—is incredibly prohibitive, even for shrimpers with citizenship. Add to this that it is currently impossible to get the permit required to shrimp in federal waters because of a decades-long moratorium,⁸⁴ and it becomes clear that the diversion does not promise to end commercial shrimping but rather ensures that racialized and low-income fishers will be eliminated from the industry and, for many, the coast altogether.

In light of this, the captain said, “Given the permanent adverse impacts and collateral injuries of this project, the few long-term benefits do not justify the costs of construction, nor the economic loss to the fisheries, low-income families, and flooding of coastal communities affected.”⁸⁵ The subtext of these comments was that coast-dependent residents understood their compulsory sacrifice under the diversion. This sentiment was beautifully articulated by Katharine Ecole-Poole, a climate scientist, at the second meeting I attended:

If your EIS states that Black and low-income communities will be highly and disproportionately impacted by a project, that is where exploration should end, full stop.

If your EIS states that dolphins will be harmed via this project, more than were killed in the oil spill that it was designed to rectify, that is where it should end.

If your EIS states that flooding will increase in areas that are already highly vulnerable and underserved as a result, that is where it should end.

If your EIS states that wildlife will have their habitats destroyed on an expedited timeline, hurting not only the animals, but the ecosystems and people who depend on them for their livelihood, that is where it should end.

If your EIS doesn’t properly address the implications of diverting one of the most toxic and polluted rivers in the world into another ecosystem, that is where exploration should end.⁸⁶

Ecole-Poole’s explicit tracing of the environmental sacrifices embedded in the project put a spotlight on the fact that in addition to sacrificing small-scale fishers, residents’ resilience—refugee and otherwise—is tacitly incorporated into Louisiana’s approach to

the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion. The message this has and continues to send to the fishing families I work with is thus: to build land, some critters and communities will just have to figure out a new and different way to survive. That the same communities have lived under environmental racism—determined organized abandonment for decades and generations shows just how little imagination Louisiana has; not just ongoing disaster, but the responses thereto—which fisherfolk confidently identify as disasters unto themselves—begin from the idea that Vietnamese American, Cambodian American, Black, Central American, Indigenous, and poor white and Cajun fisherfolk are expendable. That it proceeds to place the neoliberal burden for survival on already abandoned people, a preponderance of whom are Southeast Asian American, makes clear just how pervasively refugee resilience is naturalized in state disaster response: it no longer needs to be said to be invoked.

And fisherfolk know this. The problem with knowing that one is being subjected to a slate of racist, xenophobic, and extractive policies is that it does not change their material circumstances.

Conclusion

As I have shown above, for Vietnamese American commercial fisherfolk, survival is not a personal undertaking but the result of an interdependent network of families that collectively build and maintain their communities. The diversion promises to strain and likely break the places and lives made by Vietnamese Americans and commercial fisheries.

To conclude, I would like to very briefly address one likely outcome of the diversion—family displacement. When shrimp and oysters die, southeast Louisiana’s commercial fisherfolk will be forced to compete with their neighbors (both in state and in Mississippi and Texas) for fewer and fewer resources in a crumbling yet reviving ecosystem. Like so much other structural violence, the diversion’s operation will pit struggling communities against one another where they otherwise might find common cause. In ten to fifteen years, many Southeast Asian American fisherfolk will be forced to leave the industry altogether. Walking away from a business they built from scratch is one thing; making home elsewhere is another. As diversions go live and storms continue to devastate the oil refinery-rich coast, commercial fishing families are told by parish, state, and federal officials that they can “voluntarily” relocate⁸⁷ to higher ground.

For boat owners over fifty years old, relocation does not feel like an option. In public comments submitted to CPRA about the diversion, many middle-aged and older Vietnamese Americans effectively said that they do not have other skills and that starting again in a new industry would

be particularly difficult at their age. More prohibitive than age, however, is language; training and exams for construction, shipbuilding, and electric work are almost exclusively offered in English. What's more, even folks who are proficient in English find such tests overwhelming. Examples of these complex barriers to access can be found in the responses to a survey distributed by CPRA to so-called environmental justice fisherfolk (or members of racially and economically disadvantaged communities, as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency⁸⁸) at the end of 2021. The survey asked questions about fisherfolks' futures in the Birdfoot Delta.⁸⁹ To a particularly pointed question that asked whether or not fisherfolk would move—"If flooding gets worse because of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, would you stay or move?"—one Vietnamese American shrimper wrote in their answer, "No. I don't know where to go. I do not know English, so who will hire us?" The survey's last question was also complicated for respondents; following a series of potential mitigation methods ranging from elevating homes to providing loans, CPRA asked, "Are there any other ways CPRA can help you and your community with flooding that may result from the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion." One shrimper responded, "Yes, do not build the diversion," while another wrote, "As of now, no. But when it happens, I will let you know." The exasperation running through these survey results highlights the true frustration shrimpers and oyster-dependent fishers feel when being asked about how they will survive a project that is scientifically likely to drastically change their access to work and, by extension, homes.

In draft EIS public comments and the above fishery survey responses, many fishers argued that their only hope of surviving on the coast was for the state to buy them out. Historically, home and business buyouts following disaster have been incredibly inadequate, using the language of "fair market price," but in truth, only giving owners a meager percentage of what they paid to purchase. This process overwhelmingly benefits wealthy home owners on "good" land, not low-income, already expendable families who don't want to leave home in the first place.⁹⁰ These barriers render "voluntary" movement more coercive than choiceful; make it structural, not personal. Make movement—in addition to the things that produce its necessity—the purview of the state.

In this way, the violence of refugee resilience will initiate another forced displacement at the hands of the United States, another move that Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian Americans will not choose, another elsewhere where they will be forced to make do. And there, in that elsewhere, they will also be storied as environmentally expendable resilient refugees. As I continue to engage in this work, I believe that the imposition of resilience is one of the more insidious ways that already expendable communities are sacrificed to climate change, itself

produced by the gross extraction and capital accumulation that typifies U.S. politics and policy. That forced movement is a very likely outcome of refugee resilience speaks to just how much violence institutions are willing to place on structurally vulnerable communities and, in turn, how much those same institutions believe in their own primacy and longevity. As Sandy said, "You can only bend so much before you break."

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Notes

1. Called Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
2. "Place of many tongues" in Choctaw and the original name of the city now called New Orleans. The revival of Bvlbancha as the city's proper name by Indigenous organizers has encouraged me to use it in my writing.
3. Bentley and Darensbourg (2018).
4. Or a storm that, under current modeling, should only happen once every 500 years. One-hundred- and 500-year storms are now near-annual events in the Gulf of Mexico; this requires a reassessment of what qualifies as a "bad" storm.
5. Childs (2021).
6. The concept of mandatory evacuation orders is incredibly complex; on the one hand, they ensure that residents are able to make insurance claims much more easily given that they were forced to leave home. On the other hand, mandatory evacuation orders require a great deal of state resources to manage and support, from managing roadways for evacuation to, ideally, helping evacuees find safe shelter in the interim. Over a year after Ida's landfall, many people who did not receive mandatory evacuation orders are struggling to rebuild their homes, receive insurance money, and otherwise return to "normal."

7. Adams (2013); Casselman (2015); Rivlin (2016); Shelton and Coleman (2009).

8. I use “expendable” versus “residents of sacrifice zones” here, following David Pellow’s (2017, 17–18) theorization of critical environmental justice. This allows me to think more expansively about systems of environmental injustice and sacrifice rather than drawing boundaries around particularly violent places of sacrifice, which Pellow argues linguistically implies that sacrifice can be “left.”

9. Bullard (1996, 495).

10. Scholars who have influenced my thinking about the double bind of perpetual foreignness and the model minority myth include Day (2016), Espiritu (2006a), Lowe (1996), Lye (2009), Ong (2006), and Tang (2015).

11. For more foundational and critical work on environmental racism, see Bullard (1993), Checker (2005), Park and Pellow (2019), Pulido (2017), and Taylor (2014).

12. Kang (2021).

13. Given the limits of space and my own research and analysis, I do not highlight the ways that governance has and continues to make specific Central American communities vulnerable in coastal Louisiana, nor do I offer a critical analysis of how individual Indigenous communities are inordinately sacrificed to oil extraction and environmental degradation. This is not because Honduran, Mexican, Houma, Atakapa, and Choctaw people do not experience the same degree of environmental harm as Vietnamese American coast-dependent communities; they inordinately do. Rather, it is a limit of the work I present here, one I wish to push the boundaries of as I continue engaging with southeast Louisiana communities into the future.

14. Some notable exceptions include Bahng (2018), Chan (2018), Nishime and Williams (2018), Park (2005), Park and Pellow (2019), Pellow (2017), and Sze (2020).

15. In addition, my own identity as a queer, mixed white and Jatt Sikh settler who was raised on unceded Dakota lands and waters in the upper Midwest, is the grandchild of Partition refugees, holds a PhD, and occupies a tenure-track academic position on stolen Lekwungen land, deeply colors my analysis.

16. Dang (2011), Houck (2015); Whitty (2010).

17. Southern Shrimp Alliance (2019); Parker (2021).

18. Fernandez and Schwartz (2019); McCormack (2019).

19. I have written about the Mid-Barataria Bay Sediment Diversion elsewhere in Kang (2018).

20. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2017); US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021).

21. I use the term “decision maker–produced” to modify “disaster” throughout this article to highlight the fact that, 323 years after European settlement and 192 more since the Trail of Tears was initiated, five generations since the peak of coastal cypress logging across the coast, twelve decades into the extractive industry’s hold on the Gulf of Mexico, over ninety years after the US Army Corps of Engineers channelized and began infrastructurally managing the lower Mississippi River in

earnest, and in the ongoingness of natural and gas exploration–induced coastal marsh subsidence, all in addition to violent federal and international policies on emissions, oceanic warming and acidification, and so much else, no disaster in present-day coastal Louisiana even remotely qualifies as “natural.”

22. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (2016); Fears (2017); Dlouhy (2021); Groom (2020); The White House (2021).

23. For detailed histories on the resettlement process in Bvlbancha as managed by Catholic Charities of New Orleans, see *A Village Called Versailles* (2014), Campanella (2006), Bankston (1998), and Nguyen (2015).

24. Kang (2019).

25. Bankston (1998).

26. While I am not conducting a comparative ethnic studies analysis in this article, it is critical to note that several community elders I spoke with throughout my fieldwork explained that prior to Vietnamese resettlement, Versailles Arms was an overwhelmingly Black complex; the families who lived there prior to resettlement were displaced by Vietnamese families being moved in. While refugees did not choose where they were resettled, this added to the vexed dynamic between Vietnamese refugees and some Black residents in New Orleans East and city-wide. In addition to being resettled into a space where many residents themselves felt underserved and under supported by New Orleans, this decision making on the part of Catholic Charities ensured Black/Vietnamese tension. This early and persistent racial divide would be amplified by media and community members alike during Hurricane Katrina (2005) and has been a consistent point of tension across narratives of refugeeism in diaspora and disaster, which I do take up later.

27. *A Village Called Versailles* (2014).

28. Nguyen (2012), 51.

29. Which I choose not to trace here not because they aren't important but because incredible scholars have traced and theorized a great deal of these stories, their imbrication in the US imperial and settler colonial project, and the ongoing violence of US framings of war in Southeast Asia and its orientation to refugeeism. They include but are not limited to Espiritu (2006b, 2014); Ngô Nguyen, and Lam (2012); Nguyen (2012); Ong (2003); Schlund-Vials (2011); and Schlund-Vials, Võ, and Wong (2015).

30. Espiritu (2006a); Schlund-Vials (2011); Tang (2015); Vang (2021).

31. Airriess et al. (2008); Nguyen (2015).

32. While many of the fisherfolk I work with were resettled in southeast Louisiana between 1975 and 1990 by the US government and the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, a smaller percentage came to Louisiana after living elsewhere in the United States, overwhelmingly to work in commercial fishing.

33. All names of fishing interviewees have been changed.

34. It is important to note that while some new refugees came to Louisiana with prior commercial or subsistence fishing knowledge, that was not true of a significant portion of those who entered the industry between 1970 and 1985.

Once a few early businesses were established, it became easier for Vietnamese speakers to establish the skills needed to work on and possibly own a boat in the future.

35. Anh, interview with Chú Anh, March 11, 2018.

36. Since the late 1970s, over half of Vietnamese American commercial fishers in southeast Louisiana have maintained homes in and near Michoud, commuting anywhere from one to three hours to where their boat is docked closer to the Gulf of Mexico. Others elected to create small neighborhoods in more immediately coastal areas like Port Sulphur, Empire, Buras, Golden Meadow, Grand Isle, and Dulac. Regardless of where they live, commercial shrimping and fishing remains central to local economies' stability and health.

37. Louisiana Sea Grant (2015), 5.

38. Name has been changed for privacy.

39. Vuong, interview with Happy Vuong, July 2014.

40. Nixon (2011), 13.

41. I have written more about Happy's interdependent employee family structure in Kang (2020).

42. For excellent critiques of historical and ongoing violence against diverse Indigenous communities and the descendants of African and Caribbean peoples enslaved in Louisiana, see Bvlbancha Collective (2020), Coleman (2019), Comardelle (2020), McDowell (2016), Robinson (2020), and Verdin (2020).

43. Smith (2006).

44. For pieces grappling with this language, see Pesca (2005) and Associated Press (2005).

45. Chia-Chen et al. (2007); Shelton and Coleman (2009).

46. Price (2007), 71.

47. Espiritu (2014), 4.

48. Washington (2015).

49. Cacho (2012).

50. Grimm (2015); Robertson (2016).

51. Gelinias (2020).

52. *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010).

53. Work on this topic includes Clark (2018); Flaherty, Goodman, and Washington (2010); Lawrence and Lawless (2018); Pellow (2016); and Wright (2018).

54. Gilmore and Crispino (2021).

55. Agyeman (2020); Tuck, Guess, and Sultan (2014); Whyte, Talley, and Gibson (2019).

56. Klein (2008).

57. Bosworth (2021); Lowe (2015); Simpson (2014); Tuck, Guess, and Sultan (2014); Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016).

58. Klein (2008), 9.

59. Gotham and Greenberg (2014).

60. Tierney (2015, 1333).

61. Airriess et al. (2008).

62. Alvarez (2015).

63. Nguyen (2013).

64. For a comprehensive overview of the uses and application of mutual aid, see Spade (2020), and for examples of mutual aid in the Gulf of Mexico, see Mancall-Bitel (2020), Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (2021), and Another Gulf Is Possible (2021).

65. Significantly, Vietnamese American Bvlbancha residents were not displaced by Katrina in the same way that Black residents were, nor were they subjected to nearly the amount of hyper-visible post-storm racism. Work on these violences includes Adams (2013), Allen (2007), Bullard and Wright (2009), Cacho (2012), Casselman (2015), and Troutt (2006).

66. Vanlandingham (2015).

67. Xu (2017, 56).

68. Importantly, refugee resilience was and is also weaponized against Black and Central American residents of New Orleans East who did not return in the same numbers and thus were told that they too did not need to be resourced post-storm because they hadn't tried as hard as Vietnamese American residents. For more on this, see Allen (2007), Casselman (2015), Chia-Chen et al. (2007), and Tang (2011).

69. For more on this environmental injustice and residents' resistance thereto, see *A Village Called Versailles* (2014), Hua (2014), and Nguyen (2013).

70. Nguyen (2015).

71. Ninh (2021); Park (2005).

72. Ninh (2011, 2021); Park (2008); Suzuki (1977).

73. Xu and Lee (2013).

74. Tang and Patel (2016); Yang (2004).

75. For excellent scholarship on settler colonial extraction and environmental racism and sacrifice, see Ahuja (2021), Ekanem et al. (2010), Gómez-Barris (2017), Park and Pellow (2011), and Walia (2013, 2021).

76. Foucault (1990).

77. It is important to note that this kind of temporal violence—where no agency or other structural support system shows up until far too late—is the experience of tens of thousands of racialized coast-dependent residents, not just Vietnamese Americans. A non-comprehensive list of resources on the experience of non-Vietnamese American southeast Louisiana residents (particularly Indigenous coast-dependent communities) in disaster includes McFarlan Miller (2021), Maldonado et al. (2014), Davenport and Robertson (2016), Verdin (2020), and Whitty (2010).

78. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2017); Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group (2021); US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021).

79. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2007, 22–23).

80. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April

6th" (2021, 145).

81. Oysters, additionally, are "expected to experience major, permanent, adverse impacts under the Project.... The potential impacts of fecal coliform contamination from introduced Mississippi River water could also have a major, adverse impact on beneficial uses related to oyster harvest." As with brown shrimp, these impacts will disproportionately affect low-income and commercial oyster fishers. US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021, 25).

82. US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021, 26–27).

83. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2001).

84. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration (2016).

85. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April 6th" (2021, 50–51).

86. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April 7, 2021" (2021, 32–33).

87. Black et al. (2011); Braam and Kumar (2020); Georgetown Climate Center (2020); Hino, Field, and Mach (2017).

88. United States Environmental Protection Agency (2015).

89. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2020).

90. Cusick and E&E News (2020); Elliott, Brown, and Loughran (2020); KATC News (2019).

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Lan Xang Village: Place-making in Louisiana's Iberia Parish

Davorn Sisavath

In the wheelhouse, Papoose scans the two-way radio, and we overhear fishermen speaking Cajun English and French. We hear the twang of Texas oil workers heading out to offshore platforms and the exotic language of exiled Vietnamese shrimpers who've fished these waters since the 1975 fall of Saigon, drawn to America's own elaborate version of the Mekong Delta. Completing the ethnic gumbo are French-speaking Houma Indians, driven by European settlers over the centuries to the farthest ends of the bayou country where they now survive as expert fishermen.¹

This passage from journalist Mike Tidwell's *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast* (2003)—a regional and ecological history tracing the environmental losses occurring in Louisiana's Mississippi Delta—introduces the history of the Cajun coast and those who live along the bayous, including Texas oil workers, Vietnamese fisherfolk, Houma Indians, and Cajuns. It simultaneously sheds light on the socially and spatially uneven ways some stories are muted while others appear front-and-center.² In fact, across Acadiana, nearly 15 percent of residents are Black, and in some parishes such as Iberia, Black residents make up at least 30 percent of the total population.³

In Iberia Parish and Lafourche Parish, Latinx residents make up 4.3 percent and 4.4 percent. Building on Carl Bankston III's and Phanat Xanamane's scholarship on the stories of one such frequently overlooked group—a Lao community of about 400 people on the northern edge of New Iberia, the largest city in Louisiana's Iberia Parish—this article explores how place-making plays an integral role in belonging and experience for immigrants and refugees. Although this article focuses on how Lao immigrants negotiate their spatial practices and experiences in Louisiana, I also deliberately use data about Vietnamese and Cambodians and apply it to the Lao community under examination. This reflects both in terms of very little scholarship examining Lao immigrants in the region and as subjects of U.S. militarism and imperialism, Southeast Asian refugees experienced similar, yet different processes of displacement and resettlement to America.

Set against Louisiana's coastal south landscape and local distinctiveness, Lan Xang village is home to refugees from Laos who resettled with sponsorship from the Catholic Diocese in the 1970s and 1980s, and through secondary migration after learning of federally funded job training made available. Like many newly arrived Southeast Asian refugees in the Gulf Coast, Lao refugees landed job opportunities produced by the oil boom, while others filled the demand for unskilled labor in peeling shrimp, shucking oysters, picking peppers at the Tabasco factory, and working in food processing and textile mills. As Bankston writes, "Laotians began moving into Iberia Parish during the early 1980s, the peak period of Lao resettlement in the United States. Their concentration in this area was a consequence of secondary migration in search of job opportunities.... Those who arrived in New Iberia came with little capital, often relying on the help of friends and relatives, and on the public assistance made available under the provisions of the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980."⁴ Today, the small community off Melancon Road consists of three residential streets and a main avenue. At the heart of Lan Xang village, a Buddhist temple serves as an ordination hall where monks are ordained, and a sanctuary and gathering center for the community. In their efforts to belong and stay, I suggest place-making practices by Lao refugees in Lan Xang village make visible their multiple displacements but also make evidence of their collective process to belong and endow their place with value and attachments in New Iberia. This practice can be seen in places where temples serve as the center of the community such as Morganton, North Carolina and Willington, Connecticut.

I approach place-making as work-in-progress and as an active space imbued with purpose, identity, and meaning whose final form is always contested. This approach acknowledges the complex relationships between people and place, and the stories created and shared. In "Space and Place," Yi-Fu Tuan states, "place incarnates the experiences and

aspirations of a people... a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning."⁵ Namely, people imbue space with meaningful attachments and connections to make a place home (a cultural creation). They endow it with value as a way to know and understand their environment. In defining and coming to know place, Dolores Hayden writes, "'place' is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid. It carries the resonance of homestead, location, and open space in the city as well as a position in a social hierarchy."⁶ As such, a sense of place allows one to imaginatively produce, live, and experience, while simultaneously serving as a source of memory encompassing the richness of everyday life. Here, I am interested in how place-making become a resource for residents of Lan Xang Village. Simultaneously, how do place and place-making continue to persist despite the temporal and spatial dimensions of environmental displacement? The use of archival analysis, census data, newspaper articles, and YouTube videos alongside Tidwell's *Bayou Farewell* can shed light on how a small Lao community makes place as they navigate histories of their multiple forced displacements. The article begins with a historical context for understanding the nature of Southeast Asian refugees' resettlement to the United States, specifically refugees from Laos. This is followed by place-making and the ways in which Southeast Asians make place despite the threat of ongoing displacement in the region. Lastly, I provide an analysis of Lan Xang village and the importance of place-making and place-naming in Iberia Parish where Asians make up 2.7 percent of the total population. This paper concludes that refugees' experience of repeated displacements in their homeland and new home compels an active and ongoing process of place-making and belonging.

Laotian Resettlement in the U.S.

Overshadowed by the war in Vietnam, America's covert military intervention in Laos since 1954 and bombing campaign from 1964 to 1973 resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people to fend for themselves. By 1971, America's failed war in Laos to contain the spread of communism became public in several congressional hearings with focus on the devastating impact of refugee and civilian war casualty, its political-military significance, and effectiveness of U.S. aid programs. As the war wound down and the United States withdrew its forces from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, a large percentage of refugees resettled in the United States under both the 1975 Indochina Refugee Migration and Assistance Act (amended in 1976 to include refugees from Laos) and the Refugee Act of 1980, which provided for an annual number of admissions for refugees.⁷ With little coordination, the U.S. federal resettlement policy conducted an *ad hoc* admission process in 1975 for

the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees (predominately Vietnamese), of whom the majority were academics, military officials, professionals, and people who worked for the United States government. By the end of the 1970s, media reports and images of an increasing exodus of refugees led to the passing of the Refugee Act of 1980. By comparison with the first wave, the second wave (1978–1982) of refugees tended to be rural, less affluent, poorly educated, and largely unskilled individuals who escaped harsh political and economic conditions under newly installed governments in the former French Indochina.⁸ Between 1975 and 1981, over 500,000 refugees resettled from Vietnam (346,654), Laos (109,811, including Hmong and ethnic Laotians), and Cambodia (60,422) to America.⁹

Fears and concerns of burdening receiving communities, particularly during an economic recession in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with facilitating cultural adjustment, assimilation, and economic self-sufficiency into American life, the U.S. resettlement policy emphasized dispersal of refugees throughout the country to prevent the settlement of large ethnic communities. Although well intended, the policy's incohesive programs and resources to state and local agencies reflected refugees' resettlement process. In the hands of voluntary organizations subcontracted by the United States government to provide counseling and placement with sponsors, some refugees were resettled in impoverished neighborhoods with affordable housing. Others were assigned sponsors from local church congregations who handled housing logistics, job training, and English language instruction. The majority of refugees from Laos resettled in California, Texas, Minnesota, and Washington because of the growing ethnic communities in urban areas. After their initial resettlement, some refugees opted to resettle near relatives to further access support, information, comfort, and protection from hostility and racism. Many others chose to resettle in semirural areas or migrate to areas for job opportunities and better climate. Due to fragmentary data, resettlement for refugees from Laos tend to suggest they either stay in their initial place of resettlement or move for job opportunities that were often hazardous, low-income, and low-skilled.¹⁰ In their 1987 study, Amy Zaharlick and Jean Brainard demonstrate that in comparison to Hmong refugees, "ethnic Lao appear to exhibit a relative lack of clustering in ethnic communities due to more scattered initial placement and lower rates of secondary migration."¹¹ Today, 254,000 Laotians (not including Hmong) live in the U.S., and established a community where many refugees resettled, such as San Diego and Fresno in California, Seattle in Washington, and New Iberia in Louisiana.¹²

In Louisiana, Lao families relied on kinship networks, little capital, and public assistance to resettle in Iberia Parish in the 1980s. According to

Carl L. Bankston and Min Zhou, "Laotians first established a community on the southwestern of the city, in a large complex of federally-subsidized, Section-8 housing."¹³ As is the case with many Southeast Asian refugees' resettlement processes in the United States, the reliance on nongovernmental and faith-based organizations relocated many to federally subsidized, low-income housing.¹⁴ For example, in the eastern section of Orleans Parish in Louisiana, nearly 1,000 Vietnamese refugees moved into a 402-unit Versailles Arms apartments and surrounding subdivisions (Versailles Gardens and Village de L'Est) which changed the makeup of the neighborhoods. The surrounding subdivisions were first occupied by whites who gradually left in the early 1970s and later replaced by African Americans. Stacy Seichcnaydre et al. trace the long history of housing policy in New Orleans and show how housing projects built for whites during the New Deal era "were located on higher elevation and closer to the front of town, while the black-only projects occupied lower spots in the back of town" or in economically isolated and racially segregated areas.¹⁵ Explicitly designed and implemented, segregated public housing programs in New Orleans and nationwide defined where whites and African Americans lived, and later where Southeast Asian refugees would be resettled. In fact, due to their status as poor racial minorities, Southeast Asian refugees' resettlement into already racially segregated public housing (Versailles subdivisions and Village de L'Est) and unhealthy neighborhoods illustrate the "continued violence, uncertainty, and itinerancy" experienced after resettlement as Eric Tang states in *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (2015).

Lao families with dual incomes and who could afford to move out of the apartment complex began settling in small clusters in northern Iberia Parish "outside of established residential, commercial, and industrial zones, and at the time unused for farming."¹⁶ As Bankston and Zhou state, "by 1986, the Laotians had established themselves sufficiently to begin planning their own community and cultural center. They found a [relatively inexpensive] tract of land in a semi-rural area on the northern edge of the county."¹⁷ The purchase of the land began the process of formalizing their community that included a temple built in 1987, three residential streets, and a main avenue. This initial act of place-making cultivated socioeconomic mobility within the community and provided a sense of familiarity of a Lao village for families who moved into Lan Xang. As Phanat Xanamane writes, "Through kinship clustering they are able to create networks that provide income and emotional support, forming a social group similar to a Lao homeland village but set in a suburban American neighborhood context."¹⁸ The act of place-making can also be seen through the use of land for community gardens. This active process of planting familiar vegetables and herbs gives meaning

to place, but also serves practical needs for refugees and immigrants in their attempt to live in often unsustainable environment. For example, despite toxic exposure in the soil, Lao, Khmu, and Mien ethnic groups in Richmond, California found ways to sustain their agrarian background through communal gardens by revitalizing unmanaged backyards in public housing complexes.¹⁹ As Tim Cresswell notes of gardens created by the Puerto Rican community in New York City, “The gardens are the result of the efforts of immigrants and others to carve out a place from a little piece of Manhattan for their community to enjoy nature. Some of the community gardens—often the first to be leveled—are the sites of casitas—little houses made by the Puerto Rican community to replicate similar buildings from ‘home.’”²⁰

Creating Place After Resettlement

What might place-making practices in the U.S. look like for racialized minorities whose stories and histories begin with dispossession and displacement? How might a refugee-centered approach shed light on displacement, race, and violence in Louisiana and elsewhere? These questions both capture complex connections to how individuals and communities enact ways of sustainability and create alternative places in efforts to express and preserve language and cultural practices. Simultaneously, in an era of the Anthropocene—the growing human activities on the planet that have polluted the oceans and altered the atmosphere, among other lasting impacts—the collective act of place-making is out of necessity for communities to survive and belong. Yet, for Southeast Asian communities who have resettled and relocated in the Gulf Coast, they know too well their experience of displacement and precarious life is ongoing. The threat of vanishing land and surrounding water levels make the region the most vulnerable place in the country when it comes to climate change and human-made disasters. Such as, the BP oil spill in 2010 disproportionately impacted Southeast Asian American communities “who make up one-third of the seafood industry workforce in the region” according to Miya Saika Chen and Audrey Buehring.²¹ Many individuals who work in specialized trades such as seafood processors, fishers, crabbers, boatwelders, the BP oil spill and effects on Louisiana’s economy have resulted in an uncertain future, and the only choice to consider is to wait and see what happens. A choice for many who remain to stay after building a livelihood in the seafood industry. For example, in the coastal community of Bayou La Batre, Alabama, while several hundred Southeast Asian refugees took advantage of work in the shrimp and crab industries that were abandoned by white and Black workers who left for higher-paying jobs in Mobile, the majority of Vietnamese refugees made the city home as Daniel Le states, “eventually people find their way to the place they feel the most comfortable and find work.”²²

The region is home to approximately 200,000 Southeast Asians.²³

In the opening passage of this article, Tidwell uses water in his evocation of the similarities between Louisiana's waterways and the Mekong Delta, a region in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River empties into the South China Sea, that culminated in "Vietnamese shrimpers" resettlement and place-making in Louisiana, and home to one of the largest concentrated settlements in the country. Throughout *Bayou Farewell*, Tidwell seeks to engage with members of the Vietnamese fisherfolk community. On a trip with Tim Melancon (the surname is also the main road off Lan Xang village), a Cajun shrimper who is proud of "still liv[ing] off de land," Tidwell comes across a shrimp shed owned by a Vietnamese family who "seems to inhabit a parallel universe."²⁴ The scenes of Vietnamese taking breaks, eating together, smoking cigarettes, and squatting "Asian-style" are separate from scenes described about Cajun people, mostly English-speaking white Americans who are not in the shrimp business for money. These scenes conceptualize Vietnamese lives and histories as "Other" in contrast to the Cajun people. Although both groups found shelter in Louisiana as refugees after forced displacement and have colonial proximity to the Francophone, their interactions are scant in *Bayou Farewell*. At the same time, the minimal presence of Vietnamese reflects the tensions between Cajun people, and recently arrived Vietnamese refugees who keep to themselves. Complicated by cultural and language barriers, the separation of both communities inevitably led to prejudice and resentment spurred by economic uncertainty. Despite the racial and economic tensions, both communities relationally stand to lose their livelihood and way of life as they feel the impact of environmental and human-made disasters happening at a speed that sees large chunks of marshland disappearing every year.²⁵ While *Bayou Farewell* locates complex stories of the Cajun people and articulates environmental and human disasters as an endemic crisis of the Louisiana coast, the book has largely reduced Vietnamese refugees to a depoliticized "object" of inquiry: the "exotic" and "exiled" who are not here to stay and seen as perpetual new arrivals.

For example, on one of his tours of the bayou, Tidwell finally manages to meet Tri Dong Phu, a Vietnamese man who owns the crab shed in Golden Meadow, and Phan Duc Nguyen, who works with Tri. Tidwell arranges a day ride with Phan down the bayou and learns of Phan's multiple displacements—Vietnam, the Philippines, Guam, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and Breaux Bridge, Louisiana—that led him to Bayou Lafourche and ultimately with the hope of returning to Vietnam after he saves enough money from crabbing. Tidwell's story of Phan ends with a gloomy outlook of the vanishing "huge estuary system of the Mississippi River, this Mekong Delta of America" and the locals who call

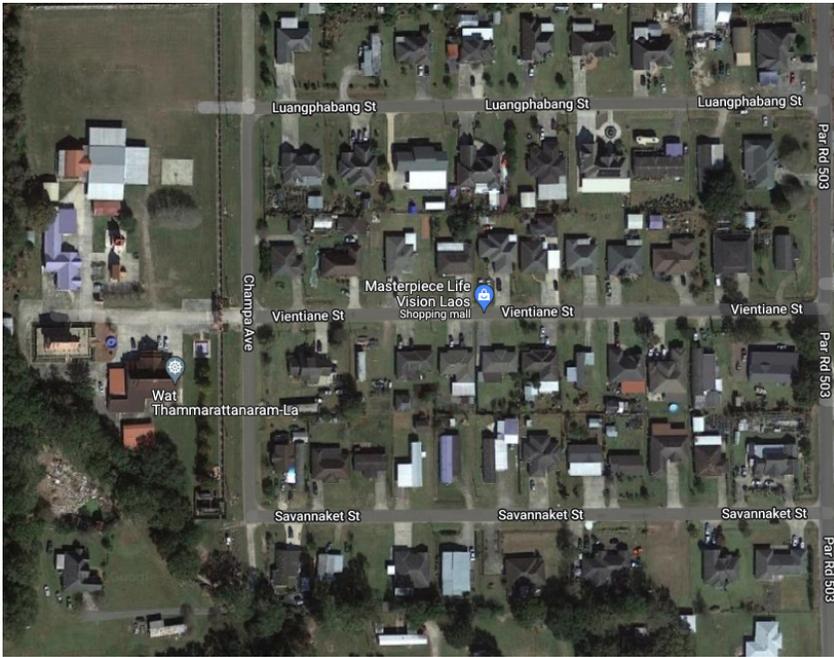


Figure 1: Satellite Google image map of Lan Xang Village, New Iberia Parish, Louisiana.

this region home, except the Vietnamese “are mostly unburdened by any emotional ties to this land, free to walk away since the region is not and never has been truly ‘home.’”²⁶ His concluding remark disregards Phan’s “stories, actions, and inactions—simultaneously trouble *and* affirm regimes of power,” as Yén Lê Espiritu writes, resulting in his multiple forced displacements.²⁷ Similar to many Southeast Asian refugees who resettled in the United States, Phan’s multiple routes of displacement make visible the local, national, and international acts of racialized and militarized violence. His movement and itinerancy, including the criminalization of his drug use and low-wage work, must be understood in relation to the U.S. empire and wars in Southeast Asia. In connecting the dots of the U.S. military empire and exposing the militarized violence of refuge and refugees, Espiritu emphasizes the geographic points of refugees’ journey beginning in Vietnam, the Philippines, Guam, and the U.S. as a violent process.²⁸ Eric Tang argues this racialized violence is unsettled, which defines the precarious nature of refugee experience of displacement and captivity. That is, refugees are subjects of a “long, unresolved colonial and imperial project carried out by the United States, a white supremacist project that wrought unprecedented death.”²⁹

Despite the scant mention of Vietnamese in *Bayou Farewell*, the ways in which Southeast Asian Americans demonstrate they are here

to stay is through place-making, whether in the form of rebuilding in the aftermath of major disasters or preserving their culture through home and community gardens. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the recovery of the Vietnamese enclave in New Orleans East illustrates cooperative social relations and close-knit communities based on shared sense of ethnicity and cultural traditions as noted in Karen J. Leong, Christopher A. Airries et al. study of immigrants' profound attachment to place, which contributed to their strong community identity.³⁰ Although much that has been written in news media about the Vietnamese community reflects their resiliency and adaptation, additional scholarship demonstrates a deeper relationship to place and community. In their qualitative study of Vietnamese in Biloxi, Mississippi, Yoosun Park, Joshua Miller, and Bao Chau Van demonstrate Little Saigon's long roots in the city and profound attachment to place, either through the relationship to the community or the workforce in the Gulf Coast.³¹ Similarly, "For Laotians, the environment of Louisiana bore a resemblance to their homeland. ... Louisiana was familiarly agricultural, its land full of lakes for fishing and woods for foraging mushrooms and palmetto shoots—all common ingredients in Laotian cuisine. The climate, too, agreed with them," as As Emily Carmichael writes.³²

Lane Xang Village: Placemaking as an Act of Belonging

The importance of placemaking can be seen in the three residential streets named after cities in Laos (Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Savannakhet) and the main avenue named after Laos' national flower, Champa. The symbolic meaning of naming represents and reflects the genesis of place-making, in that meaning and familiarity are assigned in connection with collective memories of "home" and "homeland." In other words, transforming the location into place invites analysis of ways in which communities create familiarity and comfort of the homeland while constructing their new lives in America. Tim Cresswell notes the concept of place is simple, yet complicated. Broadly defined, place is a setting for everyday encounters and practices, a location where meanings, memories, ideas, and social positions are lived and layered, and a site of histories and identity. Place is a "meaningful location" teeming with social purpose, meanings, memories, identities, and histories.³³ In the case of Lan Xang village, referencing street names after cities in Laos highlights the importance of place-making and bridges familiar places in the homeland and America. For example, Luang Prabang was once the capital of Lan Xang Kingdom from 1353, until it moved to Vientiane. In northern Laos, Luang Prabang remained the royal residence and religious center until 1975 when the communist forces seized power and dissolved the ancient monarchy. Vientiane, the largest city and capital of Laos is situated in the middle of the country near the Thai

border. Lastly, Savannakhet is the largest province of Laos located in the central-southern panhandle and the second largest city after Vientiane. Moreover, naming the community as Lan Xang references the Kingdom of a Million Elephants that ruled the north for centuries before the French took the country as a colony and mapped the boundaries of Laos. In her comparative approach examining Vietnamese American communities in Orange County, California, and Boston, Massachusetts, Karin Aguilar-San Juan formulates a critical theory of place to underscore the significance of place and the place-making process for Vietnamese Americans, which is active and holds great value.³⁴ The notion of “staying Vietnamese” in a social and spatial context serves as an act of “purposeful and ultimately strategic, shifting and changing to arrive at new ways of being Vietnamese in a U.S. context.”³⁵

In Iberia Parish, the small rural neighborhood also arrives “at new ways of being” and “staying” Lao in a U.S. context. As Aguilar-San Juan shows, “staying Vietnamese” is to have some connection to themselves, their histories, and their cultures—a lens that further grasps a deliberate belonging and a deliberate resistance to forgetting the homeland. In his research on resilient landscapes, architecture, and local residents, Phanat Xaname’s study “suggests that the process of Lao-immigrant cultural adaptation translates the American suburb environmentally, socially, and psychologically into a resilient Lao-American village landscape.”³⁶ Examining settlement patterns through the lens of architectural and urban design, Xaname shows how Lao refugees’ interpretation of the ecologies directly links to their previous patterns of living. Their deliberate design of Lan Xang to be similar to villages in Laos include the temple serving as the central place to gather and make merit by giving alms to monks, bringing offerings, or participating in labor by cooking, sharing, and eating together. Adorned in gold and intricate details, the design of Wat Thammarattanaram, a Theravada Buddhist monastery on Champa Avenue mimics Lao-style Buddhist temples. As Xaname demonstrates, first-generation immigrants translated small villages based on kinship ties in Laos to Lan Xang. He writes, “Louisiana Lao immigrants use a small-village-based relational system to structure a Lao-American immigrant urbanism with unique social interactions, micro-economies, and cultural dynamics. This made way for the emergence of a spatial network of Lao ethnic enclaves that adapted on a physical and architectural level in the Louisiana rural-suburban landscape.”³⁷ In areas with a sizable Lao population, community members pool their resources together to build Lao Buddhist temples. For example, in Morganton, North Carolina, where approximately thirteen Lao families lived, they came together and bought the plot of land nearby to build Wat Lao Sayaphoum.³⁸ In Lan Xang, the importance of community donations and mutual aid relationships to build the temple serves as an act of continuity by bringing aspects of Laos to Louisiana. Seen through this lens of placelessness, the desire to make

place frames the loss of homeland. In "Bayou Lotus," Bankston shows Buddhism allows Laotians to make sense of their new environment, and to help "establish continuity between the familiar and the unfamiliar."³⁹ Today, the temple is an established place that functions as a community center for residents, and continues to serve the needs of other small clusters of Lao, Thai, and Cambodian residents in neighboring towns such as Lafayette and New Iberia area.⁴⁰ Place-making is also about finding connections between Lao and Cajun culture by inviting the community to the annual Songkran Festival of parades, pageantry, traditional dances, and ceremonies.⁴¹

The settlement today represents the culmination of years of saving to make place while "staying" Lao within Iberia Parish. Initially, Lao refugees settled in ethnic concentrations and the first "took root in a complex of federally subsidized, low-income apartments on the western edge of the city of New Iberia," as Bankston notes.⁴² Deemed "out of place" as refugees, the creation of Lan Xang village and other Southeast Asian communities in various locations throughout the United States can be viewed as places of refuge, familiarity, and sameness. A form of resistance to mistreatment and exclusion, these places serve as havens for residents who established stores, restaurants, and religious sites. For example, in a documentary series *Finding American: Stories of Immigration* by Colin Boyd Shafer,⁴³ Phanat Xanamane and his family resettled in New Iberia in 1983, and after working sorting potatoes into cans, peeling crawfish, and shucking oysters, his mother opened Asia Market in 1985. The market offers Thai and Lao videos, staple foods like rice and sauces, Asian produce grown from their backyard, and small loans to help others start their own business. As Phanat states, "The store became a mecca of Southeast Asian culture. There was an economy that was independent of the mainstream economy that was built in the Asian community."⁴⁴ Today, the market is an extension of the Lao community, and the space not only functions as a typical market, but as Xanamane writes, there are "two housing complexes, a greenhouse, extensive gardens, orchards, vertical trellis-growth structures, ponds, bean sprout stations, and a large warehouse for storage, as well as pavilions and picnic tables."⁴⁵ This description reveals the market is much more than a storefront, but a place that acts as a center for social and cultural connections, as well as for practical needs where Asian products and produce sold remain a source of identity for Lao immigrants.

Conclusion

Like other racialized ethnic groups, early Asian immigrants and laborers forged their communities and enclaves in both rural and urban areas imbuing spaces with their meanings and familiarities of homeland through sights, sounds, smells, and names. After years of pooling their

money together, Lao refugees' efforts to make place in Louisiana and elsewhere demonstrate the many ways they endow place with value and attachments formed out of a sense of belonging, stability and security, even if under the threat of disaster displacement in regions such as the Gulf Coast. What begins as an undifferentiated space in New Iberia Parish off Melancon Road becomes a place for Lao immigrants to develop their understanding and perceptions of a built environment. Creating Lan Xang village is one specific instance in which they endowed the place with value and attachments that cannot be washed away. This has been seen in other small communities throughout the U.S. For example, in her study of a Lao community located north of Fort Worth, Texas, Sadhon Bhookong demonstrates the importance of refugee community and kinship network in the adaptation process in assisting integration to American society and in preserving traditional Lao way of life.⁴⁶

This article attempts to think through place-making, and I plan to expand this article into a larger study of Lao American communities in the U.S. I thank the anonymous reviewers for providing constructive suggestions and comments. I also thank Giselle L. Anatol and Joo Ok Kim for their critical and editorial support to strengthen the article.

Notes

1. Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003): 15–16. Tidwell is founder and director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness about the impacts and solutions associated with global warming.

2. See also Carl A. Brasseaux and Philip Gould, *Acadiana: Louisiana's Historic Cajun Country* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011). Brasseaux demonstrates that the idea and image of Acadiana region as homogenous is false and exists for tourism.

3. The population of Black residents in the following parishes: Lafourche, 13.5 percent; Jefferson Davis, 16.5 percent; Acadia, 18 percent; Vermillion, 14.3 percent; Terrabonne, 19.2 percent; and St. Charles, 26.2 percent. The population for Latinx residents in the following parishes: Lafourche, 4.4 percent; Iberia, 4.3 percent; Acadia, 2.8 percent; and St. Charles, 6.4 percent. *United States Census Bureau 2020*.

4. Carl L. Bankson III and Min Zhou, "De Facto Congregationalism and Socioeconomic Mobility in Laotian and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities: A Study of Religious Institutions and Economic Change," *Review of Religious Research* 41, no. 4 (2000): 453–470; 462.

5. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," in *Philosophy in Geography*, eds. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (D. Reideal, Dordrecht, Boston, London, 1979), 387.

6. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 15.

7. These acts also represent the two major waves of refugee resettlement. Moreover, for the first time the 1980 Refugee Act defined refugee and all refugees were eligible for cash payments and medical assistance for the first 36 months after arrival. For more on definition of refugee, see 96th Congress, Public Law 96-212-March 17, 1980, which amends the Immigration and Nationality Act to revise the procedures for the admission of refugees.

8. I want to note during the resettlement process between 1975 and 1982, the data for refugees from Laos includes ethnic Lao and Hmong.

9. Woodrow Jones, Jr. and Paul Jones Strand, *Indochinese Refugees in America: Problems of Adaptation and Assimilation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

10. In their 1987 study assessing Southeast Asian refugees experience and resettlement, anthropologists Amy Zaharlick and Jean Brainard note, "studies of local populations have been few in number to date as well as limited in their ethnic group coverage. The majority have focused on the Vietnamese and Hmong, while ethnic Lao and Cambodian refugees have been relatively neglected" (337). Today, studies examining ethnic Lao and other groups such as Khmu and Lu-Mien continue to be limited. "Demographic Characteristics, Ethnicity and the Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 16, no. 4/3 (1987): 327-373.

11. *Ibid.*, 353-354.

12. Abby Budinam, "Laotians in the U.S. Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Center*, April 29, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-laotians-in-the-u-s/#top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-laotian-population-2019>.

13. Carl L. Bankston III and Min Zhou, "De Facto Congregationalism and Socioeconomic Mobility in Laotian and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities: A Study of Religious Institutions and Economic Change," *Review of Religious Research* vol. 41, no. 4 (2000): 453-470; 462.

14. Christopher A. Aierriess and David L. Clawson, "Versailles: A Vietnamese Enclave in New Orleans, Louisiana," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 12:1 (1991): 1-13. See also Allison Truitt, "Bringing Buddha to the City: Metropolitan New Orleans and Vietnamese Buddhist Communities," *City & Society* 3:1 (2019): 17-33. Truitt writes, "The Archdiocese rejected the federal government's model of dispersing refugee families by instead settling them in three different apartment complexes, a decision facilitated by a newly created, federally funded program called Section 8 Housing in 1974" (22).

15. Stacy Seicscnaydre, Robert A. Collins, Cashauna Hill, and Maxwell Ciardullo, "Rigging the Real Estate Market: Segregation, Inequality, and Disaster Risk," *The Data Center*, April 2, 2018.

16. Phanat Xanamane, "Lao Immigrant Cultural Adaptation in Southwestern Louisiana's Urban Landscapes," *Nakhara*, 102.

17. Bankston and Zhou, 463–464.

18. Xanamane, "Lao Immigrant Cultural Adaptation," 100.

19. For more on the Laotian community in Richmond, California and toxic exposure, see Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). <https://apen4ej.org>.

20. Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 10.

21. Miya Saika Chen and Audrey Buehring, "The Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill in AAPI Communities," *The White House President Barack Obama Archives*, June 17, 2010. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2010/06/17/impact-gulf-oil-spill-aapi-communities-0>. See also Antonia Juhasz, "BP Oil Still Tars the Gulf," *The Progressive*, March 4, 2012. Juhasz provides a slightly higher number of the workforce of Bayou La Batre prior to the BP gulf oil spill in 2010. Juhasz writes, "an estimated 80 percent of the workforce made its living from the commercial seafood industry. A large percentage of this workforce is of Southeast Asian descent, primarily from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia."

22. Victoria Macchi, "Half a World Away, Vietnamese Build Lives on the American Bayou," *VOA News*, <https://projects.voanews.com/all-over-the-map/vietnamese-bayou/>.

23. Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote, "2020 State Factsheet Louisiana." <https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Louisiana-2020.pdf>. (Accessed September 15, 2021). In the 2018 Louisiana State Fact Sheet produced by AAPI Vote, data for Laotian is available. There were 3,725 Laotians living in the state. According to the US Census Report 2020, Asians (1.8 percent) and Native Hawaiians (0.1 percent) account for 1.9 percent of the total population in Louisiana (4,648,794). The largest Asian American Pacific Islander ethnic groups include Vietnamese (32,984), Filipino (20,015), Chinese (13,908), Indian (11,405), Other/not specified (5,538), and Japanese (4,745), and with the highest populations in Jefferson Parish (18,185), East Baton Rouge Parish (14,170), and Orleans Parish (11,410). See also, Eric Tang, "Vietnamese," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 262–265.

24. Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell*, 201.

25. See also Simi Kang, "States of Emergence/y: Coastal Restoration and the Future of Louisiana's Vietnamese/American Commercial Fisherfolk," *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, Issue 10 (Spring 2018). <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/states-of-emergence-y/> (accessed October 5, 2021).

26. Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell*, 298.

27. Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*

(Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 2.

28. In *Body Counts*, Espiritu calls this journey "militarized refuge" which examines the very space that rescued refugees and made possible the war in Asia/Pacific.

29. Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 13.

30. Karen J. Leong, Christopher A. Aierriess, Wei Li, Angela Chia-Chen Chen, and Verna M. Keith, "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East," *The Journal of American History* (December 2007): 771.

31. Yoosun Park, Joshua Miller, and Bao Chau Van, "'Everything has Changed': Narratives of Vietnamese American Community in Post-Katrina Mississippi," (2010). Northampton, MA: School for Social Research: Faculty Publications, Smith College. https://scholarworks.smith.edu/ssw_facpubs/2.

32. Emily Carmichael, "The Buddhists and the Catholics: In a Tiny Corner of Broussard, A Laotian Community Flourishes," *CountryRoadsMag.com*, April 20, 2020, 42-46.

33. Cresswell, 7.

34. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

35. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

36. Xanamane, "Lao Immigrant Cultural Adaptation in Southwestern Louisiana's Urban Landscapes," 97.

37. Xanamane, "Lao Immigrant Cultural Adaptation in Southwestern Louisiana," 100-101.

38. For more on the Lao community, see Kathryn Anne Clune, "Home in a New Place: Making Laos in Morganton, North Carolina," Master's Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2015).

39. Carl L. Banskton III, "Bayou Lotus: Theravada Buddhism in Southwestern Louisiana," *Sociological Spectrum* 17, no. 4 (1997), 463-468.

40. *Ibid.*, 463.

41. For more on the Lao New Year Celebration at Wat Thamarattanaram Temple for April 2022, see Iberia Travel, <https://www.iberiatravel.com/events/lao-new-year-celebration-0>.

42. Banskton, "Bayou Lotus," 463.

43. Colin Boyd Shafer, "Phanat's Immigration Story—Phanat Nikhom—Refugee Camp, Thailand to New Iberia, Louisiana," *Finding American*, April 21, 2020. <https://findingamerican.com/phanat-thailand-louisiana/> (accessed July 8, 2022).

44. Colin Boyd Shafer, "Phanat's Immigration Story."

45. Xanamane, "Lao Immigrant Cultural Adaptation in Southwestern Louisiana," 107.

46. Sathon Bhookong, "A Laotian Refugee Community: Its Impact on Adaptation," Dissertation, Texas Woman's University, May 1990.

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Afro-Asian Intimacies Across Southern Cartographies: Race, Sex, and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Home* and Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao*

Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

In 1953, following the Korean Armistice Agreement that ostensibly ended direct U.S. intervention in Korea (but, in reality, merely led to a recalibration of the unending Korean War), African American soldier Clarence Adams was one of twenty-one prisoners of war who refused repatriation back to the United States and instead migrated to the People's Republic of China. His decision was influenced by the antiblackness that structured the segregated U.S. South, curtailing his chances of upward mobility, as well as his compassion for the Korean civilians devastated by U.S. military intervention, prompting recognition of the shared oppression of Third World peoples.¹ Twelve years later, during the Vietnam War, he broadcast a message to Black soldiers via Radio Hanoi, urging them to return to the United States: "You are fighting the wrong war. Brothers, go home. The Negro people need you back there."² According to Daniel Y. Kim, "Adams mobilize[d] a historiography of a race war to cast both the Korean and Vietnam Wars as ones waged by a white empire against a colored population," exemplifying what Bill Mullens terms "Afro-Orientalism": a phenomenon in which Black activists turned to idealized Asian subjects for anti-imperialist and antiracist inspiration.³

I begin with Adams' story for three reasons. First, it highlights continuities between Black narratives of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Whereas historians have elucidated the experiences of Black soldiers during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, respectively, few studies have grappled with these two Cold War fronts in relation, noting patterns and

particularities in Black subject formation across the two U.S. imperial conflicts.⁴ With the signing of Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, President Harry S. Truman desegregated the U.S. military, exemplifying the United States' project of racial liberalism and bolstering the expansion of the liberal empire, vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, even as Jim Crow laws continued to delimit the mobility of African Americans on the home front. Whereas the Korean War was the first U.S. experiment in militarized integration, it wasn't until the Vietnam War that the question of Black-white tensions in the military, transposed from the continental United States to the battlefield in Asia, gained widespread visibility. As Martin Luther King, Jr., famously observed in his "Beyond Vietnam" speech of April 1967: "[We watch] Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago."⁵ Segregation at home was only interrupted by "brutal solidarity" abroad: the uniting of Black and white soldiers in a common project of racialized wartime destruction.⁶ But continuities between the Korean and Vietnam Wars also led to political mobilization: many civil rights and Black Power leaders active during the Vietnam War era, such as Bobby Seale, James Forman, Ivory Perry, and Robert F. Williams, were radicalized during their experiences as Black soldiers in Cold War Korea.⁷

Second, Adams' story stitches together three southern spaces that are rarely discussed in relation: the U.S. South, South Korea, and South Vietnam. To focus on the southern-ness of these three sites is to trace the convergence of white supremacy, antiblackness, imperialism, and anticommunism that cohere at the intersection of the U.S. Civil War and Cold War politics.⁸ Raised in Memphis, Tennessee, amid the structural antiblackness of the segregated U.S. South, Adams joined the U.S. Army to escape incarceration at the hands of white policemen. This military service brought him to South Korea: a decolonizing nation that the United States had taken upon itself to protect in the Cold War struggle against North Korea, Communist China, and the Soviet Union. These south-south relationalities—the transposition of a Black subject of the U.S. South to the southern warfront of a new Cold War/civil war struggle—were then extended to South Vietnam, when Adams in a radio broadcast addressed a new generation of Black soldiers deployed to fight in the United States' latest war of imperial expansion. As with South Korea, South Vietnam became a distinctly southern space of U.S. military intervention and U.S.-styled capitalism and democracy within the Cold War frame; indeed, much has been written about South Korea's own participation in the Vietnam War on behalf of South Vietnam and the United States.⁹ My goal in this essay is not to homogenize or

reify an abstract, southern sensibility. Rather, I argue that to attend to these three sites—South Korea, South Vietnam, and the U.S. South—as distinctly *southern* spaces is to trace how the legacies of the U.S. Civil War—southern white supremacy and the afterlives of slavery—were extended into Cold War Asia via Black experiences of soldiering. It also acknowledges that what the United States called the Korean and Vietnam Wars were also *civil wars* over competing domestic visions of what postcolonial independence should look like. In other words, it's important to highlight the (albeit curtailed) political agency of South Korea and South Vietnam in what too often gets flattened in U.S. historiography as a binary Cold War struggle between U.S. capitalist democracy and North Korean and North Vietnamese socialist authoritarianism.

Lastly, Adams' anecdote is haunted by the gendered subjects who are not named in masculinist accounts such as these, which detail the conflict of race relations as one between Black and white men. In actuality, Black soldiers also encountered Korean and Vietnamese women in the battlefields and in bed, in spaces of militarized intimacy and struggle, which shaped their racial triangulation with Asian subjects also fighting against white supremacist violence.¹⁰ These encounters necessitate discussing race alongside sex and gender, the U.S. South alongside South Korea and South Vietnam, to unpack the entanglements of Afro-Asian intimacies across multiple southern cartographies.

This essay converses with other comparative studies probing the messy, private Afro-Asian intimate relations that exceed the "public, institutionalized space of the archive" and do not cohere to the "heteropatriarchy of Afro-Asian solidarity history."¹¹ To adopt Vanita Reddy and Anantha Sudhakar's analytic of "feminist and queer Afro-Asian formations," however, is not to romanticize intimacies between Black soldiers and gendered Asian subjects as inherently feminist or radically queer, but rather to forward feminist and queer analyses of complex race and gender dynamics. In her discussion of Black GIs' romantic encounters with Japanese women in "Jim Crow Tokyo" during the Allied occupation of Japan and the subsequent Korean War, Sonia Gomez invokes the term "Afro-Asian intimacies" to demonstrate how such encounters reproduced "existing gender and sexual hierarchies" across imperial spaces even as they "unsettled American racial hierarchies" between Black and white men.¹² Gomez's analysis offers a template for unpacking the power dynamics structuring the Afro-Asian intimacies between Black soldiers and South Korean and South Vietnamese subjects discussed in this essay. Moreover, she contextualizes these vexed Afro-Asian intimacies abroad during the Korean (and, later, Vietnam) War within the domestic civil rights struggle for interracial marriage equality, which was not guaranteed across the fifty U.S. states until the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*. Reddy meanwhile

mobilizes “Afro-Asian intimacies” to pinpoint “tacit, minor, or ephemeral affective relations that remain difficult to locate within state or official archives and that may surface only within the domains of the aesthetic and the representational.”¹³ Moving from the archival to the literary, this essay analyzes two prominent African American representations of Black soldiering during the Korean and Vietnam Wars—Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012) and Yusef Komynyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dao* (1988)—to probe the complex contours of otherwise elusive Afro-Asian intimacies. Attending to how “domains of the intimate relate to the structured violences of imperial states,” to quote Ann Laura Stoler, I probe how these Afro-Asian intimacies manifest not only as romantic partnerships and Third World solidarities, but also as forbidden erotics and gendered violence.¹⁴ In so doing, I extend the rich scholarship on Afro-Asian relations in the U.S. South to the southern Cold War spaces of South Korea and South Vietnam.¹⁵

In this essay, “Afro-Asian intimacies” refers not only to sexual relations between Black soldiers and Asian subjects, but also cartographic convergences between the U.S. South (figured here as “Afro”) and South Korea/South Vietnam (figured here as “Asian”), connecting transatlantic histories of slavery with transpacific encounters of imperial warfare. As other scholars theorize, “intimacies” is a profoundly cartographic analytic. Hazel Carby characterizes “imperial intimacies” as “geographies of pain, of the continuing aftermath of enslavement, a story of land, of sea and of war.”¹⁶ Lisa Lowe mobilizes “intimacies” as a “practice of reading across archives” that “unsettles the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins,” defiantly mapping the interdependent emergence of European liberalism, Indigenous genocide, African chattel slavery, and Asian coolie labor across four continents.¹⁷ Similarly, this essay charts the southern intimacies between the U.S. South, South Korea, and South Vietnam that structured Afro-Asian intimacies between Black soldiers and Asian subjects during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In doing so, it invokes Gayatri Gopinath’s theorization of “region” as a “subnational and supranational space” that “suggests the possibility of tracing lines of connection and commonality, a kind of South-South relationality, between seemingly discrete regional spaces that in fact bypass the nation” as the singular, heteronormative unit of subject formation.¹⁸ Gopinath puts forth a “queer regional imaginary,” and whereas the Afro-Asian intimacies represented in these literary texts are heterosexual, they are nonetheless racialized as nonnormative and perverse, alternatingly violent and hopeful, necessitating a feminist and queer analysis of these imperial, southern encounters.¹⁹

If, as Yogita Goyal argues, the runaway genre of the slave narrative has gone global, what does it mean to view the Cold War “through the

lens of a historical event like slavery?"²⁰ *Home*, the tenth novel by Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison, follows protagonist Frank "Smart" Money, a twenty-six-year-old Black Korean War veteran who must return to his southern hometown in Georgia with his sister Ycidra "Cee" Money in order to confront past traumas and heal from racial violence. Of particular note is the character of an unnamed girl that Frank encounters while stationed in South Korea and how she relates to Morrison's notable oeuvre, which has narrated southern Black subjectivity in the wake of the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and ongoing antiblackness. Although Morrison never explicitly names the character's race or ethnicity, in this article I refer to her as a "South Korean girl," given her location near a U.S. military base south of the 38th parallel.²¹ I argue that she be considered a *southern subject* alongside *Home's* Black protagonists from the U.S. South, and I offer the analytic of *southern violence* to connect antiblack violence emanating from the U.S. South during the afterlives of slavery with the imperial violence in South Korea in the wake of U.S. Cold War intervention. Additionally, I examine how "the South"—understood most explicitly as the U.S. South but also South Korea—is figured in the novel as a space of not only haunting trauma, but also communal healing, for not only the novel's southern Black characters, but also its South Korean one.

According to Shirley A. James Hanshaw, Black literature on the Vietnam War includes a robust literary corpus of "thirty-five novels, eighteen oral narratives and autobiographies, nine collections of poetry, and an anthology," the most famous of which is Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao*.²² Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, in 1947, Komunyakaa grew up in the U.S. South in the shadow of the Korean War. From 1968 to 1971, he joined a new generation of Black men inducted into the recently integrated U.S. armed forces. While stationed in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970, Komunyakaa served as a correspondent and editor of *The Southern Cross* and received a Bronze Star for his work as a journalist.²³ In 1994, he became the first African American man to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his book *Neon Vernacular*. According to Angela M. Salas, "much of Komunyakaa's finest poetry derives from the trauma associated with his military service in Vietnam," though it is important to note that "Komunyakaa considers himself a poet who served in Vietnam, rather than a Vietnam War veteran who has turned to poetry to express his anguish about the war."²⁴ In other words, attending to Komunyakaa's literary craft is important when analyzing his depictions of Afro-Asian intimacies during the Vietnam War.

The title of Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poetry volume, *Dien Cai Dao*, refers to the Vietnamese term "điên cái đầu," meaning "crazy in the head," which the Vietnamese used to refer to U.S. soldiers and their stubborn insistence in intervening in Vietnam's civil war of decolonization.

Starkly vivid and hauntingly beautiful, Komunyakaa's poems capture the psychological dimensions of the war: the nearness of death, the camouflage of the enemy, the mystery of the landscape, and the fleetingness of sex. According to Salas, the poems are "human, humane, wrenching, ironic, and infused with love for people, even when asking hard questions about atrocity and complicity in atrocity."²⁵ Eleven of *Dien Cai Dao*'s forty-three poems depict intimate relations between Black men and Vietnamese women, marking both vexed encounters between imperial aggressors and sexualized subjects, as well as possibilities for solidarity across distinct yet interconnected *southern sensibilities*.

Scholarship on Morrison's *Home* and Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao* has yet to analyze these two texts in relation and, by extension, explore the continuities between Black soldiering in South Korea and South Vietnam and the militarized southern cartographies that such juxtapositions reveal.²⁶ Previous literary analyses of Morrison's *Home* highlight the novel's similarities to *Beloved* as well as to other southern American classics, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*; analyze the novel's invocations of home in relation to Morrison's talk at the 1997 Princeton University "Race Matters" conference of the same title; and explore how the Korean War resonated with non-Korean minoritized subjects and authors.²⁷ They also debate the influence of the Cold War context on the novel's plot and characters; explore the novel's contribution to literary trauma theory, ghosts and haunting, and progressive gender roles; and note resonances between the novel and the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale.²⁸ My analysis aligns most closely with that of A.J. Yumi Lee, who argues that *Home* "focuses on the fraught figure of the black veteran to link the lethal violence of liberal racism to the lethal violence of liberal empire," in effect juxtaposing "the foundational antiblackness of American policing with the dehumanizing impulses of American soldiering in U.S. wars of intervention" in order to reveal "important continuities between these two linked forms of violence."²⁹ Highlighting the southern cartographies that link antiblack policing (figured via the U.S. South) with imperial soldiering (figured via South Korea), I build on Lee's analysis to pinpoint the gendered dimensions of these linkages as well as extend her analysis to South Vietnam.

Literary analyses of Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao*, meanwhile, emphasize how Komunyakaa's poems challenge the white canon's representations of the Vietnam War, highlighting the distinct challenges of Black soldiers who faced not only the uncertainties of guerilla warfare in Vietnam, but also the racism of white soldiers with whom they were supposedly aligned.³⁰ Less explored are the relationalities between Black and Vietnamese subjects, both male and female, that the poems

depict. A significant exception is Sunny Yang's article "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," which, via an analysis of Afro-Vietnamese intimacy in *Dien Cai Dao*, posits a new spatial imaginary, the "global southscape," to reconfigure the "literal and figurative distances" between the U.S. South and the Global South, understood here as Vietnam.³¹ As Yang notes at the beginning of her article, Komunyakaa was inspired to write his first Vietnam War poem while renovating a house in the Bywater district of New Orleans. Komunyakaa explains, "[I]t was just something that happened, and perhaps it had a lot to do with the fact that it was summertime, and there was a kind of familiar tropic heat that day."³² Yang observes, "For Komunyakaa, the excavation of his Vietnam memories hinged on a serendipitous convergence of two seemingly disparate places and times in his life. The 'familiar tropic heat' triggered a joining of New Orleans with Vietnam, inducing the past to resurface in the present and generating his first written reflections on the war."³³ In other words, the southern cartography of New Orleans bled into the southern space of South Vietnam. I build on Yang's incisive arguments to understand South Vietnam as not only a key site of the larger Global South struggle, but as a short-lived nation shaped by southern sensibilities and interpolated into the United States' empire-building project, making possible fraught alignments between the U.S. South and South Vietnam. I also extend Yang's spatial analysis to South Korea, tracing Cold War/civil war intimacies between the U.S. South, South Korea, and South Vietnam in order to reveal overlapping southern cartographies marked by race, militarism, and empire.

Southern Haunting and Healing in Toni Morrison's *Home*

Southern cartographies map affective and political resonances between different southern geographies marked by Cold War/civil war conflict. Yang's "global southscape" can be extended to facilitate analytical linkages between not only the U.S. South and South Vietnam in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao*, but also the U.S. South and South Korea in Toni Morrison's *Home*. The novel—more fleeting and gestural than Morrison's other work—consists of seventeen short chapters that move between the third-person narratives of Frank, Cee, and Frank's lover, Lola, as well as the first-person soliloquies of Frank, who addresses an unnamed second-person author tasked with narrating his story.³⁴ Distinguished formally by the use of italics, these first-person chapters, of which there are eight in total, emphasize the mediated nature of the rest of the text, marking distance between the characters' experiences of racial and gendered violence and the second-person author/witness/reader. For example, the protagonist Frank accuses the author in chapter nine: "*Korea. / You can't imagine it because you weren't there. You can't*

describe the bleak landscape because you never saw it."³⁵ This mediation marks the gendered difference between Frank, the Black GI, and the author, a stand-in for Morrison, and foreshadows the themes of secrecy, memory, trauma, and retelling that structure the novel's depiction of the so-called "Forgotten War." Grappling with the culpability of Black soldiers and "the unspeakability of the past... that refuse[s] to die," *Home* builds on a rich southern gothic tradition, of which Morrison is a key author, to put the "original sin of slavery" in intimate relation with the transpacific Cold War.³⁶

In *Home*, Frank's narrative is marked by multiple southern displacements: first from Bandera County, Texas, at age four, when he, his parents, and fourteen other families are ordered by hooded Ku Klux Klan members to vacate their homes within twenty-four hours or risk facing death, and later from Lotus, Georgia, where his family resettled but which Frank describes as "the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield," marked as it is by the afterlives of southern plantation slavery and curtailed opportunities for upward mobility: "Nothing to do but mindless work in fields you didn't own, couldn't own, and wouldn't own if you had any other choice."³⁷ Frank escapes Lotus via the U.S. military, only to find himself in another southern space wrought by racial violence: the battlefields of South Korea. Despite the promises of militarized integration, South Korea does not offer an escape from the antiblackness of the U.S. domestic front. As a Black reverend points out to Frank once he returns to the United States from South Korea: "An integrated army is integrated misery."³⁸ According to Lee, what is "miserable" is not just a matter of the fraught and elusive experience of desegregation abroad, but the "mission of the army" itself, which "advances the project of U.S. imperial domination and racialized violence around the globe."³⁹ Indeed, on this new southern front of the global race war, Frank is not only a victim of white supremacist violence, but also a perpetrator. Morrison writes, "There were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him. The copper smell of blood no longer sickened him; it gave him appetite."⁴⁰ Lee highlights a "structural contradiction": that, as a Black civilian, Frank is "routinely targeted by state violence in the form of policing," but as a Black soldier in South Korea, he was "tasked with carrying it out"—an observation underscored by President Truman's insistence on calling the Korean War a "police action."⁴¹ In sum, Frank enacts the racial violence he suffered at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan and stultifying Jim Crow laws in the U.S. South onto the bodies of Koreans displaced by the Cold War/civil war conflict. Moreover, this racial state violence can be understood in spatial terms as *southern violence* to mark the specificity of antiblack violence that culminated but did not begin or end with the U.S. Civil War as well as the Orientalist violence that manifested in the north/south divisions of Cold War intervention in Korea.

This southern violence was enacted by Black soldiers, such as Frank, on not only Korean soldiers but also Korean civilians: in particular, the figure of an unnamed South Korean girl in *Home*. Frank's encounters with the South Korean girl are marked by the figurative blurring of southern spaces, the U.S. South with South Korea. Chapter nine, italicized and narrated from Frank's first-person perspective, first introduces readers to the girl: "*Then I saw... a child's hand sticking out and patting the ground. I remember smiling. Reminded me of Cee and me trying to steal peaches off the ground under Miss Robinson's tree, sneaking, crawling, being as quiet as we could so she wouldn't see us and grab a belt.*"⁴² Here, the "ground" of Frank's and his sister's hometown in Lotus is figuratively transposed onto the ground of a snowy hill in South Korea, perched high above "a quiet village" that Frank is tasked with patrolling.⁴³ In this passage, the South Korean girl's body is also transposed onto the bodies of Frank and his sister via the grammar of comparison: she "*reminded me of Cee and me.*" This bodily transposition is further facilitated by the fact that Morrison avoids using explicit racial markers to identify the characters in *Home*, instead deploying what Lee calls a "strategic form of color-blindness" to reveal racial identities not through skin color, but through subjects' differential relationships to power.⁴⁴ The figurative space between Frank and Cee as children and the girl—never explicitly described as "South Korean" or even "Asian," but instead via the racially ambiguous characteristics of "*two missing teeth*" and "*the fall of black hair over eager eyes*"—thus collapses, facilitating a reading of Frank, Cee, and the girl *collectively* as *southern subjects*.⁴⁵ I return to this southern subjectivity later to describe the girl's haunting transposition onto the bodies of two other ghostly figures of the U.S. South. But, first, I highlight that Morrison also uses fruit imagery to suture the soil of the U.S. South to South Korea: the "*peaches... under Miss Robinson's tree*" are echoed in a later scene by an "*orange, soft now and blackened with rot*" that the girl reaches for before her untimely death.⁴⁶

This image of the rotting orange appears twice in the novel: once in chapter nine, quoted above, and then again in chapter fourteen, also typeset in the italicized font signaling Frank's first-person narrative. The story of the South Korean girl's death is, thus, mediated through Frank's trauma, which necessitates multiple first-person retellings in order to reveal, in Frank's words, "the whole truth."⁴⁷ In the first iteration, which appears in chapter nine, Frank narrates the cause of the girl's death using third-person pronouns, mirroring the formal shifts in first- and third-person perspective that structure the novel's chapters:

...*"Yum-yum."*

She smiles, reaches for the soldier's crotch, touches it. It surprises him... he blows her away. Only the hand remains in the

*trash, clutching its treasure, a spotted, rotting orange.
 ... Thinking back on it now, I think the guard felt more than disgust.
 I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill.
 Yum-yum.*⁴⁸

In this passage, the girl's innocent hunger for fruit—the rotting orange, but also the southern peaches in Frank's recollection—slips suddenly into a fraught expression of the third-person soldier's hunger for oral sex: a forbidden erotics, marked by transgressions across race, age, and imperial borders. Faced with a masculine embodiment of the occupying U.S. military forces, the South Korean girl automatically enacts a gesture that she thinks will satisfy the soldier and, thus, save her but, tragically and ironically, actually leads to her death.

The girl thus recalls the occluded figure of the *yanggongju*, which Grace M. Cho, in her groundbreaking sociological study on the gendered dimensions of Korean War hauntings, theorizes as a “ghostly figure of all that has been erased” and a “psychic figure” that “has been constituted by trauma.”⁴⁹ Literally meaning “Western princess,” the word, often used pejoratively and deployed at the level of the family as well as the nation, refers to a Korean “woman who provides sexual labor for the U.S. military” but is “so full of meaning” that it is simultaneously “unspeakable and ‘phantomogenic.’”⁵⁰ Power dynamics are even more vexed in *Home* because the girl is underaged, unable to provide any meaningful form of consent. Whereas Cho examines how the occluded *yanggongju* haunts the Korean diaspora, I extend Cho's analysis to explore how this figure also haunts the Black diaspora in Morrison's *Home*—particularly the Black veteran who shares the traumatic experience of the Korean War and in particular the southern violence made possible by both antiblackness and military imperialism on this new Cold War/civil war front.

Indeed, understanding the South Korean girl as a *yanggongju*, a sexualized “ghostly figure,” helps to explain her return in the novel as a ghost. Shifts in formal point-of-view register changes in the perception and acknowledgment of the girl as ghost. In chapter thirteen, narrated in the third person, Frank's sister Cee, whose womb was gutted in a series of nonconsensual experiments performed by a “heavyweight Confederate” doctor in Atlanta, tells Frank after they return to Lotus: “It's like there's a baby girl down here waiting to be born. She's somewhere close by in the air, in this house.”⁵¹ Cee's revelation prompts Frank, in chapter fourteen, narrated in the italicized first-person perspective, to speculate, “*Maybe that little girl wasn't waiting around to be born to [Cee]. Maybe it was already dead, waiting for me to step up and say how.*”⁵² In life, the South Korean girl was conflated with Frank and Cee as children as discussed above; in death, she is now conflated with Cee's

unborn daughter, the ghostly “fruit” of Cee’s womb (a word that calls to mind other fruit imagery, namely, the rotting orange and the southern peaches from chapter nine).⁵³ Cee’s unborn daughter recalls as well the quintessential gothic ghost of American literature, Morrison’s *Beloved*.⁵⁴ Such comparisons again support a reading of the South Korean girl and the novel’s Black characters as, collectively, southern subjects marked by different iterations of southern violence in the aftermath of slavery and imperial warfare.

Moreover, Cee’s revelation prompts Frank to retell the cause of the South Korean girl’s murder, this time using first-person pronouns:

*I shot the Korean girl in her face.
I am the one she touched.
I am the one who saw her smile.
I am the one she said “Yum-yum” to.
I am the one she aroused.*⁵⁵

Frank’s narration in this chapter of the traumatic memory of arousal and murder is marked by a formal shift in point of view: from third-person pronouns, placing the blame for the girl’s death on an anonymous soldier, to first-person pronouns, as he acknowledges his culpability as an agent of U.S. imperialism.

As scholars of literary trauma studies and gothic fiction observe, Frank’s confession in this passage, buried as it was in secrecy and shame, was only made possible by his and his sister’s healing return *home*—a complex figuration, evocative of Gopinath’s “queer regional imaginary,” that invokes multiple meanings.⁵⁶ Drawing from Yoruba-Bantu-Kongo spiritual systems, Valorie Thomas highlights the importance of homecoming as a form of healing for the African diaspora in particular given the trauma of the Middle Passage.⁵⁷ Cheryl A. Wall argues that Morrison’s novels “understand home as a place in the spirit, a place that is necessarily symbolic rather than real.”⁵⁸ Likewise, in Mark A. Tabone’s discussion of “home-as-utopia,” he argues that “home for Morrison is primarily about caring people rather than spatiality.”⁵⁹ In response, I emphasize that the racial contours of “home” in the novel also signify a specific physical, sociohistorical region: the U.S. South. In other words, we need to understand the U.S. South as a space wrought by white supremacist violence—southern violence—but one that also harbored a resilient Black community open to welcoming Frank and Cee back: “Now [Lotus] seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding.”⁶⁰ Indeed, I argue that, via Frank and Cee’s return home to the U.S. South, the southern figure of the South Korean girl is also “returned” home, put to rest, albeit in a different south: not the South Korea of her birth, but the

U.S. South that, throughout the novel, is linked to South Korea as a space of traumatic violence but also southern healing.

According to Kim, "the question of what acts of reparation toward that Korean girl would be warranted remains unresolved" in *Home*.⁶¹ I offer a different reading by turning to the burial that takes place toward the end of the novel. In the penultimate chapter, Frank and Cee return to the field in Lotus that opened the novel, another site of southern violence and southern trauma, to dig up the bones of the father of another Black character, Jerome, whom Jerome was forced to fight to the death for the entertainment of white watchers—a fight that Frank and Cee witnessed as children in chapter one but did not understand the implications of until the end of the novel as adults. In chapter sixteen, Frank and Cee return to this scene of violence to dig up the bones, wrap them in a quilt that Cee has knitted, and give them a proper burial at the foot of a sweet bay tree whose description, as many scholars note, applies to Frank and Cee as well: "*Hurt right down the middle / But alive and well.*"⁶²

For Kim, this reburial does not "provide any redress for the horrific act of violence [Frank] had committed against the young girl in Korea," and the novel's resolution "does nothing to compensate or atone for the war crime [Morrison's] protagonist has committed."⁶³ Mobilizing "analogy as a heuristic," to quote Goyal, I argue instead that the ghostly figure of the South Korean girl *does* return in the novel's final chapters.⁶⁴ Recall that the South Korean girl in previous chapters is compared to the novel's Black characters: Frank and Cee as children, Cee's unborn daughter. Recall as well Lee's observation that Morrison's "strategic form of color-blindness" elides explicit racial markers, opening up space for racial ambiguities and cross-racial connections across distinct yet shared experiences of southern violence. The "small bones" and "few pieces of clothing" in chapter sixteen are never explicitly identified by Morrison as belonging to Jerome's father, although the makeshift grave marker that Frank makes, "Here Stands A Man," certainly lends itself to this reading.⁶⁵ However, I suggest that we can read these bones as belonging to the unnamed figure of the South Korean girl, the ghostly *yanggongju*, as well. By extension, if we recall the previously discussed scene of southern peaches, the bones can also be read as belonging to Frank and Cee as children: that is, an acknowledgment that Frank and Cee lost their childhood innocence in the field that night when they witnessed the traumatic scene of racial violence. The field thus becomes a mass graveyard of multiple victims of southern violence, of multiple ghosts of southern trauma. These readings open the possibility that the novel offers healing to the southern figure of the South Korean girl alongside the southern figures of Frank and Cee. Frank and Cee find healing in "home"—the region of the U.S. South. Understood expansively, via southern cartographies, this southern soil can also lay to rest the

ghost of the South Korean girl, who bridges two southern spaces brought intimately together by the southern violence of the Korean War. In this way, *Home* addresses and perhaps even redresses the southern trauma of not only its Black characters, but its South Korean one as well.

Southern Intimacies and Fraught Solidarities in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao*

Lee's argument that Black soldiering during the Korean War connected the antiblack violence of domestic policing in the U.S. South to the military violence of global policing in South Korea can also be extended to Black soldiering during the Vietnam War. Indeed, it is these vexed imperial entanglements that structure the Afro-Asian intimacies depicted across Komunyakaa's poems in *Dien Cai Dao*. These entanglements necessitate an analysis of southern cartographies—how overlapping southern landscapes, affects, and political conditions facilitate Afro-Asian intimacies between multiple southern subjects in the poems: Black soldiers shaped by the afterlives of slavery in the U.S. South as well as South Vietnamese women marked by U.S. military intervention into Vietnam's civil war of decolonization.

I begin with "Hanoi Hannah," the eighth poem in *Dien Cai Dao*, to establish the importance of southern particularity. "Hanoi Hannah" depicts the address of a female North Vietnamese communist radio host to a Black American soldier: an appeal to cross-racial solidarity against the violence of white supremacist imperialism. With the sounds of warfare serving as a backdrop, Hanoi Hannah croons: "Hello, Soul Brothers. Yeah, / Georgia's also on my mind."⁶⁶ As in Morrison's *Home*, here too does Georgia stand in as synecdoche for racial violence—understood as southern violence—that emanates from, yet is not confined to, the U.S. South. Hanoi Hannah also recalls Seoul City Sue, the white American radio announcer whose North Korean propaganda also targeted Black soldiers during the preceding Korean War.⁶⁷ In Komunyakaa's poem, "Soul Brothers," which invokes Black fraternal vernacular as well as references "Soul Alley" in the Khanh district, the segregated street in Sài Gòn set aside for Black soldiers' rest and recreation, operates as a targeted, racialized interpolation, a form of psychological warfare that, as Yang notes, "cynically appropriates the language of black liberation and community not to signal Afro-Asian kinship but to emphasize the racial tensions and civil-rights struggles dividing Americans."⁶⁸ In between the songs of Ray Charles and Tina Turner, Hanoi Hannah warns to her listeners: "You know you're dead men, / don't you? You're dead / as King today in Memphis."⁶⁹ The cause of death here is ambiguous: perhaps literally at the hands of communist Vietnamese soldiers but also figuratively at the hands of American white supremacy that killed Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. Indeed, during the war, white soldiers flew

Confederate flags throughout U.S. army and naval bases, particularly after Dr. King's assassination, transposing the antiblack politics of the U.S. South to the Cold War/civil war region of South Vietnam.⁷⁰

In Komunyakaa's poem, Hanoi Hannah's warnings are followed by an invitation to defect from the U.S. army and join the Vietnamese struggle for independence: "Soul Brothers, what are you dying for?"⁷¹ According to the poem's narrator, Hanoi Hannah's "knife-edge song cuts / deep as a sniper's bullet" for exposing the hypocrisies of the U.S. liberal project: of promising racial equality in the military while denying civil rights at home. And yet the promise of Afro-Asian solidarity in this moment is amorphous and fleeting, ultimately evidencing, to quote Yang, "the more destructive applications of intimacy."⁷² The poem ends on an ambiguous note: "Her voice grows flesh / & we can see her falling / into words, a bleeding flower / no one knows the true name for. / 'You're lousy shots, Gls.' / Her laughter floats up / as though the airways are / buried under our feet."⁷³ Striking from below, Hanoi Hannah's laughter in these stanzas comes as a taunt: an insincere attempt at Afro-Asian solidarity that, despite the truth it tells about U.S. race relations, is ultimately more self-interested in Vietnamese independence than Black justice. This self-interest, I argue, is in part due to the *northern* positionality of Hanoi Hannah as an agent of North Vietnamese communism. That is, Afro-Asian solidarity breaks down without the affective glue of a shared southern sensibility, a shared vulnerability to what this article calls southern violence. My goal here is not to reify the Vietnam War's north/south, communist/anticommunist divisions, which, in fact, were relatively short-lived when understood in the context of Vietnam's much longer history, nor is it to deny the importance of the Great Migration, which facilitated African Americans' departure from the U.S. South during the twentieth century. I would like, however, to pinpoint the historically specific contours of a shared southern subjectivity, a shared historical experience of different forms of southern violence, that in African American literature facilitates Afro-Asian intimacy between Black soldiers and South Vietnamese (and South Korean) civilians.

The poem "Tu Do Street"—named after the famous "Liberty Street" in Sài Gòn, so called during the war—also depicts the fraught ambiguities of Afro-Asian solidarity facilitated through intimacy from the perspective of a Black male soldier. In the opening lines of the poem, the Jim Crow segregation of the U.S. South bleeds into the brothels of South Vietnam, marking overlaps between multiple southern cartographies:

Music divides the evening.
I close my eyes & can see
men drawing lines in the dust.
America pushes through the membrane

of mist and smoke, & I'm a small boy
 again in Bogalusa. *White Only*
 signs & Hank Snow...⁷⁴

As in *Home*, spatial resonances trigger temporal slippages as the Black GI narrator slips back into the memory of southern violence experienced during childhood.⁷⁵ The narrator tries to cross the color line, transposed from the U.S. South to South Vietnam, but is denied service by a Vietnamese "mama-san" who respects the unwritten segregationist rules. White–Black integration on the battlefield falls apart in this space of pleasure: "We have played Judas where / only machine-gun fire brings us / together." As Judas betrayed Jesus, so too have U.S. soldiers "betrayed the Christian ideal of brotherhood," replacing it with, in Tom Marvin's words, "the hollow camaraderie of combat," or what King called "brutal solidarity."⁷⁶

Turned away by the antiblack mama-san, the narrator wanders "deeper into the alleys" to Soul Alley, where "black GIs hold to their turf also."⁷⁷ There, he is able to find intimacy in the bodies of South Vietnamese women, exchanging money for sex and also expressing a genuine tenderness and mutual anguish that I argue is facilitated by a shared southern subjectivity. The narrator notes "a softness behind these voices / wounded by their beauty & war" while also acknowledging his culpability in the women's sorrow as an agent of the U.S. military and, therefore, an imperial aggressor stationed in South Vietnam: "Back in the bush at Dak To / & Khe Sanh, we fought / the brothers of these women / we now run to hold in our arms."⁷⁸ This invocation of Vietnamese familial relations—the brothers of the South Vietnamese women positioned as the enemy of Black soldiers in this Cold War/civil war struggle—pinpoints the entanglements of Cold War divisions that pitted Vietnamese family members against one another in a brutal civil war over differing visions of Vietnam's independence. Although a mutual southern sensibility facilitates Afro-Asian intimacy in "Tu Do Street"—elusive moments of shared vulnerability, comfort, and pleasure—as in "Hanoi Hannah," genuine solidarity ultimately cannot surmount the barricade of self-interest, this time on the part of the American GIs. The poem ends: "There's more than a nation / inside us, as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart, tasting / each other's breath, / without knowing these rooms / run into each other like tunnels / leading to the underworld." Here, the South Vietnamese female figure becomes a bridge, a mere tool, in the seemingly larger goal of white–Black American fraternity. And yet this goal is questioned—not as hopeless, but perhaps misguided, "leading to the underworld" instead of true racial and gender justice for Black men and South Vietnamese women alike. According to Marvin, the poem's closing image "calls to mind the myth of Orpheus,

whose unsuccessful attempt to rescue his beloved from the underworld resonates with the speaker's desire to rescue the Vietnamese women, even as he participates in their sexual exploitation."⁷⁹ As in Morrison's *Home*, Afro-Asian intimacies in *Dien Cai Dao* are vexed, rooted in the Cold War context of U.S. imperial intervention and global police violence.

Other poems gesture toward more promising opportunities for Afro-Asian solidarity via intimacy, for mutual recognition via shared vulnerability to different forms of southern violence. In "'You and I Are Disappearing,'" the title of which references a quote from Swedish disabilities activist Björn Håkansson, the cry of a South Vietnamese girl, burned by napalm, emanates from the anguished Black narrator's own throat.⁸⁰ He embodies her pain, identifying with the violence wrought upon her body. "Night Muse & Mortar Round" features the beckoning ghost of a South Vietnamese woman who saves the narrator and his comrades from a mortar blast.⁸¹ In "One More Loss to Count," a Black GI narrator comforts Be Hai, an ethnic Chinese South Vietnamese woman spurned by a white southern sergeant major with "blond children / back in Alabama."⁸² Likely having suffered the brunt of the sergeant major's southern racism himself, the narrator shares a moment of sexual escape with Be Hai and in doing so betrays his own lover, Anna, who awaits him at home.⁸³ "After the Fall" features a South Vietnamese sex worker, Dzung, singing "Stars Fall on Alabama," a 1930s jazz standard performed by prominent Black jazz singers, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday. She does so while "trying to bite off her tongue"—a reference to the sense of chaos, loss, and betrayal following the Fall of Saigon, as well as an invocation of the violent racial landscape that African Americans had to navigate following the end of the U.S. civil war.⁸⁴

"Re-creating the Scene," the thirteenth poem in *Dien Cai Dao*, is notable for aligning the Black male narrator with a South Vietnamese woman *against* white male aggressors, distinctly identified as embodying the southern violence of the U.S. South. In this two-page, single-stanza, free-verse poem, whose urgent, undulating rhythm mirrors the "curves of the land," a South Vietnamese mother is raped at the hands of three men who "ride her breath, grunting / over lovers back in Mississippi," while a "Confederate flag / flaps from a radio antenna" attached to the armored personnel carrier in which the violation occurs.⁸⁵ Here, the military vehicle becomes a space of sexual violence; the Confederate flag sutures the rape of this South Vietnamese woman by white soldiers during imperial warfare to the rape of Black women by white masters during slavery and its afterlives.⁸⁶ Resistance is curtailed though not absent as the men avenge the Confederacy's loss in the U.S. South upon the body of this new southern woman in South Vietnam: "She floats on their rage / like a torn water flower, / defining night inside a machine / where men are gods."⁸⁷ The South Vietnamese woman draws on an otherworldly

strength to weather the brutalization.

It is not until halfway down the second page of the poem that the first person is invoked, revealing the Black narrator as the one who listens, who bears witness to this southern sister, and who informs *The Overseas Weekly* of the crime. Solidarity here, though earnest, is fleeting as the poem ends ambiguously: the woman disappears, “turns into mist,” either paid off or killed before she can press charges, her baby abandoned and left “searching for a breast”—an uncanny echo of the way that slavery also severed the familial ties of Black subjects deemed property and calling to mind Cee’s ghostly child in *Home*.⁸⁸ In sum, Afro-Asian intimacies in *Dien Cai Dao*, shaped by the vexed encounters of Black GIs with South Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War, are formed in the shadow of a Confederate flag: a stark symbol of southern violence, transposed from the antiblack landscape of the U.S. South to the imperial warfront of South Vietnam.

Conclusion

In *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific*, Simeon Man offers “soldiering” as an analytic for unpacking the labor of war: the mobilization of racialized soldiers to further U.S. imperial expansion of capitalist markets in the name of racial liberalism.⁸⁹ Whereas Man focuses on Asian and Asian American military laborers, this essay grapples with the vexed positionality of Black soldiers, simultaneously subject to Jim Crow laws and the afterlives of slavery in the continental United States while also serving as imperial and masculinist aggressors in Cold War Asia. The fraught contours of Black soldiering become apparent in African American literary representations of Afro-Asian intimacies, understood as sexual encounters between Black GIs and Asian subjects as well as cartographic convergences between the U.S. South, South Korea, and South Vietnam. Reading Morrison’s *Home* and Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dao* in relation illuminates continuities and convergences between Black experiences of soldiering during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, particularly in regards to hierarchies of race, sex, and gender. In this essay, I understand Black GIs, South Korean girls, and South Vietnamese women collectively as *southern subjects* shaped by *southern sensibilities*—not to erase the historical and cultural specificity of their raced and gendered positionalities, but to articulate potential linkages between shared experiences of what I call *southern violence*: antiblack policing of Black men, rape of Black women, and imperial war-making and gendered violence against South Korean and South Vietnamese women and children. Such experiences demand accountability but also facilitate possibilities for cross-racial intimacy, healing, and resistance: an acknowledgement of intertwined fates that necessitate expansive southern coalitions in both literature and beyond.

Notes

1. Clarence Adams, *An American Dream: The Life of an African American Soldier and POW Who Spent Twelve Years in Communist China*, ed. Della Adams and Lewis H. Carlson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 33, 40, 141; see also Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict: Cultural Memory and the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 205–10.

2. UPI, "Korean War Defector, as 'Voice' of Hanoi, Bids G.I.s Get Out," *New York Times*, August 15, 1965.

3. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict*, 203; Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

4. David P. Cline, *Twice Forgotten: African Americans and the Korean War, An Oral History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Daniel Widener, "Seoul City Sue and the Bugout Blues: Black American Narratives of the Forgotten War," in *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 55–87; Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Daniel Lucks, "African American Soldiers and the Vietnam War: No More Vietnams," *The Sixties* 10, no. 2 (2017): 196–220.

5. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" (Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967), http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/.

6. For more on "brutal solidarity," see Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, "Queer Love across Queer Time: Nonaligned Solidarity, Indigenous Incommensurability, and the Temporal Drag of the Vietnam War," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 99–123.

7. Widener, "Seoul City Sue," 76.

8. For more on these southern convergences, see Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, "Revisiting the Southern Question," *Georgia Review* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 16–25; Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, "Southern Memory, Southern Metaphor: Representing South Vietnam through the US South," *American Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2022): 591–614.

9. Jin-kyung Lee, "Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965–73," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 17, no. 3 (2009): 655–82; Hyun Sook Lee Kim, "Korea's 'Vietnam Question': War Atrocities, National Identity, and Reconciliation," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 622–35; Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

10. Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105–38.

11. Vanita Reddy and Anantha Sudhakar, "Introduction: Feminist and Queer Afro-Asian Formations," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 14, no. 3 (2018), <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/feminist-and-queer-afro-asian-formations/introduction-feminist-and-queer-afro-asian-formations/>.

12. Sonia Gomez, "The Politics of Afro-Asian Intimacies in Jim Crow Tokyo," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 39, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 37.

13. Vanita Reddy, "Afro-Asian Intimacies and the Politics and Aesthetics of Cross-Racial Struggle in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 18, no. 3 (October 2015): 234.

14. Ann Laura Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

15. Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi, eds., *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
16. Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019), 4.
17. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.
18. Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5, 10.
19. Gopinath, 5.
20. Yogita Goyal, *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 7.
21. In her book on Black women writers' depictions of "Black intimacy with state-sanctioned terror," Erica R. Edwards refers to the girl in *Home* as "North Korean" but does not elaborate on this identification. See Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 13, 291. Rather than contradict Edwards' analysis, my reading of the girl as alternatively "South Korean" points to the generative ambiguity of the girl's national framing, which exceeds Cold War borders via Gopinath's "queer regional imaginary."
22. Shirley A.J. Hanshaw, *Re-Membering and Surviving: African American Fiction of the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), x.
23. Yusef Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 64.
24. Angela M. Salas, *Flashback through the Heart: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2004), 67.
25. Salas, 67.
26. For another project that insists on analyzing literary representations of U.S. intervention in the Korean and Vietnam Wars in relation though not necessarily through the frame of Black soldiering, see Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Cold War Friendships: Korea, Vietnam, and Asian American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
27. Erin Penner, "For Those 'Who Could Not Bear to Look Directly at the Slaughter': Morrison's *Home* and the Novels of Faulkner and Woolf," *African American Review* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 343–59; Mark A. Tabone, "Dystopia, Utopia, and 'Home' in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *Utopian Studies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 291–308; Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 3–12; Laura Castor, "'This House Is Strange': Digging for American Memory of Trauma, or Healing the 'Social' in Toni Morrison's *Home*," in *Living Language, Living Memory: Essays on the Works of Toni Morrison*, ed. Kerstin W. Shands and Giulia Grillo Mikrut (Sweden: Elanders, 2014), 139–50; Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict*, 210–18.
28. Donald E. Pease, "The Uncanny Return of Settler-Colonial Capitalism in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *Boundary 2* 47, no. 2 (May 2020): 49–70; Maxine L. Montgomery, "Remembering the Forgotten War: Memory, History, and the Body in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *CLA Journal* 55, no. 4 (June 2012): 320–34; Maxine Montgomery, "Bearing Witness to Forgotten Wounds: Toni Morrison's *Home* and the Spectral Presence," *South Carolina Review* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 14–24; Katrina Harack, "Shifting Masculinities and Evolving Feminine Power: Progressive Gender Roles in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2016): 371–95; Irene Visser, "Fairy Tale and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *MELUS* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 148–64.
29. A.J. Yumi Lee, "Repairing Police Action after the Korean War in Toni Morrison's *Home*," *Radical History Review* 137 (May 2020): 120.
30. Owen W. Gilman Jr., *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 143–49; Kevin Stein, "Vietnam and the 'Voice Within': Public

and Private History in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau*," *Massachusetts Review* 36, no. 4 (1995): 541–61; Michael C. Dowdy, "Working in the Space of Disaster: Yusef Komunyakaa's Dialogues with America," *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 812–823; Salas, *Flashback through the Heart*; Tom Marvin, "Komunyakaa's Tu Do Street," *The Explicator* 64, no. 4 (2006): 256–58.

31. Sunny Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South: Remapping History and Afro-Vietnamese Intimacy in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau*," *African American Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 80.

32. William Baer, "Still Negotiating with the Images: An Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa," *Kenyon Review* 20.3–4 (1998): 6.

33. Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 79.

34. For more on the novel's formal use of different points of view, see Jan Furman, "Telling Stories: Evolving Narrative Identity in Toni Morrison's *Home*," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 231–42.

35. Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Vintage International, 2013), 93.

36. Goyal, *Runaway Genres*, 74, 94.

37. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 83–84.

38. Morrison, 18.

39. Lee, "Repairing Police Action," 125.

40. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 98.

41. Lee, "Repairing Police Action," 120.

42. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 94.

43. Morrison, 94.

44. Lee, "Repairing Police Action," 123.

45. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 95.

46. Morrison, 94–95. The peaches and orange can also be read as allusions to the forbidden fruit of the Biblical Garden of Eden.

47. Morrison, 133.

48. Morrison, 95–96.

49. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4, 17.

50. Cho, 3.

51. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 62, 131.

52. Morrison, 133.

53. Morrison, 128.

54. Goyal, *Runaway Genres*, 74.

55. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 133.

56. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986); Harack, "Shifting Masculinities and Evolving Feminine Power"; Montgomery, "Re-Membering the Forgotten War"; Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 5.

57. Valorie Thomas, "A Kind of Restoration: Psychogeographies of Healing in Toni Morrison's *Home*," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 194–204; see also Montgomery, "Bearing Witness."

58. Cheryl A. Wall, "Trying to Get Home: Place and Memory in Toni Morrison's Fiction," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 64.

59. Tabone, "Dystopia, Utopia, and 'Home,'" 305.

60. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 132.

61. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict*, 217.
62. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 147; see for example Castor, "This House Is Strange," 142; Harack, "Shifting Masculinities," 391; Lee, "Repairing Police Action," 133; Montgomery, "Bearing Witness," 22; Visser, "Fairy Tale and Trauma," 160.
63. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict*, 217.
64. Goyal, *Runaway Genres*, 9.
65. Morrison, *Home*, 2013, 145.
66. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 13.
67. Widener, "Seoul City Sue," 65–69.
68. Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 90.
69. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 13.
70. Greg Grandin, "What Was the Confederate Flag Doing in Cuba, Vietnam, and Iraq?," *The Nation*, July 7, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/what-was-the-confederate-flag-doing-in-cuba-vietnam-and-iraq/>; Gerald F. Goodwin, "Black and White in Vietnam," *New York Times*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/opinion/racism-vietnam-war.html>.
71. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 13.
72. Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 90.
73. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 13–14.
74. Komunyakaa, 29.
75. See also Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 85.
76. Marvin, "Komunyakaa's Tu Do Street," 256–57; King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam."
77. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 29.
78. Komunyakaa, 29.
79. Marvin, "Komunyakaa's Tu Do Street," 258.
80. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 17.
81. Komunyakaa, 21.
82. Komunyakaa, 22.
83. Yang writes, "The union between Be Hai and the speaker is thus enabled by a literal and figurative reproduction of Southern whiteness in Vietnam." Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 89.
84. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 53.
85. Komunyakaa, 19.
86. See also Stein, "Vietnam and the 'Voice Within,'" 546; Yang, "Expanding the Southscape to the Global South," 86.
87. Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, 19.
88. Komunyakaa, 20.
89. Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

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Queering/Querying the Text in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* and Sui Sin Far's "Jamaica Works"

Giselle Liza Anatol and Joo Ok Kim

Although African/Jamaican novelist Patricia Powell and Chinese/Canadian writer Sui Sin Far were born almost exactly a century apart, their artistic works are strongly linked by setting—both time and place—and the authors' forceful critiques of the British Empire and its productions of colonial knowledge.¹ For Far, the empire entangled transnational links from Shanghai, where Far's English father met her Chinese mother; to England and the British dominion of Canada, where she spent her childhood; to her work as a journalist in the United States—founded as a British colony—to Jamaica, another British colony, which Canada provided with "an ongoing force of women office workers" (White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography*, 32). Her writings, particularly "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian" (1909) and "The Sugar-Cane Baby" (1910), provide sharp expositions on the racialized, gendering plantation labor system and white supremacist colonial violence routed through the circuits of empire. Patricia Powell's novel *The Pagoda* (1999), which features a gender-queer Chinese/Jamaican protagonist seeking firm footing in post-emancipation colonial Jamaica, holds significance in the historiography of the Chinese Americas and multiple global souths—including the U.S. South—which invites exploration beyond the book's conventional categorization as queer fiction of the Anglophone Caribbean. Thinking through the Chinese/Jamaican community as represented in Powell's novel in conjunction with Sui Sin Far's stories set in Jamaica, we explore the ways

both authors challenge xenophobic and imperialist regimes, particularly those predicated on knowledge production and literacy. Far's decision to "fight... battles" on behalf of Chinese people in North America by writing articles in local papers ("Leaves" 223) and Powell's artistic choice to open and close her narrative with the act of letter-writing foreground the ways that composing and deciphering all kinds of texts contribute to empire building and whether, as Audre Lorde so provocatively questioned, these "master's" tools can indeed "destroy the master's house."

Like Ella Shohat, we argue for the Caribbean's significance in understanding Orientalism: the myth of Columbus's "discovery" of the so-called "New World" in 1492 can be tied to the expulsion of Muslims and Jews in Spain in the same year—commonly known as the Reconquista. The events are linked in terms of both discourses of travel and conquest and expurgatory practices. As Shohat claims,

Perhaps the first modern orientalist was none other than Columbus. After his arrival in the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, he wrote to the Spanish throne praising the war against both Muslims and Jews, and thanking the queen for having sent him to the regions of India to convert its people to the holy faith. Here, discourses about Muslims, Jews, and (Asian) Indians crossed the Atlantic... arming the conquistadors with a ready-made us-versus-them ideology aimed at the regions of India, but applied instead towards the indigenous peoples of the accidentally discovered continent. (47)

Significantly, Shohat's argument hinges on acts of writing: Columbus's missive to the queen; his travel journals, diaries, and maps; Bibles for converting "heathens"; and later, historical accounts of empire and colonization are essential to constructions of race, geographies of the "backward" cultures of the Global South, idealized notions of the "progress" of the Global North. In U.S. history, denied or restricted access to literacy was essential—even after the abolition of slavery—to preventing Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from participating in the political sphere. Twentieth-century literacy tests, for example, served as obstacles to citizenship: barriers to African American enfranchisement and, in the form of entrance applications, impediments to Chinese immigrants' physical entry to the nation. Despite its centrality to the liberation narratives of prominent figures, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and others, literacy has been utilized for "regulation, imposition, surveillance," and other means of control that regularly "do damage or inflict harm on individuals" (Pritchard 9, Prologue).

These considerations of reading, writing, and power are further

elaborated upon by Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra, whose critique of state and historical archives inspires a queer reading practice that brushes against linear nationalist histories: "the 'archive' is... a way to refer to the parameters for knowledge, or how we read, find evidence, and make legible the complex conditions of the past" (38). Such a reading practice motivates the registers of knowledge beyond that of the written archive, which "may often be a means of stabilizing colonial power," and instead directs attention to "embodied affective practices implied by material things [that] may evoke other notions of agency and resistance, particularly with respect to subjects and communities without access to written means of representation" (42). Following Shohat as well as Pritchard, Lowe, and Manjapra, and in recognizing the undertheorized relationalities of "Asian Americas" across the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean, we explore the queer conjunctions of race, gender, and literacies in Powell's and Far's work: both literal, commonly recognized practices of reading and writing and the acts of interpreting physical bodies as racialized, gendered, queer and queered texts. In pursuing this idea of corporeal literacy, we apply the lens provided by Gayatri Gopinath, who asserts that the skill of being able to decipher what is "written" on the body is not readily available to all members of a community; rather, it "demands a certain way of seeing"—and here, we insert the word "reading"—which Gopinath identifies as "queer": "This alternative optic renders apparent the unruly embodiments and desires that are usually obscured by dominant historical narratives" (328). This reading practice requires the viewer's investment in recognizing "abjected, forgotten, and disavowed other[s]" (330), whether in real time or trans-temporally, as Powell's historical fiction sets out to do, and enables her readers to accomplish.

Sui Sin Far's Autobiographical Writings

Sui Sin Far's perspectives on race were sharply informed by responses to her Chinese heritage as she encountered not just individual acts of racism but legislative ones, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, anti-miscegenation laws, and the Canadian parliament's head tax on Chinese immigrants in 1904. In her 1909 autobiographical sketch, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," Sui Sin Far exercises a politics of comparison informed by her encounters with racism in order to provide critical commentaries on racial power dynamics throughout various U.S. regions, Jamaica, and by extension other parts of the Caribbean. The title of this work focuses attention on Far's position as one who records her experiences on paper: the vignettes are to be found on "leaves," or pages, and the word "portfolio" also conjures images of sheafs of paper.² Notably, however, the collection of pages is a *mental* one, not a physical record; despite the

fact that Far published extensively and worked as a stenographer, there is an ambivalence conveyed about the capturing of her experiences in writing, via what Xine Yao states is “the crafting of artifice to both disclose and withhold” (204).³

Significantly, although during her lifetime much of her work was published anonymously, it “often found print in such outlets as railway brochures or local newspapers” (White-Parks xiv). The newspaper publications correlate to her occupation as journalist while the work in railway brochures reveals her proximity to the material histories surrounding railroads and the discursive production circulating through railways. She was employed as a stenographer by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, which was built exploiting Chinese labor, and the trace of this population’s work in “Leaves” interrupts a dominant history that would forget the racialized exclusion and mistreatment of these workers in Canada and the United States.

In recording racist discussions about Chinese people in the “Middle West,” Far describes her invisibility as a woman of Asian descent: “Some one [*sic*] makes a remark about the cars full of Chinamen that past [*sic*] that morning. A transcontinental railway runs thru the town” (224). The disparaging comments that ensue are underscored by irony: the transcontinental railway, invaluable to the U.S. economy and mythography of the nation’s technological advancement, was built by Chinese laborers; additionally, Far’s colleagues assume the composition of their gathering is exclusively white. This short passage also provides glimpses of understanding of ethnic prejudices encapsulated within broader racializations: “‘Now, the Japanese are different altogether. There is something bright and likable about those men,’ continues Mr. K” (224)— although this paternalistic moment of paradoxical racial tolerance would change dramatically during World War II.

The ambiguity surrounding who starts the conversation (“some one”) suggests that everyone present is culpable of racist participation—the author included, since a “miserable, cowardly feeling keeps [her] silent” (224). As the discussion continues, the town clerk states, “A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a [n-word]” (224), revealing an operative hierarchy of differential racialization and “indexing the uneasy positioning of Asian subjects subject to geopolitical developments and situated, as needed, as disciplinary mediator complicit in the ongoing subordination of Black and Indigenous populations” (Yao 173). In another ironic gesture, Far captures both a sense of her erasure from the scene and the racial illiteracy of the townspeople when she records, “‘I wouldn’t have one in my house,’ declares my landlady” (224). After informing her company that she is Chinese, the author “do[es] not remain much longer in the little town” (225). The breadth of this short conversation registers transnational labor histories, riding through on a transcontinental railway,

and coalescing racial hierarchies. Immediately following this "Middle West" section, Far writes, "I am under a tropic sky, meeting frequently and conversing with persons who are almost as high up in the world as birth, education and money can set them. The environment is peculiar, for I am also surrounded by a race of people, the reputed descendants of Ham" (225). The author now resides in Jamaica, addressing new sets of ambiguities. Her choice to use the word "peculiarity" may refer to the "peculiar institution"—a profoundly violent euphemism for U.S. slavery—in a compelling weaving together of the racial dynamics found in two societies in the Americas that envision themselves as quite distinct. Another reading exposes the contrast between those "high up," the unidirectional beneficiaries of colonialism, and "the reputed descendants of Ham," the African-descended producers of the wealth. In "The Intimacies of Four Continents," Lisa Lowe broadens the definition of "intimacy" to encompass "spatial proximity or adjacent connection... the political economic logics through which men and women from Africa and Asia were forcibly transported to the Americas, who with native, mixed, and creole peoples constituted slave societies, the profits of which gave rise to bourgeois republican states in Europe and North America" (193). Sui Sin Far's writing insists that race must be considered in relation to transnational labor migration, and through her immediate juxtaposition of the U.S. Midwest and Jamaica, she shows the close relation between these specific histories. In this way, the "leaves" of the title, besides suggesting the literal pages readers are asked to turn as they proceed along her "mental portfolio," refer to Far's counter-memories to dominant narratives while simultaneously calling sharp attention to the continuity of the historical pages of movement within empires.

Far remarks on "[t]he novelty of life in the West Indian island," where "[m]ixing with people of fashion, and yet not of them, [she] is not of sufficient importance to create comment or curiosity" (225). The author's purposeful use of "mixing" and "comment or curiosity" refers to her own racial ambiguity in a place where multiracialism is not uncommon, especially after Britain's importation of indentured servants from South and East Asia to replace enslaved laborers following the Emancipation Act of 1833. Far reports the same racist assumptions she encountered in the "Middle West" as "[o]ccasionally an Englishman will warn me against the 'brown boys' of the island, little dreaming that I too am of the 'brown people' of the earth" (225). The Englishmen's admonitions against her possible intimate contacts with "brown boys" undergird the racialized and gendered formula for the lynching of people of color in the United States. In response, her self-inclusive use of "brown people" frames a global critique of imperial whiteness.

Correspondingly, an early memory that Far documents in "Leaves" takes place in England, at "a children's party, given by the wife of an Indian

officer whose children were schoolfellows of mine. I am only six years of age, but have attended a private school for over a year, and have already learned that China is a heathen country, being civilized by England" (218). This passage reveals intimate childhood memories sedimented with xenophobic and imperialist knowledge regimes, resonating with Stoler's argument that "colonial institutions, designed to shape young bodies and minds, were central to imperial policies and their self-fashioned rationalities... [with] an abiding interest in a sentimental education, in the rearing of the young, and in affective politics" (43).

Even as she narrates her early encounter with colonial racial logics, "The dissonant moments in Far's sentimentalism allow space for her explorations of transgression that cannot easily be included in projects of political utility: such recalcitrance speaks to how the requirements for sympathetic literary representation intertwine with the evolving apparatus of immigration as a modern manifestation of sentimental biopolitics" (Yao, 2015). The presence of the Indian officer recalls British colonialism in South Asia. Far directs attention to the fact that she is only six years old, yet in the single year that she has attended school in Great Britain, she has "*already* learned that China is a heathen country, being civilized by England" (italics added). The "already" carries multiple resonances. As a small child, the author has fully absorbed the colonialist rhetoric of benevolently civilizing the Other. Within this atmosphere, she is also "already" Othered when her Chinese heritage is revealed. Finally, the "already" read in the tone of a child's boast or lament also reflects the sensitive internalization of this racist rhetoric, exposing the school's imperial bestowing and regulation of knowledge. The author's careful observations and comparisons enable her later, in Canada, the United States, and Jamaica, not only to grasp and redirect knowledge production, but also to create a counter-knowledge against, and uncontained by, colonial and racist rhetoric. "Leaves," thus, traces intimate memories, indicating the critical value of transnational encounters for shaping Far's politics and amplifying her investment in producing counter-narratives to the dominant ideologies of imperial racism.

Reading, Writing, and Knowledge Production in *The Pagoda*

Born a girl child into a poor family in nineteenth-century China, Powell's protagonist is not supposed to learn to read or write. Lowe⁴ (or A-yin, as Lowe's given name is revealed to be on the last page of the book⁵), notes that their father—a coffin maker and sign painter (24) who "smell[s] of ink" (189)—sends Lowe's brothers out into the world for formal schooling while introducing Lowe to literacy in private. Lowe is raised as a boy by this parent and taught calligraphy while "sitting in the unfinished coffins under the yellow glare of oil lamps" behind the shop's

deadbolt (25). The scene is highly suggestive: the child must be taught in secret, in darkness. Literacy is linked to danger for both, but specifically to death for Lowe, literally seated in a casket in "the *dead* of night" (25, emphasis added).⁶

The other man who teaches Lowe to read and write is Cecil—this time in English. Cecil, the owner of a small ship he uses to bring indentured laborers from China to Jamaica, fills his cabin with various types of texts: "*barricades* of books, the sheets of paper and old maps dotted with ink spread out on the floor, tacked on the walls, and piled high on the great wide desk that dwarfed the room" (69, emphasis added). Strikingly, that cabin space becomes a site of trauma for Lowe in the forms of physical imprisonment, rape, and the forced erasure of their female identity. Literacy thus takes on valences of the traumatic as well. Once they arrive in Jamaica and Cecil establishes Lowe as a shopkeeper, the link between violence and writing occurs again when Lowe recalls,

Every time Cecil came [to the shop], he [Lowe]⁷ was *assaulted* with the memories of the ship.... sketches and watercolors, the loose, rough-cut sheets of brown paper scattered across the carpeted floor with illustrations, the scrawl of letters and words Cecil was teaching him.

... rope wrenching into his narrow wrists, ... Cecil's teeth tight on the tip of his earlobe; ... and Lowe lying there, no image behind the expressionless eyes, ... no movements save for a soft and precise *singing* from *paper*-thin lips. (96, emphasis added)

The brutality of the voyage—initially cast in this scene as violence inflicted upon Lowe's mind (as opposed to their body) in the form of traumatic memories—is wrapped up in images of paper and writing: sketches, letters, and literacy lessons are scattered around the scene of the physical rape. In contrast, Lowe's presence in the ship's cabin is rendered in terms of their voice: their "soft and precise singing" ties Lowe to orality. This sound and the movements of the mouth necessary to create this artistic expression are the only signs of the protagonist being alive.

Literacy is not solely connected to the male oppression of women in the novel; Cecil's identity as a white man parallels Miss Sylvie's position as a white-skinned woman. Cecil brings Sylvie, a woman of undisclosed mixed ancestry, into Lowe's household to serve as a mother to young Elizabeth, the child born of the sexual violence between Cecil and Lowe on the ship. Although Ann-Marie Lee Loy is correct when she interprets Sylvie and Lowe as two people struggling against "the powerlessness and limitations of the gendered female body as it had been defined

in China and Jamaica around the turn of the century" (12), the critic underplays the advantages and social capital that Sylvie's complexion allows her—quite different from those to which Lowe has access in the rigid British colonial hierarchy. Indeed, Sylvie's access to educational privileges and leisure time makes possible her pursuits of reading and writing for pleasure "at the great desk in her study" (222).

In their analysis of a mid-eighteenth-century desk from Puebla de Los Angeles, Mexico, as a colonial object with proximities to sugar plantation histories, Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra ask, "what sociality and behaviors are held within the materiality of the desk? ... Who had the leisure to sit at the desk, and what did they write as they gazed at the painted maps? Were they curious if the Black workers depicted were enslaved or free?" (42). Where Cecil owns walls—"barricades"—of books, Powell indicates that Sylvie possesses "columns of texts fitted into ceiling-high shelves" (28), alluding to the architecture of the spaces that literate subjects inhabit. Lowe is largely excluded from these spaces. After their shop burns with Cecil inside, Lowe knows that the police—upholders of white colonial authority—will only want to talk to Sylvie, who is female, but white. The officers abide by colonial markers of authority, protecting the narrow passageways of access as they maintain their own forms of masculinist control over the written word: they keep records "with their black notebooks and bristling mustaches" (19).

It therefore seems highly significant when, each evening in the weeks after Sylvie first arrives and "sen[ds] a note by way of either Dulcie, the housekeeper, ... or Dulcie's son, Omar, imploring Lowe to join them for dinner," that Lowe decides not to respond to the missives. We interpret this act as a metaphor for the protagonist's refusal to comply with the colonial order. "[E]ach day he crumpled the note and burned it in the fire that cooked his meals, cursing the audacity of these porcelain alabaster people to want to control his life so thoroughly and completely" (107). His resistance appears, on the surface, to be about his jealousy: he is competing with Sylvie for Elizabeth's affection and for the place as "true" mother. The fact that this rivalry takes place in the form of written correspondence, however, is infinitely compelling.

Despite Lowe's obsession with building a pagoda that will function as a site for teaching future Chinese/Jamaican generations to acquire literacy skills and pursue white collar professions associated with book-learning—"law and medicine, public speaking and drama"—as well as Cantonese and Mandarin literature (41), the character has a troubled relationship to texts: in both his lack of access to them and his challenge to their absolute authority. He has been thoroughly conditioned by what literacy studies scholar Eric Darnell Pritchard identifies as "literacy normativity": "value systems that say what is not literacy, who is and is

not literate, what is an acceptable... way to acquire [it] and how suitable is the space in which to do it, and what are the appropriate materials for literacy practices" (22 of ProQuest Ebook).

Sylvie's position as a part of the colonial order, marked by her ties to literacy and the written word, is conveyed once again after Elizabeth elopes, has children, and establishes a home of her own. Sylvie sends her

a travel journal Uncle Cecil had left there with accounts of some of his travels, a book with soft moldy boards, a flimsy binding, and humid pages that were loose, coming apart, sticking to her fingers and to each other, with pages that had been ripped out, reorganized, rewritten, still wet with ink that ran, smudged, leaked into sentences, that set the room awash with the humming, murmuring sea, the shrieking gulls, the clanging masts from the forests of boats. (65-66)

The "moldy boards" of the book suggest rot; its "soft[ness]" and "flimsy" binding imply that this text is not sturdy or, by extension, reliable. The loose pages, "coming apart," reinforce the notion of the flimsiness of construction both of the physical document and the narrative within. Powell associates Cecil's written ledger with a lack of substance that counters notions of history and truth. The torn-out pages, the smeared and illegible words, the rewritten and reorganized accounts—all indicate facts that have been omitted, changed, and reordered: stories that have been revised by a writer hoping to preserve his reputation, remember the past in a nostalgic way, or fit into the established record.

The Pagoda allows readers to extend these ideas, considering other ways that written documents can manipulate not just individuals, but entire populations. Cecil's journal triggers trauma in Lowe, "set[ting] the room awash... with the sea," causing Lowe to physically relive the distress of the passage from China as Cecil's captive. This power over Chinese bodies echoes certain details of indentureship preserved in historical records. The first Chinese men brought to the British Caribbean arrived in Trinidad in 1806 as part of an experimental colony of about 200 sugarcane laborers from Macao, Malaya, and Calcutta. From 1838, which marked the abolition of slavery in the British empire, until the end of World War I, over 500,000 new workers had entered the plantation system in the British West Indies: 80% from India, approximately 8% from Madeira, and a little under 4% from China. Written contracts drawn up in Asia were indecipherable to the laborers who could not read or write. And, when they reached the Caribbean, they were also subject to an "elaborate system of regulations... in immigration ordinances passed by

local legislatures (and sanctioned by the Colonial Office" (Look Lai 11)—legal texts that controlled their mobility. These mandates frequently involved severe penalties, such as jail time or extensions of the indenture period, for major crimes as well as minor offenses, such as failing to work up to a given standard. Other statutes bound indentured servants to specific plantations; yet others restricted their mobility rights outside of the plantation milieu. Official written documents were also required for contracted laborers to travel beyond an area of two miles outside of a plantation's boundaries. Historian Walton Look Lai notes that this strict pass system "could be utilized either for the paternalistic protection of the immigrant in a new and strange environment, or for the abuse of his labour power by unscrupulous plantation officials" (11), a statement directly applicable to Cecil's manipulation of Lowe's body on both the ship and Jamaican soil. In these ways, written texts served as a trap—a cage and a prison—to the indentured laborers brought from South and East Asia to serve on sugarcane plantations after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies.

Powell refers to bills "now sitting in legislature" that stymie Chinese businesses so they cannot challenge the operations of white merchants (57). The Chinese men in the novel, "faces haggard and gray," have "fingers still glistening from the India ink that bound them to contracts—two pounds a month for five years at seventeen, twenty hours a day, six days a week" (Powell 43). These contracts "promised one thing when they signed in Whampoa but presented another once they arrived on the estates" (44). All of these papers lie in sharp contrast to the blueprints for the pagoda—imagined by a multiply marginalized subject for a marginalized community. And significantly, Lowe never completes the pagoda; it stands unrealized by the novel's conclusion, whereas papers exist, get preserved, and continue to produce racialized subjects.

Cecil, as a white-skinned European man, avoids official documentation but has the luxury of employing these texts for his benefit whenever he desires—the "laws that had been passed to deter [Black and brown] people from working away from the estates, the high taxes that had been instituted to prevent them from starting their own landholding business, from opening up shops" (135). With just a small ship and some capital, "[he] could disregard the contract system, where they'd have to dole out money per head at immigration for each Chinese" (17). On his last voyage, his boat—which he has received, significantly, as a part of his uncle's involvement in the slave trade,⁸ "collect[ing] the African people and sell[ing] them" (67)—contains 800 Chinese laborers: 500 kidnapped ("illegals" without contracts), only 300 with documentation to pass through official channels. Cecil's racial, national, and gender privilege allows him to operate both within the legal system and outside of it.

Cecil's ability to navigate by the stars is described in terms of

literacy—access to a variety of coded narratives—underscoring his connections to reading and writing. Upon inheriting his ship, "in twos he could *read the sky* like the belly of his hand, *like a newspaper*" (67, emphasis added). He is able to advance his career and increase his profits enough to have "hired captains to run things and he *looked after the accounts*" (67, emphasis added). His facility with inscribed signs stands in striking contrast to Lowe's lack of access to written documents. On several occasions, the protagonist is described as sitting in "*Miss Sylvie's study*" (130, 144, emphasis added); this space of reading, writing, and learning is not identified as belonging to both Lowe and Sylvie, despite decades of co-residence. Lowe "started innumerable novels and biographies of great men, none of which he had the patience to finish" (130). Here, anxiety over the possible exposure of childhood gender identity prevents Lowe from completing the texts, but their unreadability is also significant in that these works "of great men" can never include Lowe, as transgender, as Asian, as non-white Jamaican.

It seems significant, then, that while Lowe's father is initially depicted as an avid reader so deeply invested in literacy that he insists, despite tradition, on teaching his daughter to read, he seems grounded in oral traditions. "[Lowe's] father *recited by heart* and with his eyes closed soliloquies from plays and entire books of love poetry" (25, emphasis added). The coffin maker has "ideas for a book," but the production is endless, never finding its way onto the page: "he'd been making for twenty-three years... a collection of nine short stories, all of which had already been titled, all the pages numbered, some with illustrations; only the stories were *left to be written*" (25, emphasis added). Also unfinished, marking the novel's ambivalence toward written documents, is Lowe's letter to Elizabeth. Before trying to write this confessional to their daughter—the act of literacy that opens the novel—Lowe "had never written a letter before and had had to rifle through *Miss Sylvie's moldy and decaying correspondence* in order to find the correct form" (5, emphasis added). Powell's protagonist is distanced from literacy from the very start of the narrative, distanced from the formality of written correspondence and formal education. When "he pick[s] up the pen. It quivered in his hand, jumped out, and clattered on the desk" (6). Although readers might intuit that Sylvie's letters are "moldy and decaying" from age, one gleans from the start that literacy—reading, writing, and physical texts—occupies a complex role throughout *The Pagoda*. Therefore, when Lowe hears a voice that startles them while writing the letter and the paper falls, "his feet were frantic, searching for the letter, the letter that would reveal him, point him out, disgrace him in front of everybody" (10). The document is dangerous, and he eventually burns it (28). Lowe returns again and again to try to capture their ideas on the page: "Ask anybody, I been writing you this letter for years... maybe I had to lose every damn thing first and fall

down so low and so deep that I almost hit bottom before I could finish writing it finally... And exactly with the words put just so" (245). Lowe signs the letter, which ends the novel, but Western notions of completed missives, linear narratives, and "logical" texts are still undermined: *The Pagoda* begins and ends with the letter, creating a circular rather than linear form, and the action ends with the letter written but not actually sent. The phrase "words put just so" suggests the finality of a singular narrative, and exempts other versions and possibilities; however, Lowe's own inhabitation of genders demands more complexity—a refusal of imposed, static taxonomies. In other words, the (symbolic) perpetual deferral of this letter perfectly echoes the nature of flux of Lowe's gender identity and position in the community.

So why create this link between writing, documents, and trauma? Especially when what Lowe ostensibly desires most through the course of the novel is to construct a pagoda—a building, or set of buildings, that he envisions as a "school for the Chinese children born on the island. A school and meetinghouse where they could hold weddings and celebrate festivals" (40). Lowe's friend Kywing, also an immigrant from China, sees no use for the pagoda. Thinking primarily of profits from his physical labor and his eventual return to China, he remarks, "we not learners here, man. We didn't come to turn learners.... [M]y big boy there, talking this *nonsense about law, bout sacred and universal history!*" (40, emphasis added). While Lowe perceives literacy and book-learning as "nonsense," they imagine a space for children to learn "law and medicine, public speaking and drama, and... literature" (41), a space to "liberate themselves"—notably not *ourselves*—"from shopkeeping." And, even further into the future, they fantasize about "this club, this benevolent society writing its own newspaper, reporting on events affecting Chinese both here and abroad. There would even be an obituary section and another announcing weddings and births, and still another reporting on those murdered in cold blood... on those opening up new businesses" (41). The newspaper suggests the power of self-representation: capturing the life stories (obituaries), culture (weddings), accurate census data (births), successes (new businesses), and injustices against (murders) one's community instead of being captured and distorted by the writing of others.

The pagoda stands as a potent symbol of resistance against the "multitude of schools [that] had sprung up [all over the country]. Mico Teachers Training, Munro, Mannings. Down by his way alone, five more missionary schools, two trade centers, and a teacher training college. Why not one for the Chinese so they could learn Commerce and Geography, Elements of Astrology?" (40). The mission schools in particular point toward oppressive colonial history. Powell notes that "Spaniards came [to Jamaica], raping and pillaging with guns *and Bibles*

and the words of God" (71, emphasis added). Among the gifts Lowe brings to Kywing's children when they are young are books, texts "from one of Miss Sylvie's husband's old trunks, wet with *mildew and rotting* in the buttery: three bloated copies of *Pilgrim's Progress*, with passages underlined in ink... [and] an atlas with the pictures faded and the names of countries inked in Latin" (36, emphasis added). Again, these texts not only rot with age, and from the damp tropical climate, but symbolically as well. These books belonged to the oppressor, the white European ruler of these colonized lands. They are colonizing texts, with the power to warp the minds of Kywing's and Sharmilla's Indo-Chinese Jamaican children. The very currents that allowed colonization via European migration and expansion also create the atmospheric conditions for colonial decay—the natural elements themselves conspire against colonizing texts.

Queering Heteronormative Narratives

Numerous scholars have written about the queered family structures present in Powell's novel. Yumi Pak argues that Miss Sylvie offers Lowe "an alternative model of conceptualizing the world: a Black queer maternal that considers a horizontal passing *on*, rather than a vertical passing *down*" (49). Tao Leigh Goffe theorizes that what is at stake in the novel "is not the task of rewriting the past or inserting queer narratives into history but rather to meditate on the production of history and the role of power" (59). Jarrod Hayes' *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (2016) provides an especially productive framework for pursuing the literacy line of inquiry in the book. Comparing "roots narratives" from African, Jewish, and Armenian diasporas, Hayes explores how the writers explored—the majority of whom were/are *not* LGBTQIA-identified—create stories of returns to homeland and origins that "queer" the connection "between diasporic identity and its roots by acknowledging their own fictionality" (20). Hayes argues that "the *telling* of the story is actually what creates the origins and indeed, the identity rooted in them" (3, italics added); we intend to pay even closer attention to the distinction between *telling* a story and *writing* one down. Hayes notes,

Queer Roots is... about a certain obsession with beginnings and origins and the impossibility of returning to those origins with any certainty, or of knowing that the beginnings one has returned to are the true beginnings and not just the product of the fiction making that is the telling of the story of that return. It is a book about the writtenness of roots, the impossibility of roots, and the importance of recognizing both. (1)

The scholar's interrogations of rhizomatic theories of origin, "alternative

forms of affiliation and descent" (10), mythography, and the ways that writing works lend us productive pathways to wrestle with the complex meanings of the writing depicted in Powell's novel.

Powell forcefully wrenches apart the heteronormative imperative of the colonial enterprise, conventional celebrations of diaspora identity, and romantic searches for origins: Lowe is almost violated in a legal marriage in China, raped during the diasporic passage to the Caribbean, and Lowe's Jamaican-born daughter-of-the-diaspora is raised by a gender-queer couple. Stefan Helmreich's etymological discussion of the word "diaspora" is useful for considering the implications of Powell's choices. The Greek word for diaspora (διασπορά), meaning "dispersion," stems from the words for "through" (διὰ) and a verb meaning "to sow or scatter" (σπειρείν). Because the sowing of seeds has strong sexual connotations—seeds are metaphorical for sperm—"d]iaspora, in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates" (245, quoted in Hayes 16). Hayes also points to the work of Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, who bring together myths of origins and heterosexual diasporas in their interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve: "[T]he simultaneity of the expulsion from Eden and the installation of heterosexuality suggest that Western sexual and diasporal discourses are fundamentally, if anxiously related" (2, quoted in Hayes 18). It should be noted that this narrative from the Book of Genesis simultaneously connects diaspora to sinfulness, disobedience, and *forbidden knowledge*—ideas crucial to colonial regimes seeking to maintain control over their colonized subjects. The colonizer's control of knowledge, typically tied to literacy, makes Powell's complex renderings of reading and writing in the hands of various characters an intriguing anti-colonial commentary.

And here, again, weaving together our analysis of *The Pagoda* with Far's Jamaica writings proves fruitful. Far undermines the primacy of the Christian creation story in "The Sugar-Cane Baby," first published in *Good Housekeeping* in May 1910, presenting a counter-narrative to an ostensibly benevolent colonizing mechanism. The short story opens with vivid, colorful imagery of nature's abundance: "Humming birds glistening like jewels... darted from flower to flower; insects of all colors and shapes droned over the grass and vines; lizards, green, yellow, speckled, black-and-gold, glided... Coiled around a flat, smooth stone was a green spotted snake. In the midst of all sat the sugar-cane baby sucking a piece of green sugar cane" (258). The scene is idyllic and Edenic, with Christian overtones of both snake and child. However, readers soon learn that the site is a sugar plantation, not the Garden of Eden: "The mother of the sugar-cane baby was working in the cane field. All morning she had carried him on her back; but in the afternoon

he had become restless, so she had laid him under a clump of bamboo outside the plantation, and without misgiving had returned to her labor" (258-9). Although slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1838, plantation owners continued to exploit indentured laborers, most from India and China. Far undermines the conventional Judeo-Christian text by suggesting that *inside* the plantation ["Eden"] is a dangerous space—*outside* is safest place to leave her baby. The passage simultaneously insists on reckoning with the reality of forced labor amid such a beautiful landscape, embedding a critique of the colonial plantation system that might otherwise selectively portray the luxuries of those "high up in the world" ("Leaves" 225, emphasis added).⁹

Far continues to set up the colonial logic that seeks to depict colonial subjects as uncivilized, and poor, immigrant, Black, and brown women as negligent mothers (which justified the tearing apart of families during slavery, and the relocation of Indigenous children to missionary boarding schools)—ideas with which the primary readership of *Good Housekeeping* would likely have concurred. When she introduces two Sisters of Mercy into the narrative, the ostensibly benevolent Christianity of the story becomes much more explicit; the nuns, coming across the child and the snake, become alarmed:

"Dear little thing!" murmured the younger Sister, as the elder raised him in her arms. "See, how pretty he is; his little features are almost perfect; his eyes as black as night; and his skin—his silky skin is the color of a dead leaf."

"A Hindu child!" observed the elder. Then almost passionately, "Oh, these mothers, these mothers! What love have they for their children when they can leave them like this?" (259)

The narrative suggests that the Sisters' mission in Jamaica is to convert "heathen" laborers, intimately linked to the colonial system: when they first see the infant, they refer to him as a "Hindu child," revealing their attention to religion, conversion, and race. Far, however, constructs a parallel version of the Christian creation story offered in Genesis. Notably, the Indian woman emerges after the fall, as she labors, in the dual meanings of working the land and giving birth. The Sisters encounter the infant in the "wilderness," not a domesticated garden, and the snake is not Satan, but instead a protector "trained by the baby's father to guard the little one" (261). By reframing the biblical story, the text unsettles religious epistemologies that justify racial hierarchies that cast racialized "others" as inferior and directs the critique instead to the injustices of colonialism.

Far's attention to the transnational dynamics of religion, labor, colonialism, race, and gender in this story does critical work in unsettling

normalized imperial ideologies. She indirectly challenges racializing rhetoric, partly through her refusal to engage in racializing language, and partly through embedding a critique of racializing rhetoric into her diction. The Sisters, for example, take the baby to the convent orphanage where it lies in one of many white cribs in a long white room—the baby becomes symbolically immersed in whiteness. The narrator identifies most of the other babies as “pure pickaninnies, but not a few bore the mark of the white man in complexion and feature. The sugar-cane baby was distinguished as being the only little native of Asia” (260). These two sentences point readers in several complex directions. The latter, referring to the sugar-cane baby as “the only little native of Asia,” pulls together the transnational framework of the story, reminding readers of the forced labor of Africans controlled by the British empire and the presence of South Asian laborers who were imported when slavery ended in the British empire in 1838. The term “pickaninnies” is striking for Far, who rarely uses the term “Black” in “Leaves” and “Sugar-Cane”; she relies instead upon more indirect language such as “the reputed descendents of Ham” and “brown people” (“Leaves,” 225) and critiques directly racist language such as the n-word (“Leaves,” 224). “Pickaninny” generally functions as a pejorative in the English language—“A black child. (Now considered offensive when used by a white person of a black child.) *Caribbean* and *U.S.* A black child of African origin or descent” (*OED*). The word choice stresses the significance of the rest of the line: that “not a few bore the mark of the white man in complexion and feature.” The phrase gestures to the ways that colonial contact and profiteering produced and also “rescued” orphans.¹⁰ The sentence also gestures toward sexual violence against laborers of African descent, perpetrated by the white plantation-owning class and, while structurally incommensurate, akin to the brutality endured by Lowe during the passage from China to Jamaica. As Cutter notes, Sui Sin Far is not always forward about sex in her works, much less in the context of coerced imperial violence. The narrative setting, away from the United States and Canada, and its more obvious plantation activity may have encouraged her to write more explicitly about colonial sexual violence (Cutter 87).

“Reading” the Body

As Gabrielle Owen argues, “Queer epistemologies... allow for a profound recognition of *what is real* about the body and desire even when the cultural norms of gender and sexuality or the limits of language make such recognition seem unthinkable or impossible” (194). Notably, Owen’s analysis includes norms of age as well—particularly the constructions of limited categories that operate to ensure the management and control of particular bodies. This concept lends itself well to analysis of Sui Sin Far’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” in that

Far frequently resists and rejects attempts by others to lock her into constrictive frameworks of identity. For instance, when Far writes about the childhood experience of being singled out for her Chinese heritage at a party, one perceives the ways her body and physical features are "read"—they are looked at, interpreted, and symbolically integrated into the body of colonial knowledge. During this recollection, Far identifies a "white haired old man" as imposing an authoritarian imperial gaze on her body:

"He adjusts his eyeglasses and surveys me critically. 'Ah, indeed!' he exclaims. 'Who would have thought it at first glance? Yet now I see the difference between her and other children. What a peculiar coloring! Her mother's eyes and hair and her father's features, I presume. Very interesting little creature!'" (218)

The author's use of "eyeglasses" as the medium through which the man "surveys" her points to the intense racializing reliance on the ocular, the colonizing language of surveying land for territorial expansion, and the objectification of the girl's body, with its "peculiar coloring" as a text to be interpreted. Far's response works to distance herself from this colonizing gaze: emphasizing her sense of violation, she writes, "I had been called from my play for the purpose of inspection. I do not return to it. For the rest of the evening I hide myself behind a hall door and refuse to show myself until it is time to go home" (218-9). Although hiding might appear to be a gesture of defeat, Far effectively resists the racializing gaze by "refus[ing] to show [her]self," embodying and critically interrupting the injury and the reading of her phenotypical features in a way that allows her to disrupt an authoritative, empirical, patriarchal, and putatively scientific British colonial gaze.

Elsewhere in the memoir, she comments on other ways she chooses to subvert colonial attempts to interpret and interpolate her body. Upon moving to the United States, she realizes that generating misreadings is a relatively easy task, though sustaining them becomes psychologically damaging: "It is not difficult, in a land like California, for a half Chinese, half white girl to pass as one of Spanish or Mexican origin. This poor child does, tho she lives in nervous dread of being 'discovered'" (227). One need only think of Powell's Miss Sylvie, who hides her racial identity as a person of African descent from her white husband, eventually killing him to maintain the charade, before moving in with Lowe.¹¹ She does not reveal her parentage immediately, allowing everyone in the Jamaican community to read her white skin as the sole marker of her identity. When Sui Sin Far rejects the suggestions of acquaintances "who advise me to 'trade' upon my nationality... [by] dress[ing] in Chinese costume, carry[ing] a fan in my hand, wear[ing] a pair of scarlet beaded slippers,

liv[ing] in New York,” and “discours[ing] on my spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors” (230), readers might question whether she is acting in alignment with Miss Sylvie and others who chose to “pass” for white. Far refuses to render herself as a hypervisible, readable emblem of Chinese-ness, and indicates her polite dismissal of these advisors by calling them “some funny people” (230). She expresses a desire, rather, to bond with the Chinese American community, “making myself familiar” with everyday folks instead of catering to white patrons and other members of society who can insure her literary success.

Miss Sylvie’s choice to let white elites and working-class people of color in Jamaica believe she belongs to the planter class should not be interpreted simply as a rejection of her African heritage in pursuit of a sense of belonging with an allegedly superior European community. “Passing” for white in a setting where the one-drop rule dictated racial authenticity would have been one of the few possible ways for a Black woman of the time to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Powell situates the complexity of Sylvie’s identity in a type of intertextual framework. Her body is not the only document analyzed by others to determine her status; rather, she is also interpreted through the phenotypic aspects of her children’s bodies. She feels compelled to give away three newborns because “[t]hey were too brown” (143): their African ancestry is legible in the color of their skin, making her own bloodline the subject of intensive scrutiny.

The Pagoda also presents the body of Lowe’s daughter Elizabeth as a text that requires careful reading. The protagonist describes their daughter’s face as a mask with a smile that gets “pasted onto her face” (64), like an item in a scrapbook. Without clearly defined eyebrows, she “ha[s] penciled in a narrow brown arch above her eyes that put her face in perpetual question” (63). The references to pencils further aligns her visage with a written page: it becomes a surface marked with inscriptions. Interestingly, her husband, who is African Jamaican, is perceived by Lowe as “the dead stamp of Cecil” (78). A stamp suggests an imprint to be read, or an adhesive attached to correspondence, again allowing *The Pagoda*’s author to gesture toward notions of literacy. The flurry of references to the act of reading bodies and evidence of writing on bodies again highlights Powell’s attention to literacy and the fraught access to this set of skills—as well as to the power that literacy is supposed to bestow—for members of the community outside of the European planter class.

Ann-Marie Lee Loy describes Chinese workers transported to the British Caribbean colonies in the nineteenth century as multifaceted instruments of “colonial power and control”: they were brought in as a cheap labor force as well as for the establishment of a “neutralizing buffer zone” between enslaved Black people and European planters (2).

Ostensibly apolitical, and culturally distinct from the enslaved population and Europeans, they were viewed as "no real economic competition or social threat to the planter class" and recruited to keep colonial hierarchies firmly intact (3). Lee Loy's article asserts that "Powell's novel reveals a special interest in the construction and mediation of social identities, particularly gender," with the protagonist's "Chineseness" stereotyped as a result: *The Pagoda* "re-inscribes a number of colonial ideas about Chinese alienation" (11). In other words, Lee Loy critiques the way the novel, while negotiating conflicts between an individual's "desires" and "the social roles and positions afforded to their gender," aligns Chinese Caribbean subjects with being unassimilable—not only socially and culturally but in the alienation between Lowe's physical body "and the inner being or soul that it houses" (11). She astutely connects constructions of the self and constructions of the other to the power of colonial discourse: "Simply put, power produces knowledge. It is those who are in positions of authority and have the power to control the dissemination of ideas who shape what we know, or think we know, about ourselves and others, despite the fact that this knowledge reflects the desires, biases, needs and anxieties of those who construct it and are as such, limited sites of knowledge" (13). In other words, Lee Loy asserts that the source of tension does not lie in the disconnect between Lowe's body and the spirit; the true conflict lies between identity as a discursive construction. We believe it crucial to parse the novel even more specifically through notions of literacy, and not only discourse: the ways bodies get "read" or interpreted by others.

The connection between written documents and experiences "written" on human bodies is brought into play in *The Pagoda* more literally when Lowe wonders about Dulcie perusing the dailies. "He knew she combed the same newspaper daily, poring over the same article, reading and rereading and grunting the same profound grunt, though, as far as he knew, she couldn't as much as spell her own name. Was it the announcement with word of the bounty?" (128) He imagines that Dulcie is the revolutionary who was almost beaten to death by the British for inspiring uprisings on sugar plantations and then "paraded naked through the streets, her skin gutted by whiplash" (127). Unable to see her naked body, he is unsure of her identity; he is blocked from reading her body just as she is blocked from reading the paper by laws that forbade literacy among enslaved people prior to abolition, and the post-emancipation system of labor that did not allow for any education other than unrelenting work for survival.

Lowe consistently, but unsuccessfully, tries to "read" Dulcie's body for signs of what's in her mind: he attempts "to decode the moods betrayed by her sordid murmuring, the messages hidden in her solid

back, in the hump of her shoulders, in the sturdy neck. He glanced at her *unreadable* brown eye when she handed him his meals" (126, emphasis added). Once again, the protagonist's failure at reading—or perhaps misreading—separates him from the colonial class that selfishly exploits marginalized populations and seeks to reinforce social hierarchies. He does not belong to the caste that engaged in the historical practices of branding enslaved peoples and indentured servants or cutting off the braids of Chinese laborers—all identifying marks inscribed onto bodies to make them more legible as property. Powell notes, "Planters chopped off their glossy imperial queues and emblazoned, in bold red letters on their skins, the initials of plantations" (45). The shearing of Chinese workers' hair also served as the symbolic erasure of a cultural text—an attempt to eliminate emotional ties to the home country.

The concept of reading the body is obviously essential in *The Pagoda* when it comes to gender. Lowe's father rejects his child when he is able to read femininity on Lowe's adolescent body: puberty leads to isolation, and then to being sold to an old man to cover debts. On the ship, the revelation of Lowe's female body beneath male attire results in sexual assault, and the protagonist's life in Jamaica for decades afterward is spent in desperate attempts to be recognized as male. In the protagonist's anxiety about the community's discovery of the gender they were assigned at birth, escaped during childhood, had reinscribed for marriage and then again during the weeks of sexual abuse on the ship, we come to recognize their body as a dangerous text with hidden meanings. Powell refuses to allow readers to pin down a single interpretation. Can Lowe accurately be described as transgender, when their father's refusal to acknowledge them as an adolescent girl and Cecil's insistence on their maintaining male persona in Jamaica preclude choice? Powell's omniscient narrator always refers to Lowe as "he," even when Lowe stops wearing the false moustache, starts wearing women's clothes again, and sits down to write a letter to Elizabeth that they sign "Lau A-yin" (245). This reclaiming of the female given name along with the Chinese spelling of "Lowe" suggests a return to "origins," but this identity is queer—it encompasses his longing for Sylvie, sexual relationships with both Joyce and Omar, and the "suffocat[ing]" and "smother[ing]" embrace of Sharmilla, the wife of good friend Kywing, another Chinese migrant. Lowe does not fight the hug, but "allow[s Sharmilla]... to blot the last breath from his body, to absorb him completely" (238). In this scene, Lowe symbolically dies—and by implication, is reborn—in Jamaica, "absorbed" into an Indian Caribbean woman's body. The embrace stands in striking contrast to their dynamic earlier in the novel, when Lowe "extracted himself neatly... and stood back," externally jovial but "wanting only to forget and to distract her curling eyes from lolling along the arches of his limbs, *from reading him, a smooth-spined*

text" (35, emphasis added). Fearing discovery, Lowe "thought perhaps she desired him, but he found the idea so worrisome, so marked with frustration and distress, that he wiped it completely from *the shelves of his mind*" (36, emphasis added). The shelf metaphor suggests the ledges for displaying wares at the shop—a core part of Lowe's identity is that of merchant—but bookshelves represent another possibility, especially given Lowe's identification of self as a book with a spine. Thus, Powell repeatedly frames identity in terms of literacy, but not in a single form. Written documents are not the only ones that have value: when Lowe arrives to Jamaica, "His English was spare. He couldn't read their furtive glances and secret smiles. He didn't understand their codes, their gestures of kindness" (65). Clearly, one of the most crucial means of survival is gaining the ability to read the people in one's community, even as he does not fit easily into any community to call his own.

Fear, however, makes Lowe falter and dedicate decades of struggle to writing a "false" text of self and maintaining a complicated gender performance. At one point, trying to calm anxieties about being "outed," Lowe thinks, "Nothing at all could betray him unless he removed his clothes, and over the years his instincts had grown keener and he could detect the precise moment at which innocent conversations verged on violence, when a demure innuendo could leap out of hand, when boundaries were crossed, and at that point he knew to remove himself" (118). This constant vigilance comes at a price to their physical and mental health: "All of a sudden Lowe felt exhausted. All of a sudden he felt burdened by his costumes, loaded down by his masquerade, by the labyrinth of lies, the excessiveness of his imagination, that *self that no longer had inherent meaning and instead was just a compilation of fiction*" (124-5, emphasis added). Notably, Powell shifts from the language of performance—"costumes" and "masquerade"—to the language of writing with her choice of the word "fiction." In an era when laws prevented most women from China from emigrating to Jamaica (42), legal documents and other forms of writing represent restrictions and danger rather than freedom and empowerment, indicating yet another way that the possibility of Lowe's existence as a stable subject is deconstructed.

When Lowe begins exploring Miss Sylvie's land with Omar, their quiet walks are redolent with desire. Passing a cigar back and forth, "fingers slightly brushing... Lowe liked the easy silence between them, and the brooding, pouting lips of Omar, and often *he felt the lazy glow of Omar's eyes traveling the contours of his figure*, and at first the panic would rise in him.... *For after forty years he wore his costume like a glove, a second skin*" (117-8, emphasis added). Omar's "reading" of Lowe's body is as male but a masculinity distanced from certain standards of virility. He remarks, "You've small hands for a man, Mr. Lowe. Small feet" (125) and

states, "You look much better without [the mustache]. You don't need it. Look at me. Nothing at all. Definitely more attractive" (124). Lowe's attraction to Omar is partially based on signs typically interpreted as feminine: Omar is a man "who lived with his mother still, who had neither married nor fathered children and who did not sprout hairs on his chin or on his narrow and puffed-out bird chest" (117). His "feminine hands" feature "soft and crisscrossed pink palms" and his muscular limbs move in a way described as "serpentine" (119).

Decolonizing Knowledge, Texts, and Archives

As Lee Loy compellingly states in her analysis of Powell's novel, "constructions of identity, colonial or otherwise, are inherently embedded in the intersection of power and knowledge" (13). She makes the case for this argument by testifying to the authority that gives Lowe's father, Cecil, and Sylvie the power to "impose identities upon Lowe that meet their own needs" (13-4). Cecil embodies the figure of the colonizer; Sylvie wields white-skinned privilege; Lowe's father holds the position of family patriarch.

The statement can be pushed much farther, however: *The Pagoda* highlights the ways that, for Asian laborers migrating from East and South Asia, as well as enslaved Africans, the physical body was all there was to prove one's existence and experiences: legal statutes and other documents had failed these communities in the Caribbean, literacy was largely inaccessible, and in our contemporary moment the absence of detailed records marks the erasure of these subjects from history and conventional archives. Notably, Omar can be understood as an archive of a different type of information—one that is distinct from the colonial knowledge conveyed through writing and absorbed by reading conventional texts. "He knew the medicinal purposes of each bark and bush, each leaf and stem. And each tree and shrub they passed, he dwelled on their abilities to heal wounds and grow hair and pull down swellings and abort fetuses and beat back depression and cleanse blood and maintain sanity and regulate intestines and dissolve ulcers and ease murmuring hearts" (116). Omar talks to Lowe about "vermin and animals" and "impressed in Lowe's memory ways to recognize roots—the bittersweet smell, the acrid odor, the jagged edge of leaf, the five-leaf cluster that looked like a clenched fist, the burnished Indian-orange color of the stem" (116-7). Lowe's admiration for Omar's teachings suggests a key moment in the novel's push toward decolonizing knowledge. As Omar "reads" the landscape of the nonhuman natural world, Powell describes him as printing the facts—"impress[ing] them"—on his listener's memory rather than on a sheet of paper.

Correspondingly, throughout the process of writing to Elizabeth to explain his identity and history, Lowe suggests the inadequacy of the

written word to capture truth, wondering if he shouldn't tell Elizabeth the story "in person and explain face-to-face, so you can see for yourself. I am not what you think" (8). Written correspondence is deemed insufficient. Lowe's lines in the opening letter remind the reader of Cecil's disregard for the contract system in favor of the biggest profit: "the hope is you will understand. There isn't a record of any of this. Of what I am in truth. No certificates. No registration. Everything had to be quick and hush-hush. Nothing was written down" (8). Without official documentation, Lowe's identity has been their own creation, but one that is fraught with anxiety for much of the narrative.

Conclusions

Both Far's and Powell's writings speak back to popular histories of British and U.S. empires in England, North America, and Jamaica. Although Sui Sin Far's notions of racial prejudice may not specifically account for the power differentials among racialized people in the United States, her refusal to categorize and classify people by race—to read their bodies as texts with one single interpretation—is significant because, in that gesture, she refuses racial hierarchies. Her statements on race and class are attentive to the operations of labor and empire, distinguishing her vision of multiracialism from contemporary neoconservative fantasies of "racelessness" or "colorblindness" that willfully ignore historical and contemporary structural inequalities. Partly because of her own Chinese and white heritage, her focus in "Leaves" centers on "Eurasians," but she was attentive to people of African heritage and other racialized groups in her other works. That attention is evident in "The Sugar-Cane Baby" as well as in "A Chinese Boy-Girl" and "Away Down in Jamaica," a short story about an interracial love triangle published in a Montreal women's newspaper in March 1898.¹² Far's writings serve to reroute embedded circuits of knowledge production in the Global South, enriching complex histories of migration and racialization in a transnational framework.

And while *The Pagoda* is most frequently discussed as a story of alienation—cultural, gender, sexual—we choose to highlight how Patricia Powell engages with the notion of alienation from the written word. At one point, Lowe notes that "[h]e had been so locked up in his self, in his survival, more and more he saw how he did not know [the villagers]. Had not figured out how to read them" (212). The statement is easily interpreted as evidence of the protagonist's inability to achieve intimacy with anyone around them: a striking depiction of alienation from others and self (Lee Loy, 12). While this is true, the language of the passage significantly points toward the ways Lowe is blocked from participating in processes of multiple literacies, ranging from learning how to read and write as a girl child to the coded contractual languages of indenture to reading the people in his proximity.

Both authors' attentions to the intimate contact zones of race and sex address persistent, ongoing social anxieties about the policing of "normative" sexuality—white, intraracial, cis, and heterosexual—and constructions of any other acts as deviant. In nuanced and complicated ways, they problematize discourses centering on racialized, gendered, sexualized "others": discourses that are continually repurposed to construct propertied white males as "universal" national subjects. By asserting their counter-discourses, recalling marginalized histories, and creating another epistemology to critique state-sanctioned and -enforced violence, Sui Sin Far and Patricia Powell unsettle the contradictions and illogic of empire and colonial knowledge production. The policing of literacy is integral to the colonial agenda, including the reading of the proper bodies to engage in intimate acts. Although contributors to the world of textual production, which assumes an audiences' literacy, and centralizing print culture and its associations in their texts by including journalist heroes or protagonists striving toward the building of an educational institution, both Far and Powell illuminate how access to and denial of literacy was—and, by extension, continues to be—critical in both emancipation movements and in the justifications for excluding Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from the political and social sphere.

Notes

1. We have chosen a forward slash (/) between terms to signal the diasporic condition of the categories "African" and "Chinese," simultaneously challenging conceptions of an exclusively white, Euro-American U.S. (and Canadian) citizenry or an exclusively Black Jamaican citizenry.

2. Whether the portfolio belongs to a writer or a visual artist is unclear, but the tangibility of paper and notions of permanent records and physically archived sources remain.

3. Correspondingly, Far's choice of naming her collection a portfolio suggests self-conscious curation, as opposed to the messier, maximalist motivations for archive-keeping.

4. Given that Lisa Lowe is cited on multiple occasions in this article, we use her full name (first and last) from this point on to distinguish more explicitly between Lisa Lowe, the critic, and Lowe, the fictional character.

5. Lowe demands to be called A-yin shortly before the end of the novel (222), but it is unclear at this moment whether it is a name they have chosen for themselves in this new stage of life or a return to the name given by their parents until the very end of the narrative.

6. It also seems significant that Lowe's father's coffins remain empty (except for Lowe's lessons) and unfinished; their lack of use renders the burial-less deaths of Chinese indentured laborers in Jamaica (and on their way there) all the more poignant. Powell describes how "only one third" of the migrants "survived the passage—their bones scattered, sunken in beds in the middle of the Atlantic"; along with suicides—those "who walked off cliffs from overwork, who hung themselves with pigtailed looped round tree limbs, who tied stones to their feet and jumped in rivers"; and runaways who "were hunted down and strapped up to rafters and left there swinging, for birds to pluck" (45).

7. We have chosen to use "they/them" pronouns for Powell's protagonist, but preserve the pronouns used by different characters, including Lowe, when quoting from the book.

8. Powell's choice of the name "Rob" instead of "Robert" for Cecil's uncle might seem anachronistic to the twenty-first century reader; however, it illuminates the unethical nature of the man's commercial enterprise: by participating in the slave trade, he plunders, or robs, the African continent of its residents, and steals these peoples' freedom, families, culture, and humanity.

9. For a more thorough discussion of the significance of sugarcane production (and extraction) in the Caribbean, see Mimi Sheller's *Consuming the Caribbean*.

10. Laura Briggs discusses how "raising the 'orphans' of colonized people is a very familiar practice," a practice that lies squarely within imperialist "order" and "civilizing" missions (348).

11. Given that both Far's racial identity, and that of Miss Sylvie, are not stable, the significance of Far being able to pass for Spanish or Mexican (rather than "American" white) suggests a different kind of racializing mechanism at work from Miss Sylvie, particularly since the stratification of racial identities in Jamaica operate differently from the United States. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

12. For a more detailed discussion of the latter, see Cutter's "Sex, Love, Revenge, and Murder in 'Away Down in Jamaica': A Lost Short Story by Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton)." *Legacy* Vol. 21. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

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Transpacific Exoticisms: Performing Asia Across the U.S. Southern Border

Rosanne A. Sia

In 1951, Korean American soprano Florence Ahn stood center stage in an elegant gown at the Trocadero nightclub in Havana, Cuba (Figure 1). She gestured graciously toward the audience, soaking up their applause as she prepared to take her bow. Florence took her place among a group of Cuban rumba dancers costumed in polka-dot sleeves and long shiny dresses. An appreciative audience clad in furs and suits clapped from their seats at tables strewn with the remnants of drinks. The Cuban entertainment magazine *Carteles* wrote that Florence Ahn's arrival in Havana had been a triumph: "This Chinese girl came, saw, and conquered. She came to Cuba like a shining star."¹

In the postwar period, Asian Americans traveled on nightclub circuits that took them across the southern border to perform amid the glitz and glamour of Cuban and Mexican cabaret culture. Many of them had first showcased their artistic talents and "oriental" beauty at famed Asian-themed nightclubs, such as the Forbidden City in San Francisco or the China Doll in New York City.² They gained visibility during the early Cold War period when American policymakers, journalists, and cultural producers sought to demonstrate the promises of American racial democracy to audiences at home and abroad by promoting "desirable" images of race.³ This led to what Christina Klein has termed "Cold War Orientalism," a blossoming of American middlebrow entertainment about Asia, such as the musicals and films *Flower Drum Song*, *South Pacific*, and *A Many Splendored Thing*.⁴ As Klein has argued, this middlebrow

culture served the pedagogical function of teaching white Americans “correct” feelings of sympathy toward Asians and Asian Americans, but it also served to conceal war and violence across the Pacific. Along with films and musicals, American GIs brought home a taste for live Asian-themed nightclub shows. This led to the growth of lively audiences in the U.S. South at a time when the region was expanding with the postwar growth of the American military, industry, and tourism. Asian Americans took their shows on the road to entertainment hubs down south.

Their travels show how the U.S. South served as what Tara McPherson has called a “hinge point between the Americas.”⁵ Asian American entertainers boarded ferries and planes between Miami, Florida, and Havana, Cuba, or took the bus between the small border towns of McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, Tamaulipas, before heading to Monterrey and Mexico City. In turn, they criss-crossed entertainers of Asian descent traveling in the opposite direction. Asian Cuban and Asian Mexican entertainers formed part of the stream of Caribbean and Latin American artists moving across the border to cater to the American craze for tropical rumba and dancing Mexican señoritas. They brought with them Cuban fantasies of the national symbol of the *mulata*, a figure that officially incorporated Blackness and whiteness, but also carried erased histories of racial mixing with the Chinese in Cuba.⁶ Others brought with them Mexican fantasies of Asia that had origins in the sixteenth century Manila galleon trade, intimate transpacific ties subsequently denied because of Mexico’s orientation toward the transatlantic.⁷

This article draws on archival and oral history research to explore how four entertainers of Asian and mixed-Asian descent, Florence Ahn, Estela, Jadin Wong, and Su Muy Key, navigated the multiple racial and gendered imaginaries of the transpacific that circulated throughout the U.S. South, Mexico, and Cuba in the postwar era. They formed part of a much larger circulation of performers of Asian descent in this interconnected region. I argue that performers of Asian descent occupied culturally and racially ambiguous positions that allowed them to embody multiple transpacific fantasies in nightclub performances that experimented with cultural mixing. This included incorporating new genres global in scope, such as zarzuela, rumba, modern dance, and Mexican revista, developed through cross-cultural encounters during the entertainers’ travels. In doing so, they disturbed the Black and white binary in the U.S. South as well as the erasure of the long-standing Asian presence within Latin America and the Caribbean; in some cases, they also facilitated the expurgation of African-European racial mixture from certain constructions of national identity.⁸

Asian American entertainers entered the busy cultural flows that circulated throughout the Gulf Coast of the United States and Mexico, stretching into Cuba. Cold War American images of Asian beauties

assimilating into U.S. culture traveled into Mexico and Cuba through nightclub shows, theatre, and Hollywood films. Meanwhile, Cuban images of tropical Blackness that carried an erased Chinese component swept into Miami and through Veracruz to Mexico City along with the rhythms of son, rumba, mambo, and cha-cha-cha. In Mexico City it met with the “*exóticas*,” a group of vedettes who embodied racialized and sexualized fantasies of the Pacific Islands, the Far East, and the Caribbean. The image of the *exótica* traveled through live shows and films such as *Mujeres de Teatro* (1951) and *Han Matado a Tongolele* (1948) to Mexican migrant communities in the Texas-Mexico borderlands. These gendered imaginaries of the transpacific connected the U.S. South with the rich performance cultures flowing between the entertainment centers of Cuba and Mexico.

These complex transpacific cultural mixings provide an unexpected lens into the U.S. South as a bridge into the circum-Caribbean in the postwar era. The popular depiction of the U.S. South as an isolated region has been challenged by scholars who have reoriented new southern studies toward the flow of people, ideas, culture, and capital. This has refigured the U.S. South in terms of border crossings into the transatlantic and hemispheric worlds.⁹ More recently, scholars have also begun exploring how the transpacific forms a significant part of these flows through studies of Asian labor migration and capital as well as Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. South.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in the field of performance studies, scholars have explored the circulation of Caribbean, Mexican and Mexican American, African American, and Louisiana Creole entertainers who connected the U.S. South with the circum-Caribbean and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.¹¹ However, yet to be explored are the transpacific influences that form an important part of the complicated cultural exchanges within this interconnected region, as I show in this article.

Because they confound logics of racial formation, these transpacific influences have been overlooked. Scholars have described Asian Americans as occupying an “interstitial” space between the Black and white binary in the U.S. South or as sliding between American inclusion and exclusion during an era of heightened Cold War political tensions between the United States and Asia.¹² And yet, entertainers did not necessarily remain fixed within a Black and White binary or a striving toward Americanness. They leveraged their ambiguity to also slide into other national imaginaries, such as toward *mexicanidad* and *cubanidad*, within these nations that had their own long-standing connections to Asia. While the United States remained a dominating imperial force in this hemisphere, this transpacific lens reveals how nightclub entertainers created a world of rich cultural exchanges in which the United States was not the inevitable center.

I focus on two pairs of criss-crossing performers, one pair traveling on the New York City–Miami–Havana–Mexico City circuit and the other on the Texas–Mexico borderlands–Monterrey–Mexico City circuit, to trace how live performers moved inside and outside American categories of racial formation to also become enmeshed within legacies of *mestizaje* and *mulataje*. Tracing performing bodies in motion reveals how performers break down expected categories of race, nation, ethnicity, and genre. Individual performers faced their own unique constraints, such as the exclusion of Afro-Cuban people from high-class Cuban cabarets or the collapsing of Asian diversity into Chineseness. However, they found ways to circumvent these limits to appeal to diverse audiences through skilled performances that called on imaginaries of American cosmopolitanism, Afro-Asian intimacies, or nostalgic Mexican migrant imaginaries of home. While their performances drew on different national imaginaries of the transpacific, they also connected them in ways often unexpected to the performers themselves. Their vision of the transpacific reveals a U.S. South pulled toward the cultural centers of Havana and Mexico City.

The Korean Lark Meets the Cuban Rumbera

When Florence Ahn sang Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine" in her full operatic voice, she won over the audience of *Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts* television and radio show in the late 1940s. "Begin the Beguine" became one of her signature songs. The popular American jazz standard evoked longing for a past love under a starry "night of tropical splendor." Porter claimed to have written the 1935 song while on tour in the South Pacific, where he witnessed a dance that transported him back to the sultry rhythms of the beguine in Martinique.¹³ Florence took the song "Begin the Beguine" on travels that also bridged the transpacific and the Caribbean. She toured on a New York City–Miami–Havana entertainment circuit where she performed side by side with Caribbean musicians and entertainers who linked this circuit further afield to Veracruz and Mexico City, where they featured in Mexican film and cabaret. This included mixed Chinese Cubans, such as rumba dancer Estela and the legendary *orquesta femenina*, or all-girls band Anacaona. American news columnist Walter Winchell dubbed Estela and her dance partner Papo "Begin the Beguine experts" [*sic*], again evoking Porter's popular imagination of the tropical wonder of the Caribbean.¹⁴

This section explores how Florence Ahn and Estela navigated the transpacific imaginaries that circulated throughout the United States, Cuba, and Mexico, which included tropical imaginaries of Blackness with erased ties to the transpacific. Florence moved from catering to Cold War American fantasies in New York City into Cuban imaginaries of race in Havana's cabaret culture. Working across genres such as musical showtunes and Cuban zarzuela, Florence developed performances

that combined American class and sophistication with Cuban national fantasies of the *china mulata*, which gave her the cachet to become a star. Meanwhile, in Cuba, Estela used her sheer skill and talent as a rumba dancer to move away from the confining image of the foreign “chinita,” proving her ability to embody the Cuban figure of the *mulata* that incorporated elements of the transpacific. When Estela performed in Mexico and the United States, however, she now embodied images of tropical Blackness, where these associations with the transpacific appear to have been lost. Although they never met, tracing the criss-crossing movement of these two performers shows how the transpacific is enmeshed with histories of *mulataje* that have often been erased, occluding complex Afro-Asian intimacies.

Florence’s childhood was firmly situated within the Pacific. She was born in pre-statehood Hawai’i to a Korean diasporic family who expected her to return to Korea. Instead, in the mid-1930s, Florence left her childhood home of Honolulu to study opera at Los Angeles City College and then at Juilliard Graduate School in New York City. Despite these achievements, Florence saw little possibility of a career in classical opera as a woman of Asian descent in the United States. She married a Korean international student, and they settled down in San Francisco, California. However, after she found herself a single mother with two young boys to support, she made the bold decision to move to New York City. She found an agent and booked singing engagements, not in opera, but in nightclubs. She became a regular fixture at the Hotel St. Moritz, Casa Seville, and the China Doll.

When she arrived in New York City in 1948, Florence became immersed in a cultural scene promoting Cold War American middlebrow entertainment about Asia.¹⁵ Danielle Seid has identified the rise of what she calls the “Asian/American femme” in Cold War television. These figures stood in as stylish and beautiful “symbols of inclusion,” but their exotic racial difference marked them as perpetually “citizens-in-the-making.”¹⁶ In this context, Asian-themed nightclub revues that featured an Asian female body were all the rage.

Florence navigated these racial and gendered fantasies of Asian American women in New York City. Her classically trained voice represented the promises of American democracy to critics who often commented on her Juilliard School training. However, they also continually remarked on the exoticism of her racialized and gendered body, which reduced her to at best a copy or a mimic, the “finest singer of her race.”¹⁷ When Florence appeared on Arthur Godfrey’s show in December 1948, Godfrey framed her performance not in terms of the quality of her voice but in terms of her “Korean” ethnicity, making a joke about her Korean dress to promote his Lipton Tea sponsorship.¹⁸

As Florence performed in New York City, she met Caribbean

musicians traveling on entertainment circuits that connected her to Miami, Florida, and Havana, Cuba. In 1949, Florence booked a six-month engagement at the China Doll nightclub in Midtown Manhattan. The China Doll marketed the fantasy of the Asian female body with its all-Asian floor show, but the music was all Latin. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote: "Rumba rumblings, slant-eyed honeys and enticing Chinese food tidbits—no new formula for this W. 51st St. club."¹⁹ The China Doll had previously been the Latin music hotspot La Conga, which had brought in famed Afro-Cuban bandleader Machito and singer Miguelito Valdés.²⁰ Inside the nightclub, Asian American and Caribbean entertainers mixed and mingled, forming friendships and at least one marriage.²¹

It was during this time that Florence was recruited by Miami businessmen scouting for talent.²² She entered the connected entertainment worlds of Miami and Havana. The military and tourist boom in postwar Miami had opened up the rapidly developing city as the "Gateway to the Americas." An opulent nightlife catered to these adventure seekers. Nightclubs marketed their shows through the exoticism of tropical Blackness, but they also played with a range of tropes from Harlem jazz to Arabian nights, Mexican mariachi, Haitian vodou—and the mysticism of the Orient.

Florence booked a show called the Bataclán Chino at the Teatro Martí in Havana, Cuba, produced by Cuban impresario César Alonso and American baseball player Mickey Grasso. Asian American and Asian Cuban entertainers filled the acts of what Florence termed an "oriental strip show." Cuban reviews panned the show. They noted that dancer Mai Ling's strip act showed off a beautiful body but was overall too fleeting, the music was just "noise," and the rest of the acts "excel at nothing."²³ The reviews lumped together the acts as vulgar burlesque.

However, critics made a clear exception for Florence Ahn. *Carteles* placed Florence in a class of her own: "The artistry in the show was provided in the most outstanding manner by Florence Ahn, who is a good singer."²⁴ Critics recognized not only her artistry, but also her technical brilliance with "good vocal flow, good interpretative taste, good training."²⁵ Florence's voice reflected her classical music training at Juilliard, linking her to the prestige of the premier performing arts school in the United States. The press was fascinated by her ability to sing in multiple languages, including "English, French and Spanish with absolute authority."²⁶ Her son Vincent recalled that she played up this linguistic virtuosity by singing songs like "Sin Ti" and "Besame Mucho" in both English and Spanish, sometimes rotating languages between verses. Critics took special pleasure in the spectacle of a "Chinese" singer demonstrating her mastery of Western languages: "This chinita soprano who sings in all languages, except... Chinese!"²⁷

In Cuba, Florence was finally granted artistry and the status of a star by a Cuban press that associated her with Euro-American modernity. At the same time, her “Chinese” body was part of her appeal, lending her a tinge of the exotic. The press hailed Florence as “la dama china de la canción” (the Chinese lady of song), “muñequita china” (little Chinese doll), and “pollo chino” (Chinese chick). As a “chinita,” Florence’s Korean background was typically erased in Cuban newspapers. According to Vincent, however, Florence experienced these as “words of endearment and appreciation” that differed from the limiting stereotypes she had faced in the United States.²⁸ The outpouring of fascination led to a nightly radio show contract and regular appearances at the lavish Tropicana and Sans Souci cabarets in Havana. Commenting on her appearances on Radio Cadena Habana, *Carteles* wrote: “Florence Ahn can proudly say that, both at the Martí theater and on the radio, the public gave in to her without reservation.”²⁹

Florence took her place on the cabaret stage next to the Cuban vedette. The vedette was known for her stunning beauty, statuesque body, and artistry as a dancer, singer, and actor. She had mastered the most Cuban genres of rumba and mambo, but she was equally at home in American musical showtunes or French ballads. Cuba inserted itself into the internationalism of the early Cold War period through this figure of the vedette, a world traveler to the cosmopolitan centers of New York, Paris, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires.³⁰ However, in film and high-class cabaret, vedettes such as Ninón Sevilla and Rosita Fornés embodied a light-skinned or whitened figure of the *mulata*, the national symbol of Cuba.³¹ This exoticized figure of the *mulata* came out of the historical mixing of African and European in Cuba, provoking fascination for the thrill of illicit Blackness, but also representing a threat that needed to be tamed. Elite Cuban cabarets such as the Tropicana “promoted whiteness” by privileging light-skinned and white vedettes who embodied the figure of the *mulata* for upper class Cuban and international tourist audiences, although some Afro-Cubans did appear on the cabaret stage.³²

Significantly, the figure of the *mulata* included traces of transpacific influences that came from long histories of Chinese migration to Cuba. The Chinese had formed part of the colonial experiment of replacing slavery with indentured labor. They arrived to Cuba in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where they faced harsh conditions.³³ After the abolition of slavery, some of the Chinese formed relationships with formerly enslaved African women, leading to a second generation of mixed Afro-Asian descendants.³⁴ As scholars such as Kathleen López have argued, the Chinese have often been erased from official *cubanidad*.³⁵ Nonetheless, the figure of the *china mulata* has played an important role in religious practices, literature,

and the performing arts in Cuba.³⁶ This includes an eroticized character of the *china mulata* in Cuban literature, which Ignacio López-Calvo characterizes as “libidinized and objectivized for [her] ‘exotic’ physical appeal.”³⁷ In this context of racial mixing, “china” as a term of endearment has also been used to gesture toward racial ambiguity in Cuban culture.³⁸ When Cubans celebrated Florence as a “chinita,” they pulled her into this history of racial mixing in Cuba, despite her Korean ancestry.

Mixed Chinese Cubans, however, also made significant cultural contributions to Cuban genres in the performing arts. Dancer Estela was celebrated by contemporaries as “the best rumbera from Cuba.”³⁹ Rumba was an art form indelibly linked to the legacies of slavery, originating in Cuba’s poor Afro-Cuban working-class neighborhoods. By the 1930s, *Afrocubanismo*, or a celebration of Afro-Cuban culture, was playing an important role in defining Cuban national identity. This cultural movement coincided with the global export of Cuban music and dance.⁴⁰ Estela and her dance partner, René, were among the first to bring rumba abroad. The Cuban press raved about the “originality” of her style, her “complete mastery” of the dances, and her “tempting body.”⁴¹

And yet, Estela had not always been allowed to stand in for Cuba. Estela, whose birth name was Ramona Ajón, claimed Chinese and Mayan ancestry. It is important to note that Chinese and Indigenous ancestry were sometimes highlighted or claimed strategically to avert the discrimination experienced by African-descended people in Cuba.⁴² However, Chineseness still carried social stigma. In her early career, Estela recalled how Cuban director Roberto Rodríguez had looked askance at her Chinese-like eyes, long straight hair, and skinny body. Relegated to dancing foreign numbers in his company shows, Estela asked to dance rumba instead. At first doubtful, Rodríguez was astonished when she started to move, which *Bohemia* journalist Don Galaor reimagined: “Undulating the hips, hardly in the form of hips. She shook the shoulders and all of her was rumba. Cuban rumba learned in that universal and magnificent school which is the street. As she advanced, new figures, new steps showed that she, Ramona, knew about this.”⁴³ Through performance, Estela asserted her presence in *cubanidad*, insisting on her ability to perform rumba authentically by using performance to overcome her Chinese features. She now embodied the figure of the *china mulata*.

Estela danced her way through the vibrant nightlife scenes of New York and Mexico City in the 1930s and 1940s. She was booked nightly at the Havana-Madrid and Club Yumuri in New York City. She also followed the stream of Caribbean entertainers, including Anacaona, who traveled to Mexico City through Veracruz, Mexico’s port city on the Gulf Coast. In 1938, Estela and René appeared in the Mexican films *Tierra Brava*,

México Lindo, and *María* before stopping in Hollywood to film *Another Thin Man* (1939).

In 1939, they booked the Mexican government-sponsored production of *Mexicana* at Forty-Sixth Street Theatre on Broadway. Estela starred in "La Mulata de Cordoba," the famous Mexican myth of a *mulata* from Veracruz who cures the poor and renders men spellbound. Denounced to the Inquisition, she instead enthralls the Inquisitor who falls in love with her. She then draws a ship on her prison wall and sails away. Casting Estela to dance in the "Mulata de Cordoba" contributed to what scholars have argued was a project of displacing Blackness onto Cuba in the post-revolutionary era. As B. Christine Arce argues, Mexican national discourses disappeared people of African descent from Mexico through the trope of an exotic *mulata* rendered foreign.⁴⁴ Through these exoticized images of Blackness, Mexicans could transgress gender, sexual, and racial conventions and incorporate themselves into modernity.⁴⁵ In the context of Mexico, Estela's transpacific influences appear to have in turn been disappeared into Afro-Cubanness.

By the 1950s, Estela had also become a frequent presence in Miami's growing nightlife scene. She entered a Jim Crow South contending with the complications of race as the city developed into a Pan-American center. Estela booked Place Pigalle, El Mambo, and Hotel di Lido in Miami Beach. Miami Beach venues were infamous for booking Black artists as entertainment but banning them from staying at their hotels. However, as Chanelle N. Rose has argued, Afro-Caribbeans often occupied intermediate positions in Miami due to their ethnicity demonstrated through their Spanish-language fluency, giving them entry into otherwise segregated spaces.⁴⁶

In Miami, Estela catered to the American craze for rumba, contributing to the growth of an exoticized imaginary of tropical Blackness. The American popularization of Cuban rumba, which had begun at the 1932 Chicago World's Fair, soon spread across the nation. Musicians such as Don Aspiazu, Xavier Cugat, Machito, and Mario Bauzá discovered enthusiastic audiences. As Robin Moore has argued, now North American composers and musicians such as Cole Porter, Bing Crosby, and Marion Sunshine also began to bring rumba to Broadway and Tin Pan Alley.⁴⁷ The fascination with rumba was a highly racialized and often sexualized encounter that allowed white Americans to adventure beyond middle-class boundaries of propriety, similar to the reception of exoticized Blackness by Mexican audiences. The obsession with the sensual movement of Estela's hips erased the rich Afro-Cuban histories conveyed through rumba, including its transpacific connections.⁴⁸

In contrast to Estela's reception during her travels, Florence discovered that in Havana she now brought to mind a bewildering number

of associations that tied her to the cosmopolitanism of the vedette and the Cubanness of the *china mulata*. The Cuban newspaper *Pueblo* wrote: "This is something serious, to be in Havana and interviewing a lovely Chinese woman, who was born in Honolulu, who likes the Spanish language and who loves Argentinian mate drink, is like being at the center of the United Nations."⁴⁹ Off stage in interviews, Florence played up the romance of her background in Honolulu as she drew a connection with Cuba, presenting her origins in an island of tourism and pleasure not in the Caribbean, but in the Pacific.

In her shows, Florence learned new repertoire to appeal to her Cuban audiences. Another of her signature songs now became the famous *romanza* from Ernesto Lecuona's zarzuela *Maria La O* (1930), based on Cirilo Villaverde's iconic novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the quintessential song of the tragic "*mulata infeliz*" [unhappy *mulata*]. And so, Florence ascended to the cabaret stage by singing the role of a *mulata* who stood in as a national symbol for Cuba. Cuban magazine *Carteles* stated that Florence interpreted Lecuona with authority and originality, displaying "great prestige."⁵⁰ Her ability to craft performances that displayed cosmopolitanism, Americanness, and Cubanness all at once promoted her to stardom in Cuba.

After spending two years in Havana, Florence left Cuba, but Cuba did not leave her. Florence now saw possibility in future Latinx audiences. In 1953, Florence sang at the Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles for a variety show headlined by Mexican actress Miroslava. She was held over for the following month, headlined by Ecuadorian Paco Miller as "La encantadora Princesa Coreana" [The lovely Korean Princess]. Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión* wrote: "She who shone with her beautiful soprano voice was the Korean Princess, Florence Ahn, who returned to the Million Dollar stage at the request of her many admirers."⁵¹ Her travels to Cuba had brought her in front of Spanish-speaking Mexican and Mexican American audiences, but now she was in Los Angeles.

The Moon Goddess Meets la Exótica

In 1948, Chinese American dancer Jadin Wong's unique style of American modern dance was advertised in Mexico City to Tívoli nightclub audiences as a "marvelous Chinese spectacle" that would be "first of its class in the history of the arts in Mexico."⁵² Sitting in the audience was mixed Chinese Mexican dancer Su Muy Key, a member of the *exóticas* who appeared frequently at the Tívoli. The *exóticas* were vedettes who attracted scandal, not praise, for embodying exoticized fantasies of Asia, the South Pacific, and the Caribbean on the Mexican nightclub stage. After Jadin Wong's resounding success, the Mexican newspaper *El Nacional* wrote that Su Muy Key had much to learn from the "gringita," or her American counterpart.⁵³

In this section I explore how dancers Jadin Wong and Su Muy Key navigated multiple transpacific imaginaries on a route that stretched from the Texas-Mexico borderlands to Monterrey and then to Mexico City, although both traveled more extensively within the Gulf Coast of the United States and Mexico. Trained in American modern dance, Jadin's exclusion from the concert stage led her to the nightclub world where she catered to American fantasies of the transpacific on a circuit that included the Texas-Mexico borderlands. However, she moved into Mexican imaginaries of the transpacific when she booked nightclubs in Mexico City and Monterrey. Jadin developed a modern dance show that, similar to that of Florence Ahn, brought both her American training and exotic Chineseness to Mexico, which combined to raise her to the status of an artist, a status she had been denied in the United States. Meanwhile, Su Muy Key catered to desires for exoticism and eroticism as an *exótica* in Mexico City and Monterrey. However, when she traveled to the Texas-Mexico borderlands, she now found herself catering to new audiences. This included Cold War American fantasies of the transpacific in front of American tourist audiences and Mexican migrant nostalgia in the Rio Grande Valley and San Antonio. The criss-crossing movement of Jadin and Su Muy Key reveals a transpacific entangled with histories of *mestizaje* in Mexico as well as histories of Mexican migration.

Thinking back over her years working as a dancer in the late 1930s to the 1950s, Jadin Wong reflected that she had "a nightclub career as a concert dancer."⁵⁴ This was a profound statement of resistance against the racial exclusions of American concert dance. Jadin had never been short on daring. At the age of sixteen she ran away from home in Stockton, California, to pursue her dreams in Hollywood. She ended up in San Francisco, studying with renowned Japanese modern dancer Michio Ito, a choreographer and dancer who had developed a career in Europe before moving to California. Ito was working within an American modern dance world in which white dancers and teachers, many of them women, queer men, and immigrants, pushed for the formation of a concert dance tradition. To create this American tradition, they borrowed heavily from diverse dance aesthetics, including African diasporic, Indigenous, Latinx, and crucially, Asian and Pacific Island dance forms. White American dancers such as Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn claimed legitimacy on the stage through the figure of the "artist-genius," promoting dance as a universal expression of the inner self.⁵⁵ They equated white American bodies with universalism, meaning that racially marked bodies could not stand in for the universal. Despite working within this modern dance tradition, Ito was classified as an "international" dancer marked as foreign.⁵⁶

In contrast, white American dancer and choreographer La Meri, also Jadin's teacher, pioneered the genre of "ethnic" dance. Growing up in San

Antonio, Texas, La Meri had become fascinated with Mexican culture.⁵⁷ This motivated her travels as an amateur ethnographer throughout Latin America and Asia, where she studied with local dance teachers. La Meri's aim was to perform and teach these dances with authenticity, claiming to be a translator of "alien" dance forms to white American audiences. In doing so, however, she positioned herself as modern, aligning herself with the white American "artist-genius" and freezing Asian and Latin American dancers into the past.⁵⁸ At her Ethnologic Dance Center, La Meri taught dances she identified as originating from the Orient, Spain, Hawai'i, Polynesia, and Latin America.⁵⁹ Jadin credited La Meri for developing her unique hand technique. Unlike La Meri, however, Jadin was denied the position of "artist-genius" as critics attributed her hands to traditional "Oriental temple dances."⁶⁰

Recognizing the challenges Jadin would face in the American concert dance scene, Michio Ito instead recommended the nightclub world. Together, they developed Jadin's signature Moon Goddess dance, with its blend of Javanese, Balinese, and ballet technique. She brought the Moon Goddess dance to San Francisco's Forbidden City, New York City's Leon & Eddie's nightclub, and far beyond to small nightclubs and USO shows across the United States, Canada, and Europe. This included shows Jadin booked in the U.S. South at nightclubs such as the Blue Room in New Orleans, a club that often featured Asian-themed shows, including a 1947 appearance by film star Anna May Wong, and performances at Winnie's Riptide in Miami.

The American press was especially drawn to Jadin's dancing body. *Life* magazine's feature on the Forbidden City in 1940 featured Jadin's dancing body for a full-page spread, showing her in a deep back bend, wearing a Southeast Asian inspired headpiece and a dress with a long train that revealed her legs and midriff. *Life* magazine commented: "Chinese girls have an extraordinary aptitude for Western dance forms.... Slim of body, trim of leg, they dance to any tempo with a fragile charm distinctive to their race."⁶¹ The press was fascinated with an "Asian" female body moving toward American modernity, but always lagging one step behind.

During this time, Jadin formed a traveling revue, choreographing the entire show, and took it on tour to Hawai'i and Mexico. In Mexico, she discovered a very different reception. In October 1948, the "Chinese Ming Toys" debuted at the Tivoli nightclub in Mexico City. The advertisement stated: "For the first time a Chinese show in Mexico." The Mexican press described Jadin as an "exotic Chinese star" and a "little Chinese doll." On the one hand, she evoked histories of constructing *mexicanidad* defined against the Chinese alien, although here through romanticized tropes.⁶² On the other hand, the Mexican press pointed to Jadin's Americanness,

"coming from Chinatown in San Francisco, California." The press reprinted Jadin's *Life* magazine cover and depicted her reading *Esquire* magazine.

Meanwhile, vedette Su Muy Key was in the unusual position of sitting in the audience at the Tívoli where she so often stood under the spotlight. The Tívoli was located near the Plaza Garibaldi in a working-class neighborhood known for its nightclubs, bars, and sex-trade work. Su Muy Key, the stage name for Rosa Su López, was one of the so-called "*mujeres exóticas*" who scandalized Mexican audiences in the Tívoli's shows. The most famous of the *exóticas* was Tongolele, an American born in Spokane, Washington, who took on Afro-Cuban and Tahitian exoticism in her onstage personas. The sight of exotic Blackness performed by a whitened body served to bring Mexico into a cosmopolitan modernity even as Blackness remained condemned as a national threat.⁶³ Su Muy Key, meanwhile, was able to access the stage by claiming mixed Chinese, Aztec, and French descent, strategically associating herself with the origins of cabaret in France. During her lifetime, however, she attracted fascination and censure for her vulgar "*desnudismo*" or nudity.⁶⁴

The *exóticas* became the focus of censorship campaigns in Mexico. As Laura Pérez Rosales and Claire Fox have pointed out, the "spirit of antiexoticism" of the late 1940s and 1950s tied together attacks on "foreign" ideas with sex and pornography.⁶⁵ The Catholic church-affiliated Liga Mexicana de la Decencia and the Acción Católica denounced foreign influences within the realm of culture.⁶⁶ At a time of rapid urbanization in Mexico, the *exóticas* symbolized a threat to *mexicanidad* through their associations with a foreign racial other, urban decay and poverty, and transgressive gender and sexual norms.

Su Muy Key's shows linked nudity with the foreign exotic. She brought to life the persona of "Su Muy Key, the beautiful daughter of the imperial celestial."⁶⁷ Su Muy Key appeared in films like *Carta Brava* (1949) and *Mujeres de Teatro* (1951), where she was relegated to a racialized and eroticized other counterpoised to a whitened Mexican female figure, played in both films by the Spanish actress Emilia Guiu. In *Carta Brava*, Su Muy Key's character was the villain who lured Guiu's character to an opium den, threatened to kill her with a knife, and then stabbed the hero in the back before she succumbed to death. The film rendered Su Muy Key utterly alien to *mexicanidad*. This portrayal is reminiscent of American Anna May Wong's villainous Hollywood film personas in the 1930s and fits within the broader representation of the Chinese in Mexico during the early years of the Korean War.⁶⁸ In Su Muy Key's publicity for the film *Carta Brava*, she claimed to have been a spy for the United Nations during World War II, perhaps as an attempt to offset Mexican Cold War images of a Chinese foreign threat.

While Mexican journalists frequently debated whether her shows

had artistic merit or were mere vulgar pornography, Su Muy Key had something of her own to say on this matter. In October 1948, *El Nacional* reported, tongue in cheek, on an exchange between the great Mexican artist Diego Rivera and Su Muy Key:

As a decorative performer, above all, [Su Muy Key] has great vision and an extraordinary ability. So much so, that when Diego [Rivera] became aware of [her as] a dangerous competitor, he became furious.... For her part, Su Muy Key has not given importance to the incident because Diego is an absolutely inoffensive man. On the other hand, if it were a policeman or a theater or cabaret inspector, the situation would change.⁶⁹

Diego Rivera's murals formed part of a movement to shape a mestizo vision of *mexicanidad* for the popular classes.⁷⁰ However, as Ed McCaughan points out, Rivera and other muralists also contributed to "a heterosexist, patriarchal machismo that constrained the private and public life of women and men alike."⁷¹ While men such as Emiliano Zapata or Francisco Villa were celebrated as heroes, *mestiza* and Indigenous women were often depicted as passive and noble or through the figure of the *Malinche*, the traitor who betrayed the Aztecs to the Spaniards. Su Muy Key's dismissal of Diego Rivera refused these depictions. In contrast, she claimed agency as a Chinese-Mexican artist pushing boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race in the face of regulation. She, too, spoke to the popular classes, providing the racial and sexual fantasies that served the needs of a working-class population experiencing urban displacement in the late 1940s.

The Mexican newspaper *El Nacional* reported that Su Muy Key had come to "observe her countrywomen [at the Tívoli], with the aim of taking some lessons."⁷² The Mexican press distinguished the Chinese Ming Toys from the *exóticas* as "a high-quality group and the first of its genre to be seen in Mexico."⁷³ The distinction was their artistry. One newspaper called Jadin "a formidable and accomplished dancer who cultivates the varieties of modern dance, absolutely dominating all the rhythms and cadences of the dances of her distant land and also of our own."⁷⁴ In this statement, the press afforded Jadin legitimacy within the world of American modern dance, presenting her as a figure who bridged the Orient and the West, and in doing so wrapped Mexico into her cosmopolitan modernity. Even Princesa Tsiu-Tsiu's exotic fan dance, choreographed by Jadin in the style of American burlesque dancer Sally Rand, showcased musical and dance training according to the Mexican press. *Jueves de Excelsior* wrote that Princesa Tsiu-Tsiu was "a figure who has come to save us from sinking [to] the [level of the] frivolous, owing to the seismic movements of shameless exotic excess, and has

demonstrated that nudity in theatre is as clean and pleasant as a Baccarat crystal vase."⁷⁵ The Chinese Ming Toys approached respectability due to their cosmopolitan associations with both the United States and China.

From Mexico City, Jadin Wong booked the Chinese Ming Toys in Monterrey before heading to Reynosa, the twin city to McAllen, Texas, in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For one weekend in December 1948, the show took over the Monte Carlo Casino. This was no small feat in a casino that advertised itself as the "largest dance floor on the border" with tiered seating for 3,000 people.⁷⁶ During World War II, the audience for the Monte Carlo had expanded with the influx of servicemen searching for liquor, gambling, and sex in their days off from nearby Moore Air Base in Mission, Texas. In clubs like the Monte Carlo, racial and sexual fantasies flourished in their lavish productions.

Within this context, the Chinese Ming Toys now found themselves catering to largely white American military and tourist audiences. Advertisements in the McAllen *Monitor* played up Cold War American fantasies of "desirable" Asian women. One promoted Jadin's "movie star" image, reprinting an image of her appearance in RKO's *Around the World*, where she showed off her bare leg in a high kick while her dance partner raised two index fingers.⁷⁷ Another advertised the Ming Toys as a "Chinese review from the 'Forbidden City,' San Francisco," direct from Mexico City. It played up the absurdity of Jadin performing dances from around the world as "the originator of the Chinese conga."⁷⁸ The gloss and glamour of Hollywood featured in the advertisements, erasing Jadin's unique style of modern dancing in a nation striving to assert American cultural preeminence on the global scene. Two years later, when Su Muy Key traveled to the Monte Carlo Casino, she too would be presented as a cosmopolitan entertainer: "Su Muy Key Chinese exotic dancer of international fame... direct from Mexico City... has charmed thousands with her exotic dancing... in China, in the USA, abroad with the USO, in old Mexico."⁷⁹ The *Monitor* placed Su Muy Key alongside Asian American entertainers.

At the same time, Su Muy Key brought *mexicanidad* into the Rio Grande Valley and up to San Antonio, traveling on larger American entertainment circuits that would also bring her up to New York City. She performed to Mexican migrant and Mexican American audiences during a 1950 American tour to promote *Carta Brava*. Su Muy Key was joining a circuit of Mexican stars who traveled to the borderlands to perform at movie theatres, *carpas* (tent shows), and variety shows. These Mexican stars performed to eager Mexican and Mexican Americans audiences who continued to look across the southern border during an era when they faced what Jennifer R. Nájera has called "accommodated segregation." In her study of small town La Feria in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Nájera argues that the Mexican American community gained partial inclusion



Photo Credit: USC Digital Library. Korean American Digital Archive Collection.

in the 1940s, but this left intact a “logic and culture of segregation.”⁸⁰ Due in part to ongoing segregation, *mexicanidad* remained critical to the cultural identities of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans.

Su Muy Key contributed to local constructions of *mexicanidad* in the borderlands. She gave a “special show” at Cine El Rey, a historic movie theatre in downtown McAllen, Texas, on the segregated “Mexican” south side. According to Velia Rangel, who worked in the box office as a teenager, the theater was the “centre of the Valley,” home to community events and the latest Mexican films, with attendees of sometimes up to 1,200.⁸¹ From McAllen, Su Muy Key traveled up to San Antonio to headline a variety show at the lavish Cine Alameda, a theater that had become “synonymous with the best entertainment for *Mexicanos* and Mexican-Americans.”⁸² In a photo in *La Prensa*, Su Muy Key sat cross-legged, eyes closed, hands in a meditation mudra wearing an orientalized headdress with a bikini top and a flowing skirt that showed off her legs.⁸³ A caption read: “Su-Mey-Key the oriental dancer full of grace and splendor.”⁸⁴ Alien cosmopolitanism now spoke to Mexican migrants experiencing their own sense of displacement in the borderlands. Film scholar Laura Isabel Serna has argued that Mexican nation-building among early twentieth-century migrants was “as conditioned by their exposure to discourse on progress, modernity, and nationhood in Mexico as they were by the experience of migration and cultural shock.”⁸⁵ Defining themselves

against the foreignness of the Chinese Mexican vedette brought Mexican migrants experiencing exclusion in the United States into *mexicanidad*, even as Su Muy Key also brought them the cosmopolitan modernity of Mexico City.

Su Muy Key's career was stopped short soon thereafter in 1951 when she was tragically killed by her lover, journalist Roberto Serna. This sensationalized story traveled far and wide across both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, shocking Mexican and Mexican American readers, as well as readers across Latin America. Now, the Mexican press began to recognize Su Muy Key's artistry and contributions to *mexicanidad* denied during her lifetime. Mexico City's *Jueves de Excelsior* wrote that the "china de México" (Chinese woman from Mexico) had never been an "audacious 'exótica,'" but rather had danced with thoughtfulness and emotion "rhythms with tradition and history."⁸⁶ The article refused the orientalist stereotypes that had plagued her career: "A doll Su-Muy-Key? A woman, with a heart that leaps. All a woman." Only after death could Su Muy Key's artistry be recognized in Mexico and abroad.

Conclusion

The travels of Florence Ahn, Estela, Jadin Wong, and Su Muy Key reveal the diversity of transpacific imaginaries that circulated throughout a U.S. South connected with the circum-Caribbean of Cuba and Mexico. To access the stage, performers of Asian descent embodied gendered figures of the transpacific that fulfilled different functions within these national imaginaries. During a time of U.S. expansionism, Cold War American visions of exotic Asian beauties put forth a view of the United States as a benevolent power seeking to integrate the Free World, relegating Asian Americans to approaching but never belonging to Americanness. Meanwhile, the figure of the vedette served to promote a vision of modern Cuba abroad for elite Cubans in the early Cold War. This included the visibility of a whitened or light-skinned figure of the *china mulata* who evoked an exoticism derived from the historical mixings between Afro-Asian communities in Cuba. Finally, in Mexico, the *exóticas* promoted a vision of an exotic foreign other during a period of tightened social control, a vision that included the exoticism of the Orient that gestured toward Mexico's intimate, if denied, ties to the transpacific.

Performers of Asian descent took advantage of the ambiguous positions they occupied to slide between national imaginaries as they traveled and connected with new audiences. They show how the U.S. South served as an entryway for Asian Americans into the vibrant cabaret cultures of Mexico City and Havana and, in turn, for Asian Mexicans and Asian Cubans into the nightclub circuits of the Texas-Mexico borderlands and Miami. It was through their performances that they bridged "multiple souths," moving between performing Americanness, Cuban

cosmopolitanism, Afro-Cubanness, Mexicanness, or migrant nostalgia to gain mobility to access audiences across borders. They reveal the importance of the transpacific to the rich cultural exchanges within the interconnected region of the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean.

Nightclub performers, however, needed to make a living by entertaining their audiences. Within the constraints of the Cold War entertainment scene, their nightclub shows led to incomplete and contradictory results. They had to participate in crafting racial and gendered fantasies that supported national imaginaries, but at the same time opened up possibilities for them to build more expansive ties and connections with their audiences. Their performing careers open up larger questions about these transpacific connections to historical Afro-Asian intimacies and Mexican migration. Furthermore, their artistry points to the need for more research into the transpacific cultural contributions to genres such as modern dance, zarzuela, and rumba, genres in which Asian subjects have not typically been recognized. It was through their skill as singers and dancers that these four performers insisted on being taken seriously in front of past and now present audiences, challenging the occlusion and erasure of transpacific influences within the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean.

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Notes

1. *Carteles*, September 3, 1950.
2. See Arthur Dong, *Forbidden City, USA: Chinese American Nightclubs, 1936–1970* (Los Angeles, CA: Deep Focus Productions, Inc., 2014).
3. Benjamin M. Han, *Beyond the Black and White TV: Asian and Latin American Spectacle in Cold War America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Danielle M. Seid, "Cold War Asian/American Chic on TV: Beauty, Fashion, and the Asian/American Femme," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no.6 (2017): 1254–1275.
4. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 11–17.
5. Tara McPherson, "On Wal-Mart and Southern Studies," *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (2006): 698.
6. Ignacio López-Calvo, *Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

7. Laura J. Torres-Rodríguez, *Orientaciones transpacificas: la modernidad Mexicana y el espectro de Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019).

8. Thank you to Joo Ok Kim and Giselle Anatol for emphasizing the latter point.

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