Southern Orientation: Reimagining Asian American Identity and Place in the Global South

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Southern Orientation: Reimagining Asian American Identity and Place in the Global South

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ABSTRACT PAGE

Asians have been part of the American South’s physical, cultural, and economic landscape since Reconstruction when plantation owners introduced Chinese immigrants to replace newly freed African Americans as their primary labor source. Nearly a century later, sweeping immigration reform led to the influx of thousands of Asian immigrants who transformed the region’s social, economic, and physical landscapes. Southern Orientation: Reimagining Asian American Identity and Place in the Global South utilizes twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, film, and oral histories to investigate how the socio-spatial practices of Asians produce new iterations of place-bound identities that unsettle traditional notions of southern community. Drawing from spatial theory, cultural trauma, and ecocriticism, this dissertation argues that the appearance of the Asian engenders new anxieties and reawakens past anxieties about racial and ethnic integration in the post-Jim Crow South. However, the growing visibility of Asians in the region also hints at the possibility of new multiracial and multiethnic coalitions and new place-bound communal identities centered on the shared struggle against material, social, and spatial inequalities.

With the exception of a few studies, there is a noticeable lack of scholarship on Asian Americans in southern literature and film. But the increased focus on the South in a global context and the growing number of narratives depicting Asians living in the region are compelling reasons to further explore the ways in which Asians influence and are influenced by southern cultural practices. These recent texts highlight the global movements of peoples, cultures, and economies that mark the region as both a transformed and transformative place. Works including Monique Truong’s short story “Kelly” (1991) and Cynthia Kadohata’s children’s novel Kira-Kira (2004) illustrate how the internationalization of southern locales can reintroduce segregationist practices as a means of safeguarding long-held communal boundaries based on racial, ethnic, and class differences. Other narratives such as Mira Nair’s film Mississippi Masala (1991) and Cynthia Shearer’s novel The Celestial Jukebox (2004) reveal how Asians are part of a larger narrative of exploitation, exclusion, and survival that interweaves the history of multiple “Souths.”

For Asians migrating to the American South, defining home often involves the complex interplay between stasis and movement, acceptance and opposition, remembering and forgetting. This study foregrounds the critical intersections between Southern studies and Asian American cultural politics in order to better understand how global processes influence the ways in which an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic population define, inhabit, and transform communities in the American South.
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For my family and friends who offered their love and support
For years a small Confederate battle flag hung from a wall in my parents' home during my childhood in Annandale, Virginia. My parents found the flag after someone had placed it on our front lawn. Unaware of what it represented or why it was left anonymously on our property, my father displayed the pocket-sized flag as a means of livening up an otherwise unadorned wall. Despite being one of the few Korean American families living in the predominantly white, middle-class suburb in the early 1980s, we felt welcomed in our neighborhood that had no real history of crime or violence. My sister and I were too young to be aware of the flag’s history and its symbolic resonance and paid little attention to its presence in our home. Years later another emblem was left on our lawn, one more troubling, more unsettling: a small, burning cross. For two weeks my family and I awoke to the sight of more burning crosses and the sound of sporadic gunfire that caused damage to our home and my parents’ automobiles. Police officials began to regularly patrol our street but were never able to find the perpetrators. They suspected that it was most likely the act of unruly teenagers. These events coupled with our growing awareness of the history of southern racism convinced my sister and me to take the battle flag down. While my parents thought about moving, the cross burnings and gunfire eventually stopped and my parents continue to live in that house.

The memory of the burning crosses and the Confederate battle flag still resonates and generated the questions that serve as the basis of this project. How could public displays of ignorance and hate still take place in contemporary southern communities?
What elements of the South’s troubled racial past endure? In what ways do Asian Americans come to influence, embrace, and/or reject southern identity? These questions become more pronounced when one looks at the cultural, economic, and physical transformations that have emerged and continue to take place as a result of the growing presence of Asian American populations and Asian businesses in the American South. Since their arrival in the mid to late nineteenth century, foreign- and American-born Asians have played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the ways in which we define and study southern communities. Once defined by a white-black racial binary, the region now possesses a more racially and culturally diverse identity. In turn, writers and filmmakers have begun to depict this socioeconomic shift through narratives that spotlight the growing visibility of Asian Americans in southern communities.

My dissertation examines the ways in which twentieth and twenty-first century literature and film utilize the figure of the Asian American to consider how the global movement of peoples, cultures, and economies influence the socio-spatial practices of the post-segregation American South. By socio-spatial practices I refer to the cultural, economic, and geographic properties and ideologies that define where and how people live, work, travel to and from, and interact. The physical and social landscapes that surround us play a pertinent role in social and cultural interactions. Witnessing the increasingly global identities that communities across the world take, urban theorist Edward Soja speculates that “perhaps never before has the spatial organization of human society . . . been as widely recognized as an influential force shaping human behavior,
political action, and societal development." I focus on the socio-spatial because the ideas of place and community, which have long been central themes of southern culture, take on heightened meaning in the post-segregation era. Recent debates over immigration, the growing presence of foreign manufacturers, and national security have reestablished the South as a site of conflict and change. As historian James L. Peacock asks, "What happens to the southern sense of place as the South assumes a global identity?"  

The reconceptualization of the American South as a global space also plays out in new and exciting ways in contemporary fiction as a growing number of writers and filmmakers depict the region through the experiences of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. Recent narratives by writers and filmmakers of both Asian and non-Asian descent not only recover the lost histories of cultural exchange but also engender new, more hopeful narratives of integration and cooperation in the post-segregation South. Michel de Certeau argues that stories “carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places” and “organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.” I argue that recent fiction depicting Asians living in the South reveals the ways in which the increased visibility of immigrants and foreign capital has not only fostered segregationist practices but has also engendered multiracial and
multiethnic coalitions that suggest how the southern past is part of a larger, more global historical narrative of loss, displacement, and survival.

My interest in looking at the American South in a global context follows the recent shift in southern studies to examine the region through a broader, transnational lens at the South. But while scholars continue to investigate how these socioeconomic connections place the South in a global context, there remains a noticeable lack of scholarship on how the growing presence of Asian Americans, one of the largest and fastest growing populations in the region, impacts contemporary southern socio-spatial practices. Likewise, Asian American studies has predominantly focused on communities along the East and West coasts where there are higher concentration of Asian Americans. While scholars such as John Howard and Leslie Bow provide deft studies on the experiences of Asian Americans during the segregation era, there are no book-length studies that specifically address the period following the Civil Rights era. Moreover, little scholarship exists on the influence that Asian Americans have had on southern literary production. This project attempts to offer insight into the significant role that Asian Americans play in how we define and study the American South. Rather than simply tracing the appearance of the Asian American figure in contemporary southern literature, I examine how Asian Americans bear witness to the persistent anxieties about racial integration as well as the emergence of new socio-spatial practices in the post-

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4 Howard’s book focuses on the experiences of Japanese Americans in the Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers during World War II internment. Bow examines how “interstitial” groups—populations such as Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans who were not explicitly defined as either white or black—reveal the ambiguities and contradictions of Jim Crow racial logic. See John Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Leslie Bow, Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
segregation era. Asian Americans have reinvented and continue to reinvent southern communities by incorporating physical markers of their ethnic traditions in the built and natural environment and by establishing economic and social relationships that cut across racial and ethnic lines. While these transformations point to the South’s increasingly global identity, segregationist attitudes continues to figure prominently in the ways in which southerners inhabit and make use of their surroundings.

In order to better understand how contemporary writers utilize the growing presence of Asian Americans to reimagine community and place in the contemporary American South, we must first consider how Asians came to call home a region fraught by a troubled legacy of racial exclusion and violence. Chapters 1 and 2 provide historical context by investigating the formation of Asian American communities during and after Jim Crow. Chapter 1 focuses on the period between the late nineteenth century and the 1950s to examine the ways in which Asian Americans negotiated the racial and spatial logic of Jim Crow segregation. Analyzing the experiences of Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta and Japanese Americans living in federally enforced internment camps in Arkansas, this chapter argues that while local and national anxiety about racial mixing limited their freedoms, many Asians living under southern segregation established a sense of economic, social, and physical mobility through their ambiguous status within the white-black racial binary. Defined as neither “white” nor “colored,” Asians sought to foster relationships with both southern whites and African Americans that undermined the strict racial divisions of the Jim Crow South. Chapter 2 investigates how desegregation and the lifting of national origins quotas in 1965 created new opportunities for community building. Tracing the development of Vietnamese American communities
in Louisiana and Mississippi and Korean American businesses in Annandale, Virginia, I suggest that Asian Americans in the post-segregation South have reappropriated the local landscape as a means of increasing their cultural, economic, and political visibility. What emerges are new place-bound identities and socio-spatial practices that spotlight the global networks reestablishing the region as an increasingly transnational place.

The remaining chapters turn to novels, short stories, and films that position Asian Americans as central figures in the economic and cultural processes reimagining the contemporary American South as a place characterized by cultural exchange and lingering anxieties about race mixing. Chapter 3 spotlights the disorienting effects that Asian immigrants experience when they migrate to southern communities. Focusing on works such as Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* (1992) and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1998), I argue that Asian immigrants attempt to assuage feelings of dislocation and come to terms with the traumas that forced them to leave their native homes through the physical and symbolic recreation of former homes and communal identities. Chapter 4 specifically addresses texts that center on Vietnamese refugees who first came to the South after the fall of Saigon in 1975. These works reveal how the still fresh wounds from American involvement in Vietnam and the Civil Rights struggle compel southerners to reenact segregationist practices in an attempt to maintain white authority. Post-Vietnam narratives suggest that Asian immigrants bring their own history of loss and violence to southern communities still working through their own complicated past.

My final chapter engages with novels and films depicting the realization and at times, failure, of multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that destabilize the physical and
social boundaries continuing to divide southerners along racial and ethnic lines in the
post-segregation South. Writers Cynthia Kadohata and Cynthia Shearer and filmmaker
Mira Nair hint at the possibility of communal solidarity through their portrayals of the
intimate relationships that develop between local-born southerners and Asian, African,
and Latino immigrants. My analysis is framed around the concept of social justice as the
characters in these texts contend with the persistence of labor exploitation, racism, and
anxieties about interracial romance that continue to dictate the spatial and cultural
practices of the South in the post-Civil Rights era. The narratives discussed in this
chapter suggest that the shared experiences of marginalization, loss, and survival serve as
a means of reconciling cultural, racial, and ethnic differences.

For Asians living in the contemporary American South, establishing a sense of home
and community often involves the complex interplay between stasis and movement,
acceptance and resistance, remembering and forgetting. Concurrently, longtime southerners
attempt to make sense of how the growing presence of foreign capital, cultures, and peoples
influence the socioeconomic identities of their communities. As Jon Smith and Deborah
Cohn suggest in the introduction to their ground-breaking collection Look Away!: The
U.S. South in New World Studies, the “U.S. South comes to occupy a space unique within
modernity: a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated,
empire and colony, essentialist and hybrid, northern and southern (both in the global
sense).”6 From cities like Atlanta and Nashville to rural towns such as Greenville,
Mississippi, and Boiling Springs, North Carolina, southerners from diverse racial, ethnic,

6 Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, “Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities,” in Look Away!: The U.S. South in
and cultural backgrounds are working to co-exist in the aftermath of Jim Crow. While some communities establish a sense of cohesion through the shared histories of hardship and survival, others remain contentious sites of conflict. Asian Americans figure prominently in the physical, economic, and social exchanges that redefine the South as a global region. This project aims to show how the growing body of literature and film depicting multiracial and multiethnic communities compels new perspectives on southern spatial practices and place-bound identities that rearticulate the region as both a transformed and transformative place.
CHAPTER ONE

MAPPING ASIAN AMERICA IN THE DEEP SOUTH:
EARLY ASIAN IMMIGRANTS UNDER JIM CROW

White folks is evil
And niggers is too
So glad I’m a Chinaman
I don’t know what to do...
- Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941)

Small Chinese storekeepers ... are not numerous enough to present a problem—except to the small white storekeeper—but in so far as I can judge, they serve no useful purpose in community life: what wisdom they may inherit from Lao-tse and Confucius they fail to impart.

Richard Wright’s claims about the Chinese immigrant’s liminal status speak to the ways in which race ascribes social and political status within the American framework. But the statement also highlights the ambiguity surrounding the status of Asians in a society long defined by a racial logic entrenched in the dynamics between whites and African Americans. Despite the presence of populations, including immigrants and mixed-raced individuals, that fail to fit into neatly defined racial categories, the conventional histories of the South persistently uphold the image of a region defined by a racial binary with little to no room for any gradation. History informs us of the relationships between whites and their black counterparts but does little to show those who straddled or failed to register on the region’s (and nation’s) “color line.”

The appearance of Asians in the American South created new challenges to segregationist practices meant to codify the ways in which southerners inhabited and maintained communal spaces. Physical space represents a critical feature of identity politics because of its ability to define and at times reinforce societal customs, interactions, and attitudes. Kate Berry and Martha Henderson argue that space
“simultaneously shapes and records the way life unfolds, including the lived experience of ethnicity and race.”¹ The spatial element of identity politics is placed into heightened relief in the Jim Crow South, where white southerners attempted to enforce geographic boundaries based on racial difference. But while segregation worked to reinforce white authority by limiting the physical, economic, and social mobility of southern blacks, Jim Crow policies failed to fully restrict the movements and freedoms of Asians migrating to the South. Southerners’ unfamiliarity with Asian populations made it difficult to control these groups within a system dependent on a white-black racial binary. Thus groups such as Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta were both challengers to and victims of enforced racial separation.

The ambiguity surrounding Asians’ place in the context of Jim Crow provides an opportunity to examine the changing racial ideologies and spatial practices of the early twentieth century South. Leslie Bow contends, “The space of the interstitial where the culture is consciously interpreted—whether minutely, forcibly, or over an extended period of time—can be a site where the terms of culture not only become visible but are subject to potential reenvisioning.”² Homi Bhabha provides a similar critique of the tensions defining intersubjective negotiations. He suggests that the processes produced in “the articulation of cultural difference,” what he refers to as “in-between spaces,” offer “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of

¹ Kate Berry and Martha Henderson, “Introduction,” in Geographical Identities: Race, Space and Place, ed. Kate Berry and Martha Henderson (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 6.
defining the idea of society itself.”3 Following this logic we can consider the ways in which southern communities inhabited by Asians during segregation became sites of active economic, cultural, and social transformation, spaces that complicated regional and national ideologies of racial and ethnic identities. The ambiguities surrounding their racialized subjectivity allowed many Asians living under Jim Crow to interact and engage with southern whites and blacks. By revealing the ways in which Asians could move within and across white and black spaces, the everyday social and economic transactions of Asians living in the South have helped make visible the inconsistencies of southern segregation and subverted the supposedly fixed racial categories that were central to Jim Crow logic.

While southern whites and blacks were bound to racially coded spatial practices, many Asians were afforded more latitude because of their ambiguous position within segregationist politics. More so, Asians’ movements and daily activities helped establish alternative communal spaces defined by multiracial and multiethnic mixing. Economic transactions like those between Chinese merchants and African American consumers and athletic events such as baseball games between World War II Japanese American internees and local white athletes from Arkansas carried significant weight as these interactions temporarily destabilized existing provisions of racial separation. Thus spaces such as rural country stores became sites of cultural transformation. Michel de Certeau suggests that a specific space emerges from “the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or

3 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 2.
Following this logic, we can consider the ways in which Asian immigrants and Asian American migrants deploy new strategies of community building that transform the racial and cultural dynamics of southern communities under Jim Crow through their active engagement with their surroundings.

While their intermediary position provided many Asians living in the South a degree of social, economic, and physical mobility, national anxieties about non-European immigration created new modes of surveillance and control that threatened to isolate and marginalize them in their communities. Mia Tuan famously suggests that American ideologies of race situate Asian Americans as “forever foreigners” and deny them the ability to fully integrate into the national society. In many ways, southern spatial practices reinforced their identity as perceived outsiders because Asians could not fully integrate into white or black communities. In certain locales like the Mississippi Delta, groups such as Chinese immigrants were forced to live on the peripheries of town. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II most clearly illustrates the exclusionary practices that pushed Asians to the spatial margins of society. Federally enforced detainment, as Kandice Chuh explains, becomes “a process of literal and metaphoric imprisonment—into internment camps, into a concretized identity as ineffably inassimilable, alien, enemy, Japanese.”

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4 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 117.
5 In Forever Foreigners or Honorary White? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), Tuan uses interviews with later-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans (primarily from the west coast) to argue that while Asians adhere to and embrace American cultural practices, they are consistently identified as being different from ethnic white Americans. Thus race rather than ethnicity becomes the primary marker of national identity.
camps located in Arkansas contended with the added challenges of navigating the spatial codes of southern segregation. The restricted movements of Asians living under Jim Crow reveal the ways in which the racially coded spaces of the segregated South became a means of clarifying not only regional but also national identity by explicitly defining who does and does not belong.

This chapter will explore early Asian immigration in the South and its impact on existing race relations and the complexities involved in negotiating race, space, and place in the postbellum South. The first half traces the introduction of Chinese workers in the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast region as white landowners and businesses looked to new labor sources following the emancipation of African Americans following the Civil War. Although many initially came as temporary sojourners, a number of these Chinese immigrants made permanent residence in the South and opened new economic and social spaces that force us to reconsider race relations outside of a two-race system. The second half of this chapter will focus on Japanese Americans interned in the two southern concentration camps (Jerome and Rohwer War Relocation Centers) during World War II in order to examine how these Americans of Asian descent faced the challenges of expulsion, Jim Crow segregation, and the limitations placed on their citizenships and personal freedoms.

The experiences of early Chinese grocers and Japanese American internees highlight the ways in which southern attitudes toward race during the Jim Crow era afforded Asians living in the American South a degree of physical, social, and economic mobility. While segregationist spatial practices challenged Asians’ understanding of their place in their respective communities, the ambiguities surrounding Asian identity in the
framework of pre-Civil Rights southern racial politics allowed them, at times, to live outside of Jim Crow’s reach. The binary racial logic behind southern segregation failed to fully regulate the movements of Asian immigrants because white southerners were, in many ways, more concerned with restricting the rights and freedoms of African Americans. Thus Chinese groceries emerged as a space where Chinese immigrants could assert some control over their social and economic development. Meanwhile, Japanese Americans interned in Arkansas during World War II experienced limited mobility within the camp walls, but their excursions to nearby communities suggest that southerners granted Asians access to whites-only spaces because they were not viewed as a threat to existing racial hierarchies. But the increased presence of Asians in the South also enacted new modes of spatial control meant to reaffirm white authority. As this chapter will show, the growing visibility of Asian Americans both undermined and reinforced Jim Crow segregation, consequences suggesting an uneven portrait of race relations in an increasingly diverse South.

**Labor from Exotic Lands: Early Asian Immigration Overview**

When Captain James Cook first encountered the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, he was amazed by its stunning landscape and lush farmlands. The beauty and abundance of farmable land on the islands similarly drew the interest fifty years later of American businessmen who viewed the islands as a potentially profitable investment. They predicted that Hawaii’s exceptional sugar fields would yield large profits and boost the United States’ agriculture industry. While sugar crops were plentiful throughout the islands, labor shortages threatened to stall efforts to bolster cane cultivation. Hawaii’s indigenous population was already on the decline because of disease, and American
investors scrambled to seek new sources of cheap labor. This labor shortage led business owners to consider alternative options, including foreign workers from Asia.

Sugar planters in Hawaii first introduced laborers from Asia when several Chinese men were brought to the island around 1835. Planters created the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society to combine resources to further expand the importation of Chinese workers. Landowners believed that Asian laborers would boost production because of their supposed efficiency and ability to learn proper farming techniques quickly. Planters also viewed Chinese laborers as a means of educating native Hawaiian and white fieldworkers who were viewed as unreliable and undisciplined. Chinese workers played a significant role in the rise of Hawaiian sugar crops. By the time of the United States' annexation of the islands, sugar was Hawaii's primary export and accounted for more than 95 percent of the islands' total exports.

Businessmen and lawmakers on the mainland United States also became interested in the use of Chinese labor and began conversations regarding formal trade agreements with China in order to import workers for various projects throughout the states. Aaron H. Palmer, an influential businessman from New York and leading supporter of these efforts, submitted a plan to Congress that would establish San Francisco as the central hub of trade with China. Chinese laborers began to be imported into the United States mainland shortly after the annexation of California in 1848 with

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many being hired by both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads to work on the Transcontinental Railroad project.8

As Chinese immigrants began to immigrate to the mainland United States in larger numbers small, ethnic communities emerged, particularly along the West Coast near railroad lines and Gold Rush towns. By the mid-nineteenth century “Chinatowns” were prevalent in rural California towns like Stockton and Marysville. Ronald Takaki notes that these communities consisted of Chinese businesses, secret societies known as tongs, and Chinese village organizations known as fongs.9 Although workers were fairly dispersed across various locations to avoid competition, many recognized the need to work together to maintain both professional and cultural ties. More importantly, ethnic enclaves provided newly arrived immigrants with a sense of community and security, which became more important as anti-Chinese sentiment grew. While newly arrived Asian immigrants viewed Chinatowns as a place where they could adjust to life in the United States, Americans were ambivalent about the increased visibility of Asian homes and businesses. Many simply ignored or avoided contacted with ethnic enclaves and continued to believe that Asian immigrants were predominantly insular communities that chose not to engage with the larger American public. Others expressed more critical opinions of the ethnic enclaves. K. Scott Wang notes how some Americans viewed neighborhoods like New York’s Chinatown as “a site of cultural pollution.”10

Exaggerated stories of seedy opium dens, violent murders, and abductions of white

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8 Ibid., 22.
9 Ibid., 118-9.
women fueled the growing concern over the dangers that Asian ethnic enclaves posed to the nation. Yet Asian immigrants found comfort in the sense of community and solidarity that these neighborhoods established. Evelyn Hu-DeHart explains how Chinatowns and other areas represented a spatial and social "basis for resistance to racial and cultural oppression" and provided an "alternative vision of social organization for the future." Simply put, ethnic enclaves provided early Asian immigrants with a sense of home and belonging in a country wary of their presence.

From Cane to Cotton: Chinese Immigration and the Post-Civil War Gulf South

While the significant influx of Asian immigrants in larger cities along the East and West coasts of the United States helped establish strong ethnic enclaves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sparse immigration to the South led to more isolated pockets of Asian immigrants in the region. Interest in Chinese labor in the South first arose prior to Reconstruction as white southern landowners devised new ways to increase productivity while simultaneously keeping costs low. By 1849, British colonists in the Caribbean Islands and Central America had already begun experimenting with the importation of laborers from across Asia. The goal was to expand operations at a relatively low cost as British colonial officials believed that Chinese laborers would work well and accept minimal wages. These new practices sparked interest from

12 British entrepreneurs were already interested in utilizing Chinese laborers in the Caribbean Islands by the time slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1838. Spanish merchants followed the British model and imported laborers from Asia to work in Central America and Cuba. Between 1847 and 1874 approximately 125,000 Chinese laborers worked on Cuban plantations. (Moon-ho Jung, Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006], 13-17).
agriculturalists across the South who sought cheap labor to help sustain and expand the region’s cotton production.

Among those interested in the importation of Chinese workers were influential journalists who explored new means of increasing agricultural production across the South with relatively low overhead. Daniel Lee, a New York-born physician turned publication editor, noted in the *Southern Cultivator* that the introduction of Chinese labor in the South would ultimately multiply the region’s wealth. Meanwhile, James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow, whose *De Bow’s Review* boasted the widest circulation of any publication in the South by the 1850s, examined the possibilities of Chinese labor with more skepticism.13 Although interested by the idea of a new labor force, he ultimately deemed that the South’s reliance on African slaves was too significant to introduce a contract labor system that involved Asian immigrants. While Lee, De Bow, and other leading agricultural figures debated over the idea of Chinese laborers, the introduction of a new foreign workforce was put on hold in favor of the existing slave labor system.14

Reconstruction signaled a turning point for southern landowners who faced the dilemma of maintaining their financial operations in the wake of war-ravaged farmlands and a growing labor shortage. Anxiety over the financial impact of the newfound political, social, and economic freedoms of African Americans forced many white

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13 De Bow attempted to justify African slavery through scientific racism. He argued that “the negro was created essentially to be a slave, and finds his highest development and destiny in that condition (sic).” Furthermore, De Bow was deeply disturbed by the abuses that Chinese laborers faced under the China-Cuba trade. (J.D.B. De Bow, “The West India Islands.” *De Bow’s Review* [May/June 1848], 487).
14 Popular sentiment among opponents of Chinese laborers was based on the notion that the introduction of a new race would disrupt the South’s racial order. (M. Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 30-31).
landowners to seek alternative labor sources. The question of implementing Chinese laborers was reintroduced as a viable replacement for slave labor.

Initial attempts at importing Chinese workers proved to be difficult. Fearing that this new labor system would mimic slavery, numerous government officials voiced their concerns over the importation of laborers from outside of the United States to southern plantations. Legislation such as the 1862 Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” by American Citizens in American Vessels worked to curb Asian immigration and limit southern landowners’ ability to draw interest from Chinese officials to export workers to the American South.\(^{15}\) Despite these setbacks, white landowners and agriculturalists were determined to discover new labor sources to help bolster the region’s economy. Those who supported the importation of foreign labor believed that Chinese workers would be easily supervised, and more importantly, would be willing to work long hours in grueling conditions for minimal payment.\(^{16}\) Trade publications and local newspapers, once again, proved to be an integral arena for the discussion of Asian labor. In a series of articles published in the *Houston-Galveston Daily News*, editors described how the “docile and thrifty” Chinese would be ideal plantation field hands.\(^{17}\) Like black slaves, Asian immigrants were solely considered in terms of economic worth.

The introduction of an entirely new and foreign labor source proved to be difficult as initial attempts to bring Chinese workers to the South during the first few years of

\(^{15}\) Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 44.

\(^{16}\) Many planters and merchants across the South were convinced that Chinese laborers would abstain from engaging in political matters concerning workers’ rights. More so, southern entrepreneurs hoped to introduce new labor groups to show newly freed African Americans that southern plantations could thrive without them. (M. Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 78-79).

\(^{17}\) Houston-Galveston *Daily News*. July 5, 1865.
Reconstruction failed. Lucy Cohen suggests that three major criteria needed to be in place in order for Chinese labor to be effective. First, a significant amount of interest from local employers was necessary to generate enough support in a specific community. Landowners also required strong financial backing from both capitalists and planters. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, strong national and international contracts between landowners and Chinese exporters needed to be in place in order to appease both employers and laborers.¹⁸ The prevailing belief among supporters was that foreign labor would still be more manageable and financially sound than utilizing newly freed African Americans and lower-class white sharecroppers.

Despite financial setbacks and the strict monitoring of labor practices by the federal government, white landowners and entrepreneurs began to bring Chinese workers to the Gulf South by the mid-1860s. Terence and Arthur Chaler imported the first group of Chinese laborers into the South in 1867. Based in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, the Chalers received fifteen workers from China to work on their cotton plantation. Natchitoches provided an ideal setting for immigrant labor. Positioned between the heavily trafficked ports of New Orleans and Texas, the parish became a central point for businesses operating eastern and midwestern states.¹⁹ Furthermore, Natchitoches boasted a diverse population of residents of Indian, French, Spanish, African American, Creole, Italian, and German descent. Another Natchitoches planter, Benjamin W. Bullitt, brought over fifty-five additional workers from China to work on plantations along the Mississippi River. Edward T. Wyches, a resident of both Louisiana and Cuba, began

¹⁸ Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 80.
¹⁹ Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 52.
work to establish and labor trade routes between plantations in Cuba and in the Gulf region. Wyches’s operation came under intense scrutiny of the United States government as officials questioned whether it violated existing laws prohibiting the “coolie trade.” Yet business leaders supporting Chinese immigration argued that those arriving in New Orleans ports came voluntarily much like those who arrived in California years before.

Although early experiments with Chinese labor yielded mixed results, business leaders and landowners across the South considered the use of foreign labor a promising solution to the expanding labor shortage on southern farmlands. Early entrepreneurs in Chinese labor began promoting their plans to leaders across the region in hopes of garnering widespread support of their endeavors and subsequently increasing their profits. In May 1896 business leaders organized two commercial conventions centered on debates over immigrant labor in hopes of swaying skeptical landowners. Those supporting the use of Chinese labor persuaded convention attendees to pass a resolution requesting the use of recently discharged workers of the Central Pacific Railroad on all railroads being constructed in the South. The second convention revealed less enthusiasm over the importation of Chinese workers. Concerns over the potential challenges of cultural barriers between white landowners and Asian immigrants led convention participants to reject a motion proposed by James O. Noyes, commissioner of immigration of Louisiana, to recommend the increased importation of Chinese laborers.

White landowners and community leaders continued to push for Chinese workers despite increased skepticism because they still required a reliable labor source to replace black slaves. Arguing that Emancipation had made African Americans ineffective as laborers, the editors of the *Vicksburg Times* suggested that the South “let the Coolies
come" in order to recover both financially and culturally. Those who had already introduced Chinese laborers praised their work ethic and docile nature. Popular sentiment at the time suggests that many white landowners viewed them as superior workers to African Americans and easier to manage. In a letter to Baton Rouge’s *Tri-Weekly Advocate*, a Louisiana businessman noted that Chinese workers “are more obedient and industrious than the negro.” Similarly, landowners utilized Chinese labor to strengthen their existing African American workforce. The belief was that the Chinese would not only provide plantations with strong labor but would also help educate former slaves on work ethic and thriftiness.

Enthusiasm for foreign labor on southern plantations among white southern business leaders continued to grow despite lingering skepticism. Additional conventions were held in cities across the South to discuss the benefits of Chinese labor. On July 13, 1867, approximately five hundred delegates from across the South met in Memphis to discuss the possibilities of a labor company that would import workers from China on a large scale. A key attraction at the conference was the presence of Cornelius Koopmanschap, an Amsterdam-born businessman, who had extensive experience traveling throughout the East Indies and China. Having settled in San Francisco in 1850,

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20 “The Coming Laborer.” *The Vicksburg Times*, June 30, 1869.
21 *Tri-Weekly Advocate*, February 15, 1871.
22 Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 94.
23 Meetings were held in cities including Pine Bluff, Vicksburg, Montgomery, Mobile, and Charleston. Supporters of Chinese labor argued that a significant number of workers would be willing to immigrate to the South and work for low wages. Business leaders began to form organizations to consolidate funds including the Arkansas River Valley Emigration Company. These organizations worked to secure the necessary funds and procure laborers from both China and from other regions in the United States (Cohen, *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 64).
he became one of the leading importers of Chinese goods and labor. Koopmanschap informed the southern delegates that he had brought over close to thirty thousand Chinese laborers to the United States and could easily supply the South with thousands of workers.

While Koopmanschap's plans garnered significant publicity, delegates ultimately decided to follow a proposal submitted by Gideon J. Pillow, a former Confederate general from Tennessee, who vowed to aid in the establishment of a large investment fund needed to procure significant numbers of Chinese laborers. He called for his Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company to raise $1 million to further their plans of importing foreign workers to be dispersed throughout the South. But his plan failed to generate enough capital after the convention as investors and public officials had concerns over the possible racial tensions that could arise with the introduction of a new ethnic group in the South. Proponents of Chinese labor including Koopmanschap continued their efforts despite these setbacks. In August 1870, 960 Chinese laborers were sent to Alabama from California by his labor company to begin work on the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad. But Koopmanschap was unable to provide payments for these workers, a failure resulting in "the dispersion of the largest single group of Chinese brought to the South." Most of the displaced laborers managed to find work either on plantations, in cotton mills, and/or as house servants for nearby families.

The arrival of hundreds of Chinese laborers signaled a curious shift in social and race relations across the Mississippi Delta. Most if not all of the workers were young men who came to the United States from rural peasant villages across China. Focused on earning money to send back to their families, most of the laborers limited their social interactions with community members, particularly with whites, and preferred to stay close to the labor camps and with their fellow immigrants. The high concentration of Chinese immigrants in cities like San Francisco and New York allowed for the development of Chinatowns while southern towns and cities lacked any visible ethnic enclaves, given that immigrants were found in fewer numbers and were more widely dispersed. Chinese in the Gulf and Delta regions lived either in outlying rural towns or in white immigrant communities in more urban areas.28 The spatial separation between the local and immigrant population limited the social interaction between both groups.

Yet local residents took notice of the growing Chinese presence. The *New Orleans Bee* reported in 1871 that residents began to “see them everywhere” working on plantations and opening their own businesses.29 Reception of these inhabitants was mixed as both whites and African Americans looked upon the Chinese with a combination of curiosity, apathy, and resentment. For some, the laborers represented nothing more than an exoticized spectacle. Onlookers would gather at ports and railroad stations in hopes of catching a quick glimpse of the South’s newest residents. Despite their curiosity of an entirely foreign and new population, whites viewed the Chinese as heathens whose sole purpose was to provide cheap and effective labor.

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29 *New Orleans Bee*, December 4, 1871.
While early endeavors to import Chinese labor to southern plantations were relatively successful, the use of foreign workers began to fall out of favor by the early 1870s. New trade regulations established by Great Britain limited southern landowners' ability to import laborers directly from China and forced them to rely more heavily on workers who had already been employed by mining and railroad companies in western states. Although this strategy helped to cut transportation costs, competition to secure contracts with these workers increased as the news of successful experiments in Chinese labor out west spread to the midwest and eastern cities.

A major reason for the decline of immigrant labor was the belief among Chinese workers that sharecropping and plantation work did not provide livable wages or lead to economic self-sufficiency. The Chinese asserted a greater sense of agency than southern landowners initially believed they would. Unwilling to accept low wages and angered by poor working conditions, many left their plantation jobs in favor of other ventures that yielded higher incomes and more flexibility. Those arriving from California and the Pacific Northwest were accustomed to higher wages and to management of their own businesses and accordingly often avoided plantation work. While few ethnic enclaves existed in the South, Chinese immigrants migrating to the region managed to establish communal ties through work-related negotiations. Linked by a shared culture and facing similar working conditions, Chinese workers banded together to scrutinize labor contracts and dispute terms that they deemed to be unfair. Lucy Cohen describes how plantation owners, “accustomed to having absolute control over laborers,” were surprised when a
potential Chinese workforce refused to agree to work under their absolute authority. Rather than being passive, the Chinese would dispute unfair labor contracts and in some instances would take part in workers' rebellions or simply leave their positions and seek opportunities elsewhere.

Fueled by common stereotypes and racist ideology, southern whites also began to grow increasingly wary of the growing Asian presence in their southern communities. Following the trends in larger urban cities in the North and along the West coast, popular stereotypes began to emerge of the Chinese as heathens, untrustworthy, and ultimately impossible to control. But while whites in other areas of the country often used physical violence to quell Asian laborers, southern landowners and businessmen simply ignored them and turned their attention to alternative labor sources. Powell Clayton, Reconstruction Governor of Arkansas, summed up whites' frustrations as he reluctantly admitted that "the efforts to utilize Chinese labor proved [to be] a disastrous failure." In a few short months after the first large-scale importation of foreign labor, Chinese immigrants had left plantations and turned their attention to a new economic endeavor: the Chinese grocery.

Common Ground: Inside the Chinese Grocery

The popular perception of Chinese workers was that they were sojourners who would move from town to town, region to region, in search of new economic opportunities. Many of the Chinese immigrants who migrated to the South in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came first to the west coast where they attained moderate financial success operating laundries and restaurants in states such as California, Oregon, and Washington. James Loewen and Robert Seto Quan argue that the ultimate goal for Chinese laborers was to accrue enough income to send money back to their families and return to China as soon as possible.\(^{32}\) I would suggest that a number of early Chinese immigrants sought to establish more permanent roots in their new southern homes and establish a longstanding business in communities throughout the Gulf South and Delta region. Despite their longing for familiar surroundings and the hardships resulting from their lowly social position, these immigrants began to view a long-term stay in the South as both financially and socially lucrative.

Groceries operated by Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta played a subtle yet significant role both in terms of services, and more importantly, as an intermediary between whites and African Americans. Chinese groceries first appeared in the Mississippi Delta around 1872. As James Loewen points out, the benefits of opening a grocery store were that Chinese immigrants needed only a small amount of capital ($100 afforded a modest retail space) and limited English skills to carry out daily transactions with distributors and customers.\(^{33}\) Laundries were another popular endeavor as many Chinese immigrants found success operating cleaning businesses in mining towns across the western states in the nineteenth century. Depending on what


\(^{33}\) Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 33.
neighborhoods these stores were located in, Chinese laundries in cities across the South catered to both white and African American clientele.34

Early groceries were often located near former plantations because Chinese merchants could cater to sharecroppers who needed quick and easy access to basic supplies. Chinese-owned stores first appeared in more rural centers such as Greenville, Cleveland, and Clarksdale, Mississippi, and catered to the growing number of African American sharecroppers. The goal was to establish a steady customer base of lower-class whites and African Americans. The Chinese-owned grocery store typically consisted of a moderately sized space that was convenient for both customer and proprietor. The merchant would stand behind a long counter with the goods situated behind him. Given that many of the early immigrants possessed limited English skills, storeowners would provide customers with a long stick with which they would point out their desired products. Most grocers lived on the premises in small rooms located behind the stores because most storeowners lacked a means of transportation. Combining work and living spaces also cut down on costs and allowed merchants to open their businesses quickly at the start of each day. The living arrangements reinforced the fact that the Chinese merchant’s life solely revolved around the grocery.

While the shared work and living space constituted a practical solution to business operations, it was also the result of the Chinese’s limited social mobility. Denied access to white residential areas, most Chinese immigrants often settled into African American

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neighborhoods. The store itself became a visible marker of the Chinese immigrant’s liminal status. Although Chinese-owned stores were not in direct competition with businesses operated by whites, immigrant merchants were often reluctant to display any visible signs of economic success. Building exteriors were often left unkempt because owners feared that whites would “resent property improvement and that the blacks [would] regard it as a sign of wealth.”35 Thus early Chinese grocers found themselves in a precarious position. Basic human needs and financial support for their families both in the South and in China required economic success, but their safety and steady flow of customers depended on giving the impression that they were barely getting by.

Despite the social and economic limitations facing Asian immigrant merchants, the Chinese grocery provided a critical service in poorer African American communities by offering goods and services unavailable to them elsewhere. In many ways, the store became a safe space for African Americans. Unlike white storeowners, Chinese grocers were more likely to extend store credit to blacks.36 Chinese merchants also provided goods that were more affordable than their white counterparts. African American customers were able to attend to their business without being harassed or carefully scrutinized by white owners and customers.

African Americans were not always receptive to Chinese merchants. While many Delta blacks viewed the Chinese grocery as a welcoming space, others believed that the stores functioned as an extension of white control. In some communities Chinese grocers

35 Quan, Lotus Among the Magnolias, 14.
were perceived as “clannish exploiters” of poor blacks who “played the white man’s racial game” to maximize profits rather than serve the needs of their customers. The belief that these stores only served to further oppress African Americans created, at times, tension between merchants and local black residents.

For the most part the relationship between Chinese merchants and African Americans was amiable and often extended beyond that of proprietor and customer. Although many immigrants solely focused on attaining financial success and planned temporary stays in the United States, others sought to build social relationships with fellow community members and, in turn, establish permanent roots in their southern communities. The lack of a strong ethnic enclave such as New York’s Chinatown left immigrants in the South feeling culturally isolated. Most if not all of the Chinese who migrated to the region in the late-nineteenth century were bachelors or men whose families remained in China. Marriages between Chinese merchants and African American women did occur but were often subject to harsh criticism by Chinese, African Americans, and whites. Some Chinese, particularly older immigrants, viewed interracial marriages as detrimental to social and economic advancement because these intimate relationships would position Chinese and blacks as equals. Grocers who had African American wives and/or children often felt “out of place” in the Chinese community, and they were often excluded from social and business affairs. African Americans similarly expressed reservations about interracial marriages with Chinese but to a lesser extent.

37 Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias*, 90.
38 Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 137.
Because merchants operated in black communities, social relationships between both groups were more likely to be accepted.

Allowing access to both African Americans and whites, the Chinese grocery became a space that brought together racial groups despite Jim Crow segregation. Grace Hale suggests that general stores of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were "places of racial mixing" where southern whites and Africans Americans could purchase the same items in the same stores. Furthermore, these shared consumer habits "subverted an ideology of absolute white supremacy." Chinese groceries in the Mississippi Delta further blurred the distinction between white and black spaces. Echoing Hale's arguments, James Loewen notes that "Chinese store[s] became, in fact, the only integrated milieux (sic) in the Delta" where whites and poor blacks could not only occupy the same space but often shared equal social and economic footing. Although interaction was somewhat limited, white and black patrons used the store as a resting place after work. White landowners would also frequent Chinese groceries to recruit African Americans looking for work. Because merchants were from neither the white nor black community, the grocery represented a neutral site that was not explicitly governed by segregationist spatial policies.

As more immigrants immigrated to the South, the Chinese grocery became increasingly central to establishing and strengthening communal networks that linked Chinese families across the region. Stores throughout the Mississippi Delta served as

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40 Loewen, The Mississippi Chinese, 61.
41 Loewen, The Mississippi Chinese, 61.
gathering places, and more importantly, as a means of preserving a link to the immigrants' ethnic culture and past. While most stores carried products that specifically catered to American tastes, some groceries sold Chinese goods to recent immigrants who moved to towns across the South. The Joe Gow Nue store in Greenville, Mississippi, one of the first Chinese groceries to open in the Delta in the 1890s, attracted Chinese living across the region by selling imported items like food, art, and newspapers from China and Chinese communities across the United States. The small grocery also served as a makeshift “travel agency” and immigration services center by helping area Chinese with travel arrangements, passport applications, and immigration forms. These services played a more crucial role than mere economic transactions as they helped provide a communal identity in lieu of a physical ethnic neighborhood. The Chinese grocery became a place where Chinese immigrants could become active members of the larger Delta community without depriving themselves of their strong ethnic heritage.

Middleman Status: Asian Identity and the Ambiguity of Place in Jim Crow Spatial Politics

Early Asian immigrants occupied a peculiar position in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century South. The arrival of new ethnic groups, particularly in more rural areas in the Gulf and Delta, generated anxieties among local-born residents over rising racial tensions and economic competition. Initially classified with African Americans, Asian immigrants began to occupy a more ambiguous role. A number of scholars acknowledge how most studies of early twentieth-century race relations in the

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42 J. Jung, Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton, 63.
South limit their focus on whites and African Americans. Asians found themselves on the peripheries of southern communities and struggled to understand their place in southern society. James Loewen contends that the biracial system left "no provision[s] for a third race." Lucy Cohen takes the argument a step further by suggesting that the uniqueness of Asian immigrants, specifically Chinese laborers, "made them automatic outsiders in the southern social and economic system." But what did Asians living in the South make of their liminal status? How did the emergence of a "non-white" and "non-colored" population complicate Jim Crow's strict divisions of race that governed southern spaces?

Certain communities across the Gulf and Mississippi Delta were receptive to Chinese laborers moving into their towns. Although many remained socially isolated, others integrated themselves into their respective communities. Lake Providence in Carroll Parish, Louisiana, had a rather significant Chinese population that became visible and welcomed members of the community without much hostility from local residents. Immigrants living in the town had established numerous businesses frequented by both fellow Chinese workers and by whites.

While Chinese merchants enjoyed a degree of social and economic success in communities across the Mississippi Delta, national opinion on Asian immigration challenged Asian mobility. By the early twentieth century anxiety about growing immigrant populations increased racial tensions in the South, and southern whites stepped up their efforts to safeguard white social, economic, and spatial superiority. Federal

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43 Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 73.
44 Cohen, *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 82.
legislation such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act had restricted Asians from immigrating to the United States and those living in the country struggled to improve their living conditions. Asians living in the South faced the added challenge of negotiating the parameters of Jim Crow. Although de facto segregation established clear delineations between whites and African Americans, Asian immigrants found themselves in a dubious position of being unsure of which side they fell on the color line.

Despite their in-between racial status, Asians were often denied white privileges and were subjected to the same limitations southern blacks faced under Jim Crow. States throughout the region revised existing miscegenation laws to include individuals from the “yellow or Mongolian race” among those prohibited from marrying whites. As they began to prosper financially, early Asian immigrants hoped to move out of their one-room shacks and into larger homes and middle-class neighborhoods. Swayed by popular stereotypes and prevailing mistrust of Asians, whites were often reluctant to allow them to move into their communities. Ambivalence toward Asian immigrants grew into resentment and fear as whites attempted to maintain the division of space through racial politics.

James Loewen and other scholars have argued that early Asian immigrants like the Mississippi Chinese sought to improve their social status by distancing themselves from whites.

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45 Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia passed anti-miscegenation legislation that extended to groups such as Asians and Native Americans. These laws focused on prohibiting marriages between whites and non-white populations. Georgia enacted the most stringent law in the South as their 1927 law denied whites from marrying any “person of color” that included anyone having “either Negro or African, West Indian, or Asiatic blood his or her veins.” (Georgia Laws 1927 No. 317, Pt. I-Title VII, pp. 272-273). For a more detailed discussion of anti-miscegenation laws pertaining to Asians in the South, see Bow, Partly Colored, 46-53.
from African Americans. The goal was to elevate themselves to the status of whites so that they could gain access to certain privileges that would provide their families with a comfortable homes, social mobility, and proper education. Some met little resistance in their attempts to incorporate themselves into white society. Japanese American Sydnie Kohara felt a strong sense of connection to her hometown of Alexandria despite being one of the only Asians living in the town at the time. Her Japanese-born father’s moved to the small central Louisiana community in the late 1920s. He operated a successful photography studio, married a white woman, and was active in a number of social organizations. Kohara notes that the primarily white community showed no ill will toward her father for being Asian. She argues, “When you knew your neighbor and trusted him, it didn’t matter what your heritage was.” Asian Americans like Kohara could gain membership in the white community as long as they adhered to its social and moral codes.

But others learned that their ethnic heritage did matter as many failed in their attempts to claim the rights and freedoms granted to southern whites. The most prominent example of the liminal status of Asians within Jim Crow segregation is the case of Martha Lum. In 1924 Lum, a Chinese American student at the all-white Rosedale Consolidated School in Boliver County, Mississippi, received a note from the superintendent during the first day of classes informing her that her enrollment at the school was to be revoked. Her father, Gong Lum, a grocer in good standing with the

46 Quan makes a similar argument in Lotus Among the Magnolias.
white community in Rosedale, argued that Martha and her sister had the right to attend the school given that they were born in the United States. His lawyers presented the case to the circuit court of Bolivar County arguing that Martha was “not a member of the colored race nor is she of mixed blood.” The arguments made on behalf of Lum reveal how the normative social structures in place during Jim Crow failed to account for racial identification outside of the white-black binary. Although Lum’s goal was not to explicitly challenge segregation and existing racial politics, his case did generate discussion and greater awareness of the inherent flaws of relying upon a biracial system in the postbellum South.

The district court ruled in favor of Lum and allowed Martha to re-enroll at Rosedale Consolidated. Upset with the court’s decision, state officials took further legal action by taking the case to the state’s supreme court. The court reversed the decision by noting that the 1890 Mississippi Constitution stated that separate institutions were to be provided for whites and those of the “colored races.” The ruling illustrates the curious position of Asians living in the Jim Crow South. While the Chinese were not specifically defined as “colored,” they were not identified as white. Lum moved forward by taking the case to the United States Supreme Court in October 1927. The Court ultimately sided with the state of Mississippi in prohibiting Martha from attending the all-white school. Citing the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, Chief Justice Howard argued that the “separate but equal” clause applied to those of the “yellow or Mongolian race.” While the Court’s ruling did not explicitly equate Asian status with that of “colored,” the case

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49 *Gong Lum et al. v. Rice et al.* 275 U.S. 78 Supreme Court of the U.S. 1927.
clearly reveals that Asian Americans were not immune to the strict racial divisions of southern segregation. The Gong Lum case not only played an integral role in “tying Chinese Americans to Jim Crow legislation” but also highlighted the inconsistencies in the enforcement of and adherence to southern segregationist policies.⁵⁰

Despite the Court’s decision, ambiguity surrounding Asian Americans’ place within the cultural and legal systems of Jim Crow remained. In many cities, whites maintained authority over African Americans and Asians. Waldo E. Martin contends that the Gong Lum case reinforced white control under Jim Crow as it solidified the “erasure of Chinese racial identity and its conflation of that identity with a black racial identity.”⁵¹

Rather than revising segregation laws to accommodate populations outside of the white-black racial binary, southern whites simply expanded upon existing definitions of “colored.” Meanwhile, other locales provided Chinese Americans with a greater sense of social mobility. By the mid-1940s most counties across the Delta began accepting Chinese students in their white public schools, including Bolivar County. However, access to these spaces often relied on strong connections between Chinese Americans families and prominent white community leaders. Only the Chinese Americans who made proper economic and civic contributions to their communities were permitted to send their children to white schools. But white students were less than welcoming to these new classmates. Chinese American students were often excluded from popular school organizations like cheerleading and student government and fights were known to

break out with whites. Students faced similar hardships at local universities as sororities and fraternities failed to extend invitations to Chinese students.\textsuperscript{52}

As Chinese families continued to move to the Mississippi Delta in the early 1940s, social networks and organizations worked to solidify a more cohesive communal identity and strengthen their social and economic visibility in the region. Chinese Americans utilized new gathering places to reaffirm both their ethnic heritage and their place in the South. The church emerged as an integral space to counter the exclusionary practices of Jim Crow segregation. While excluded from joining many white social organizations, Chinese families sought comfort and acceptance within local Baptist churches as they used prayer services and church events to further entrench themselves in the greater Delta community. White church leaders began working with local community organizations and Chinese American families to establish religious and educational spaces for Chinese American residents. Reverend Ira Eavenson of Cleveland, Mississippi, helped build the Chinese Mission School in 1934 for Chinese Americans families. Similarly, Galla Paxton, President of the Women's Mission Union in Greenville, Mississippi, proposed the idea of establishing a school for Chinese American children that led to the construction of a Chinese school and dormitory run by the First Baptist Church in 1937. Employing white teachers, these schools focused on an American-centered education. In some sense, the schools worked to further integrate Chinese Americans into southern communities by providing the similar educational

\textsuperscript{52} Loewen notes that Chinese American high school students joined academic and occupational organizations rather than the more popular social organizations. Greek organizations at the University of Mississippi excluded Chinese students while some fraternities and sororities at other universities like Mississippi State had Chinese members (Loewen, \textit{The Mississippi Chinese}, 93-96).

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resources afforded to whites. Conversely, the lack of proper accreditation (making it difficult for students to enroll in area secondary schools) and the muting of Chinese heritage within the classrooms further exemplified the cultural lines of segregation that continued to exclude Asian Americans.

Cemeteries were also constructed by residents “as direct responses to exclusion from the white prototypes.”\textsuperscript{53} Denied access to space in white cemeteries and wanting to maintain some separation from African Americans, many Chinese families and community leaders worked to secure unused land for burial grounds for family members. The Chinese Cemetery in Cleveland, Mississippi, attracted the interest of families across the South as one of the first graveyards specifically constructed for the Chinese. These cemeteries utilized both Chinese and southern cultural markers as a means of honoring their ethnic heritage while also acknowledging their local surroundings. Tombstones typically featured Chinese characters that created a visible display of cultural solidarity while others incorporated crosses and markers of southern religious traditions.

Integrating themselves into local communities remained a challenge for Chinese families. Despite their relative indifference toward Chinese Americans, then many white southerners still enforced spatial borders that reinforced Asian exclusion. As with early immigrants, Chinese residents during the 1930s and 1940s struggled to find housing in middle-class white neighborhoods. Realtors blocked sales while other whites purchased lots and properties to prevent the entry of Chinese into their neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{54} But Chinese merchants used their economic prowess to establish meaningful relationships

\textsuperscript{53} Loewen, \textit{The Mississippi Chinese}, 87.
\textsuperscript{54} J. Jung, \textit{Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton}, 144.
with white community leaders, including local government officials and heads of various
civic organizations, to secure better social and educational opportunities.

Only a handful of Chinese groceries presently remain in the Delta and the survival
of these stores in the face of significant socioeconomic transformations remains
uncertain. The out-bound migration of many early Chinese families and more
significantly the increased presence and popularity of larger, multinational box stores
such as Walmart make it difficult for these small businesses to remain in operation. But
the economic and cultural impact of Chinese groceries cannot be erased as early
immigrants who settled in small towns across Mississippi established new spaces that not
only reaffirmed their ethnic heritage but also challenged the reach of Jim Crow
segregation. By developing a network of groceries in towns across the Mississippi Delta,
Chinese grocers were able to create a communal identity without the “daily and easy
access to Chinese commodities, customs, and companionship” that immigrants in larger,
metropolitan ethnic enclaves enjoyed. \(^5\) These stores also provided a neutral space for
whites and African Americans where they could carry out everyday transactions without
incidents of racial conflict. While early Chinese immigrants worked to implant new
cultural and familial roots in the Mississippi Delta, Asians continued to occupy a
precarious position within their southern communities under segregation. As the
experiences of World War II Japanese Americans internees will show, the growing
presence of Asians in the South highlights not only local concerns about communal
spatial practices but also larger anxieties about national borders.

\(^5\) J. Jung, Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton, 217.
Unfamiliar Enemies: Japanese American Internment and Jim Crow Segregation

To me, the tall guard towers and the barbed wire fence that incarcerated my family and me became part of my normal landscape... I learned to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag within sight of armed sentries watching over us. I was too young to appreciate the irony as I recited the words, “with liberty and justice for all.”

-George Takei, Rohwer Relocation Center Inmate

While Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta enjoyed increasing social and economic success in the 1940s, Japanese Americans across the United States faced a period of uncertainty and fear following the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Concerns over national security and mounting resentment of the economic success of Asian Americans spawned new racist spatial practices meant to control and restrict the movements of Japanese Americans. The most blatant and far-reaching of these exclusionary measures was the internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Just as Jim Crow was framed as a means to maintain the social and spatial order in the South through racial separation, Executive Order 9066 was presented as a necessary action for the safety of the entire nation. But what happens when Asian Americans are forced to contend with both regional and national modes of racial and ethnic exclusion? For Japanese Americans detained at internment camps located in the South, southern segregation coupled with federally enforced internment posed the threat of being marginalized twice over. Living under the constant surveillance of officials inside of the camps and negotiating the complexities of Jim Crow outside of them, many Japanese Americans struggled to find their place in both regional and national terms.

Anti-Japanese sentiment had already been on the rise across the United States prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Like early Chinese laborers, Japanese immigrants were depicted as a threat to the sanctity of American economic prowess and white racial purity. The Issei, first-generation Japanese, had already established a strong economic and cultural base by the time the United States entered World War II. Many found success in various agricultural endeavors across the West Coast leading to the creation of strong, ethnic communities like the Japantowns and Little Tokyos in cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. Farm cooperatives within the Japanese American community as well multiracial coalitions such as the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) helped establish a sense of permanence in the United States that contrasted with the early sojourning patterns of the initial group of Japanese immigrants. Their success, as Ronald Takaki notes, “reflected the effectiveness of Japanese ethnic solidarity and the mutual-support systems they had developed in America.”57 The development of ethnic enclaves in areas like northern California helped immigrants and American-born Japanese to retain a sense of a shared cultural heritage while also working to become a visible and viable component of the nation.

But the thriving conditions of Japanese American communities further stoked hostilities toward Asian Americans. Local leaders and Washington bureaucrats argued that Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans posed a threat to the well-being of American citizens, more specifically, whites. John Rankin, an outspoken Democrat Congressmen from Mississippi who often disparaged African Americans, Jews, and non-

57 Takaki, Strangers From a Different Shore, 193.
European immigrants, argued that the nation had a duty to prevent "Jap or Negro blood" from being "pumped into the veins of white Americans." Following the logic behind the myth of the African American "brute," Japanese men were viewed as a threat to white womanhood and racial purity. But the illusion of Japanese male hypersexuality was also tempered by portrayals of Asian men as effeminate or asexual. Mainstream representations of Asian men such as Earl Derr Biggers's popular Charlie Chan literature and film series often depicted them as being rooted in a "d esexualized Zen asceticism." Elaine Kim suggests that Asian men are often viewed as asexual because "the characterization of Asian men is a reflection of a white male's perspective that defines the white man's virility." Despite the persistence of effeminate/desexualized stereotypes, southerners like Rankin continued to portray Japanese immigrants as sexual predators, an assumption prompting many to conclude that the only solution to "the Oriental problem" was establishing and maintaining segregated communities.

Japan's deadly attack on Pearl Harbor persuaded government officials to detain Japanese Americans as a means of safeguarding communities across the United States. Despite the absence of any connection to the attackers except for their shared ethnicity, American-born Japanese were deemed a potential threat to national security. Executive Order 9066 transformed the United States into one large military zone that displaced over

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58 Rankin initially worked to help poor, rural communities in the South co-authoring the Tennessee Valley Authority bill in 1933. But much of his time in Congress was spent on limiting the rights and opportunities of African Americans and Jews as he was often vocal in his bias against non-whites (Howard, Concentration Camps, 63).


100,000 people of Japanese descent despite the fact that the act targeted all immigrant groups. The federal act systematically categorized Japanese Americans as the enemy and generated a new set of national and local borders aimed at keeping Japanese Americans under close watch. Put another way, Executive Order 9066 created a new geography of racism masked as an attempt to protect existing communal boundaries. Much as Jim Crow segregation worked to preserve southern collective (white) identity by creating spatial distinctions based on race, the forced imprisonment of American citizens of Japanese descent represents “the suturing of the unity of the U.S. nation by means of differentiating between those who do and do not belong through the deployment of race, a category that in this context signifies national origins.”

While most of the scholarship on Japanese American internment focuses on concentration camps located in the western United States, little attention has been given to the two “relocation centers” that were constructed in the South. Texts like Miné Okubo’s illustrated memoir Citizen 13660 (1946), Linda Gordon’s and Gary Okihiro’s Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment (2008), and Elena Tajima Creef’s Imaging Japanese America: The Visual Construction of Citizenship, Nation, and the Body (2004) primarily focus on the conditions and hardships

61 A number of German and Italian immigrants were also sent to detention camps (separate from Relocation Centers) in Texas, New Mexico, Montana, North Dakota, and Idaho. For more, see Lawrence Distasi, ed. Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II. (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001) and Arnold Krammer, Undue Process: The Untold Story of America’s German Alien Internees (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).
63 Concentration camps located in the western half of the United States included Manzanar and Tule Lake (California), Gila River and Poston (Arizona), Granada (Colorado), Heart Mountain (Wyoming), Minidoka (Idaho), and Topaz (Wyoming). Camps were predominantly built in the West given the high population levels of Japanese Americans living in states like California and Washington as well as the region’s surplus of readily available land tracts that were removed from densely populated towns and cities.
of well-known camps like Manzanar and Tule Lake, both located in California. John Howard's *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (2008) is the only book-length study on the two camps located in the American South: Arkansas's Jerome and Rohwer War Relocation Centers. The Japanese Americans in Arkansas confronted not only a new physical environment and climate but also a social system that many were entirely unfamiliar with: Jim Crow segregation. The experiences of inmates at these southern camps highlight not only questions of national identity and allegiance but also ways that communal identities were transformed at the local level during global conflict.

Between 1942 and 1945 the Jerome and Rohwer War Relocation Centers in southeastern Arkansas housed over 16,000 Japanese-Americans from across the United States. Jerome's population included a relatively large contingent from Hawaii (ten percent of the total camp population) while many inmates arrived from California and other western states. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) viewed the Arkansas Delta as an ideal location for its internment camps. Officials noted how the region was relatively isolated from sizable populations, easily accessible by railroad transportation, and fertile for agricultural cultivation by and for inmates. The Arkansas division of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) helped the WRA acquire the land and began work to transform the dense and marshy floodplain into working detention centers with little disruption to nearby communities. In September 1942 the Linebarger-Senne Company of

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65 Lewis, “Looking Like the Enemy,” 43.
Little Rock completed work on the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Desha County, approximately 100 miles southeast of Little Rock. Thirty miles to the southwest in Chicot and Drew counties, the Rife Construction Company of Dallas oversaw the construction of Jerome Relocation Center. Jerome had the distinction of being the last government relocation center to open when it began operations in October 1942 and the first to close in June 1944, while Rohwer became the last to close in November 1944. Each camp was built over approximately 10,000 acres with 500 of that allotted to residential housing and businesses. Local whites and African Americans were hired to build the camps with Japanese Americans inmates brought in from western camps to complete their construction. A rail line connected both camps and transported inmates and vital supplies. With the arrival of thousands of Japanese Americans in the days after the camps’ completion, Rohwer and Jerome became the fifth and sixth largest “cities” in Arkansas.

Once at the camps, Japanese American inmates were introduced to a completely foreign physical environment. The Arkansas wilderness that surrounded both Jerome and Rohwer was a stark contrast to the predominantly urban landscape in which inmates grew up. Acclimating to the South’s climate was also a significant challenge. Inmates used to the moderate climate of the West were unprepared for Arkansas’s humid summers and frigid winters. Former Rohwer inmate Haruko (Sugi) Hurt describes how walking to work during Arkansas winters was treacherous as he “had not experienced such a cold

67 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 70.
climate" before being displaced. Fellow Rohwer inmate Eiichi Kamiya suggests that the camp's location in the Arkansas Delta made it the prime location for the perfect storm, literally. He notes that the camp was “far enough south to catch Gulf Coast hurricanes, far enough north to catch midwestern tornadoes, [and] close enough to the [Mississippi] river to be inundated by Mississippi Valley floods.”68 The South's physical environment not only posed a danger to Japanese Americans but also reinforced their sense of dislocation.

Despite the WRA's attempt to recreate an environment similar to those to which inmates were accustomed, the physical camps themselves also made life difficult as Japanese Americans struggled to adjust to cramped living quarters. Housing barracks and communal areas like dining halls and bathrooms were quickly and poorly built with cheap supplies. Camp housing lacked many of the basic amenities found in the Japanese Americans' homes before displacement. Barracks were constructed with tarpaper and wood providing limited insulation from the heat and cold. Each barrack was divided into apartments that included a small unit for heat, one single electrical source in the form a single light bulb, and no running water or cooking facilities. Inmates lacked private space and had to adjust to life in shared, communal buildings. Wall partitions were short, and bathrooms and showers located in communal buildings lacked dividers and thus made privacy impossible. The open spaces of the camps' housing facilities failed to provide inmates with the familiar comforts of their former homes.

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68 Lewis, “Looking Like the Enemy,” 43.
Like all WRA’s concentration camps, Jerome and Rowher were designed as self-sustaining communities. Camps were divided into approximately 50 blocks that included housing barracks, mess halls, recreational centers, laundry outposts, and communal latrines. A separate section of the camp was designated for administrative buildings for WRA officials, military police, and white employees and their families. WRA officials hoped that the neighborhood-like layout of the camps would provide the least amount of disruption to the everyday lives of Japanese Americans. More significantly, the physical design of the camp also functioned as a means to educate inmates on an American way of life. While segregating Japanese American buildings from those occupied by whites was meant to demarcate inmates from prison officials, the spatial divisions mimicked those found in the nearby southern communities—that is, Japanese Americans were taught to abide by Jim Crow etiquette even within the camp walls. The schools at Jerome and Rohwer also became an integral space for WRA officials to actively shape younger inmates into proper American citizens. Classes centered on teaching Japanese American children the values of American patriotism and national allegiance. Both camps provided designated worship spaces but only for practicing Christians. Clergy members from nearby towns and across the South converged upon Jerome and Rohwer to convert inmates to Christianity. T.L. Harris, the president of the Arkansas Southern Baptist Church, informed southern whites that the Arkansas camps provided “the greatest opportunity for winning to Christ those of pagan faith we have ever witnessed.” Japanese Americans who were not Christians, particularly Buddhists, were forced to

69 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 168.
utilize other areas of the camp for makeshift worshipping spaces and temples. Jerome and Rohwer became spaces where federal officials and white local community leaders could educate Japanese Americans regarding an acceptable American way of life and “rehabilitate” them as proper citizens.

Despite the challenges that camp living conditions posed to their way of life, Japanese Americans inmates at the southern camps worked to forge a strong sense of community centered on shared values and cultural pride. John Howard contends that inmates “built new lives and living environments with extraordinary resilience” as they transformed their shoddy surroundings into a thriving community. Stripped of their rights as American citizens and forced into a life of confinement, Japanese Americans at Jerome and Rohwer looked to utilizing their physical environment as a means of resisting the complete erasure of their cultural heritage and their sense of identity. Inmates personalized their living quarters by adding on elements of their former homes like porches, stoops, and small gardens. Issei residents decorated their apartment interiors with traditional wall hangings and floral arrangements. These simple landscape transformations helped remind them of a home place far away from the swampy floodplains of the Arkansas Delta. Imbuing their surroundings with physical markers of their Japanese heritage also helped inmates reaffirm their multinational identity and prevent the complete erasure of longstanding ethnic cultural practices.

Inmates at Jerome and Rohwer also engaged in communal activities that helped strengthen neighborly bonds and promote group solidarity. Leisure activities such as

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70 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 73.
71 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 98.
organized sports (particularly baseball and football) and dances brought Japanese Americans together to create a sense of familiarity despite being thousands of miles away from their homes. Officials helped organize inter-camp competitions while also allowing Japanese Americans to compete with local whites in sports like boxing, bowling, and football. Competitive sports helped foster relationships between Japanese Americans and local residents, but more importantly, athletics created a sense of communal belonging. Whether it was loyalty to a team, camp, ethnic group, or nation, sports became a means of self-identification for camp inmates who had experienced multiple displacements. Japanese Americans also took part in hobbies such as gardening that helped alleviate feelings of alienation and dislocation. Despite the relatively poor terrain of the camps, inmates utilized what limited materials they could procure to build traditional Japanese gardens. The camp gardens served as a recreation of the cultural markers that reinforced Japanese Americans' ethnic heritage. The simple landscape changes provided a momentary escape for the rigors of camp life.

Work-related activities also helped inmates establish a sense of community shaped by ethnic solidarity and a desire to reclaim and assert their American identities. Labor cooperatives developed and organized by Japanese Americans, particularly at Jerome, forged bonds among inmates while also providing them with needed goods from outside of the camps. Jerome Cooperative Enterprises worked to promote communal living and help connect Japanese Americans to the outside world as consumers and as workers. The project began as a way for inmates to procure goods unavailable within the

Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front*, 80.
Mail order departments allowed cooperative members to purchase clothing, home furnishings, and other products from popular consumer companies like Sears Roebuck. Japanese Americans could also purchase “luxury” items like tobacco and candy, items that were once readily available to them in the outside world but were now considered non-essential to an individual’s welfare. More importantly, Jerome’s cooperative program gave inmates back the power of consumerism, a power stripped of them upon being displaced from the greater American society. John Howard argues that the communal consumer practices of Japanese Americans “allowed a critique, in theory and in practice, of profit-oriented American capitalism.” The creation of economic spaces and activities such as the cooperatives transformed portions of the camps into makeshift communal centers and reinforced their identity as American citizens.

Despite the success of the cooperatives and athletic events, Japanese Americans in the Arkansas Delta experienced racial and ethnic tensions with local residents wary of their presence. Much of southeastern Arkansas was a rural agricultural region populated by poor whites and African Americans when Japanese Americans arrived. Although inmates lived in poorly constructed structures, they did have access to a central sewage system, running water, and electricity, amenities that were scarcely available to residents in the areas surrounding the camps. The availability of these goods and services in the Jerome and Rohwer camps “spurred anger and resentment among some white residents of the Delta” who were frustrated that the perceived “enemies” to the United States received

73 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 74.
74 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 74.
better treatment than loyal whites.\textsuperscript{75} While Japanese Americans were under the strict supervision of WRA officials who limited their mobility and activities, inmates were granted short leaves from the camp for excursions into nearby towns. Trips included shopping outings in Little Rock and dance parties with servicemen of the all-Japanese American 442nd Army division at nearby Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{76} These excursions outside of the camps introduced Japanese Americans to new set of challenges as they attempted to navigate an unfamiliar cultural and legal system of Jim Crow.

While they understood their status inside of the walls of Jerome and Rohwer, Japanese Americans struggled to make sense of their social standing when visiting neighboring communities. Life in Arkansas provided their first encounter with Jim Crow segregation. Despite growing up in urban cities far from rural Arkansas, many Japanese American inmates had some knowledge of the South's strict racial codes. Former inmate Daisuke Kitagawa recalls how "no one, irrespective of where he were originally from, wanted to be sent to the two Arkansas camps... The fact that those camps were located south of the Mason-Dixon Line made them unpopular, and there were all kinds of rumor rampant about them."\textsuperscript{77} But concerns over racial violence transformed into confusion. Japanese Americans learned that they occupied a unique place within southern race relations. For many, a simple bus ride became a "revelatory moment" in which they

\textsuperscript{75} Lewis, "Looking Like the Enemy," 43.
\textsuperscript{76} Lewis, "Looking Like the Enemy," 45.
learned how the South’s racial politics “entailed careful spatial distinctions.” Inmates and soldiers in the 442nd were often confused as to which section of the bus to sit in. Ben Tsutomu Chikaraishi recalled the confusion over where to sit on a local Arkansas bus on his first trip outside of his camp. The Rohwer inmate moved toward the back only to be surprised when the driver informed him to sit with white passengers. Confused by the driver’s instructions, he eventually decided to sit “right by the dividing line.” Chikaraishi’s predicament was not uncommon as many Japanese Americans, who understood that their imprisonment marked them as the enemy, were forced to straddle, sometimes quite literally, the South’s color line in order to avoid hostility from local residents.

Inmates struggled to rationalize how they were denied their rights as American citizens within the camp walls but given access to certain white privileges when visiting surrounding communities. Life in Arkansas during World War II represented a unique paradox: Japanese Americans were subjected to intense scrutiny on a national level while remaining virtually untouched within their local communities. While mounting American casualties in the Pacific intensified anti-Japanese sentiment across the United States, Japanese Americans in the Arkansas Delta rarely experienced conflicts with local residents.

Confrontations between local Arkansas whites and Japanese American were sparse, but internees did experience certain instances of racial hostility. Some white proprietors hesitated in granting camp residents access to their businesses despite the

78 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 128.
79 Quoted in Lewis, “Looking Like the Enemy,” 45.
agreements made with WRA officials. Despite their status as American servicemen, members of the 442nd were still perceived by some locals as viable threats. W.M. Wood, an elderly white resident of Dermott shot Private Louis Furushiro at close range while the soldier was on leave from nearby Camp Robinson, an incident resulting in facial burns to Furushiro’s face. Wood, who commented that he was anxious to “shoot the next Jap he saw,” was arrested but freed shortly thereafter.80 While Japanese Americans attempted to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States through military service, local whites continued to perceive them as dangerous outsiders.

While Jim Crow posed numerous challenges to Japanese Americans, the ambiguity surrounding the status of Asians in the South unexpectedly opened up new possibilities of social mobility that were unavailable to them within the internment camps. The limitations of segregation provided inmates with the opportunity to move within and between whites and African Americans by excluding themselves from segregationist politics. Put another way, Japanese Americans could circumvent several Jim Crow laws simply because they existed outside of the racial binary that defined southern spatial politics. During their excursions to surrounding communities, inmates were able to utilize both white and African American public facilities because they were defined as neither “white” nor “colored.” Since they were associated with neither group, Japanese Americans hoped their intermediate status would “translate into mobility between both groups.”81 WRA officials also set up contracts with local white residents to allow inmates to patronize their businesses and social organizations. While the mobility

80 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 132.
81 Bow, Partly Colored, 131.
and freedoms that Japanese Americans enjoying during their trips to cities across Arkansas and Mississippi highlight the inconsistencies of Jim Crow enforcement, the near-white status of inmates also reinforced the notion of white superiority. John Howard suggests that by allowing Japanese Americans to utilize white facilities and businesses, southern communities could “maintain whiteness as the category worthy of emulation and aspiration” and simultaneously reinforce blackness as “the inviolable category of abjection.”

For southern whites, granting inmates access to white spaces became a means of educating Japanese Americans on the South’s racial hierarchy and more importantly reaffirming white authority.

Inmates at the Arkansas camps faced the uncertainty of life after internment when WRA officials began the process of closing its ten Relocation Centers across the United States in 1944. Many had lost their homes and jobs, and it was unclear as to whether they would be able to reestablish themselves in their old communities. Despite these challenges, most Japanese Americans chose to return to the West Coast and Hawaii because the idea of staying in the South was unappealing given the hardships and potential dangers that Jim Crow segregation presented. The clear assertion of white authority and fear of racial hostility convinced inmates that the post-World War II South offered limited possibilities for social and economic advancement. While Japanese

82 Howard, Concentration Camps on the Home Front, 134.

83 On December 18, 1944, the United States Supreme Court handed down Ex parte Mitsuye Endo that declared it illegal for the federal government to detain any citizen that the government concedes is loyal to the United States. The decision was handed down on the same day as the ruling on Korematsu v. United States (323 U.S 214) in which the Court determined that Executive Order 9066 was constitutional because the exclusion order was established during wartime. For more information, see Ex Parte Endo. 323 U.S. 283 Supreme Court of the United States. 1944 and Fred Korematsu v. United States 323 U.S. 214 Supreme Court of the United States. 1944.
Americans were able to take advantage of their intermediate status, they were able to do so only because of the WRA, to a certain degree, which provided a form of protection from local residents. Recently freed inmates feared that the absence of federal officials would allow southerners, particularly whites who resented the presence of Japanese Americans, to exert more control over their activities. Even so, inmates feared that remaining in the South would place them in the same class and social status of poor whites and African Americans.

Few Japanese Americans stayed in the South once the camps closed but struggled to regain a sense of normality. By 1945 jobs and affordable housing were scarce across the Arkansas Delta, and former inmates had little to no savings from their work at Jerome and Rohwer. But local entrepreneurs learned of the successes of Japanese American agricultural production at the camps and sought to recruit them for their businesses. Officials at Wilson Plantation, a sprawling 65,000-acre operation spread across five towns in Mississippi County, took particular interest in recently freed inmates. Run by the Lee Wilson Company, the Wilson Plantation centered on cotton, corn, and alfalfa cultivation but also owned and operated several homes and businesses. Seeking new farmers to help expand their agricultural operations, Wilson officials targeted Japanese Americans and advertised the plantation as an attractive postwar home that offered jobs and housing.

But like the early Chinese immigrants who worked long hours for little pay during Reconstruction, former Jerome and Rohwer inmates who moved to Wilson became the target of white landowners hoping to exploit Asian laborers to maximize their profits. Japanese Americans hoping to establishing new roots in the South after internment fell victim to the “classic postbellum scheme of tenant farming and sharecropping” that presented few opportunities to attain economic self-sufficiency.\(^{85}\) The Lee Wilson Company had a history of exploiting non-white laborers. In 1925 the Mexican Embassy had filed numerous complaints against the company for failing to provide the wages promised to over 5,000 Mexican laborers whom the company recruited from Texas.\(^{86}\) Most Japanese Americans were unaware of Wilson’s reputation and the potential drawbacks of tenant farming and many accepted Wilson’s offer to move to the plantation. Wilson officials appealed to Japanese Americans by offering a plan that provided tracts of land and farming equipment for free. This option was particularly attractive to former inmates because they did not have enough money to rent land to farm. But the plantation’s tenant system became a financial burden because farmers had to split their sales with the company. Any remaining profit that Japanese farmers earned went to purchasing essential farming supplies and basic goods that could only be purchased from the plantation at inflated prices and that left most Japanese families in significant debt.\(^{87}\) Life at the plantation effectively became another manner of incarceration because Japanese farmers were required to remain in Wilson until they paid off their debt. Many

\(^{85}\) Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front*, 234.


\(^{87}\) Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 235.
former inmates who decided to stay in the South found themselves further marginalized by the false promise of economic stability and greater social freedoms.

By 1950, only a handful of Japanese Americans from the Jerome and Rohwer camps remained in Arkansas. As black and white southerners began to mobilize in their fight for desegregation in the 1950s, many Asians living in the South remained ambivalent about their role in southern racial politics. The desires for economic success and social acceptance were often in conflict with one another and left Asians cautiously treading along the color line in hopes of achieving both. Japanese Americans could, to a degree, inhabit both whites and African American spaces, but prevailing racial attitudes rooted in a racial binary made it difficult to precisely determine which spaces they could or could not occupy. While the circumstances and historical contexts of their presence in the South greatly differed, early Chinese grocers in the Mississippi Delta and Japanese Americans internees in Arkansas shared similar challenges in negotiating local southern boundaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. National anxieties about Asian immigration coupled with local racial attitudes enacted a dual sense of foreignness that relegated Chinese immigrants and Japanese American internees to the peripheries of their respective communities. Asians quickly learned that they remained under the surveillance of whites who maintained control over southern spatial practices.

But the inconsistencies of Jim Crow enforcement also provided Asians a degree of social and spatial mobility that allowed them to make use of certain white public facilities while maintaining close social and economic ties with the black community. From businesses like Chinese groceries to small, makeshift Japanese gardens in the Arkansas internment camps, public and private spaces became important sites of identity.
politics where newly arrived Asians could reaffirm their ethnic heritage and carve out new modes of home and community in the South. While under the constant surveillance of Jim Crow, Chinese immigrants and Japanese American internees could exert some control over their physical surroundings and establish a sense of permanence in the region. Penny Gong, whose family opened a Chinese grocery in Clarksdale, Mississippi, after moving to the Delta from San Francisco in 1954, explains that she defines herself as “a true southerner. I have grown up here. I have never wanted to move away.”88 Gong’s sentiments suggest that the restrictive measures of segregationist politics did not stop many Asian migrants from forging new communal relationships that challenged the racial and spatial logic of Jim Crow.

88 Penny Gong. Interview by Georgene Clark. October 7, 1999, transcript, Delta State University Oral History Archives, Cleveland, MS.
In 1984 the Plaza Seven Shopping Center, a once-popular retail destination in Falls Church, Virginia, was in need of revitalization as residents were being drawn to the area’s newer and larger indoor malls. Developers began purchasing the aging commercial space in hopes of capitalizing on the growing number of Vietnamese immigrants who migrated to the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area after the Vietnam War and whom developers saw as a potentially strong consumer base. The goal was to create a new cultural and economic hub in the northern Virginia suburb by recreating the thriving open-air markets found across Vietnam. The new shopping center would be “a reminder of the home away from home” for the growing number of Vietnamese living in the Washington, D.C., area. By 1996, Plaza Seven had transformed into the Eden Center, a sprawling 15.3 acre mixed-used space that features over 120 restaurants, stores, and social service centers. The Vietnamese-centric shopping center now serves as the city’s top tourist attraction drawing in shoppers and visitors from across the region with its ever-expanding retail outlets and cultural events such as the annual Autumn Moon
Festival and Tet celebrations. The transformations of public landscapes like those in Falls Church reflect the changing demographics of the American South in the years following segregation. More specifically, the construction of Eden Center and similar residential and commercial spaces found in cities across the South underscores the growing economic and cultural visibility of Asian Americans in the region. Places once primarily inhabited by whites and African Americans now include a growing number of Vietnamese, Korean, and South Asian residents. These demographic shifts are not only occurring in larger cities such as Atlanta and Houston but also in smaller, more rural areas. Historian James L. Peacock notes that “globalizing currents” are now “woven into the life of small towns” across the American South. The growing influence of immigrants and foreign capital on social and spatial practices in the South situates communities in the region as sites of economic and cultural transition.

Asian Americans in particular figure prominently in the South’s physical and social transformations as they work to become more visible in their communities as entrepreneurs, activists, and political leaders. As discussed in Chapter One, discriminatory immigration policies (such as the Immigration Act of 1924) and segregation codified southern spaces by creating racially and ethnically defined neighborhoods that forced many Asian Americans to the physical and social peripheries of their respective communities. But sweeping reform in the mid 1960s undermined the legal apparatuses that limited Asian American mobility and growth and paved the way

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2 Peacock defines globalization as a series of economic, social, and political processes that establish a sense of connectivity on a worldwide scale (Peacock, Grounded Globalism, 162).
for new perspectives about Asian American communities in the South. The Immigration Act of 1965 which abolished national origins quotas not only led to an influx of thousands Asian immigrants who introduced new cultural traditions that revived ethnic solidarity and pride but also established economic and social networks between the South and countries across Asia. Meanwhile, the fight for Civil Rights and desegregation allowed for increased partnerships among Asian Americans, southern whites, and African Americans. The once restrictive borders that segregated Asian Americans became more porous as communities in the post-1965 South took on an increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and transnational identity.

While the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Movement successfully broke down many of the social and physical barriers that divided communities, the conflicts over the growing visibility of ethnic enclaves point to the ways in which southern spaces continue to be encoded by race. This new visibility is particularly evident in smaller, more rural areas where Asian immigration has been slower but no less palpable. The emergence of prominent Asian neighborhoods across the South reveals how communities in the post-segregation era are sites of both resistance and progress. Asian immigrants who now populate areas once predominantly inhabited by whites and African Americans add a new wrinkle to the debates over how communities get defined and who determines this definition. Barbara Ellen Smith contends that new immigrants in the South represent “the human embodiment of globalization” who symbolize “all of its
threats as well as, at least for some people, promise."3 The growing economic, social, and political visibility of populations like Asians also suggests that the South’s traditional social structures are less stable or, at least, less discernible. In his analysis of Latino migration to the South, Jamie Winders rightly asks, “How will a dualistic framing of race account for and accommodate a group whose place outside its boundaries points to the contrived nature of this binary system of difference?"4 Put another way, what exactly does this new multiracial and multiethnic South look like?

The changing appearance of cities across the contemporary South clearly indicates the region’s growing Asian American population as the region’s physical landscape includes visible cultural markers and designs. But these physical transformations do not simply serve an aesthetic purpose; rather the act of making Asian cultures visible represents a strategic appropriation of the local landscape that works to cultivate the economic, cultural, and political presence of Asian Americans and redefine once segregated communities as global sites of cultural exchange. The use of tangible markers of Asian ethnic cultures by businesses, religious sites, and private dwellings provide immigrants with a sense of familiarity and reinforce communal solidarity through shared cultural traditions. Meanwhile, neighborhood organizations and community-sponsored events help promote civic responsibility and collective action by raising awareness of the issues that impact the economic and social practices of community

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3 Barbara Ellen Smith, “Place and the Past in the Global South,” special issue, American Literature 78, no. 4 (December 2006):694.
4 Jamie L. Winders, “Rethinking Southern Communities, Reconfiguring Race: Latino Migration to the U.S. South,” American Literature 78, no. 4 (December 2006): 700.
members. Geographically defined and socially constructed spaces serve as sites of cultural renegotiation where Asian immigrants and Asian Americans sustain their ethnic traditions and inscribe them in the historical memory of their respective communities.

This chapter identifies the Gulf Coast and the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., as southern communities that have undergone and continue to undergo physical, economic, and cultural transformations as the result of a growing Asian American presence. Gulf South cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi, are now home to thousands of Vietnamese Americans who first arrived in the coastal region as refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Displaced by war and confronted with the foreign landscapes and customs of a new country, they imbued their surroundings with the ethnic traditions brought over from Vietnam and transformed low-income neighborhoods into thriving cultural and commercial spaces. While the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 threatened to displace Vietnamese immigrants once again, the economic, environmental, and political challenges that emerged in the aftermath of the storm also spurred a movement to rebuild and reenergize not only Vietnamese American communities but also the Gulf South as a whole through cultural industries and multiracial and multiethnic coalitions. Meanwhile, the suburbs of northern Virginia experienced an economic and cultural shift when thousands of Korean immigrants began to arrive in search of new economic opportunities in the 1980s. The city of Annandale, in particular, has become an emergent “Koreatown” as Korean businesses now make up a significant portion of its economy. But many longtime residents fear that an ethnocentric communal identity establishes exclusionary practices based on race and ethnicity. The debates over Annandale’s Koreatown identity and the
Vietnamese Americans’ fight for economic, cultural, and political visibility in the Gulf South suggest that southern communities remain contested sites in the post-segregation era.

Moral Obligations: Immigration Act of 1965 and Vietnamese Refugees

By the early-1960s the United States was grappling with the onset of new challenges to its foreign and domestic policy. Anxiety over Cold War diplomacy and the ongoing domestic conflicts over the Civil Rights Movement left many government officials concerned over the nation’s status at home and abroad. Americans were grappling with the escalating clashes over segregation in cities across the South while trying to make sense of the United States’ involvement in the deadly conflicts in Vietnam. Lawmakers in Washington recognized that the changing social and political climate in 1965 required new conversations about domestic and international policy, conversations that would ensure the nation’s standing as the leader of the free world. One of the more fiercely contested issues to arise from these discussions was immigration reform. More specifically, politicians questioned whether the restrictive measures such as the national quotas and the immigration exclusions of existing laws, such as the Immigration Act of 1924, truly reflected the ideals and values of Americans.

Fearing that immigration restrictions put the United States at an economic disadvantage by failing to attract skilled laborers from foreign countries, President John F. Kennedy, along with numerous House and Senate Democrats, lobbied for large-scale immigration reform. Additionally, lawmakers hoped to use immigration reform as a tool to curtail the spread of Communism by allowing people to “vote with their feet” by
immigrating to the country. Democrats argued that a broadminded immigration policy would serve as the ultimate form of anti-Communist propaganda by showing the rest of the world that the United States was a growing and increasingly diverse nation.

Although proponents of immigration reform were confident that the strong liberal presence in both the House and the Senate ensured victory, conservatives, especially those from the South, vigorously fought to prohibit extending immigration privileges to non-European nations. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 revealed changing attitudes about race and ethnicity in the United States as African Americans and whites came together to eradicate the injustices of segregation. But white southern lawmakers struggled to accept these shifting viewpoints and argued that immigration reform would further destabilize the nation’s social structure. West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd argued that while immigrants from Western European nations were “more easily and readily assimilated into the American population,” new populations from regions like Asia and Africa would struggle to adapt to life in the United States. The efforts to help new immigrants become acclimated to a new country would place a burden on American citizens by draining economic and social resources.

White southern rhetoric regarding immigration reform strongly resembled the language of debates over civil rights and segregation. North Carolina Senator Sam J. Ervin spearheaded the movement to preserve the restrictive measures of the Immigration Act of 1924. He suggested that limiting the number of immigrants entering the United

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6 *Cong. Rec.* 23 (1965)
States from regions like Asia and Africa were not discriminatory but rather a reflection of the desire of American population. Just as they believed that Civil Rights legislation impinged upon the rights and privileges of southern whites, lawmakers from the South feared that the influx of non-European immigrants would weaken the economic, political, and cultural authority of American citizens. Politicians like Ervin and Byrd believed that the United States was and should continue to be a nation buoyed by white immigrants. Simply put, southern lawmakers feared the loss of a predominantly white, middle-class national identity.

Proponents of reform refuted the arguments of southern conservatives by suggesting that the Civil Rights movement validated the need to overturn discriminatory immigration policies such as national quotas. If the United States was truly a free nation as the fight to grant African Americans the same rights and privileges of whites demonstrated, then it was only appropriate to provide immigrants, regardless of their race or ethnicity, with the same opportunity. California Representative Philip Burton declared, "Just as we sought to eliminate discrimination in our land through the Civil Rights Act, today we seek by phasing out the national origins quota system to eliminate discrimination in immigration to this nation composed of the descendants of immigrants." If laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 worked to fix the wrongs of discrimination and racism, then immigration reform was considered the next logical step to rectify the failures of American involvement in Vietnam. Lawmakers in favor of

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7 Roger Daniels, "The Immigration Act of 1965: Intended and Unintended Consequences of the Twentieth Century," Historians on America (September 2007): 76.

revising existing policies also argued that immigration expansion would further reinforce the United States as a world power by attracting professional and skilled workers from around the world. Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy argued that eliminating national origins quotas would help increase the nation’s workforce but “would not flood our cities with immigrants” in the process.9

Despite southern lawmakers’ efforts to block immigration reform, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Act (INS Act of 1965, Pub. L. 89-236), proposed by New York Representative Emanuel Celler and co-sponsored by Michigan Senator Philip Hart (both key figures in the passage of Civil Rights legislation), into law on October 3, 1965. Like the recently passed Civil Rights Act of 1965, the new immigration bill served as a corrective measure to eradicate discriminatory practices based on race or ethnicity.10 In a symbolic speech given at the steps of the Statue of Liberty, President Johnson explained how prior legislation had been “un-American in the highest sense, because it has been untrue to the faith that brought thousands to these shores even before we were a country.”11 Proponents of the new law recognized that long-held exclusionary immigration practices needed to be overturned, particularly given the ongoing plight of innocent Vietnamese overseas and the ongoing domestic shifts toward desegregation.

By abolishing the 1921 and 1952 national origins quota (although certain limitations on the annual number of immigrants were allowed remained in place) and establishing a preference system for immigrants, the new bill opened up immigration

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10 The Hart-Celler Act was to overturn the discriminatory components of existing legislation such as the Asian Exclusion Act. See Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of the Immigration Act of 1924.
from Third World regions like southeast Asia and Africa. A major component of the 1965 law was family reunification that would be carried out through group sponsorship programs. The new act allotted 20,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere (children under twenty-one, spouses, and parents were exempt) per year while no limits were placed on those immigrating from the Western Hemisphere. Of those coming from eastern countries, seventy-four percent were granted for family unification, twenty percent for workers and professionals, and six percent for refugees. The preference system was established in order to provide a check-and-balance system for expanded immigration. The new law prioritized immigrants in the following order: 1) unmarried children of United States citizens under the age of twenty one; 2) spouses and children (who are unmarried) of permanent residents; 3) professionals, scientists, and artists of exceptional ability; 4) married children of citizens over the age of twenty one; 5) siblings and spouses of United States citizens; 6) workers in occupations that had labor shortages, and 7) political refugees.\(^{12}\)

While supporters of immigration reform convinced the American public that new legislation would not significantly alter the ethnic composition of the United States population, the prediction would prove to be inaccurate in the years following the bill’s passage. The cultural, racial, and ethnic landscape of the United States dramatically changed as a wave of immigrants from Southeast Asia entered the country in search of new social and economic opportunities, opportunities denied to them by Asian exclusion.

First, the sheer number of immigrants in the United States grew considerably. Immigrant populations doubled in the five years after 1965. These numbers would double again between 1970 and 1990. By 2002, 19.4 million immigrants had entered the country as a result of the Hart-Celler Act. Second, lawmakers did not foresee the significant number of immigrants coming from Asian nations. Approximately 7.3 million of the 19.4 million that arrived by 2002 had immigrated from Asia, second only to North American immigration primarily from Mexico. Among the countries with the highest number of immigrants were the Philippines (1.5 million), China (1.1 million), and Vietnam (one million). Cities across the United States felt the impact of new Asian populations as immigrants helped fuel local economies while diversifying communities in ways unimagined. But the changing demographics also produced communal conflicts, particularly in the South, where many southerners still reeling from the end of segregation feared that newly arrived Asian immigrants would further weaken white control over the economic and cultural identities of their respective communities.

South China Sea to the Gulf Shores- Vietnamese Refugees in New Orleans

The arrival of political refugees in the 1970s and 1980s transformed the South’s social, economic, and physical landscapes as Southeast Asian immigrants opened new businesses and constructed ethnic communities in areas once primarily populated by southern whites and African Americans. The sudden and substantial increase in Asian populations was a challenge for both immigrants and longtime residents. Abruptly displaced from their home countries, Southeast Asian refugees were forced to familiarize

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themselves quickly with a foreign environment and new social customs. Meanwhile, southerners had to learn how to coexist with an unfamiliar population. Anxieties about language barriers, increased competition over jobs, and limited housing left many wary of the impact that new immigrants would have on their communities. In an effort to contend with the rapid growth of Asian immigrant populations, federal and local government officials worked quickly to establish organizations and propose new legislation that would assist refugees and ease the burden of accommodating thousands of new immigrants.

Escalating political and military conflicts in Vietnam in the 1960s proved to be a critical test for the revised immigration policies. The number of Vietnamese immigrants entering the United States in the years immediately following the passage of the Hart-Celler Act was relatively low. Approximately three thousand Vietnamese, most of whom were either students or war brides of United States servicemen, immigrated to the United States by 1970.\textsuperscript{14} For thousands of Vietnamese hoping to escape bloodshed and political persecution as the war escalated, the United States quickly became a desirable destination. Aware of the expanding American presence in Vietnam, government officials sought to provide further assistance to the South Vietnamese who opposed Communist rule. But conditions in Vietnam rapidly deteriorated as the Vietcong decimated villages and left thousands of Vietnamese homeless, imprisoned, or dead. Further complicating efforts to leave the country was President Richard Nixon’s call for the “Vietnamization” of war efforts in March 1969 that drastically cut military support for the South

Vietnamese Army. With limited resources and waning support of foreign militaries, South Vietnamese forces struggled to hinder the Viet Cong’s advance, and by April 1975, South Vietnam’s capital of Saigon fell into the hands of Communist forces. For many, escape was the only feasible option, and thousands set off on a dangerous and at times fatal journey to the United States.

Despite widespread anti-Vietnamese sentiments and an economic recession, United States government officials felt obligated to assist refugees especially after the fall of Saigon. Plans were set into motion that would not only help Southeast Asian refugees enter the country but also provide them with the resources to make the adjustment to life in foreign country. State Department officials and lower-level military personnel established the Interagency Task Force on Indochinese Refugees in April 1975. Consisting of twelve federal agencies, the Task Force drew up plans to enact a two-year resettlement plan across the US. (Freeman 66). In conjunction with these efforts, President Ford authorized an additional 130,000 individuals from Indochina refugee status to immigrate to the United States. The goal was to ease the transition for refugees while minimizing any potential disruptions to the everyday lives of Americans.

With their communities still healing from the scars of the Civil Rights Movement and with growing opposition to American involvement in Vietnam, southerners were less than receptive to the idea of widespread Vietnamese immigration. Fifty-four percent of Americans were opposed to allowing Vietnamese refugees into the United States by

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15 "Vietnamization" was part of the six-step plan to drastically reduce and eventually withdraw American military operations in Vietnam. The policy called for the strengthening of the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) in terms of numbers, combat skills, and strategic planning and making South Vietnam more self-sufficient. See American Passages: A History of the United States, 886.
16 Freeman, Changing Identities, 66.
1965. Many were fearful of the economic impact of an increased immigrant population, particularly in smaller, poorer communities. James Freeman notes how officials established refugee resettlement camps to facilitate the introduction of a new immigrant population by helping refugees adjust to life in the United States. More importantly, these camps would help to alleviate "concerns that resettlement would be an economic burden on local communities." In May 1975 the federal government set aside $405 million toward Vietnamese refugee resettlement projects (compared to the $583 million designated for Cuban refugees) that would help offset local and state expenditures. To further ease the strain on local economies, camps were constructed on military bases across the country: Camp Pendleton, California; Ft. Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. The goal was to educate refugees on American customs while also helping them establish a sense of economic self-sufficiency. Officials hoped that the resettlement camps would serve as an intermediary between refugees and local communities.

Refugees were permitted to leave the camps only after securing economic stability or establishing some sort of social connection with a nearby community. The most common means of leaving the resettlement camp was through family and church sponsorships. Close to ninety nine percent of refugees in resettlement camps sought community sponsors who assisted them in finding homes and employment opportunities in cities across the South. Organizations like the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) and the Lutheran Family Services traveled to resettlement camps to assist with

\[1\text{7}\] Freeman, Changing Identities, 44.
refugee relocation in states like Louisiana, Arkansas, and North Carolina. Catholic organizations like the USCC were particularly important as a large number of refugees were either practicing Catholics or attendees of Catholic services in Vietnam. The relationship between these religious organizations and resettlement camps were thought to be mutually beneficial. Sponsorships would provide local churches with new members while allowing military officials to resume normal military operations on their respective bases.

Louisiana became a major destination for refugees given its proximity to the Fort Chaffee Refugee Processing Center for Indochinese and the state’s substantial Catholic population. Over 50,000 Vietnamese refugees lived in the Arkansas camp that also served as a resettlement camp for Cuban refugees in 1980. The joint efforts of the USCC, Associated Catholic Charities, and Fort Chaffee officials were integral in the development of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans. Shortly after the Fort Chaffee camp opened in 1975, Philip Hannan, Archbishop of the New Orleans Archdiocese, traveled to Arkansas to speak with Vietnamese refugees on resettling in local communities. He theorized that Catholics, especially migrants seeking a sense of familiarity and belonging, would want to congregate around a specific priest and/or church. With that in mind, Archbishop Hannan sought a nearby community that had the economic, and more importantly, cultural means to accommodate refugees. Father Vien Nguyen, head of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church (MQVN) in New Orleans, Louisiana, notes how the USCC looked for “a location with a lot of vacancies nearby” to
accommodate a large group of immigrants.\textsuperscript{18} Church leaders settled on the Versailles Arms Apartment complex in New Orleans East as the most viable option for refugee relocation. For years the Versailles and Village de l’Est neighborhoods, located along Chef Menteur Highway, were home to employees of the nearby Michoud NASA assembly facility. But white flight in the 1960s led to numerous housing vacancies that paved the way for Vietnamese families to move into the area. In a few short years, New Orleans East was transformed from a middle-class suburb into a primarily low-income neighborhood that would become home to hundreds of newly arrived refugees.

The development of New Orleans’s Vietnamese community deviates from the migratory trends of post-1965 Asian immigrants as the majority of immigrants settled into larger cities along the East and West coasts. Urban centers have long been the preferred destination for contemporary immigrants in the United States. Larger cities often possess a greater number of low-skill jobs that do not require English language proficiency, and immigrants often look to settle in cities that already have an established ethnic community like New York’s Chinatown. Vietnamese refugees arrived at a time when large cities were experiencing a changing labor market. Roger Waldinger notes that while urban centers still provide some low-skilled jobs, there are “far fewer such positions” and “the number is continually dwindling.”\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, the fact that large-scale Vietnamese immigration was a relatively new development by the mid-1970s meant that there were no sizeable or established Vietnamese neighborhoods that could serve as a

\textsuperscript{18} Vien Nguyen, Interview by Elizabeth Shelborne, May 22, 2006, transcript, Wilson Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.
\textsuperscript{19} Waldinger, Strangers at the Gate, 3.
communal hub for recent arrivals. The lack of prominent immigrant networks and established Vietnamese communities forced refugees to settle in smaller cities with lower living costs and more readily available jobs.

While the Gulf Coast lacked the ethnic communities of larger metropolitan areas, the region was an appealing destination for Vietnamese immigrants for the simple fact that it looked and felt much like their former villages in Vietnam. The subtropical climate and proximity to large waterways resembled the physical features of the Vietnamese landscape and allowed refugees to adjust quickly to their new physical surroundings. Moreover, the availability of low-income housing allowed a larger number of Vietnamese immigrants to move into the region. The Gulf also presented refugees with ample job opportunities for low-skilled laborers with limited English language skills. The region's prominent fishing and shrimping industry played a particularly significant role as many of the immigrants had worked as fishermen in villages across the Mekong Delta.

The centrality of faith and spirituality in Gulf South communities also attracted Vietnamese immigrants. Aided by religious organizations that helped secure sponsorships, refugees actively sought Catholic churches and Buddhist temples so they could continue to practice their faith in their new southern communities. More importantly, local religious institutions helped the newly arrived Vietnamese establish a sense of community and belonging in unfamiliar surroundings. Churches and temples became the focal point of strong communal networks that not only linked refugees through their shared experiences of displacement but also helped them preserve long-held cultural practices. New Orleans's Catholic churches became and remain a central communal space for the city's Vietnamese population. Christopher Airriess suggests that
the refugees' rural background and history of religious persecution represent major influences on the “space and place construction in the adaptation process.” Currently in New Orleans there are six Catholic churches specifically for Vietnamese parishioners along with one for Lutherans, one for Baptists, and a Buddhist temple.

Perhaps the largest and most visible religious site is the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church located in New Orleans East. Centrally located on Dwyer Boulevard, which runs through the Versailles and Village de l’Est neighborhoods, the MQVN Catholic Church quickly became the epicenter of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans. Minh Zhou and Carl Leon Bankston note that the church’s location reflects its “institutional centrality to the community.” Not only does the space serve as a place of worship and as a social gathering spot, but the MQVN Catholic Church also functions as a symbolic marker of belonging for the approximately 6,300 parishioners. Adorned with both religious and cultural architectural elements, the church and surrounding structures serve as discernible markers of the strong Vietnamese presence in New Orleans. Catholic symbols and markers evoke the spiritual strength of the church’s parishioners. Crosses and statues of the Virgin Mary can be found throughout the church grounds while the use of Vietnamese architectural designs, such as angled awnings, helps residents reaffirm their cultural heritage as well as helping to make their presence in the community visible (Figures 1 and 2).

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But the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East utilizes their physical surroundings in other ways to establish and reaffirm their collective identity. As more immigrants moved to the neighborhood, the surrounding landscape was transformed into a “Viet Village” that illustrates the cultural and economic impact of the Vietnamese on the city. Several Vietnamese shopping centers line New Orleans East’s three main thoroughfares (Chef Menteur Highway, Michoud Boulevard, and Alcee Fortier Boulevard) within a ten-mile radius. Businesses include grocery stores, bakeries, pharmacies, beauty salons, jewelry stores, and restaurants. What makes these retail spaces unique is the fact that most, if not all, of them utilize signs written in both English and Vietnamese (Figures 3 and 4). Some of the businesses use signs solely written in Vietnamese. While these signs serve a specific economic purpose (attracting Vietnamese customers), they also play a critical role in terms of establishing a strong communal presence. Through their tangible qualities as visible objects, storefront signs demarcate these businesses as markedly Vietnamese spaces. More specifically, the prominent use of Vietnamese markings reveals that the adaptation to life in the American South does not necessarily entail a complete erasure of traditional customs and ethnic identity. While businesses may come and go, the significant presence of economic spaces devoted to Vietnamese customers, goods, and social services suggest a level of permanence in the greater New Orleans community.

Residential sections of the Versailles and Village de l’Est also incorporate physical makers of ethnic pride and communal belonging. Much like the storefront signs found through New Orleans East, street signs throughout the neighborhood reveal a synthesis of New Orleans and Vietnamese culture. Michel de Certeau notes how the use
of proper names (street signs and neighborhood markers) imbue specific places with a
"poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden, and historical order
of movement"; these simple geographic markers help "carve out pockets of hidden and
familiar meanings" for residents and visitors.22 Vietnamese-inspired street signs provide
newly arrived immigrants, particularly older residents, with a sense of comfort. The
physical markers bearing familiar names and places reinforce their connection with their
birthplaces by transforming a once foreign environment into a more intimate space.
Saigon Drive, named after the former capital of South Vietnam, is an example of the
physical reminders of the past found throughout New Orleans East. Located in the
residential section of Versailles, the street becomes a reassuring presence of Vietnamese
culture that immigrants can immediately recognize and relate to. While nearby streets
such as St Maxent Street acknowledge New Orleans's French history, Saigon Drive
reflects the memories and official recognition of the Vietnamese past.23 Simple landscape
alterations like changing street names help assuage the feelings of dislocation that new
immigrants experience by creating physical markers of former homes.

But the Vietnamese street signs also work to rebrand New Orleans East as a
community built for and maintained by Vietnamese immigrants. As visible displays of
ethnic solidarity, the neighborhood road markers become a tangible means of asserting
cultural and political influence. Their presence throughout Versailles and Villege de l'Est

22 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 98.
23 St. Maxent Street is named after Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent, a former French military officer who
became a wealthy businessman and politician in New Orleans. See Stacey Truman, "Gilbert Antoine de St.

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announces to residents and visitors that Vietnamese immigrants represent a sizeable and active population group within the larger New Orleans community. The erection of Vietnamese-inspired landscape features serves as a means of raising the visibility of Vietnamese Americans. These markers are placed in clear view not only to reaffirm the residents' cultural heritage but also to spotlight the cultural and economic impact of Vietnamese immigrants. Situated in the median of Michoud Boulevard is a large granite marker that not only demarcates the residential sector of Versailles but also signals the neighborhood's cross-cultural identity (Figure 5). The marker incorporates two small Fleurs-de-lis, the prominent symbol of the city's French and Creole influence, along with the Republic of Vietnam flag. The Vietnamese phrase “Chào Mừng Quý Khách,” roughly translated to “welcome,” greets passersby. Street names not only evoke the Vietnamese past but also help reaffirm Vietnamese residents' place within the greater Gulf South community. My-Viet Drive, located near the MQVN Catholic Church, spotlights the cross-cultural links that redefine New Orleans East as an increasingly diverse community. The street name, which translates to “Vietnamese American” Drive, reinforces the Vietnamese's connection to New Orleans and their identity as Americans. While these changes represent an “expression of adaptation” (both in terms of the Vietnamese adapting to life in the United States and the community's adaptation to the growing Vietnamese population) as Christopher Airriess suggests, the transformation of public space also represents an expression of cultural exchange and geographic

24 The Republic of Vietnam flag can be found in locations across New Orleans East. The widespread visibility of the South Vietnamese flag instead of the Communist-ruled Socialist Republic of Vietnam flag not only reinforces their allegiance to the non-Communist state but also honors the defunct Vietnamese state prior to its partition in 1950.
permanent. Street signs and flags physically mark New Orleans East as both an American and Vietnamese space. The streets become literal intersections of cultures, experiences, and histories while simultaneously solidifying a place for the Vietnamese immigrants in the Gulf South. Fitzhugh Brundage contends that infusing objects and places with "commemorative significance" helps "combat the transitory nature of memories" as well as working to establish a sense of permanence. Serving as visible and tangible markers of a Vietnamese presence, the streets signs highlight residents' deep connection to their ethnic roots and new American surroundings.

**Changing Tides: Immigrant Shrimpers and Biloxi's Seafood Industry**

Ninety miles northeast of New Orleans, Vietnamese Americans have established a similar thriving community in the Mississippi coastal cities of Biloxi and Gulfport that has transformed and continues to transform the Gulf South into a globalized place. Like their Louisiana counterparts, Vietnamese immigrants in Mississippi were drawn to the state's climate, housing, and jobs in the seafood industry. Most of the early immigrants who settled in Biloxi and Gulfport in the late 1970s came by the way of New Orleans where they worked as oyster shuckers, fishermen, and in canning factories. While less geographically concentrated than communities like Village de l'Est and Versailles, Vietnamese Americans living along the Mississippi coast find strength in their collective efforts to lay down new roots and help revitalize the Gulf South's fishing and shrimping industry in the process.

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Prior to the large-scale development of fishing and shrimping businesses, the Mississippi coast relied on tourism to sustain its economy. With its long stretches of beaches and subtropical climate, Biloxi was a popular summer vacation destination for southerners in the nineteenth century, a reputation that the city still asserts. Resort hotels such as the Biloxi House and Magnolia Hotel were constructed while steamships carrying wealthy white southerners from New Orleans and surrounding cities, frequently made stops in the city. Hoping to capitalize on the city's proximity to Gulf waterways, regional entrepreneurs looked to redevelop Biloxi into a strong fishing and shrimping hub that would supply seafood for both local residents and businesses across the South. The goal was to promote the city not only as the seafood capital of the South but the seafood capital of the world.

The construction of railroad lines linking Biloxi to seafood markets further inland in 1869 and the advent of new food preservation methods, like the use of mass-produced ice, helped establish new shrimping and canning businesses. Biloxi natives F. William Elmer and William Gorenflo were the first to take significant steps toward developing large-scale seafood operations in the city. They pooled together their economic resources with England-born businessman James Maycock and Lazaro Lopez, a Spanish immigrant who had developed successful business ventures in Cuba before arriving in the United States. The newly-formed group of entrepreneurs soon partnered with W.K.M. DuKate, a leader of the seafood canning industry from Fredericksburg, Indiana, who travelled
along the East Coast to learn more about prominent canning methods and eventually to establish Lopez, Elmer and Company in 1881, Biloxi’s first seafood canning company.27

Shrimping and canning businesses struggled to find enough laborers to keep up with Biloxi’s rapidly expanding seafood industry. Local business owners traveled across the South and East Coast in search of low-wage workers. Factory owners began to employ immigrant laborers who had developed shrimping and canning skills in other port cities like Baltimore. The Polish were some of the first immigrants to move to the area settling in the relatively unpopulated areas of Back Bay (on the northern edge of the city) and Point Cadet (the eastern tip of the peninsula). By 1891 Biloxi’s population had doubled to 3,234 as other immigrant groups like Austrians and Slavonians sought work in canning factories and on the growing number of fishing boats operating out of the city’s harbor. News of Biloxi’s expanding labor needs quickly spread as others began moving to the city in search of new economic opportunities. Cajuns from across the Gulf Coast made their way to Biloxi in the 1910s and settled into immigrant neighborhoods in Point Cadet. Organizations like the Catholic Church and social clubs such as the Slavic Benevolent Association and the Fleur de Lis Club forged strong communal identities within and among immigrant groups who represented the backbone of the city’s economy. In many ways, the seafood industry established Biloxi as one of the South’s most culturally and ethnically diverse cities by the early twentieth century.

Like the Slovanians and Polish immigrants before them, the Vietnamese who migrated to Biloxi in the 1970s were in search of jobs with which they were familiar and

which did not require a strong proficiency in English. Many had grown up in rural fishing villages along the southern coast of Vietnam and hence viewed the coastal city as a desirable destination for resettlement. While it is difficult to determine precisely how and when Vietnamese immigrants first migrated to Biloxi, most sources point to the work of Richard Gallott and his efforts to recruit immigrant laborers in the late 1970s as the key source of large-scale migration. Gallott, owner of the Golden Gulf Packing Company in Back Bay, faced a labor shortage with the rapid growth of new businesses. After learning about Vietnamese immigrants working as oyster shuckers in New Orleans, he traveled to Louisiana in hopes of recruiting them. In 1977 Gallott convinced twelve Vietnamese workers to return with him to Biloxi to work in his packing plant. In the following months these laborers brought their families and spread word of new employment opportunities to fellow immigrants who were living in surrounding cities. Biloxi was soon home to several hundred Vietnamese families who became vital to the success of the city’s seafood industry. Families, church sponsors, and immigrants like the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, the Catholic Social Services Migration, and the Refugee Center of Biloxi all worked to help immigrants finding housing and jobs. While Vietnamese immigrants moved into neighborhoods across Biloxi, the majority settled into the eastern portion of the city in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like New Orleans East, East Biloxi was primarily a lower-income neighborhood that offered affordable housing and cheap rental spaces for businesses. With the communal efforts of newly

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28 The majority of interviewees and articles point to Gallott as the central figure to the large-scale migration of Vietnamese immigrants to the Biloxi/Gulfport area.
29 Trinh Le, interview by author, August 12, 2009.
arrived Vietnamese migrants and longtime residents, East Biloxi soon emerged as a vibrant multiethnic community.

The ultimate goal for many Vietnamese immigrants moving to Biloxi was long-term financial stability for their families. Having been displaced from their hometowns and familiar landscapes, the early immigrants viewed Biloxi as a place where they could create a new permanent home. Trawl shop owner Liem Tran describes how he does not work for his wife or himself but rather he “think[s] for my children” and their future.30 The Mississippi coast represents a safe space where refugees can eliminate the disorientating effects of their sudden displacement but also establish new, permanent roots for future generations. Many believed that returning to Vietnam was not feasible and the new social and economic opportunities in the Gulf South provided a sense of optimism and a newfound appreciation for their new southern home.

Establishing a new sense of home in Biloxi continues to involve a variety of communal spaces where immigrants can simultaneously preserve their ethnic heritage while also becoming part of the larger regional community. Religious and economic spaces are central as both enable the Vietnamese to continue their everyday practices despite their forced migration. Although shrimping provides jobs for those who possess limited English language skills and little to no formal education, a number of Vietnamese immigrants recognize the need to develop small businesses that would serve as a “key wealth-building tool” for the greater Vietnamese community.31 The Oak Street Corridor,

30 Quoted in Schmidt, “Down Around Biloxi.”
a one-mile stretch of homes and businesses located off of Biloxi's main strip of beach resorts and casinos, emerged as the central location for activity with its numerous businesses and religious spaces that catered to Vietnamese residents in the 1980s. As one of the main North-South streets located in East Biloxi, Oak Street and its crop of small businesses and meeting places help raise the economic and cultural visibility of the Vietnamese in the city. The Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church and the adjacent Chua Van Duc Buddhist Temple serve as the heart of the community as they provided immigrants with a central worshipping place as well as a gathering point that helped bring residents together (Figures 6 and 7). Approximately 65 percent of Vietnamese Americans in the United States are Catholic while 35 percent are practicing Buddhists. As in New Orleans, faith and spirituality are vital to the collective identity of Biloxi's Vietnamese. The church and temple also help bring together Vietnamese spread across the city through social activities and ceremonies such as mid-autumn festivals (Tết-Trung-Thu). Despite their differing religious beliefs, both the Catholic church and Buddhist temple worked to unify Vietnamese Americans living along the Mississippi coast through the active display of ethnic solidarity.

Like the QMVN Catholic Church in New Orleans East, the Catholic Church and Buddhist Temple in Biloxi serve as anchors for the community. Evelyn Nieves notes that for many of the residents who had left Vietnam in search of a new home in the United States the temple was a symbol of their strength and a "sign that they belonged" in the
The construction of Vietnamese influenced buildings not only provides a gathering space for immigrants, but the religious spaces also serve as cultural landmarks that indicate a strong Vietnamese presence in the city. Prominently located on Oak Street, the Catholic Church and Buddhist Temple represent visible symbols of a vibrant and growing ethnic community. More so, both buildings help affirm the Vietnamese's sense of connectedness to Biloxi as these religious sites serve to impart long held Vietnamese traditions to future generations. Businesses such as the My Viet supermarket and the Chi-Kim-Lien fashion boutique were also significant spaces providing Vietnamese and American goods for immigrants during the late 1980s and 1990s. As with many ethnic neighborhoods, food was a prominent attraction as restaurants offered locals and tourists a sampling of Vietnamese fare. The Xuan Huong restaurant, which occupied almost a full block on Division Street, was one of Biloxi’s most successful restaurants drawing both residents and tourists. Xuan Muise, the restaurant’s owner and one of the city’s first Vietnamese residents, was a key figure in the early 1980s who helped fellow immigrants find homes and jobs as she served as East Biloxi’s “mother hen.” Lacking the strong networks of a larger ethnic enclave, Biloxi business owners began to come together through their shared history of displacement and their vision of creating a permanent Vietnamese community.

While the rapid growth of the Vietnamese population in the 1980s strengthened the local economy, some longtime residents met this demographic shift with skepticism.

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33 Nieves, “A Center of Solace for Families.”
and resentment. The arrival of Vietnamese refugees coincided with some of the worst shrimping seasons in years. Below average yields meant lower profit margins and stiffer competition among fishermen. Problems arose when Vietnamese shrimpers, working toward financial independence, began purchasing their own boats and working the increasingly crowded Gulf waterways. Language and cultural barriers often created communication issues as Coast Guard and gaming officials faced challenges in instructing the immigrant shrimpers about rules and regulations. Vietnamese shrimping methods also created conflicts. Utilizing the fishing techniques they learned while growing up on the coast of South Vietnam, Vietnamese shrimpers fished from North to South while longtime Gulf shrimpers typically moved from East to West. The contrasting shrimping patterns led to net entanglements. Another point of contention was the belief that the Vietnamese boats, utilizing nets at the bow rather than the stern (referred to by shrimpers as the “chopstick” method), damaged reefs that were important to the growth and sustainability of shrimp and oyster populations. For local-born shrimpers and fishermen, the shrimping methods of their Vietnamese counterparts were not centered on tradition but exploitation.

By the mid 1980s animosity toward the Vietnamese increased, regardless of whether they were or were not affiliated with the shrimping industry. The early success of the Vietnamese-owned boats coupled with poor seasons frustrated local shrimpers, predominantly whites, who began a campaign to drive Vietnamese fishermen out of the city. Bumper stickers reading “Save your shrimp industry: Get rid of Vietnamese” (emphasis mine) positioned immigrant shrimpers as a threat not only to white businesses but also to white authority and ownership in post-segregation Biloxi. The backlash
against the growing number of Vietnamese-owned shrimping boats reveals how economic success becomes a significant factor in determining who does and does not belong in the city. While Vietnamese immigrants viewed their work as a means of achieving self-sufficiency in a new country, southern whites feared that the Gulf’s newest residents were attempting to take complete control of Biloxi’s shrimping industry and in turn the community itself. As one of the city’s main industries, shrimping represents not only a source of economic stability but also a way of life. The rising conflicts between southern white and Vietnamese shrimpers in the early 1980s became a battle over who could claim ownership over the Gulf’s lucrative waterways and the right to define Biloxi’s communal identity.

Anger over Vietnamese shrimping practices developed into overt racism in the mid 1980s. Often referred to as “Vietcong” and “gooks,” Vietnamese shrimpers and their families were subjected to constant harassment by longtime residents. Some of this hostility was the result of lingering memories over the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. Thao Ha notes that “war-related prejudices only exacerbated the tensions created by economic competition” as antagonism towards Vietnamese escalated. Furthermore, rumors that Vietnamese families were receiving free fishing equipment and large welfare checks only exacerbated the problem as Biloxi became a city divided along racial and ethnic lines. As Vietnamese immigrants continued to settle in the South in the mid 1980s, southerners continued to voice their displeasure over a population that many, 

34 Schmidt, "Down Around Biloxi."
particularly veterans who struggled to readjust to life after the war, still continued to view as the enemy.

Despite the lingering tensions between white and Vietnamese shrimpers, both groups recognized the need to find common ground in order to protect and strengthen the Gulf South’s struggling seafood industry. By the early 1990s, foreign businesses were quickly gaining ground in terms of seafood production and distribution. The Gulf South struggled to keep up with their overseas competitors, particularly those from Asia. Between 1997 and 2004 Asian countries like China and Vietnam led a global surge in foreign seafood production. As a result, domestic shrimp prices dropped from $1.24 billion to $560 million by 2003, a decline of almost 40 percent. In the Gulf South region alone, prices dropped by close to 50 percent, falling from $6.08 per pound to $3.30 per pound (between 2000 and 2003). By 2003 90 percent of shrimp consumed in the United States were imported from other countries with approximately $500 million worth of shrimp being brought in from Vietnam alone. Many Biloxi shrimpers drastically scaled back their operations to avoid losing their businesses. The city once known as the seafood capital of the world was severely lagging behind more profitable markets by the early twenty-first century.

Vietnamese shrimpers now found themselves in a particular bind as many are caught between ethnic pride and an allegiance their new southern communities. On one hand, they could not entirely condemn the success of Vietnam’s shrimpers. Many of Biloxi’s shrimpers have family members living in Vietnam who work in the seafood

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industry. On the other hand, the strength of foreign competitors is a viable threat to the economic stability of their southern communities, a place where they had worked tirelessly to make their new permanent home. Working toward financial self-sufficiency and recognizing the need to help support their local economy, numerous Vietnamese shrimpers in Biloxi have established partnerships with the very competitors who once antagonized them. Local competition gave way to multiracial alliances and Gulf South shrimpers began to work together to keep the Gulf South’s fishing and shrimping industry competitive in an increasingly foreign-dominated seafood market. Once viewed as an economic and cultural threat, Vietnamese shrimpers are now considered as vital contributors to the growth of the region’s seafood industry. The collaborative efforts of white southern shrimpers and their Vietnamese counterparts suggest that the mounting pressures from a seafood market increasingly dominated by foreign businesses compel both groups to look past their racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. The mutual struggle for economic survival in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries becomes the impetus for a more integrated Gulf South shrimping industry working to defend itself against foreign competitors. What emerges from these new alliances between southern white and Vietnamese shrimpers is a communal identity based on regional and national allegiances rather than race or ethnicity.37

As the Gulf South continues to deal with the increased success of foreign seafood businesses in the past ten years, Vietnamese shrimpers play a more active role in promoting the region’s industry. Seafood businesses in the region and across the United

States have focused their efforts to challenge countries like Vietnam, China, Brazil, and Ecuador whom they accuse of selling shrimp to domestic markets at exaggeratedly low prices. American shrimpers established domestic organizations to lobby against the alleged illegal practices of foreign businesses. Established in 2003, the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) brought white and Vietnamese shrimpers into a “sometimes uneasy alliance” to help protect their local businesses. Despite the collective efforts of Biloxi’s shrimpers to strengthen the region’s seafood industry, the Gulf waterways remain divided in the early twenty-first century as immigrant and local-born shrimpers compete for the region’s best and largest catches. Local competition grew fierce as the demand for domestic shrimp continued to decline. But the SSA is working to unify white and Vietnamese businesses by emphasizing the importance of strengthening the Gulf South’s seafood industry. Efforts were made to downplay conflicts among local shrimpers by spotlighting the multiracial and multiethnic relationships that would serve as the foundation of a unified southern and American shrimpers collective. The organization’s mission statement prominently features quotations from local shrimpers that lay out the rationale for tariffs on countries like Vietnam. The statement concludes with a prominent quotation from Cuong Nguyen, a Vietnamese shrimper and SSA board member. He writes:

Many of my people came to this country to find freedom and economic opportunity. Our ships are being repossessed and our family businesses destroyed because six countries are allowed to dump shrimp into the U.S. market. Dumping violates the principles of free trade. We do not want to stop free trade, we simply want free trade that is fair. In a fair market, our

hard work will enable us to succeed.\textsuperscript{39}

In closing with Nguyen’s statement, the SSA appears to emphasize that Vietnamese shrimpers in cities like Biloxi should be included in the regional and national fight against foreign businesses. Moreover, the organization’s decision to display that last quotation prominently reinforces the Vietnamese’s identities as Americans and as significant members of the Gulf South community. Vietnamese and new immigrant populations now work alongside the local-born fishermen in effort to reinvigorate one of the South’s leading industries.

**Collective Healing- Hurricane Katrina and Redefining Community**

In the early hours of August 29, 2005, residents along the south Louisiana coast awoke to powerful wind gusts, pounding surf, and massive downpours. Hurricane Katrina was a relatively weak Category 1 storm when it crossed over Florida just a few days earlier and caused moderate damage. But in the nine hours the storm traveled over the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina strengthened from a Category 3 to a Category 5 storm with maximum wind gusts of 175 miles per hour. The storm surge became so intense that fifty three of New Orleans’s federally constructed levees protecting the city from flooding were breached, the result of which left more than 80 percent of the city under water. Katrina continued along its destructive path as it moved through Biloxi and Gulfport. Significant portions of both cities were underwater as a 12-foot storm surge pushed casino barges onshore and leveled homes and businesses several miles inland. By the time the storm dissipated later that day (as it crossed over Meridian, Mississippi, over 150

miles inland), much of the Gulf South was damaged beyond repair. In total, the storm resulted in over 1,800 casualties and $81.2 billion in damages, consequences that made Hurricane Katrina the largest natural disaster in the history of the United States.

Hurricane Katrina was particularly trying for New Orleans’ Vietnamese American community. Situated between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the 75-mile channel that runs from the city’s ports to the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans East suffered some of the worst damage as the massive storm surge caused levees in the community to breach in multiple places. While the most significant flooding occurred ten miles to the south in the lower Ninth Ward, many New Orleans East homes and businesses were destroyed while others required considerable repairs (Figures 8 and 9). The storm temporarily displaced hundreds of residents who fled farther inland while others left the city altogether.

For many of the older immigrants living along the Gulf Coast, the storm and its aftermath reawakened the feelings of dislocation that emerged following their abrupt departure from Vietnam. Having already been forcefully displaced during the war, many questioned whether this latest catastrophic event would result in another lost sense of home and place. But Vietnamese immigrants expressed a deep attachment to the Gulf South, a sentiment that drove them to quickly return to their storm-damaged communities.

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41 A large portion of Vietnamese residents of New Orleans East temporarily relocated to Houston, Texas, because of the city’s large Vietnamese population (Houston boasts the largest Asian population of any southern city). The Hong Kong City Mall, the largest Asian indoor mall in the South, served as central meeting space for evacuees. Other residents relocated to Fort Chaffee which marked the return to their first home in the United States for many of the older immigrants who first came to the Arkansas base as refugees in the 1970s.

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and begin the rebuilding process. Vietnamese Americans were the largest and fastest group to return to New Orleans en masse; nearly 50 percent of New Orleans East residents moved back just weeks after the storm. Residents rallied around the strong sense of community that helped them first reestablish themselves after leaving Vietnam in the 1970s. Father Nguyen explains how residents in New Orleans East were compelled to return after Katrina because of their sense of place in the Gulf South. He argues that the Vietnamese feel more attached to the city “especially when they feel that the community is threatened.”

Vietnamese living in Biloxi and Gulfport share similar sentiments as the desire to reestablish a strong communal identity prevailed in the aftermath of the storm. Thao Jennifer Vu, a Vietnamese refugee from Gulfport and a counselor for the community-building organization Mercy Housing and Human Development, notes that while Vietnamese residents understood that rebuilding would be a difficult undertaking, the Gulf South “is home and it will always be home.”

While the physical destruction caused by the storm was catastrophic, the social and political challenges that emerged during the rebuilding process posed the greatest challenge to New Orleans’s Vietnamese community. Local and federal government officials were hesitant to allocate critical funds to rebuild sections of the city that were considered beyond repair. Lower-income neighborhoods like the lower Ninth Ward and

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42 V. Nguyen, interview by Elizabeth Shelborne, 22 May 2006, Wilson Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
43 Thao Jennifer Vu, interview by author, August 11, 2009.
Village de l’Est were specifically targeted as low-priority areas because officials believed that the majority of residents in these communities would not return and rebuild.44

One of the main obstacles hampering rebuilding efforts in New Orleans was the estimated 7.2 million tons of storm debris that littered the city. As the amount of trash continued to grow, Mayor Ray Nagin quickly called for the construction of a new landfill in New Orleans East. The proposed Chef Menteur C&D Disposal Facility would help expedite rebuilding efforts by removing 2.6 million tons of debris from across the city.

City council members were reluctant to approve quickly the project because they wanted more time to learn about residents’ concerns and the environmental impact of the landfill. Despite substantial opposition, Nagin moved ahead with the landfill plans. In April 2006 trucks began dumping debris in the proposed site located less than two miles from the most concentrated residential and business areas of New Orleans East. In an instant, Village de l’Est and Versailles became overlooked communities on the verge of becoming nothing more than a literal wasteland. Vietnamese residents took issue with the landfill’s close proximity to residential and commercial areas. Local environmental and health activists lent their support to Versailles and Village de l’Est residents who protested the potential hazards that the landfill posed to local neighborhoods. Because of its hasty construction, the Chef Menteur facility lacked key environmental safeguards, and as a result, residents and activists questioned its long-term impact on nearby communities. Without these safeguards, hazardous materials such as cleaning products

and mold posed the danger of seeping into the surrounding soil and water. The landfill threatened to pollute the nearby 23,000-acre Bayou Savauge, the nation's largest urban wildlife sanctuary as well as vital waterways used to maintain residential and commercial vegetable gardens. Gardening is an integral activity for many Vietnamese families not only because it supplies valuable produce to local businesses, but it also allows residents to maintain a link to their Vietnamese past through the production and consumption of traditional fruits and vegetables. In posing a risk to the community's natural resources, the landfill threatened to endanger the economic livelihood and culture of New Orleans East's Vietnamese community.45

The debates over the proposed landfill and its effect on the future of the Versailles and Village de l'Est neighborhoods highlight the political and cultural barriers that segregated the Vietnamese from the rest of the New Orleans community in the aftermath of Katrina. Residents and community leaders believed that the needs of the Vietnamese were being ignored. Father Nguyen suggests that "the paradigm of the powers that be in Louisiana is still between black and white" today and that communities like Versailles's and Village de l'Est's Vietnamese are left "voiceless" and "invisible."46 Nguyen's comments highlights the ways in which a white-black racial binary continues to influence social and political processes in the post-Katrina Gulf South. Despite the efforts to cultivate and strengthen New Orleans East through new social service programs, community-based organizations, and new business ventures, the city's Vietnamese were

46 V. Nguyen in interview by Shelborne.
still viewed as an insular community because of the limited number of Vietnamese in local political positions. The apparent disconnect between Vietnamese residents and local politicians suggests that both groups had their own agendas in regards to the rebuilding efforts.

But what white and black city leaders failed to understand was that the city’s Vietnamese wanted to become more engaged in political and community matters but required additional assistance. Language barriers and the lack of available translators created challenges as many of the older Vietnamese residents were unaware of the financial and housing resources being provided by local and federal agencies. While Vietnamese residents mobilized in an effort to rebuild homes and businesses in Versailles and Village de l’Est, they struggled to establish lines of communication with the greater New Orleans community.

For New Orleans’s Vietnamese survival in the post-Katrina Gulf South not only involves the physical work of rebuilding homes and businesses but also a renewed effort to develop new community-based programs and interracial and interethnic relationships that help amplify a collective voice in matters pertaining to the future of the city. The political and cultural challenges that emerged during rebuilding efforts such as the proposed Chef Menteur landfill and the misunderstandings between older Vietnamese immigrants and local and federal agencies became a catalyst for residents in Versailles and Village de l’Est to reaffirm their sense of civic pride. Like the first immigrants who settled into New Orleans East in the 1970s worked to establish a solid cultural and economic foundation, those who returned to the city after Katrina are focusing on community outreach and entrepreneurial ventures to show longtime residents,
newcomers, and tourists that New Orleans’s Vietnamese have played and continue to play a critical role in the growth of the city.

Community leaders recognize that an important aspect of reinventing New Orleans East as a socially and politically active community is Vietnamese ethnic pride. New Orleans has long been known for its wealth of cultures as residents and tourists can see, taste, and hear African American, Creole, and Cajun influences throughout the city. Residents in Versailles and Village de l’Est hope to further showcase the traditions and practices of New Orleans’s Vietnamese population through new community-based organizations and cultural spaces. As New Orleans resident Huynh Bui states, “Our culture is the most important thing, we have to build up our culture.”47 The MQVN Church in particular serves as an important site of cultural development. Religious services help to not only reinforce a sense of communal solidarity but also call attention to the spiritual traditions that define the city’s Vietnamese American community. In May 2006 members of the church founded the Mary Queen of Viet Nam Community Development Corporation (MQVN CDC) to promote and strengthen civic and cultural pride among New Orleans East’s residents. Neighborhoods events such as Vietnamese festivals, church services, and plans for new communal gathering spaces are some of the ways in which the organization is working to “preserve and promote [the community’s] unique diversity.”48 One of MQVN CDC’s larger goals is to build a “Viet Village” to reflect the community’s sense of ethnic solidarity and to rebrand New Orleans East as a

cultural destination for locals and tourists. The proposed Viet Village would highlight Vietnamese architectural designs and cultural activities in order to provide tangible markers of the residents’ ethnic heritage and to illustrate how Vietnamese Americans “make a contribution to the city.”49 One of the central aspects of the project is the construction of the Viet Village Urban Farm that would be located directly across from the MQVN Church (Figure 10). As previously discussed, gardening is an important activity for Vietnamese residents, particularly among older immigrants who utilize growing methods they learned in Vietnam for their own private home gardens. As the MQVN CDC notes, the concept of a community-run farm “builds on a long tradition of productive gardening and farming in the Vietnamese community,” a tradition that serves to reaffirm and promote their ethnic culture.50 Moreover, the Viet Village Urban Farm would serve to raise the economic profile of the city’s Vietnamese population. Fruits and vegetables from the farm would be sold to local businesses in Versailles and Village de l’Est neighborhoods and across New Orleans and the Gulf South region. Interweaving cultural and economic practices allows Vietnamese residents to preserve their traditions while they play a more proactive role in shaping the city’s identity.

A crucial step in increasing civic engagement within the Gulf South Vietnamese community is to improve the relationship between younger, American-born residents and older immigrants. Residents in both New Orleans and Biloxi acknowledge that a generational and cultural gap divided Vietnamese Americans prior to the storm. Minh

49 Mary Queen of Viet Nam Community Development Corporation, Inc. “About Us.”
Nguyen, a community youth leader born and raised in New Orleans, suggests that the younger residents born in the United States could not relate to the older immigrants because they "did not experience what they experienced" as refugees.\(^{51}\) Growing up surrounded by poverty and crime and facing limited educational and economic prospects, many of the younger Vietnamese Americans believed that New Orleans East offered few incentives to stay. For some the experiences of living away from the city after being displaced by the storm reinforced their desire to move away. Meanwhile, older refugees felt that American-born Vietnamese teens failed to embrace their ethnic heritage and their cultural past. Father Nguyen notes that older residents viewed the youth as "those who've lost their roots."\(^{52}\) The fragile relationship between younger and older Vietnamese residents created a portrait of a fractured Vietnamese community whose members only looked out for their own individual interests.

But the tragedies surrounding Katrina and its aftermath compelled older immigrants and younger, American-born Vietnamese residents to work past their differences in order to strengthen and showcase the important economic and cultural contributions that the Vietnamese make to the Gulf South. Struggling to make sense of the complex logistics surrounding the rebuilding efforts, older immigrants turned to second- and third-generation Vietnamese Americans who possessed stronger English language skills and a greater understanding of tools and resources offered by local and federal organizations for assistance during the recovery process. They believed that younger Vietnamese residents were more connected to the region's political and social

\(^{51}\) Quoted in *A Village Called Versailles*, directed by S. Leo Chiang (Walking Iris Films, 2009), DVD.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
affairs and were a strong asset to the Vietnamese community. Meanwhile, younger Vietnamese Americans sought to learn from the experiences of their elders who had previously experienced the hardships of a sudden and forced displacement. Those who had been born in the United States recognized that the perseverance of older refugees who first moved to the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s could serve as model of survival for future generations of Vietnamese Americans living in the Gulf South.

Second- and third-generation Vietnamese Americans who spearheaded the efforts to stop the construction of the Chef Menteur landfill became the core of advocacy and outreach projects aimed at rebranding New Orleans East as a culturally vibrant and politically active community. The Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA NO) emerged from the landfill debates as a means of ensuring that younger residents stay involved in the community. The overwhelming support and mobilization of residents in the wake of the landfill fight reinvigorated youths who recognized the need to honor and continue the hard work done by their parents who helped to transform New Orleans East into a strong Vietnamese enclave in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Minh Nguyen worked to develop VAYLA NO as a youth-oriented group that would encourage younger Vietnamese residents to play a more prominent role in raising the community's cultural and economic profile. The organization provides meeting spaces, mentoring programs, and assists in organizing special events geared towards youth culture such as talent shows and dances. More importantly, VAYLA NO is working to renew a sense of communal pride for younger Vietnamese Americans whose attachment to New Orleans had weakened after the storm. The name of the organization itself translates to “Home is New Orleans,” a symbol of the group's
affection for and commitment to the city.\textsuperscript{53} Despite facing challenges such as a shortage of employment opportunities that arose from Katrina, Vietnamese American teens in New Orleans East are embracing the deep roots that connect them to the Gulf South and their Vietnamese heritage. Participation in organizations such as VAYLA NO allows younger residents to recognize their ability to improve the economic and social conditions of their neighborhoods through collective action.

Younger Vietnamese Americans in Mississippi also play a prominent role in the efforts to reinvent the Gulf South’s Vietnamese as an increasingly civic-minded and socially active community. Magalie Albert, a twenty-six-year-old businesswoman and youth activist from D’Iberville, felt compelled to return to the Gulf South and help strengthen the region’s Vietnamese community. She explains that while many of the younger Vietnamese “hated this place” growing up for its lack of social and economic opportunities, they returned after the storm because they recognized how the region’s Vietnamese community “makes you feel at home [and] comfortable.” The sense of rootedness that communal solidarity provides serves as catalyst for the work being done by younger residents. Albert hopes that Vietnamese residents in coastal Mississippi will look beyond their individual needs and goals and work together to “build a community where we want our kids to grow up in.” Organizations such as Gulf Coast Reach (formed in 2009) led by younger Vietnamese Americans work to unite Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese residents through communal activities that celebrate coastal Mississippi’s diverse cultures. Programs such as food festivals and sports tournaments help Vietnamese

\textsuperscript{53} Minh Nguyen, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 8, 2010.
residents become more involved in citywide matters and undermine the racial and ethnic divisions. Creating social, economic, and religious networks across Mississippi and Louisiana serves as a means of raising the visibility of not only the Gulf South’s Vietnamese community but also the region itself. Albert suggests the need to collaborate with other communities like New Orleans East to “make the coast somewhat more visible on the map.”

Newly formed organizations along with existing non-profits in both New Orleans and Biloxi are also working to produce new communal networks that help further link the Vietnamese with the larger Gulf South community. These groups hope to dispel the Vietnamese’s reputation as an insular community by establishing partnerships and programs that cut across racial and ethnic lines. In New Orleans MQVN CDC was one of the first organizations specifically dedicated to the needs of the Vietnamese community, many of whom could not afford basic needs such as health care, education, and housing. Established in December 2005, the church-affiliated group serves as a means of improving the relationship between residents in New Orleans East and the rest of the city through projects aimed at increasing political engagement and cultural preservation. These projects include a new charter school in the Versailles neighborhood, assistance for business owners through a partnership with Louisiana Economic Development (LED), and increasing participation in citywide rebuilding efforts by persuading Vietnamese

54 Magalie Albert, interview by author, D’Iberville, Mississippi, August 12, 2009.
55 MQVN CDC has been vital in the efforts to sustain and strengthen the New Orleans East community. The organization helped develop a temporary housing site providing close to 200 trailers for residents shortly after Katrina.
residents to work with groups such as the United New Orleans Planning program. The collaborative efforts that bring together New Orleans’s Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese residents suggest that the post-Katrina sense of community in New Orleans East centers on regional rather than racial and ethnic identity. By emphasizing the shared goals of improving education, health services, and the local economy, groups such as the MQVN CDC are working to establish multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that strengthen New Orleans’s reputation as a cultural diverse but unified city.

Similar efforts are taking place in Biloxi and Gulfport where community leaders work with Vietnamese residents to improve the social relations and economic health in Mississippi. In the months after Katrina, national and regional organizations such as Boat People SOS, the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), Hope CDA, and Mercy Housing and Human Development worked to establish meaningful relationships with the Vietnamese community by providing translators and holding informal information sessions at central gathering locations like local Catholic churches and Buddhist temples. These groups work to bolster activism among Vietnamese Americans while also creating a stronger communal identity defined by collective actions of residents across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

While community outreach organizations help Vietnamese Americans in the Gulf South mobilize and assert their collective voice in the rebuilding efforts, economic sustainability and growth also play a crucial role in increasing their influence over

56 Some of the other projects that MQVN CDC are working on include partnerships with the Tulane University Medical School to provide health screenings for the Vietnamese and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice to preserve and protect natural resources such as clean water in New Orleans East. See “Projects.” MQVN CDC website.
political and cultural processes in the post-Katrina era. Since their arrival in the late 1970s, Vietnamese residents in neighborhoods such as New Orleans East and East Biloxi have relied heavily on the expansion of Vietnamese-owned businesses for their survival. These stores not only serve as markers of their economic success but also help preserve and promote their culture through the exchange of Vietnamese goods and services. The devastation of Katrina reinforced the need to increase the economic visibility of Vietnamese Americans as residents seek to rebrand their neighborhoods as viable locations for new businesses. In New Orleans East community leaders and entrepreneurs initiated the Viet Village Collective Marketing Campaign to promote Vietnamese-owned businesses to both local residents and tourists. Organizers are using a variety of methods to promote the economic strength of the community, including the publication of a business directory, the display of company banners along main thoroughfares, and meetings with developers to attract new businesses to the area.57 Vietnamese Americans living in Versailles and Village de l’Est hope that these projects will attract new customers and help draw attention to the cultural impact that the Vietnamese have and continue to make to the city.

Economic recovery in Biloxi has been slow but steady as Vietnamese residents who returned face a poor job market as well as soaring insurance rates for businesses and homes. Concerns over the city’s storm preparedness have raised home and business insurance rates that in turn have caused some longtime residents to move further inland to cities like D’Iberville located on the other side of Back Bay. A number of the commercial

lots along Oak Street remain vacant because of these increased operational costs. Local residents who depended on the Oak Street Corridor as their source of Vietnamese goods and services had to travel further away to cities like New Orleans in the months after the storm to find businesses that catered to their needs.

A significant consequence of Katrina that has both facilitated and hampered the economic recovery and growth of Vietnamese residents in coastal Mississippi is the increased emphasis on the gaming and tourism industry. Casinos have been a staple of the local economic landscape since 1991 when the state government permitted offshore gambling barges to park along the coastlines. In an effort to create jobs and reinvigorate tourism after Katrina, onshore casinos were permitted, a move resulting in a surge in the number of gaming establishments along Biloxi’s main thoroughfare. The idea was to reestablish Biloxi as a leading tourist destination in the Gulf South much as it was during the mid to late nineteenth century. While some residents welcomed the new economic model, many within the Vietnamese community were skeptical of Biloxi’s new image. Anxiety over higher property costs and fears that casinos could potentially overtake their properties frightened residents from returning and calling the city home. In May 2007, Harrah’s Entertainment Inc. and singer Jimmy Buffett announced plans to open a new $700 million Margaritaville Casino and Resort along the waterfront. At a cost of $1 billion, the new resort was to be the largest single private investment in Biloxi since Hurricane Katrina. Some residents viewed the construction of new casinos as a crucial step toward economic recovery for coastal Mississippi’s Vietnamese community. Casino and resort projects would create new jobs at a time when employment opportunities were limited. In the years following the storm, younger Vietnamese Americans, who possessed
greater English language skills, were able to find work through the city’s existing casinos as dealers, restaurant servers, and hotel staff members.

Despite the possibility of new employment opportunities, several Vietnamese residents were concerned that the new casinos and resorts would force existing business owners out of the neighborhood and drive away potential investors who hoped to open new stores. Plans for the Margaritaville resort allocated a portion of the Oak Street Corridor for the construction of the new casino, a move that would limit the amount of retail space in East Biloxi for Vietnamese entrepreneurs. Trinh Le, a community empowerment coordinator at the Hope Community Development Agency (Hope CDA), notes that plans like this one “really scared some Vietnamese folks off.”

Vietnamese entrepreneurs feared that while efforts to reinvigorate Biloxi’s gaming and tourism industry would help with the city’s recovery process, they would do so at the expense of locally owned, small businesses. More specifically, land redevelopment would diminish the economic influence of Biloxi’s Vietnamese community by reducing the number of businesses in the Oak Street Corridor centered on Vietnamese goods and services. Business owners feared that the proposed casinos would literally and symbolically overshadow the central space of Vietnamese commerce and culture.

While community leaders and entrepreneurs continue to debate the impact of the expanding gaming and tourism industry on Biloxi’s Vietnamese community, many are in agreement that the Oak Street Corridor should not simply showcase the cultural and

economic contributions of one ethnic group but rather reflect the growing diversity of the neighborhood’s residents and businesses. The ways in which residents came together to share resources and offer assistance during and directly after the storm helped to highlight the importance of improving the social and economic relationships with those outside of the Vietnamese community. Put another way, the widespread devastation of Katrina revealed how Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese residents depended on each other for survival. One of the ways in which Biloxi’s Vietnamese hope to strengthen multiracial and multiethnic coalitions is to create a communal space that promotes cultural diversity. Trinh Le notes how community leaders hope to rebrand East Biloxi as an “International District on Oak Street” that would feature an array of businesses and cultural centers that reflect and cater to all of the neighborhood’s residents. This new iteration of the Oak Street Corridor would not only provide an economic boost to Vietnamese businesses by attracting tourists to the area but also help revitalize East Biloxi through collaborative projects such as beautification programs, cultural events, and small business forums that unite Vietnamese Americans, whites, African Americans, and the growing number of Latinos who have moved to the city after Katrina.  

Jack Nguyen, a longtime Biloxi business owner and resident, notes that many of the city’s Vietnamese are now “working to put their cliques together” and focus their efforts on the “whole community” (emphasis mine). Rather than focusing on an ethnocentric perspective,

59 Biloxi and other cities across the Gulf South experienced a significant growth in Latino populations in the months after the storm as migrants from across the United States moved to the region to work on a variety of construction projects during the rebuilding process (Danielle Thomas, “Biloxi Vietnamese Say Poor Economy Equals Local Population Rise.” WLOX. May 10, 2009, accessed August 30, 2009).  
60 Quoted in Thomas, “Biloxi Vietnamese Say Poor Economy Equals Local Population Rise.”
Vietnamese like Nguyen hope to rebuild East Biloxi as a more inclusive and more diverse place. The ways in which residents of all races and ethnicities banded together to rebuild after Katrina helped the city’s Vietnamese recognize the importance of establishing a more unified sense of community, one that is necessary for survival. As Magalie Albert explains, communal solidarity is a crucial means of raising the cultural, economic, and political visibility of Gulf South residents “so the next time a hurricane hits again, they [will] know us.”61

While the experiences of multiple displacements, racism, and natural disasters have presented unprecedented challenges for Vietnamese Americans living in south Louisiana and coastal Mississippi, they continue to display a strong commitment to the Gulf South through their efforts to rebuild and strengthen their communities in the twenty-first century. The development of new businesses, cultural events, and civic organizations underscores not only their cultural resiliency but also their attachment to a place that Vietnamese immigrants transformed into a thriving community when they first arrived almost forty years ago. The widespread damage of Katrina and more recently, the 2010 BP oil spill, has forced the Gulf South’s Vietnamese to reinvent themselves once again. But the unforeseen economic and political challenges that emerged from these recent disasters helped produce a renewed investment in civic responsibility and communal solidarity. Residents in cities like New Orleans and Biloxi are not only working with each other but also with those outside of their ethnic community to ensure that their collective voice is heard in matters pertaining to the economic and cultural

61 Albert, interview by author.
revival of the region. But the post-Katrina rebuilding and revitalization projects also become crucial historical records of an ethnic community that has often been overlooked by locals and tourists. Just as the refugees who first came to the region in the 1970s embedded their new American surroundings with markers of their cultural past as a mean of survival, Vietnamese Americans living in the contemporary Gulf South hope to preserve and commemorate their own history of loss and displacement to establish a bigger and stronger community for future generations.

Divided Identity: Annandale, Virginia and the ‘Koreatown’ Debates

While the formation of community-based organizations and grass-roots activism help increase the cultural and political visibility of Vietnamese Americans in the contemporary Gulf South, the development of economic spaces serves as a prominent means of establishing a place for Korean Americans in the northern Virginia suburb of Annandale. With over 900 businesses catering to Korean Americans living across the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, Annandale has become an epicenter of Korean culture in the past thirty years. Residents and visitors come to the city to eat traditional Korean foods, purchase Korean goods, and take part in social events centered on Korean traditions. While stores like restaurants and groceries can reinforce cultural traditions and help immigrants establish a sense of financial stability, the development of Asian businesses can also spur anxieties about how these spaces represent, or more specifically fail to represent, the cultural and economic interests of a community’s residents.

Responding to the increased visibility of Korean businesses in Annandale, Eileen Garnett, a resident of the city for over thirty years, contends that “Koreatown is a divisive word . . . We can be more than that, and we don't want to become that . . . We like to see
this as an inclusive place."\textsuperscript{62} Despite the economic boost that Korean American
entrepreneurs and business owners have made to the city, many longtime residents
question whether the construction of a Koreatown threatens to overshadow the
contributions of those who are not Korean.

As is the case of the Vietnamese, large-scale Korean immigration began shortly
after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. Korean immigrants began to arrive on the
mainland United States between 1905 and 1910; many of them had worked on sugarcane
plantations in Hawaii.\textsuperscript{63} Numbers remained relatively low until the mid 1970s, when
more than 30,000 Koreans immigrated to the country. By 2000 close to 1.1 million
Koreans were living in the United States (Census of Population 2000). While Southeast
Asian immigrants primarily entered the country as refugees, the majority of Koreans
arriving in the 1970s were from middle-class, well educated backgrounds and possessed
relative financial stability. With close to a third of the total Korean American population
residing in the state, California emerged as a popular destination for immigrants who
found established ethnic enclaves like Koreatown in East Los Angeles with support
networks and a space built around a shared cultural history. But cities across the South
like Atlanta, Dallas, and the Washington, D.C., suburbs were attractive for their relatively
low cost of living.

Northern Virginia, specifically, emerged as a hotbed of Korean immigration in the
1980s. The region’s close proximity to Washington, D.C., drew immigrants who worked


\textsuperscript{63} Takaki, \textit{Strangers From a Different Shore}, 273.
for the federal government while the rapid development of commercial and residential properties established the region as a viable location for entrepreneurs and those looking to start a family in the United States. Unlike more concentrated ethnic communities like the Vietnamese neighborhoods along the Gulf Coast, Annandale’s Korean community involves a greater level of residential dispersion as the city’s Korean population predominantly resides in neighborhoods on the peripheries of the city. While lacking a centralized ethnic space, Annandale boasts strong communal organizations and expansion of commercial properties that help bring together Korean Americans from across the region. A growing network of businesses, religious spaces, and social services works to strengthen a collective identity built around residents’ attachment to their culture, histories, and place. While this shift toward a more visible and unified display of ethnic solidarity provides Korean residents with a physical and emotional connection to Annandale, longtime residents express growing concerns over what a burgeoning “Koreatown” would mean for city’s collective identity.

Annandale’s history traces back to 1685 when Englishman William H. Fitzhugh converted over 24,000 acres of wilderness into the thriving Ravensworth tobacco plantation, one of the largest in Northern Virginia. The land was soon sold off to local farmers, many from the North, who employed new farming methods without the use of slaves. The small town rose to local prominence in 1806 with the construction of Little River Turnpike, the nation’s third toll road which connected the former plantation

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community to the larger cities of Alexandria and Fairfax.\textsuperscript{66} By the 1950s, Annandale had developed into a quaint but growing suburb that included several residential neighborhoods and a central shopping district featuring a variety of small, family-owned businesses.\textsuperscript{67} These longtime businesses remained in business for decades catering to the community’s predominantly white, middle-class residents.

Contemporary Annandale casts a strikingly different image as the growth of immigrant populations, particularly Asians and Latinos, has changed the city’s economic, cultural, and physical landscapes. Little River Turnpike remains the city’s main thoroughfare, but the businesses that line it reflect a changing racial and ethnic landscape. While the Annandale Chamber of Commerce website describes the city as being “situated at the cross roads of Northern Virginia,” the community also finds itself at a cultural and economic crossroads as new revitalization projects and business ventures point the city in two different directions.\textsuperscript{68} On the one hand, civic leaders hope to rebrand the central business district into a mixed-use space that would showcase the diversity of the city’s residents. On the other hand, the prominence of business and social services centered on the city’s Korean American population signals an increasingly ethnocentric communal identity. A key aspect of the debates over Annandale’s identity is the city’s physical spaces. Civic leaders and members of the revitalization committee are working to incorporate visible markers such as entryway signs and historical plaques to spotlight

Annandale’s rich history. But the prominence of Korean businesses in the city’s commercial corridor suggests an alternative landscape, one that positions the area as a Korean-centered neighborhood.

The emergence of a Koreatown in Annandale is primarily the result of the increased economic visibility of Korean residents who have transformed the city’s physical landscape. The first Korean-owned businesses that emerged in the 1980s were smaller stores tucked behind larger American-based department stores such as K-Mart. Entrepreneurs began purchasing larger commercial spaces to draw in the region’s growing Korean population, and by the mid 1990s, a variety of Korean restaurants, bakeries, and clothing stores dominated Annandale’s business district. Rather than establishing a centralized shopping space, Korean businesses in Annandale are widely dispersed throughout the city. Despite the lack of a centralized business area, the economic influence of Korean Americans in the city is clear as visitors can find Korean-owned businesses in almost every portion of the city. David Reimers argues that the rapid development of immigrant-owned businesses in Annandale “illustrates many of the aspects of the Korean entrepreneurship” that can be found in several southern cities like Atlanta.69 While the 2000 United States Census reports that Koreans make up only seven percent of the city’s total population (54,994), the presence of a growing ethnic community is clearly visible.70 A view of downtown Annandale reveals an expanse of businesses and gathering places owned and operated by Korean immigrants. By 2005

close to 929 businesses in the city primarily catered to Korean customers, a number that continues to grow today. As David Cho notes in his 2005 *Washington Post* article on the growing Korean presence, “a visitor wouldn’t known it from the Chamber of Commerce fliers,” but Annandale has become a veritable “Koreatown.”

The rapid expansion of Korean businesses has generated conflict over the ongoing transformations of the city’s physical landscape and the best ways to make use of the city’s public space. With one third of all Korean businesses in the greater Washington metropolitan area located in Annandale, the city’s physical landscape bears the markings of an ethnic enclave. The strip malls and shopping plazas that constitute much of the downtown area feature a plethora of signs featuring Korean characters, storefront windows displaying Korean-made goods, and buildings influenced by Korean architecture. These prominent markers evoke memories of familiar sights/sites and designate the businesses as a familiar space for Koreans living in the area. Anne Kerschen suggests that “home is deconstructed on departure and then constantly reconstructed” as immigrants adjust to life in a foreign landscape. This re-creation of a home place helps to ease the feelings of dislocation resulting from the departure from a familiar environment. Thus Annandale’s Korean businesses are more than a means to assert economic power. Restaurants and stores become communal spaces where residents can create a sense of communal solidarity through simple social and financial

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transactions. The consumption of Korean goods and use of Korean services function as
important rituals of laying claim to a place in the northern Virginia suburb. Put another
way, these businesses serve as grounding mechanisms by allowing immigrants to connect
their Korean past with their current lives in the American South. Hwa Pae, a recent
Korean immigrant, drives 45 minutes from Loudoun County to Annandale in order to
shop in a more familiar environment. Rather than visiting nearby shopping centers, she
makes the long commute because “I feel like I’m at home here.”\textsuperscript{73} The redeveloped
landscape helps Annandale not only \textit{look} like but \textit{feel} like the former homes of its Korean
residents.

Annandale’s changing landscape positions the city not only as a transformed
space but also as a transformative site. Kate Berry and Martha Henderson note that local
landscapes possess the “ability to reinforce racial and ethnic identity of second and third-
generation residents as well as new immigrants to the region.”\textsuperscript{74} For Steven Yun, a
lawyer working in Annandale, the abundance of Korean spaces reaffirms his ethnic
heritage. Born in South Korea but raised in Virginia, Yun believes that “part of [seeing
Korean signs and businesses] is pride.”\textsuperscript{75} Like Yun, many of those who regularly visit
and make use of the city’s Korean establishments are part of the so-called 1.5 generation
who immigrated to the United States as children.\textsuperscript{76} Having grown up in an American

\textsuperscript{73} Quoted in Philip P. Pan and Peter Pae, “Now Entering Koreatown: Immigrant Community Flourishes in
\textsuperscript{74} Berry and Henderson, “Introduction: Envisioning the Nexus between Geographic and Ethnic and Racial
Identity” in \textit{Geographical Identities: Race, Space, and Place}, ed. Kate Berry and Martha Henderson (Reno:
University of Nevada Press, 2002), 7.
\textsuperscript{75} Quoted in Pan and Pae, “Now Entering Koreatown,” A1.
\textsuperscript{76} W.M. Hurh, “The “1.5 generation”: A paragon of Korean-American pluralism,” \textit{Korean Culture 11, no. 1
(1990):} 21.
environment away from their birthplace, these immigrants reestablish a connection to their native homes through their patronage of Korean businesses. The public display of Korean culture via store signs and buildings helps create what Huping Ling describes as a “cultural community,” a socially defined space that lacks clearly marked physical boundaries but brings together Asian American populations through “common cultural practices.”77 Despite being geographically dispersed through northern Virginia, Korean Americans come together in the economic spaces of Annandale.

While the visibility of economic success bolsters a sense of communal solidarity among the Korean Americans living in the area, some residents and city leaders express ambivalence over the rebranding of Annandale as a Koreatown. The ongoing changes to the city’s economic, cultural, and physical landscapes leave residents asking, “What was Annandale?” Or, as Dan McKinnon notes on the website annandaleflag.com, “How can you take an unincorporated urban/suburban area and give it a sense of place . . . and give people who live here a feeling that they have a community they can identify with?”78 McKinnon’s questions take on heightening meaning for civic leaders who worry that an ethnocentric communal identity would create a social and geographic divide between Koreans and non-Koreans.

Recent plans to revitalize downtown Annandale reinforce the desire to create a unique sense of place but in a way that acknowledges the city’s rich history as well as its increasingly diverse population. For the past few years, the city’s Chamber of Commerce

77 Huping Ling, “Cultural Community: A New Model for Asian American Community,” in Ling, Asian America: Forming New Communities, 130.
has been working to promote Annandale as an ideal home for potential residents and as a shopping destination for locals and tourists. Plans to renovate the downtown area into “The Annandale Village Centre” developed around the idea to “re-create the experiences of Old Town Alexandria,” a nearby community characterized by its cobblestone streets, specialty boutiques, and commitment to historical preservation. Like many southern cities, Annandale’s city leaders appear to recognize the pertinence of public space in establishing the community’s collective identity. Revitalization projects have centered on promoting the city as a modern suburb while also acknowledging its rich history. The Central Business District Planning Committee established public areas that signaled an old town revival. These projects included the Gateway Gardens, a symbolic entryway that marks the city’s borders, and Annandale Tollhouse Park which recognizes the historical importance of Little River Turnpike. For many city leaders, part of moving Annandale forward involves embracing and spotlighting the city’s past.

Commemorative markers and the links to the city’s past appear elsewhere but in more a subtle manner. Annandale United Methodist Church sits near the site of the former Annandale Methodist Chapel. Built in 1846, the church was the city’s first major worshipping space that was burned and destroyed by Union forces during the Civil War. A marker sits near the new church honoring the perseverance of its southern parishioners. At the 1973 unveiling, Reverend Raymond Fitzhugh Wrenn noted how the city is “so intimately connected with the settlement of this continent . . . and its tragic testing in Civil War” and how the historical marker helps residents give pause and reflect on their

79 Cho, “‘Koreatown’ Image Divides a Changing Annandale.”
past. Street names also imbue the city's public space with the history of the Old South. John Marr Drive, which intersects with Little River Turnpike near the city's largest shopping center, is named after Captain John Quincy Marr, who died during a skirmish with northern troops at the nearby Fairfax Court House and became the first Confederate officer killed in battle during the Civil War. The internal processes of commemorating and preserving the city's past are made visible through the outward display of these landmarks. But as James Peacock contends, their meanings change as they are now framed by the development of new structures, boundaries, and displays of a more global presence. Rather than obscuring or supplanting the public reminders of the city's southern past, the construction of Korean businesses establishes a new historical framework that incorporates the economic and cultural contributions made by the city's newest residents. The confluence of contemporary ethnic spaces and of visible reminders of the southern past suggests that Annandale's communal identity involves an ongoing process of revision and reinterpretation. Place and community in post-1965 northern Virginia are not static but rather are in continual flux.

While Korean immigrants continue to bolster the city's economy through new business ventures, resistance to a Koreatown identity seems to grow stronger. In the past ten years, Korean entrepreneurs have purchased commercial spaces once occupied by longstanding business owners who cannot keep up with rising rent costs. Some residents

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80 Capone, "Ravensworth."
81 James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 131. Peacock argues that through globalization, a southern sense of place gives way to a "sense of process" in which a fixed meaning attached to a specific place becomes increasing dynamic with changes made to the landscape. The socioeconomic transformations that result from immigration and the growing influence of transnational businesses establish more fluid iterations of community.
view these new economic spaces as a detriment to Annandale’s overall image and argue that an oversaturation of Korean businesses fails to reflect the city’s diverse population. Robert Vaughn, Director of Continuing Education at Northern Virginia Community College and former chamber president, argues for the need to “let people know that Annandale has an awful lot to offer other than the Korean business establishments.”\textsuperscript{82} Another former president, Anne Carney, echoes Vaughn’s sentiments as she worries about the possibility of the city becoming a “closed community.”\textsuperscript{83} The frustrations of non-Korean residents reveal the ways in which the high concentration of Korean businesses produces, for some, invisible yet discernible cultural borders that divide the community along racial and ethnic lines. Thus a Koreatown identity positions Annandale as a racially and ethnically encoded space that excludes residents who are not of Korean descent. The spatial practices of recent immigrants not only reinforce a sense of ethnic solidarity but also foreground anxieties about the potential loss or erasure of an older sense of place. For many longtime residents not of Korean descent, aligning Annandale with a specific ethnic culture simultaneously alienates those within the community who do not share that culture and positions the city as a less attractive destination for those outside of it.

Some Korean residents and business owners also express concern over the idea of defining Annandale as an emergent Koreatown. The resistance to an ethnocentric identity from members of the Korean community highlights the ways in which long-held debates over assimilation and acculturation continues to play a significant role in the formation

\textsuperscript{82} Quoted in Cho, “‘Koreatown’ Image Divides a Changing Annandale.”
\textsuperscript{83} Quoted in Pan and Pae, “Now Entering Koreatown,” A1.
and identity of immigrant communities. The question facing many of Annandale’s Korean business owners and residents is whether a Koreatown identity has the potential to isolate the Koreans from the rest of the community and create racial and ethnic tensions with non-Korean residents. Kandice Chuh contends that “nationalism as a framework for Asian Americanist practice, or as a framework for driving local identity formations” can territorialize spaces in a way that denies access via racial or ethnic identity.84 Rather than a source of ethnic solidarity, a Koreatown moniker becomes a catalyst for conflict. Paul Im, owner of a local hardware store and current chamber member, believes that while the expansion of Korean businesses is vital to the city’s economic success, the creation of a Koreatown identity poses the danger of creating conflicts between Korean and non-Korean residents. He argues for the need to “assimilate ourselves into an American way of life” rather than focusing the attention on an ethnic-specific community.85 Anxieties over a Korean-centered Annandale points to ongoing debates over the role that ethnic enclaves play in immersing immigrants into American society. Wei Li suggests that “ethnoburbs” (an ethnic community that is residentially dispersed) challenge “the dominant view that assimilation is inevitable and the best solution for ethnic minorities.”86 But the sentiments of immigrants like Pau Im suggest that collective identities centered on ethnic solidarity do not reflect the increasingly diverse forms of communal interaction and engagement. As Asian immigrants in the twenty-first century increasingly seek socioeconomic opportunities that

84 Chuh. *Imagine Otherwise*, 138.
85 Quoted in Cho, “‘Koreatown’ Image Divides a Changing Annandale.”
rely on multiethnic networks, some residents fear that a Koreatown identity would hinder these efforts by limiting interactions with residents outside of their ethnic-specific community and by positioning Korean residents as a cultural and ethnically insular population.

The debates over the over-saturation of Korean businesses suggest how economic visibility plays a crucial role in the construction of place-bound identities in contemporary northern Virginia. While these businesses empower Korean immigrants and provide a sense of connectedness within the community, the expansion of immigrant economic spaces also produces new questions over how immigrants reconfigure place in the post-segregation South. The physical city represents an influential form of cultural property that has the power to both unite and divide residents. The tangible qualities of buildings, marquees, and historical markers provide residents and visitors with visible cues of Annandale’s communal identity. Public space remains a site where residents, business owners, and city leaders assert their own vision of the city, but it can also serve as a space that accommodates the collaboration of all of its inhabitants. For example, many Korean business owners in Annandale are now working with members of the city’s growing Latino population through employment opportunities and the creation of civic groups aimed at providing social services such as language programs for new immigrants. Furthermore, non-Korean residents from across the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area continue to travel to the city to experience and consume Korean

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culture. If Annandale and other southern locales are truly inclusive places as Eileen Garnett contends, then the question remains as to how a specific place can maintain and display its southern roots while incorporating the region's growing immigrant population.
CHAPTER THREE
FOREIGN PLACES: DISPLACEMENT AND THE LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY

There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits
hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not.

One of the many eateries located on the main strip of eclectic boutiques in the
popular Carytown neighborhood of Richmond, Virginia, is the Cajun Bangkok Spicy
Cuisine. The restaurant’s menu leans toward “Asian fusion” cuisine that centers on an
unique blend of Asian, American, and European dishes, spices, and cooking methods.¹

Cajun Bangkok’s menu boasts their southern twist on the popular culinary trend by
serving dishes ranging from Louisiana favorites like alligator jambalaya to Thai street
food like meang kome with “southern fried” elements. By 2007 Carytown boasted four
Thai restaurants within a half-mile radius, a development persuading some to nickname
the shopping area “Currytown.”² In the former capital of the Confederacy, Asian
immigrants have made a subtle but palpable impact on Richmond’s physical and cultural
landscape. Their homes and businesses now sit only miles from the prominent Civil War
monuments and landmarks honoring a relatively unfamiliar history that bears little
meaning to many of them. Yet the emerging signs of the city’s Asian American presence
indicates a changing portrait of the American South. The active transformation of

¹ Asian fusion in southern culinary practices can be found across the South. Restaurants such as Atlanta’s
Crawfish Shack Seafood, whose Vietnamese owners sell approximately one ton of Louisiana-style crawfish
each week, and Ben’s Whole Hog Barbecue in Manassas, Virginia, where the Korean American owners
sell both Korean and southern-style barbecue dishes reflect the increasingly popular trend and the changing
portrait of southern eateries. Though by 2012 Cajun Bangkok was no longer in business in Richmond. See
John T. Edge, “Vietnamese Immigrants Carry on a Cajun Food Tradition,” *New York Times*, April 27,
2010, and Dan Gilgoff, “Barbecue D.C. Style: Beef or Pork, Dry or Wet, There’s Something for
February 20, 2008.
southern communities not only reflects the increased diversity of the region but also reveals the ways in which the southern past gets intertwined with the memories of Asian immigrants who imbue their surroundings with their own long-held traditions and cultural legacies.

This chapter considers the intersections of place and memory in order to examine how Asian immigrants attempt to recreate the socio-spatial practices of their past as a means of finding a sense of home in their new southern communities. Susan Choi’s novel *The Foreign Student* (1998), Robert Olen Butler’s short story collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), and Lan Cao’s novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997) depict Asian immigrants struggling to adjust to life in the American South. Uprooted from their birthplace by escalating political and military conflicts, the Asian immigrant and refugee characters in these texts face a new form of displacement: navigating the unfamiliar social and physical landscapes of the South. The works discussed in this chapter suggest a dual sense of foreignness that emerges from the arrival of Asian immigrants. For southern whites and blacks, the Asian is an anomalous figure whose presence complicates traditional social and spatial logic. Conversely, Asian immigrants and refugees struggle to make sense of their new southern surroundings. Examining Choi’s, Butler’s, and Cao’s respective texts, I argue that newly-arrived Asian immigrants utilize the memories of past homes to alleviate the distress that results from an abrupt displacement from their birthplace and sense of dislocation associated with life in a new country. Through the acts of mentally and physically re-rendering familiar environments, Asian immigrants attempt to establish a new sense of home that centers on memories of their native environments.

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Immigrants often carry the memories of their birthplace with them as they move away from familiar places in search of new social and economic opportunities. These memories play a crucial role in allaying the disorientation that occurs from their abrupt departure from one country and the arrival to a new and foreign environment. Peter Middletown and Tim Woods suggest, "Places are loci for memory" that become critical "sites in which history can be negotiated."3 The American South represents a location where many Asian immigrants not only work through the past traumas of war and displacement but also work to embed their culture and traditions into the region’s social and physical landscapes. Their social interactions, economic transactions, and spatial transformations become critical activities involving the active engagement of past and present places that create communal spaces based on shared experiences and histories. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau suggests that daily movements and actions serve as the foundation for defining a specific place. Actions such as walking become “a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian” that offers the possibility of challenging established geographical, political, and cultural boundaries.4

The texts discussed here illustrate the ways in which Asian immigrants represent a new group of “practitioners” of southern towns and cities who use their memories of former homes to plant new roots in the region. Choi’s novel depicts a Korean exchange student in rural Tennessee during the height of segregation and reveals the unique

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challenges that Asians face in decoding the strict racial and ethnic divisions of Jim Crow. Interweaving Korean and southern history, *The Foreign Student* acknowledges the ways in which regional, national, and transnational boundaries determine who does and does not have access to southern communities. The novel’s Korean protagonist attempts to make sense of his new surroundings by establishing parallels between the rural Tennessee and his former Korean home. Butler’s short stories trace the experiences of contemporary Vietnamese immigrants living across Louisiana as they learn to adjust to life in the Gulf South after escaping the violent conflict between North and South Vietnamese forces. For these characters, survival in the United States involves the active reshaping of the physical landscape in order to create a more recognizable and reassuring home for themselves and their families. Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* also focuses on Vietnamese refugees uprooted by war. Whereas Butler’s characters make use of Louisiana’s resemblance to the subtropical settings of their former homes in Vietnam, Cao’s transplants contend with the urban sprawl, strip malls, and congested highways of northern Virginia. The strange and disconcerting terrain of the American suburbs compels refugees to forge a sense of familiarity by recreating the communal spaces and social activities that defined their lives in South Vietnam. Cao’s band of predominantly female immigrants attempts to create a thriving ethnic community while also working through the past traumas of the violence and political unrest that forced them away from their native homes.

Place and home take on multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings for many Asian immigrants living in the South who are forcibly removed from their birthplaces and transplanted to a foreign country. For these new arrivals, the region becomes what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of
engagement.” Overcoming the disorientating effects of a sudden migration involves the dynamic interplay between remembering and forgetting as both the familiar comforts of former places and the past traumas of war and loss play significant roles in re-creating a sense of home in the American South.

Cultural Boundaries and Mental Mapping: Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student

In her New York Times review of Susan Choi’s debut novel The Foreign Student, Kimberly Marlowe describes how the narrative comes together by constantly “moving from the present to the past, from America to Korea.” Traversing back and forth from 1950 South Korea to 1955 Tennessee, the novel’s shifts in time and location are constant and dizzying. But Choi’s non-linear trajectory points to the inextricable link between memory and place in the Asian immigrant experience in the American South as her Korean protagonist navigates the unfamiliar and disorienting surroundings of rural Tennessee. In doing so, she uncovers the surprising commonalities between these distinct regions while also acknowledging the challenges that immigrants, particularly those defined as neither white nor “colored,” face as they confront the social codes of Jim Crow. The novel’s application of both Korea’s history of regional conflict and the South’s history of segregation allows readers to consider the ways in which geographic and racial boundaries (racial, national, sexual, etc.) work to govern and define communal spaces. As James Clifford asks, “How are national, ethnic, community ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ sustained, policed, subverted, crossed—by distinct historical subjects—for

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their own ends, with different degrees of power and freedom?"\(^7\) Choi mines the regional and global borders of Korea and the American South to explore this question and ultimately reveals the possibility of new definitions of community.

*The Foreign Student* tells the story of Chang/Chuck Ahn, a young Korean employed as a translator for the United States military, as he leaves Korea following the outbreak of war to study at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. He travels half way across the world with a few meager possessions and the painful memories of political strife, violence, and his experience as a prisoner of the South Korean government. Faced with the challenges of being the only Korean amidst a predominantly white, southern-born population, Chang retreats into a self-imposed solitary existence. However, he learns to adjust to life away from home with the help of Katherine, a young rebellious outcast who was involved in a scandalous affair with Charles Addison, a respected Sewanee professor, when she was underage. Construed as outcasts in their respective ways, the two characters are drawn to each other and develop a close and intimate relationship. Chang eventually comes to terms with the scars of his past as he establishes a new life in America. *The Foreign Student* underscores the relationship between memory and place and the ways that relationship transforms our understanding of ethnic and regional identity. Physical geographies and personal relationships help map *cultural* geographies as Choi exposes both the resiliency and

\(^7\) James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 36.
fragility of the boundaries that distinguish who can (and cannot) claim a place in the American South.

The novel opens in 1950 in Korea where Chang finds himself amid the outbreak of the Korean War. Forced to flee from his parents' home and frightened by the chaos surrounding him, he closes his eyes and tries to "imagine the streets" and "visualize each building" in the city he has lived in his entire life.\(^8\) Kevin Lynch refers to this process of visualization as an "environmental image": a psychological map determined by "the memory of past experience" that is "used to interpret information and to guide action."\(^9\) The act of recalling familiar places becomes a common ritual for Chang as he regularly maps out his physical surroundings to counter frequent bouts of sleeplessness and dislocation. But I would argue that this environmental image functions not only as a trivial diversion but also as a means of establishing a place-specific identity. Kent Ryden suggests that "we apply layers of meaning to our cognitive maps" in order to affirm a connectedness to a particular locale.\(^10\) Faced with the abrupt and forced removal from his home, Chang is forced to resituate himself in relation to the world around him through this act of mental mapping. Establishing mental images of the physical world around provides a sense of emotional stability that counters his physical instability. However, the memories of his native surroundings begin to fade as he manages to remember only a single storefront and "the shape of the road."\(^11\) His inability to map out the city fully intimates a feeling of dislocation as he is forcefully removed from the only place he has

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\(^11\) Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 5.
called as home. Faced with the danger of political persecution, and worse, death, Chang discovers the personal meaning once attached to his native Korea beginning to fade away.

The novel immediately shifts to a new time and location jumping ahead five years to southern Tennessee. Chang’s bus drops him off on a rural mountain road in the middle of the night. Abruptly relocated to an unfamiliar country and literally left in the dark, he can barely make out his surroundings. The bus driver directs him toward “the featureless blackness” of the unlit landscape.\(^{12}\) He makes his way up to the home of Sewanee’s Vice Chancellor where he is met by Mrs. Reston, the Vice Chancellor’s housekeeper. Despite being greeted as “a boy being welcomed home,” Chang finds the unfamiliarity of the house and its surroundings discomfoting.\(^{13}\) His fear increases after learning that the home’s bedroom doors do not have locks. Mrs. Reston informs him that Sewanee is a place where people do not need to lock their doors. Although this fact is meant to illustrate the town’s relaxed atmosphere and provide a sense of security, the openness of the southern community elicits a sense of danger. Without barriers to protect his private world from the public, he is overcome by a sense of dislocation and vulnerability. The landscape and social customs lack any familiarity that prevents Chang from finding a sense of comfort in his new surroundings. Here Choi positions the South as “foreign,” rather than the Asian immigrant in the South.

Choi’s vision of Sewanee oscillates between a hidden, guarded world and a social paradise occupied by the southern elite. “Hidden within” the Tennessee mountain range,\(^{12}\) Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 6.\(^{13}\) Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 7.

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the town seems disconnected from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Sewanee was "someplace you always just were." Choi's description echoes the sentiments of William Alexander Percy, a Sewanee alum who fondly recounts his memories of the school in his seminal memoir *Lanterns on the Levee*. He notes the town's remoteness and unavoidable magnetism:

> it is a long way away . . . in the middle of the woods, on top of a bastion of mountains crenelated with blue coves. It is so beautiful that people who have once been there always, one way or another, come back . . . it is Arcadia—not the one that never used to be, but the one that many people always live in.

Both writers position the town as a distinct place that ultimately becomes a central part of one's identity. The physical landscape serves as a grounding mechanism that counters a sense of placelessness.

While the allure of Sewanee's natural surroundings may help establish a sense of belonging to all who visit it, the rigid social boundaries that govern the small town suggest otherwise. Choi positions the mountain town as the epicenter of southern culture, a hideaway for those who display fierce regional pride. She characterizes Sewanee as a "refuge" for those from "Birmingham, or Atlanta, or Jackson," a place that was "not someplace like Provincetown [Massachusetts], or Maine." The description relies on a conventional contrast between North and South in order to underscore its exclusivity. Simply put, Sewanee was for "true" southerners. Charles Addison, Chang's professor, is

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14 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 22.
15 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 23.
one of the many former students who “never really left.”\textsuperscript{17} The hardships of his ex-wife, a northern transplant, underscore unyielding social boundaries because her “failure to adapt” to Sewanee society ultimately “earn[s] her the indifference of everyone,” including Addison himself.\textsuperscript{18} Her inability to adapt to a southern way of life implies that the town only accepts those who have local roots or at the very least are from the South. Furthermore, Choi’s depiction of Sewanee’s strict social codes suggests that being “southern” is only something granted to those born in the region. Geographic birthplace represents the defining factor to an individual’s membership to the community. Put another way, one cannot become a southerner; one is born a southerner.

Chang’s status as a foreigner of both the South and the United States further exacerbates his attempts to gain acceptance. The all-white student body warmly greets him, but he senses their courteous reception merely to be a means of upholding their image as “worldly southern gentlemen.”\textsuperscript{19} Aside from his roommate Crane, a boisterous freshman from Georgia, Chang remains isolated from his fellow classmates. To escape the rigors of Sewanee’s social life, he turns to the natural surroundings of the Tennessee Mountains. His favorite activity outside of the classroom becomes exploring the campus and eventually learning the “layout of the buildings by heart.” While the few relationships he develops with his classmates provide little solace, the open space becomes an untainted source of enjoyment. Instilled with an “odd proprietary arrogance,” Chang sees no need to make friends as he finds strength in laying claim to his

\textsuperscript{17} Choi, \textit{The Foreign Student}, 23.  
\textsuperscript{18} Choi, \textit{The Foreign Student}, 24.  
\textsuperscript{19} Choi, \textit{The Foreign Student}, 13.
new surroundings. He embraces a solitary existence by preferring to be amidst the rich earth of the woods rather than socializing with his classmates. Standing atop the mountain peaks, he begins to feel “as if he were homing in . . . toward a place where stillness was accumulating.” The stasis of the rural South serves to counter the dislocation he experiences from the constant movement after the outbreak of war in Korea. The stillness of the Tennessee wilderness provides a fleeting sense of rootedness and more importantly a sense of place in the world around him.

The calming qualities of the Sewanee’s rural landscape also afford Chang the opportunity to ignore momentarily the painful memories of the Korean War. He tells Katherine that the constant danger and fear of violence prevented him from simply walking around the streets of his Korean neighborhood. In contrast, the Tennessee mountains serve as a healing space where he feels increasingly more secure about his safety and his own identity. His connection to the wilderness allows him to escape the anxieties of being the only Asian student at an all-white school. It is in the mountains, away from the discernible boundaries of race, ethnicity, and politics, where he would “like to learn to trust” others and himself. His short treks in and around campus allow him to feel more connected to the small southern community as he carefully maps out his once foreign surroundings. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan contends that a sense of being home may come “simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and

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20 Choi, The Foreign Student, 12.
21 Choi, The Foreign Student, 35.
22 Choi, The Foreign Student, 34.
security." For Chang, the simple act of discerning physical landmarks helps ease the shock of his abrupt departure from his former Korean home.

While the wilderness helps ease his transition to a new place, the memories of war continue to haunt him. As part of his student exchange, he travels to nearby towns to give presentations on Korean history and culture. He travels with Katherine to the sleepy town of Jackson, Tennessee, to meet with parishioners of the local Episcopal church. Chang initially struggles to explain Korean history and the Korean War to the white parishioners. Recognizing his audience's emotional investment in the South's history and distinctiveness, he "groundlessly compare[s] the [thirty-eighth] parallel to the Mason-Dixon line" which immediately sparks the parishioners' interest and comprehension. He continues to draw parallels between both nations as he discusses the Communist assault on the South in 1950. Explaining how the North Korean army "come[s] by surprise" and "invades the South," Chang's account of Korea's civil war echoes similar language describing battles of the American Civil War. The emphasis on a shared history of regional conflict represents more than a simple gesture aimed at maintaining the audience's attention. The juxtaposition of international and southern

23 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 159.
24 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 51. Japan first proposed the idea of a conceptual border in 1896 after negotiations with Russia for control of the northern half of the peninsula. The demilitarized zone (DMZ) located along the 38th parallel north was established after the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The new established DMZ would denote the areas under the authority of the United States (South) and Russia (North). Animosity between the North's Communist Republic of Korea and the South's democratic Korean People's Republic increased after North Korea, with the support of the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. Following the Armistice that ended in the Korean War in 1953, the 38th parallel became a symbolic but heavily patrolled border to enforce the ceasefire and maintain the political and cultural division between North and South. (Shin Hyong Sik, *A Brief History of Korea*, trans. Lee Jean Young. Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2005).
history highlights the power of abstract borders to define a specific community. Leslie Bow contends that both locations “suggest a conceptual parallel” that is “invested in the imaginary lines that define, in a visceral way, inclusion and exclusion.” Choi reveals how arbitrary boundaries in both Korea and the United States share the authoritative power to prescribe regional and national affiliations. Geographic demarcations not only dictate where one travels to and from but also how one is identified. Geographer and social theorist David Harvey argues that “mapping is a discursive activity that incorporates power,” an action that becomes a “crucial tool in political struggles.” Chang’s description of the 38th parallel evokes the novel’s earlier description of Sewanee’s exclusionary social practices. Once again, the novel reinforces the notion that physical geographies serve as a means of determining one’s access to and membership in certain communities. Chang’s emphasis on the similarities between his birthplace and his new home represents an attempt to bridge the cultural gap that divides him from his white audience and to attain a sense of belonging in Tennessee.

But the parallels that Chang draws between these two “Souths” do not guarantee his inclusion into his adopted southern community. Being the only Asian living in Sewanee (and its surrounding towns) marks him not only as a foreigner but also as foreign to the prevailing social and racial logic. That is, Chang occupies an ambiguous racial space as neither “white” nor “colored.” His liminal status subjects him to the “unremitting scrutiny” of those around him as they subtly express their ambivalence

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26 Bow, Partly Colored, 169.
about his presence. Throughout his travels across the South, Chang is under the constant surveillance of local whites who cast a suspicious gaze toward him. Whereas readers may be more familiar with Jim Crow’s overt hostility directed at African Americans, *The Foreign Student* depicts an understated yet discernible form of malevolence. Chang occupies the uneasy position of being the marked ethnic body. Those around him fail or choose not to look beyond his Korean ethnicity as he feels the white southern gaze focus in on the “darkness of his skin,” an outward sign of difference that obscures “all that happened within it.” The paternalistic deference that southern whites show him masks their anxiety about a foreign presence, one that threatens the cohesion of their community and social order. Jim Crow segregation relies on the compliance of whites and African Americans who “know their place” within it. Chang, however, represents an outsider who cannot easily conform to its structure. For many of the novel’s southern whites, the Korean represents a foreign outsider whose presence threatens to undermine these boundaries.

The novel reinforces the uneasy positioning of the Asian in the segregated South by spotlighting the inability of southerners to locate him properly within their community. Chang receives uneven treatment by locals who offer him access to certain white privileges at times while denying his inclusion at others. After witnessing Chang shaking hands with one of the school’s black kitchen workers, Crane, whose father is a well-known Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan, informs his Korean roommate that he

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28 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 54.
29 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 53.
must not “be casual with them.” The warning serves to educate Chang on the proper social etiquette as determined by Jim Crow segregation. Yet Crane’s statement also suggests the approximation of Asian identity to white status. Chang must maintain distance from African Americans because he is not “colored.” But later in the novel, Crane appears to reverse this positioning when he offers another veiled warning. He invites his roommate to spend Thanksgiving with his family in Atlanta and attempts to quell any fears of racial violence by suggesting that “they don’t hang Orientals” because he does not think “they’d know one if they saw him.” Crane goes on to rethink his logic and notes that whites “might mistake him from a nigger and hang him” anyways. The possibility of racial violence against Chang disassociates Asian identity from white status. Crane’s speculative comments underscore the racist impulses of southern whites while also exposing the limitations and contradictions of Jim Crow cultural logic. While whites and African Americans may “know their place” within its social spaces, the Asian cannot claim the same level of comprehension.

Struggling to understand his place within the structure of southern segregation, Chang attempts to locate himself through his connection to the land. He informs residents that “Korea, the land, looks very much like Tennessee.” While residents may be skeptical of these similarities, Chang contemplates a much deeper connection. Looking out at the hills and the mist on the mountains, he was “sure he was home.” Although it is not clear which home he means, the geographic markers reminiscent of his native

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30 Choi, The Foreign Student, 16.
31 Choi, The Foreign Student, 59.
32 Choi, The Foreign Student, 53.
country relieve the feelings of loss and the fears of a foreign environment. The Tennessee mountains are not merely carbon copies of the Korea landscape. Instead, the parallels allow Chang to establish a cognitive map that entwines the memories of his native Korea with his current surroundings. If “memory and place are hopelessly entangled,” as George Garrett contends, then, the Tennessee landscape becomes the past made present.33

The land provides a tangible means of reconciling the past with his new life in Tennessee. Chang’s game of geographic memorization is not merely a simple diversion but rather a survival tactic. Establishing a connection with his physical surroundings represents a complex gesture aimed at offsetting the dislocation he feels as he navigates life in the 1950s South. The emphasis on mapping throughout The Foreign Student reflects the Asian immigrant’s desire to create what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls “a spatial correlate of completed and contemplated moves as well as a representation of one’s mental patterning of the world.”34 Chang’s practice of visualizing “place” is an attempt to locate himself within the physical American landscape in order to become a part of it socially. As he and Katherine make their way back to Sewanee from Jackson, he begins “playing the old game, gathering what he could remember of the landscape into

34 Wong argues for the need to map out the movements and positioning of Asian Americans in the American landscape, given the prominence of the theme of dislocation in a number of Asian American narratives. She goes on to state that “plotting a map for a mobility narrative...would be one interesting way to discover the author’s visions of the land’s possibilities and proscriptions, as derived from historical experience.” (Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 129).
his mind.” What surprises him is how much he remembers, an accomplishment that escapes him while attempting to visualize the streets of his former Korean home. The connection he feels with the land allows him psychically to traverse between his former and current locations in an attempt to discover a sense of belonging.

Later in the novel, Chang spends a summer working in bookbindery in Chicago. Choi establishes a stark, if not overly simplistic, contrast between the simplicity of the rural South and the chaos of the urban North. Chang is instantly struck by the enormity of the city as he looks out the window of the train and “couldn’t choose where to look.” Urban Chicago represents a dramatic shift from the calming confines of rural Sewanee. He feels overwhelmed by the “complicated inexhaustible city” featuring a “landscape he could never memorize.” Chang’s dislocation suggests a level of attachment he feels toward the more familiar rural South. Despite the social challenges that Sewanee presents, the secluded natural environment proves to have a profound effect on him, as he feels lost especially in the midst of the northern city.

But Chang’s northern journey leads him to a community where the strict divisions of Jim Crow segregation and national borders are less explicit. He takes residence in Chicago’s Little Tokyo, an emerging ethnic enclave of old and new immigrants from across Asia. The residents welcome him into their community by anointing him “Sensei Einstein.” Simultaneously providing anonymity and acceptance, Chicago becomes a stark contrast to Sewanee and its strict social (and racial) codes. The “North” functions

35 Choi, The Foreign Student, 56.
36 Choi, The Foreign Student, 240.
as a site of new possibilities where Chang casts off his position as a displaced foreigner. His presence in a predominantly Japanese neighborhood initially evokes the difficult memories of the abuse he suffered while attending boarding school in Osaka. Japan's violent occupation of Korea in the early twentieth century established years of discord between both nations. He painfully recalls the years of ridicule and physical beatings he suffered at the hands of his Japanese classmates. But 1950s Chicago is not Japan, and Chang discovers how quickly the past fades. He notices how the "old prejudices were irrelevant" and he walks the streets as a "shabby aristocrat." National allegiances to Korea and Japan give way to a new reverence for the "generous Midwest," a place the city's Japanese have embraced as a site of unlimited potential.³⁸ Chang's journey to the North opens up opportunities for rebirth and reinvention.

Choi quickly undermines any simplistic dichotomy between a liberating North and a restrictive South. The subtle yet unnerving scrutiny Chang experiences throughout his southern travels manifests as blatant racism in Chicago. Although he revels in the anonymity he initially experiences, he eventually encounters the harsh reality that the northern city adheres to the same racial and ethnic divisions that he left behind in Tennessee. Fran, a coworker at the bindery, directs a "constant, petulant, and threatening" gaze toward Chang.³⁹ While her steadfast observations of his activities initially appear to relate to her role as his supervisor, Choi eventually reveals Fran's racism. Chang's elderly white boss falsely accuses him of stealing money found in the books and subjects him to racist taunting as she refers to him as a "slanty-eyed son of a

³⁸ Choi, The Foreign Student, 244.
³⁹ Choi, The Foreign Student, 236.
Here Choi reminds readers that the explicit racial hatred commonly associated with the Jim Crow South also exists in the urban North. The discrimination he experiences in both Tennessee and Chicago enhances Chang’s sense of isolation. Even away from the rigid racial and ethnic divisions of Jim Crow, he lacks both a place and community.

Chang returns to the South not to retreat back to the familiarity of the Tennessee mountains but to pursue Katherine. Despite the comforting reminders of home that Chang encounters in his travels across the South and in Chicago, it is his relationship with Katherine that ultimately provides him with a sense of acceptance that he seeks. She provides him with something that no place or community can: a shared sense of dislocation. Chang’s status as a Korean (that is, not white and not black) positions himself outside of the normative racial structure. Following Crane’s logic that most southerners do not know what to make of “Orientals,” Chang cannot be easily placed within Jim Crow’s racial logic, not quite white and not quite “colored.” Meanwhile, Katherine is excluded from the Sewanee community because she breaks the rules associated with southern white womanhood. Her affair with Charles Addison, coupled with the fact that she loses her virginity to him at the age of 14, represents unacceptable and reprehensible behavior. Simply put, community members think of her as nothing more than “a whore.”

The racial and gender boundaries that serve as the foundation of Sewanee’s social order ultimately restrict Chang’s and Katherine’s access to the

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40 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 237.
41 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 221.
community. While allowed to engage and interact with those who satisfy these social conventions, both characters remain on the periphery as anomalies.

The shared experiences of migration and exclusion lead Chang and Katherine to a new communal space that allows them to locate themselves outside of Sewanee's restrictive racial and sexual boundaries. Choi's interracial love story is not a hopeful expression of racial and ethnic enlightenment during Jim Crow. Rather, Chang's and Katherine's romance serves to expose the ways in which the South's strict social and racial codes can force individuals like the Asian immigrant to live a life of constant migration. Bolstered by a belief that his experiences had made him a "fearless, invisible citizen of these places," Chang journeys from Chicago's Little Tokyo and the Tennessee mountains to look for Katherine in New Orleans, where she cares for her dying mother.42 This sense of invisibility works both ways for the Korean immigrant. On the one hand, the idea of being unseen reinforces his status as the foreign figure. His lack of roots in both Chicago and Tennessee prevents him from becoming a member of either community. However, the notion of being invisible also suggests a sense of power and control. Chang is in a sense free to move actively across the American landscape because he is not bound to one region or another. His mobility affords him the luxury of not being defined by the regional affiliations that play such a significant role in the politics of community inclusion or exclusion.

But the familiar scrutiny of the southern gaze he encounters throughout the novel compromises his newfound confidence in the American landscape. He awakens in a New

42 Choi, The Foreign Student, 274.
Orleans bus station under the eyes of police officers who immediately take him into custody. In spotlighting the unnerving scrutiny that Chang experiences from whites, Choi also foregrounds the anxieties about national rather than regional borders. This latest episode of mistrust reveals how southern racism develops into xenophobia. In other words, Chang is singled out not for being an Asian in the South but rather for being an Asian in the United States. FBI officials suspect him of being a Communist Chinese national, and the line of questioning serves as a painful reminder of his traumatic experiences as a prisoner of the South Korean government. The parallels between his detention in New Orleans and Korea reinforce his interstitial position. Chang is a man who cannot easily claim allegiance to any specific community. Katherine herself falls prey to misguided racial and ethnic logic. While driving to meet with the FBI officials, she ponders whether the detainee was “some other Oriental transient” who had assumed Chang’s identity. Her momentary anxiety reinforces the ambiguous status of Asian identity. Chang becomes just another undefined “Oriental.” But Katherine quickly rejects this labelling when the FBI describes the government’s concern over the infiltration of Chinese Communists through American borders. Disturbed by their blatant ignorance, she angrily informs the FBI that he is not Chinese. Katherine’s ability, and more importantly, willingness to identify Chang correctly suggests a level of intimacy unfettered by southern racism and American patriotism.

By allowing Chang to discover his true sense of self through his relationship with Katherine, Choi suggests that racial, ethnic, and sexual outcasts must seek alternative

43 Choi, *The Foreign Student*, 277.
places to call home far removed from the South’s restrictive social and spatial codes. While Chang suffers from a sense of placelessness in both Korea and Tennessee, he is able to ground himself in his deep connection with Katherine and her own experiences with dislocation and rejection. Choi reveals that the “shared and lonely space of cultural intermediacy” guides their relationship and ultimately provides a sense of comfort and rootedness. Through his relationship with Katherine, Chang is able to confront and express the repressed memories of being tortured as a Korean prisoner in the presence of someone who shares a similarly troubling past. Rejected by their societies and questioned for their actions, the two characters provide each other the freedom to reinvent themselves. The memories that occupy Chang’s thoughts at the end of the novel are not of the war-ravaged Korea of his past but of Katherine whose “presence accompanies him everywhere.” The Foreign Student concludes with Chang returning to Sewanee where he works in the school’s kitchen after losing his scholarship, the result of the false accusations of stealing from the Chicago bookbindery. No longer carrying the “proprietary arrogance” that initially guided his experiences in the foreign surroundings of the South, he now finds comfort through Katherine’s mental map of his own identity. He revels in the fact that she “knows his landscape...better than he’ll ever know it,” and this knowledge allows him to understand his place not only in the South but in the world.

44 Bow, Partly Colored, 176.
45 Choi, The Foreign Student, 323.
46 Choi, The Foreign Student, 323.
The Foreign Student provides a narrative that juxtaposes Korean history with the southern past and reveals the complex negotiations of community and affiliation that arise when regional, national, and international borders converge. Mining both the 38th parallel and the Mason-Dixon line in search of home, Chang discovers similarities between his new southern landscape and his former Korean home that provide temporary comfort. But his experiences in the South reveal a much more problematic resemblance, that arbitrary boundaries in both countries yield significant power in determining who can and cannot belong. In taking up both international and regional history, the novel represents what Martha Cutter refers to as a “site of difficult dialogue where the national can be contested and constructed by its interaction with international and transnational roots and routes.” The novel ultimately offers the potential of new social relationships that undermine the restrictive racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions that govern both wartime Korea and the Jim Crow South. The intimate relationship between Chang and Katherine develops in the space between black and white, insider and outsider, and “the excess of memory and its absence.” While the two outcasts rely on each other in their attempts to come to terms with their respective pasts, their relationship also signals the need to move away from past traumas and establish new identities. The potential to move away from a place littered with painful memories provides both characters with the opportunity to start anew.

Reconstructing Vietnam in Robert Olen Butler’s A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain

48 Choi, The Foreign Student, 323.
Like *The Foreign Student* Robert Olen Butler’s Pulitzer-Prize winning *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* depicts the experiences of Asian immigrants as they travel half way across the world to the foreign yet vaguely familiar landscapes of the American South. Butler, who served two tours in Vietnam as a counter-intelligence agent and translator for the United States Army, developed a strong connection to the war-torn country, its people, and its culture. He recalls how his greatest pleasure in life was to “wander out into the steamy back alleys of Saigon” and “just walk the alleys and crouch in the doorways with the people.” His evening trips convinced him, in his words, that “the Vietnamese were the warmest, most open and welcoming people I’ve ever met.”\(^\text{49}\) Butler’s fascination with and deep reverence for Vietnamese culture guide the twelve short stories that constitute his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection (the 2001 republished edition includes two additional stories). *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* spotlights the Vietnamese population that has transformed both the social and physical landscape of the contemporary Gulf South. Butler’s characters range from businessmen in the suburbs of Lake Charles, Louisiana, to strippers working in New Orleans’s French Quarter. While their stories differ, these Vietnamese immigrants share the same aspirations of cultivating a life in the Gulf South. The strong connection between place and memory represents a central component of the Vietnamese experience in the South. Butler’s immigrants cast visions of their former homes onto the Louisiana landscape while others physically transform their urban environment to resemble the

rural villages and rice fields of Vietnam. In his stories, the act of recreating former homes functions as a response to the dislocation they experience in the foreign surroundings of the Gulf South. Embedding the memories of familiar places into the landscape becomes a way to integrate themselves in the Gulf South community. By reimagining Vietnam in Louisiana, the once displaced characters attempt and struggle to establish a revised definition of home in the United States, one that reveals how the past continually informs the present.

For many of Butler's characters, assuaging the apprehension of living in a foreign place relies on the similarities that they see between Louisiana and Vietnamese terrain. In his detailed study of Vietnamese communities in New Orleans, geographer Christopher Airriess notes the city's "marked landscape change" as Vietnamese residents reproduce "the cultural signatures of their past homes in a foreign urban setting." Removed from their native countries, whether voluntary or by force, these immigrants establish what Airriess calls "landscapes of memory." Community members imbue their living quarters with reminders of their former homes. These reconstructions range from Vietnamese street signs to neighborhood farmers' stands similar to the open-air markets found in the streets of numerous Vietnamese provinces. These landscapes of memory serve two critical purposes. First, they function as an intermediary between their native country and their new home. Airriess argues that changes made to local landscapes to resemble Vietnam work to soothe the hardships of "a forced and instantaneous geographic separation form a familiar place halfway around the world." Secondly,

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landscapes of memory help immigrants establish a strong communal identity. By making the Vietnamese culture visible, residents establish their presence in the region and spotlight their contributions to its history and character. The active reshaping of the terrain “gives meaning to the community’s sense of place” and subsequently redefines the Gulf South’s physical and social geographies. 

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain underscores the significance of these landscapes of memory as Butler’s immigrants visualize and/or physically reconstruct Vietnam in Louisiana. Not only do these reproductions recall certain memories of the past, but they also serve to establish a sense of permanence in a region, I would argue, where ethnic and racial divisions remain contested. Evoking the past through spatial practices becomes a process for adaptation and to nurture a sense of belonging. Unlike the mental maps that Chang uses to assuage feelings of dislocation in The Foreign Student, Butler’s Vietnamese characters employ a more tangible form of remapping that involves the physical transformation of their surroundings. Landscape features such as backyard vegetable gardens and open-air markets help reaffirm old Vietnamese traditions. Butler’s stories reveal how these spatial practices function not only to lay down roots in a new country but also to establish a communal presence in the Gulf South.

The first wave of large-scale Vietnamese immigration to the region began after the fall of Saigon in 1975. With assistance from the United States Government, thousands of Vietnamese arrived throughout the country. Believing that assimilation to American culture would best be achieved through the widespread dispersal of immigrants, the

51 Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans,” 228.
government sent many Vietnamese to Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chafee in Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania and various other locations. A large contingent eventually arrived in New Orleans settling into the eastern portion of the city.

Prior to the Vietnamese’s arrival, eastern New Orleans had mainly developed into a public housing region as a part of the city’s decentralization process that incorporated “the dispersal of sources of employment to the urban periphery.”\(^{52}\) In the early 1960s, the city constructed the Versailles Arms, Versailles Gardens, and Village de L’est apartment communities that primarily housed white and some African American employees of NASA’s nearby Michoud Assembly Facility.\(^{53}\)

The second wave of immigration (see Chapter Two) and the work of sponsor organizations such as the New Orleans Chapter of the United State Catholic Conference and the Associated Catholic Charities led to large Vietnamese populations moving into eastern New Orleans. As the result of white flight in the late 1960s and early 1970s, neighborhoods like Versailles were transformed from middle-class suburbs into predominantly low-income communities. The increase in housing availabilities and the neighborhood’s proximity to nearby waterways provided Vietnamese refugees with the perfect environment to resettle and establish new roots in the United States.\(^{54}\)

Butler’s stories call attention to Louisiana and New Orleans in particular as a haven for newly arrived Vietnamese hoping to discover a place resembling their native

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\(^{52}\) Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans,” 235.

\(^{53}\) Originally known as the Michoud Ordnance Plant, the Michoud Assembly Facility produced military vehicles during World War II and the Korean War. NASA purchased the facility in 1961 transforming it into an assembly plant for several missions including the Saturn I and Saturn V programs during the 1960s and the launch of the Space Shuttle program in 1973. See the NASA website (www.nasa.gov) for more information.

\(^{54}\) Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes,” 235.
country. For one, the Gulf South’s humid, subtropical climate is similar to that of Vietnam. Maureen Ryan argues that Vietnamese characters in contemporary southern literature “migrate to the Deep South because it looks and feels like home.” Miss Giau, a New Orleans waitress and narrator of “Snow,” reveals how she desired to “just go to a warm climate, more like home” upon leaving Vietnam. She settles in the Lake Charles area of New Orleans and finds that “it is something like Vietnam here. The rice fields and the heat and the way the storms come in.” Everyday landmarks begin to look and feel Vietnamese for Butler’s characters. Driving to Houston to pick up his wife’s grandfather, Mr. Khánh, the Lake Charles businessman in “The Trip Back,” is particularly drawn to the local storefronts lining the Texas highway. He focuses on the smaller stores “that seemed so Vietnamese...in how people always looked for some new angle, some empty corner in the marketplace.” These small bait shops, vegetable stands, and antique stores more likely found in small southern towns shift into a Vietnamese landscape in the eyes of the newly arrived immigrants. These characters remap the once foreign southern spaces in a way that evokes memories of their former homes and as a means to establish a sense of community. Erin Campbell suggests that community development for Butler’s characters “requires a hybridization of their native social values with those of their new country.” The recreation of past places functions as adjustment tool as they learn to

57 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 30.
familiarize themselves with their new home. Constructing familiar sites/sights onto a new landscape allows recently arrived immigrants to remain connected to their Vietnamese roots while also accepting their new surroundings.

While the physical reconstruction of Vietnam in Louisiana assuages the anxieties of living in a foreign environment for Butler’s characters, the southern landscape can consequently arouse memories of their native home that destabilize the link between their past and current lives. Maureen Ryan contends that for Vietnamese characters in contemporary southern literature “the myth of America as a place of opportunity and new beginnings belies the burden of ancestry, past, and place that accompanies them from Vietnam.” Even as some characters hope to start anew, they discover that Louisiana has a way of unearthing the past they hoped to leave behind. Returning to “The Trip Back,” Mr. Khánh boasts about his two successful laundry and dry-cleaning businesses in Lake Charles capitalizing on southern Louisiana’s warm climate. For him, financial stability denotes a successful assimilation to his new home. Khánh thinks of himself as “a good American now” who has “finally left Vietnam behind.” Yet the Texas terrain draws him back into the past. While driving back to Lake Charles after picking up his father-in-law, Mr Chinh, at the airport, he crosses over the Old and Lost Rivers that he combines into a single entity. The joining rivers become an omen as Khánh learns that Mr. Chinh suffers Alzheimer’s when he greets his granddaughter as a stranger. Quite literally trapped in the past, Mr. Chinh becomes a symbolic figure of the old Vietnamese way of life. The tragic reunion between grandfather and granddaughter reflects the historical amnesia that results

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60 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 36.
from displacement and dislocation. Khánh’s sense of place now centers on his life in Louisiana, where he attempts to forge an identity connected to his American surroundings. Reflecting on his childhood home of Vũng Tàu, he discovers that he “could see nothing of it clearly, not its shaded streets or its white-sand beaches, not the South China Sea lying there beside it.”61 The inability to remember his former home further emphasizes Khánh’s desire to reinvent his self to conform to life in a new country. “The Trip Back” exposes the painful gaps that can emerge from the immigrant’s attempt to reconcile the past and the present. For some like Khánh, becoming American involves a partial severing of the connections to a former home in favor of new surroundings, cultures, and identities. His journey away from Vietnam requires the planting of new roots, ones that grow out of the places and cultures of his new country.

But Butler’s stories also show that this transformation is often incomplete as his other Vietnamese immigrants living across the Gulf coast find themselves caught between places and cultures. While Khánh hopes to assimilate fully to his new surroundings in order to be a “good” American, the narrator of “Crickets” struggles to reconcile his affection for his former Vietnamese surroundings with his sense of belonging in the Gulf South. Thieu, a former South Vietnamese soldier who flees Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, settles into Lake Charles, Louisiana, with his wife and young son. Unlike Khánh, he struggles to adjust to life in America. Thieu reveals how his American colleagues call him Ted “because they want to think of [him] as one of them.” However, what troubles him most is how his American-born son ignores his

61 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 42.
Vietnamese heritage because “he’s an American.” The consequence of starting a new life in the United States is that he now finds himself trapped between two cultures, between the past and the present. Although recognizing the opportunities that life in Louisiana presents, Thiệu desperately longs to return to the simplicity of his former village.

Knowing that a return to Vietnam is impossible, he turns to the Gulf South land itself in hopes of preserving his family’s connection to the past. He welcomes the idea that Louisiana is a place “where there are rice paddies and where the water and the land are in most delicate balance with each other, very much like the Mekong Delta, where [he] grew up.”62 The bayou’s physical terrain grants him a comforting sense of place that its social geography fails to provide. Thiệu attempts to use Lake Charles’s resemblance to the Mekong Delta to his advantage in an effort to enrich his son with Vietnamese culture. Upon his arrival to Louisiana, he discovers the landscape’s plentitude of crickets that triggers recollections of playing in the rural fields of his childhood home. These fond memories convince him that he can, in fact, pass along his Vietnamese culture to his son on American soil by teaching him the traditional game of fighting crickets.

His son grudgingly agrees to learn, but he and his father manage to find only similar crickets while the game requires crickets of different sizes and colors. Unsuccessful in his attempt to impart the traditions of the past to his son, Thiệu is left feeling the pains of the cultural divide. He reluctantly admits that despite its physical similarities to Vietnam, Louisiana “is another country.”63 His statement, while obvious, simply and poignantly confirms his inability to connect with the Gulf South. Regardless

62 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 60.
63 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 64.
of the region's likeness to Vietnam, Thiệu will still be called by his *American* name and still raise an *American* son. The landscapes of memory in this story reinforce the divisions felt by some Vietnamese immigrants who feel hopelessly caught between two worlds and unable to truly claim either as their home.

Other refugees in Butler's collection reinforce their connection to native homes by actively reshaping their American surroundings. These Vietnamese transform the Gulf South into a thriving refuge built around a shared culture and history. Confronted with the pressures of adjusting to life in America, they recreate their former lives within their new confines. In "Snow," Miss Giau, a thirty-four-year-old Vietnamese immigrant and Lake Charles resident, describes her arrival to Louisiana and her current life working at the Plantation Hunan, a local Chinese restaurant. The restaurant itself is a rather peculiar fusion of the past and the present and of two cultures. Giau seems fascinated with the building's past as a working plantation home. With its walls lined with antiques and its placement among oak trees that she believes had been there since the house was constructed, the renovated restaurant clings to its former existence.

However, the building's liminal state becomes all too apparent as it embodies both the past and the present. Sandwiched between a gas station and a motel, the former plantation home turned Chinese eatery lacks "the life the house once knew." Miss Giau attempts to envision scenes of white southern elites roaming the grounds but instead finds the space "full of foreign smells" like Chinese vegetables and spices.64 The restaurant, even its moniker, combines the Old South with the emergent global South as the past

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64 Butler, *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, 126.
lingers while giving way to the region's changing social and cultural identity. Miss Giau refers to the restaurant itself as a refugee, a space still haunted by the past. For refugees like her, the journey to the Gulf South involves another form of dislocation that involves the inability to reconcile a former home and a new, foreign environment. The Plantation Hunan embodies the experiences of immigrants who feel out of place and lost between two worlds.

Despite believing that the Vietnamese in Lake Charles are "too sad" and "too tired" to establish a strong communal identity, Miss Giau views the Plantation Hunan as a safe space in which she can come to terms with her former life in Vietnam and adjust to her Louisiana surroundings. While working at the restaurant on Christmas Eve, she meets Mr. Cohen, an elderly New Orleans lawyer and Jewish immigrant. Like Miss Giau, he is not a Lake Charles native, having come to the Gulf region after fleeing his former home at the onset of war. She learns how he and his mother left Poland for England during World War II and finally settled down in Louisiana. The two immigrants discover another common link as they both fear snow. For Mr. Cohen, snow evokes the painful memories of his forced removal from Poland. Meanwhile, Miss Giau describes her first snowfall in the United States and her incomprehension that "things could change like that." The simple unexpectedness of a change in weather reinforces her sense of dislocation and intensifies her anxieties of living in a new country.

Within the walls of the Plantation Hunan, Miss Giau discovers a sense of understanding and belonging that she has not experienced since arriving in the United

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States. She and Mr. Cohen find themselves in “another place, another country” far removed their native homes. Both are non-natives attempting to adapt to a place without the support of strong and stable community. Although evoking an unfamiliar southern history, the plantation home turned Chinese restaurant offers the possibility of asserting a new southern narrative that involves the cultures and experiences of the region’s newest residents. The restaurant’s current inhabitants and the daily transactions that take place within its walls point to new communities founded on shared memories of loss, migration, and rebirth. The plantation home, a symbol of the Old South’s racial divisions and troubled past, becomes a potential healing space where relationships can develop across ethnic, racial, and religious lines and ease the fears of life away from their former home nations.

The story “Relic” best exemplifies the crucial role that landscapes of memory play for Vietnamese immigrants attempting to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the Gulf South. The story centers on a wealthy Vietnamese entrepreneur discussing his most recent and most prized purchase: a shoe that John Lennon wore at the time of his murder. The narrator begins by recounting the fall of Saigon and his former life in Vietnam. The proud and successful businessman chastises the “spineless poor” who “threw down their guns and let the communists take over.” He describes how his wealth “gave [him] courage . . . to sail away from all those things I owned” and “start again with nothing” in the United States. His sense of identity stems from his fortunes as he distinguishes himself through class divisions. He first settles into the Versailles community of New

67 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 133.
68 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 137.
Orleans, where he lives among the predominantly low-income families. The once-rich immigrant discovers that the “emptiness of the rooms” in his new home threatens to “take [his] courage.”

Like many of the characters in *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, the narrator of “Relic” views the United States as a place where dreams can be fulfilled, specifically through the workings of consumerism. His initial economic venture is selling traditional Vietnamese lanterns and firecrackers to immigrants hoping to purchase a piece of their culture. The narrator states that making money is “a gift I have, and America is the land of opportunity.” He continues to amass money by opening a pool hall and developing a successful shrimping business. The narrator of “Relic” asserts the success of Vietnamese fishermen as he predicts that “in ten years people from Vietnam will be the only shrimp fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico.”

As his wealth continues to grow, he seeks greater opportunities to understand his place in a new country. He wishes to leave behind Versailles and “become the American that I must be.” For him, the Vietnamese neighborhood represents a roadblock preventing him from reclaiming his fortunes. Following Mr. Khánh’s rationale, the narrator believes that economic success equates to fulfilling the American dream. He turns to commodities as a tangible way of feeling accepted by his new home. Believing that “there is much power in objects” he seeks to purchase an array of valuables, including John Lennon’s shoe. For him, belonging is not learned but purchased. Even his home is a symbolic attempt to proclaim a successful immersion into American

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69 Butler, *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, 139.
culture. The narrator takes pride in his “carefully trimmed yard,” his “brick barbeque pit,” and his “cypress lawn furniture.” Like many successful Vietnamese immigrants, the narrator builds a “trophy home” to signify greater socioeconomic stability. Moreover, his home serves to shed his Vietnamese past and distance himself from an immigrant identity.

Despite amassing an extensive collection of American commodities, he struggles to formulate a sense of home in his New Orleans surroundings. Luis Francia notes that modern globalization results in immigrant populations becoming increasingly dependent on capitalism in order to become American. He contends that “if the substitute for home is simply capital, where the strength of citizenship is proportionate to purchasing power, then ‘home’ loses its meaning.” Francia’s caveat regarding immigrants’ growing reliance on consumer culture suggests a need to establish a more spiritual and organic means of establishing a sense of home that allows for multiple exchanges between multiple communities and cultures. The narrator in “Relic,” however, continues to insist upon the need to move away from his Vietnamese past in order to discover his home in America. But the sightlines of his New Orleans home reveal a landscape that pulls him back to his native home. He notices the backyards of the Versailles apartments and remarks how they are “plowed and planted as if this was some provincial village in Vietnam.” The immigrants in New Orleans East reconstruct the past as he observes “a scattering of conical straw hats there [and] women crouched flat-footed and working the

garden.” He expects at “any moment to see a boy riding a water buffalo down the path or perhaps a sampan gliding along the bayou, heading for the South China Sea.”73 As discussed in Chapter Two, private and public gardens serve a practical purpose. They provide families with food and supply local farmers markets and restaurants with Vietnamese produce not found in American supermarkets. But the rows of vegetable gardens also serve a critical cultural purpose. These landscape features help create a sense of familiarity and allow the immigrants to incorporate their Vietnamese traditions in a new urban environment.

New Orleans East’s natural boundaries of swamps, canals, and bayous afford “residents a degree of cultural isolation” and simple landscape transformations like community vegetable gardens are crucial to developing and maintaining a stable ethnic community.74 The city’s Vietnamese population in “Relic” unites in an effort to adapt to their new home. The narrator states how gardening becomes more than a hobby as “the people of Vietnam are cultivating their backyards as a way of life.”75 By embedding their culture and their past into the land itself, Versailles’s Vietnamese residents lay claim to a part of the Gulf South’s culture and history. Fitzhugh Brundage’s work on contemporary southern society and memory suggests that public space can be a valuable tool in shaping a collective identity. He contends that “insinuating their memory into public space” allows communal groups to “exert the cultural authority, express the collective solidarity,

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72 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 140.
74 Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes,” 236.
75 Butler, A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain, 140.
and achieve a measure of permanence that they often crave."\textsuperscript{76} For the Vietnamese immigrants stripped of their native homes, the active transformation of the physical landscape provides the opportunity to assuage the feelings of dislocation that they experience after their abrupt departure from a more familiar home place.

However, the landscapes of memory are not enough for characters like the narrator of "Relic." He believes that a new identity requires a complete break from Vietnam. If America is truly to become the land of opportunity, one must move beyond the Vietnamese past. Purchasing and owning John Lennon's shoe becomes a means of claiming ownership to an American identity. Although he is not a fan of his music, "it is of no matter" because "the significance of this object is the same."\textsuperscript{77} He convinces himself that possessing the shoe symbolizes his connection to his new home. What is interesting is that Lennon himself was clearly an American transplant, a fact that the narrator fails to address or acknowledge. For him, the Versailles residents' insistence on reaffirming Vietnamese traditions physically and socially isolates the community from the rest of the country.

But what he fails to understand is that these immigrants are, in fact, quite literally, becoming part of the American landscape by entrenching their own history into the Louisiana soil. Utilizing the terrain to display their native culture becomes a civic duty to honor their own history while simultaneously redefining American and southern identity. Simple socio-spatial practices such as constructing vegetable gardens and establishing public markets provide Butler's characters with an opportunity to showcase the cultural

\textsuperscript{76} Brundage, \textit{The Southern Past}, 6.
\textsuperscript{77} Butler, \textit{A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain}, 141.
and economic contributions that Vietnamese immigrants make to the Gulf South in a
tangible way. Put another way, landscapes of memory function as revised narratives of
community and survival. The immigrants’ ability physically and socially to implant
Vietnamese tradition into their southern community allows them to “avoid the abstraction
and fragmentation of the mechanized, image-driven, industrial capitalist wasteland of
postmodern life.”78 “Relic” concludes with the narrator trying on Lennon’s shoe and
hoping “to find the place where I belong.”79 Perhaps what he may eventually discover is
that place he seeks is in fact New Orleans, where its foreign-born residents are cultivating
a sense of home that he and other immigrants long for. The Vietnamese immigrants in
“Relic” and in Butler’s other stories are not living outside of southern history but instead
within it as they continue to reshape it both socially and physically with new roots and
routes.

Community of Hope: Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* and Ethnic Alliances

Lan Cao’s debut novel, *Monkey Bridge*, moves the Vietnamese immigrant
experience from the Gulf South to the suburb of Falls Church, Virginia, just outside
Washington, D.C. A refugee herself who fled Vietnam in 1975, Cao presents a text that
illustrates how ethnic communities transplant their native homes to a new country. While
many of Butler’s Vietnamese manage to find comfort through a familiar Louisiana
landscape, Cao’s refugees experience a more profound sense of dislocation amid the
foreign terrain of the suburban South. Besieged by the memory of death and destruction,
her characters continually relive the past as they work to establish a viable and

sustainable Vietnamese enclave in Virginia. As in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, reconstructed landscapes help alleviate the scars from war, loss, and dislocation for these characters uprooted from their native homes and forced to carry the burden of a troubled history.

*Monkey Bridge* centers on the plight of Mai Nguyen, a Vietnamese teenager who serves as the novel’s narrator, her mother Thanh, and a cast of predominantly female refugees as they learn to live in Falls Church, Virginia, in the late 1970s. With help from “Uncle” Michael McMahon, a Lieutenant in the United States Army and friend of her husband, Thanh sends her daughter to America and eventually joins her. Mai, whose memories of Vietnam are faint, attempts to quickly assimilate to American culture and move away from her Vietnamese heritage. Thanh, on the other hand, struggles to make sense of her new surroundings and more importantly, struggles to keep a painful family secret from her daughter. While the generation gap leads to differing strategies of survival in Virginia, both mother and daughter attempt to reconcile their respective understanding of the Vietnamese past. Mai eventually learns about the dark family secret that completely alters her perceptions of the past. Baba Quan, the man whom she believes to be her grandfather, prostituted his wife to his landlord in order to save his land. Thanh’s birth is revealed to be illegitimate while Baba Quan joins the Viet-Cong, an action resulting in the family’s being forced off their native land. Honoring a long-held tradition, she returns to her ancestral village to bury her dead mother but suffers significant injuries during a napalm attack and fails to perform the ritual. Scarred and shamed by her troubled history, Thanh attempts to keep them hidden away from her daughter. She wishes for a new life for Mai in the United States, a life removed from her
Vietnamese memories. In an ultimate act of breaking from the past, Thanh commits suicide. *Monkey Bridge* reveals the daily struggles to adjust to life in a new country while simultaneously highlighting the ways in which the past shapes and transform its characters’ understanding of place and identity. Although the novel’s tragic end signals the hardships that Vietnamese refugees face in the wake of being uprooted from their homes, Cao provides a portrait of refugees attempting to come together in order to tackle the challenges of establishing a home away from home. By recreating the public and private spaces of their Vietnamese birthplace, the immigrant characters in *Monkey Bridge* work to transform the foreign terrain of Falls Church, Virginia, into a site of communal healing where its Vietnamese residents learn to better understand their difficult history while constructing a promising future.

Like *The Foreign Student*, *Monkey Bridge* oscillates between two countries and the past and the present. Following Choi’s model, Cao blurs the boundaries of insider and outsider as the southern environment becomes a new battleground for the refugees where the threat of social exclusion supplants the threat of violence. Nora Okja Keller writes that the novel “traverses memory and dream to reinvent Ba Xuyan, Vietnam and Falls Church, Virginia, as a single luminous landscape infused with karmic history, personal war, and mythic beauty.”80 The characters engage in a physical transformation of their surroundings to recreate the rural villages of Vietnam in an attempt to combat their feelings of dislocation. However, the task of reinventing a sense of home is easier said than done for the refugees as they carry the burdens of a painful past while

confronting the unfamiliarity of their suburban geographies. The physical and psychological scars left by the Vietnam War present a challenge for both the Vietnamese refugees and American war veterans who call Falls Church home. But these residents work to redevelop their Virginia neighborhood to heal simultaneously the wounds of their collective memory of war and to reaffirm their place in the southern community.

The novel opens in the jungles of Vietnam where Mai is surrounded by the chaos and bloodshed of war. But the scene abruptly shifts to Arlington Hospital where she discovers that she was only dreaming. Still half asleep, she looks out at the building’s hydraulic glass doors, vast concrete parking lot, and its American flag that “swelled and snapped in the wind” outside and that reassured her that she indeed was “not in Saigon.”

The pervasive memories of violence and the anxieties of displacement are apparent. Mai equates the stillness of the hospital to the “unreliable, narcotically unreal...calm of Saigon” as she observes her surroundings. The building’s sterile aesthetics and constant flow of doctors and nurses, meant to provide a sense of guarded optimism, serves only to remind her of the Vietnam War’s relentless ebb and flow of peace and chaos.

Whereas the clinical backdrop positions the American hospital as a space of artificial comfort, the natural beauty of Vietnam’s rural villages offers a deep connectedness to land, family, and tradition. Thanh describes the importance of the land in a letter to her daughter by stating that “to know a rice field is to know the soul of

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Vietnam." But Mai’s initial experiences in Virginia underscore the loss of place that the refugees feel upon arriving in the United States. Unlike her elders, who foster a special relationship with the Vietnamese land, she senses an “inability to feel connected to the American soil.” Central to *Monkey Bridge* is the story of Baba Quan, who serves as the benchmark of Mai’s Vietnamese roots and but later becomes a symbol of her family’s shocking past. A farmer from the Ba Xuyen province in the Mekong Delta who “loved his land,” Quan shows great devotion to his country through his spiritual and physical connectedness to the Vietnamese soil. The rich, rural landscape instills its inhabitants with honor for and pride of their culture and their history. Even the American soldiers in the midst of war in a foreign country cannot ignore Vietnam’s enchanting terrain. Uncle Michael reveals how “there were beautiful rice fields everywhere in the delta.” He goes on to state it was “like staring at a magic mirror” that lead him to “believe that everything stays beautiful all the time.” For Quan and his fellow Vietnamese farmers, one’s deep connection to the land and commitment to living in the natural world defined their sense of self.

Baba Quan’s veneration for the natural landscape of Vietnam highlights the power of place in defining one’s identity. Mai’s grandfather defines his heritage through the Mekong Delta’s abundant rice fields and scenic waterways. For him, “‘earth’ and ‘water’ combined” to define a sense of place and home in Vietnam. Cao’s Vietnamese characters establish a deep connection to their home through real work. Agrarian values

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82 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 172.
83 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 192.
84 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 162.
85 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 102.
86 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 5.

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are not simply idealized principles; they are a way of life that involves close interactions with the land through physical labor.

Family and kinship are also closely linked to the natural world that both Quan and the Agrarians revere. The past permeates the land, physically and spiritually, subsequently enhancing their understanding of place and identity. Mai notes how Baba Quan’s village was “the place where spirits of my ancestors remained, a supple burial ground for all those ancestral souls sustained by the collected years and the sanctuary of history.” Preserving the traditions and beliefs of Vietnam are crucial to refugees like Thanh who incorporate them in their daily transactions in their new southern surroundings. The act of retaining the customs of the past eases the burden of displacement from their native country by providing a means of temporarily escaping the foreign and disorientating environment of suburban Virginia and returning to the familiar places of Vietnam.

Uprooted from their native soil, Cao’s characters are faced with the task of finding a sense of comfort and familiarity amid the foreignness of a suburban environment. Mai first arrives in Connecticut to stay with Uncle Michael while her mother spends her first few months at a refugee-resettlement center in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. With the help of a Catholic Church sponsor, mother and daughter eventually relocate to Falls Church, Virginia. While still reluctant to embrace her new surroundings, Thanh views the northern Virginia suburb as “the safest place in the world,” given its close proximity to Washington, D.C. But Mai quickly points out that living “in a nuclear

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87 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 102-3.
"age" positions the city and its surrounding areas as "the first target of an intercontinental ballistic missile." The threat of war continues to haunt Cao's refugees as they struggle to feel at home in the United States.

Feelings of loss and dislocation surface as the Vietnamese refugees settle into Falls Church. On her first night in Virginia, Thanh resigns herself to the idea that "you can lose a house, a piece of land, even a country." Unsettled by her new surroundings, she is engulfed by "a melancholic array of impermanence." The initial shock of leaving Vietnam creates doubt as to whether she can ever call America home. She views the refugees as nomads who are merely "guests in this country." Mai carries the same sentiments by being convinced that the Vietnamese community in Falls Church cannot claim a true citizenship. She believes that they are simply "a ragtag accumulation of unwanted" refugees "rendered...invisible" by the United States and its people. Mai's comments suggest that immigrant/refugee status equates to a form of absence that renders the Vietnamese powerless. Invisibility functions as a form of both exclusion and forgetting. The stigma of being unseen positions the Vietnamese as foreign outsiders who cannot fully integrate into their new Virginia community. Conversely, the act of looking away or not seeing on the part of American-born residents works to erase the memory of American involvement in Vietnam. The lasting repercussions of an unpopular and deadly war threaten to leave the Vietnamese refugees without a place to call home.

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89 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 19.
90 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 42.
But Cao illustrates how the growing presence of Vietnamese refugees alters conventional notions of southern identity by supplanting traditional notions of the South’s regional past with a broader global historical memory. Michael Kreyling contends “radical changes can be felt” when the historical epicenter of the South “is no longer the Civil War but Vietnam.”91 With the war and its brutal aftermath fresh in the minds of many southerners, these immigrants represent a foreign enemy who threatens the South’s distinct sense of place and collective identity. But Cao also reveals that the burdens of southern history bear little consequence for the region’s newest residents. Mai notes that “it hardly mattered that all around us ghosts of a different war lingered, the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Battle of Bull Run, Confederate victories secured by Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.”92 What Mai fails to understand is that the past does matter as the presence of the Vietnamese alters the ways in which we define regional identity, or more specifically southern identity. Barbara Ladd aptly notes that contemporary immigration patterns change “the writing of history and culture within specific regions.” These narratives increasingly involve the impact of foreign capital, cultures, and peoples on more narrowly defined notions of place. What becomes clear is that “regions are more and more provinces that surround not a national but a transnational center.”93 Texts such as *Monkey Bridge* offer a portrait of the American South from the vantage point of the immigrant newcomer, one that considers the region not in relation to the rest of the nation but to the rest of the world. These transnational perspectives unveil

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the cultural, economic, and historical connections that incorporate the South into a global network of exchange.

Similarly, the refugees attempt to revise preconceived notions of Vietnam, its people, culture, and history. During her college interview, Mai struggles to provide a description of her native Vietnamese home. She mentally recalls her unassuming limestone home and the shoddy storefronts that litter the streets and alleys of Saigon. Her college interview becomes an attempt to “reveal something palpable” that would illustrate “the tender, vital, and most important, mundane parts” of her country and convince the American interviewer that Vietnam was “not all about rocket fires and body bags.”94 She hopes to expose the simplicity of Vietnam found within the cracks and fissures of a troubled past. However, she suggests that perhaps the refugees’ only course of action was to “make ourselves innocuous and present the outside world a mild, freeze-dried version of history.”95 Cao reveals how the central hardship for many Vietnamese refugees living in the postwar United States is reconstructing their past lives and homes without reawakening Americans’ frustrations over their involvement in an unpopular war. Laurence J. Kirmayer explains how “the narrative reconstructions of memory are not so much managed as lived in—offering vistas that reveal and conceal. Others may dwell within the same landscape, though, inextricably, they see it from different vantage points.”96 For Vietnamese refugees in Monkey Bridge, developing a new home in the Virginia suburbs involves a return to the painful past of both Vietnamese and Americans

94 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 128.
95 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 42.
that requires careful attention to how and what memories of a former place are recreated or forgotten.

Mai’s bleak outlook for the Vietnamese stems from her belief that the Falls Church refugees are unable and unwilling to assimilate. For her, the desire to cling to the memories of Vietnam hinders their attempt to become American. While sympathetic to the refugees’ plight, she disapproves of the “peculiar and timid way they . . . occupied the physical space” merely “present[ing] themselves as reproductions from the tropics.”97 Psychologically bound to their former lives, the refugees struggle to lay claim to their American surroundings. Mai compares the Vietnamese enclave to other ethnic immigrant groups and neighborhoods and ponders how the “numerous Chinatowns and Little Italys” accept their position “to inhabit the edge and margin of American life.”98 The young narrator worries that these refugees remain trapped in the memories of their former land and do little to join the broader national community. For Mai the desire to establish a Little Saigon in Falls Church signals an unwillingness to integrate and threatens to cast the refugees as a peripheral community.

Even commonplace landscape markers like grocery stores emphasize how far from home they really were. Mai describes the local A & P as “brimmed with unexpected abundance” that boasts a wealth of pyramid-shaped fruit displays and canned goods. With their meticulously arranged geometries and overwhelming supply of products, the local Fall Church businesses emphasize the immigrants’ entry into an unexpected, unrecognizable, and “modernized” world. Mai observes how customers

97 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 146.
98 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 37.
moved around as if they were “well rehearsed to the demands of modern shopping.” But her mother “did not appreciate the exacting orderliness” of the American store. Thanh is far more comfortable traversing the littered streets and makeshift fruit stands of Saigon’s open air markets than the fluorescent aisles and carefully lined shelves of the suburban grocery store. Much like the hospital, the A & P is an artificial and sterilized space that fails to provide her with a sense of comfort and familiarity. The manmade shelves and precisely organized aisles throw her “off balance and made [her] know in no uncertain terms that [she] would not be returning to the familiarity of [her] former [life].” The foreign geographies and modern amenities of Falls Church reinforce the anxieties over life detached from Vietnam. Although Mai wishes for her mother to assimilate quickly to American culture, she cannot blame her mother for wishing “to return to a more familiar home.”

But the Vietnamese refugees in Monkey Bridge do more than accept their position as marginalized citizens living in a foreign environment they struggle to navigate. They transform Falls Church, Virginia, into a healing space where they reconstruct elements of their native homes and subsequently develop a vibrant and stable ethnic community. Laurence J. Kirmayer argues that “trauma shared by a whole community creates a potential public space for retelling.” The refugees in Monkey Bridge attempt to rewrite their narrative of loss and displacement through the active reconstruction of Vietnam in the northern Virginia suburbs. They unofficially rename their Falls Church neighborhood

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99 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 32.
100 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 39.
101 Cao, Monkey Bride, 206.
102 Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory,” 189.
“Little Saigon,” a name that reflects the ongoing process of embedding the memories of their Vietnamese past into the local landscape. While Mai initially suggests that reproductions of their former lives are a burden and deterrent, it is precisely this ability to reconstruct Vietnam in Falls Church that allows them to create a strong communal identity. Situated on Wilson Boulevard, the city’s main thoroughfare, Little Saigon becomes an epicenter of Vietnamese culture and a space for refugees to reestablish a connection to the past. The neighborhood brings together Vietnamese residents who grew up in the same villages while simultaneously building new networks as they adjust to life in the United States.

The new lives that Mai and Thanh create for themselves require both accepting their new world and maintaining the traditions of Vietnam. Observing its markedly unique landscape and cultural practices, Mai notes how Little Saigon was “a world in and of itself, a world that census takers had documented, one hundred thousand growing.”¹⁰³ The neighborhood becomes a visible and tangible means of preserving Vietnamese culture while simultaneously affirming a place in the larger Falls Church community. Kate Berry and Martha Henderson suggest that “the power of the local landscape lies in its ability to reinforce racial and ethnic identity of second- and third- generation residents as well as new immigrants to the region.”¹⁰⁴ Despite their geographic separation from Vietnam, Cao’s refugees reimagine Falls Church as a home away from home by transforming their public and private spaces to look and feel like the familiar places of their lives before arriving in the United States. By making the past visible through the

¹⁰³ Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 203.

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built environment, the Vietnamese help restore a sense of continuity in their lives once disrupted by their abrupt departure from their native homes.

For Falls Church’s newest residents, survival requires a reshaping of the past. Cao reveals how community members sought to transform their former selves into new identities. Claire Stocks argues that the refugee characters’ ultimate aim is to “obscure the past” relying on “secrecy and lies” as “survival tactics.”\(^{105}\) I would argue, however, that while historical revision and erasure of the past are factors in their success in the United States, the memories of Vietnam are similarly crucial. If memory is a vital component of an understanding of place, then Cao’s characters utilize their history to adjust to life in Virginia. The refugees in *Monkey Bridge* come together to enact modified versions of past social and spatial practices that defined their experiences growing up in Vietnam. They transform the unfamiliar suburban environment into homes and businesses that resemble their past lives. Displaced from their homes in Vietnam and forced to endure multiple migrations, the refugees who settle in Falls Church learn to live a life of constant adaptation. Mai observes how the neighborhood residents learn to “adopt a different posture, to reach deep enough into the folds of the earth to relocate one’s roots and bend one’s body in a new direction.”\(^{106}\) As a transplanted community forced essentially to start over, the neighborhood learns to “stretch its limbs, lean into the wind, and heave itself in a new, untried direction.”\(^{107}\)

\(^{106}\) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 39.
\(^{107}\) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 40.
Little Saigon's emerging business district reestablishes ties to the past in order to help residents make sense of the foreign landscape. As a growing number of refugees move into the area, the neighborhood's businesses work to bring together the Vietnamese community. But the goal of this enterprise is not necessarily achieving economic success as much as it is creating a public space that reinforces communal solidarity. The memories of former homes become the most sought-after commodity as the businesses help refugees reconnect with their former villages and cityscapes. Mai describes how the Tam family's packaging store specialized in mail delivery to and from Vietnam while the Hai family's ice cream parlor sold traditional Vietnamese sweets in order to satisfy the appetites for home. The eatery in particular reflects the desire to reimagine Vietnam in Falls Church as it replicates "with unwavering precision the décor, [the] arrangement, atmosphere, and taste of the old Givrard and Brodad ice-cream parlors in downtown Saigon." The active reshaping of commercial space into familiar sights/sites attests to the resiliency of Little Saigon's residents and firmly establishes their place in the Falls Church community. The once-ignored refugees view the suburban landscape as a means of harnessing their collective memories into a unified communal identity. Imbuing their new surroundings with reminders of the past allows the Vietnamese to maintain cultural traditions while simultaneously integrating themselves into the broader Falls Church community. The increased visibility of Vietnamese shops, restaurants, and homes reveals how Little Saigon becomes a reinvented neighborhood that preserves its own historical legacy while also acknowledging the arrival of new populations and cultures.

108 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 142.
Cao’s Little Saigon appears to be a thinly-veiled rendering of the Eden Center, the Falls Church’s commercial hub for Vietnamese residents discussed in Chapter Two. Like its real world counterpart, Little Saigon functions as symbol of the strength of the Vietnamese community and its deep connection to its history and culture. While these businesses help refugees reconnect with their Vietnamese past, they also work to commodify memory as a means of attaining financial stability. Like the narrator in Butler’s story “Relic,” the Vietnamese business owners realize that a new life in the United States requires some level of wealth. Owning and selling reminders of the past is equated with economic survival. But while Butler’s entrepreneur believes that American material goods are the sources of comfort and belonging in the United States, Cao’s Vietnamese business owners look to the Vietnamese past in order to provide refugees with a sense of home in a foreign country. Little Saigon’s economic spaces are not centered on accumulating wealth but rather strengthening the ethnic community. Mai describes how the neighborhood is transformed into “a world in which every shop was a shop specializing in the business not of numbers so much as of dreams.” The Vietnamese-owned businesses provide immigrant residents with a sense of hope that they can survive in the postwar United States.

At the heart of Little Saigon is the Mekong Grocery, a place that brings together refugees and American-born residents. Unlike the foreignness of the local A & P, the Vietnamese grocery store is a welcomed and familiar site for recent immigrants. This “transfigured space” repositions Falls Church as a gateway to the past that allows

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109 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 201.
residents to step back into their native environment. Filled with the sights of traditional ceramics, the smell of pho soup, and the sounds of daily conversations about life back in Vietnam, the Mekong grocery caters to its customers’ senses and ultimately evokes their shared history and culture. Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that a sense of home can develop simply “with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures.” The Mekong grocery provides a sensory experience that instills refugees with comfort and provides a connection to their lives before their abrupt displacement. The store’s tangible and visible mementos of Vietnam help fill the void left after being torn away from their native villages.

While Little Saigon’s immigrant residents congregate at the Mekong grocery to reflect on their past, the store also serves as dynamic space of cultural exchange that allows them to engage with the broader Falls Church community. Cao reveals how American-born residents also visit the store to purchase Vietnamese goods and interact with the immigrants who work and shop there. While working at the store, Thanh’s close friend Mrs. Bay befriends many of the former soldiers. Bill, a regular customer, is one of these veterans who also carry the painful memories of war with them. Permanently altered by their wartime experiences, the returning soldiers struggle to immerse themselves back into daily life in the United States. But the simple grocery store is transformed into a sanctuary for Vietnam veterans who go to commiserate over the struggles to (re)adjust to life after war. Mrs. Bay suggests that a shared history connects Vietnamese refugees with American soldiers. They struggle to erase the collective

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110 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 203.
111 Y. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 159.
memory of war and death and become exiles in their Virginia community. Laurence J. Kirmayer suggests "reconstructions of traumatic memories involve the building up of a landscape of local coherence" that allows those involved to "better manage or contain [the memory], to present it convincingly to others and, finally, to have done with it."112 The economic exchanges that take place within the Mekong grocery open up the possibility of cultural exchange that serve as a form of collective healing. Coming to terms with lingering ghosts of the war requires the collective efforts of refugees and veterans to find commonalities despite their racial and ethnic differences.

The grocery store in Little Saigon also provides temporary refuge from the painful past for both the Vietnamese and the American veterans. Mrs. Bay becomes a motherly figure to veterans like Bill and "here, in this store, she could offer him momentary solace and protection." The simple objects in and daily conversations that take place in the marketplace enable both local and non-native residents to reach across ethnic and racial divisions. The store serves as a neutral space far removed from the battlefields of Vietnam where both refugees and veterans can engage with one another not as enemies but as members of the same suburban community. In building the Mekong Grocery, the refugee community had "fabricated a familiarity for our own comfort, which had strangely become a source of consolation and familiarity for the former GIs."113 The daily exchange of consumer goods gives way to a much deeper and intimate cultural exchange between two individuals coming from different worlds but sharing a common past. This "collective remembering forges identity" based on commonalities rather than regional, 

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112 Kirmayer, "Landscapes of Memory," 182.
113 Cao, Monkey Bridge, 64.
national, and cultural differences. The Mekong Grocery then offers a critical site that forges a new communal identity grounded in the shared memories of Vietnamese refugees and American veterans who call the region home. Characters like Mrs. Bay and Bill find solace in the physical and psychological reconstructions of the past and learn to "come together to form an amalgamation of common and at the same time competing truths" in the spaces of economic transactions.

The power of place to shape a communal identity and a sense of home extends to the residents' private dwellings. Safely in their living quarters, the newest southerners can tackle the anxieties of a foreign landscape. Mai and Thanh's initial encounter in their home, however, is far from reassuring. The Nguyen family moves into a dilapidated apartment furnished with secondhand furniture. If a crucial element of what defines home is "its components and furnishings," then their apartment hardly evokes such a feeling. Rather, Thanh views the giant broadcasting antennae across the street as an omen of danger. The transmitter becomes "a deathly sword that threatened to slash [their] fortune and health in two" as it casts a shadow directly into their apartment. The steel structure symbolic of urban advancements stands in stark contrast to the lush vegetation of the more familiar rural Vietnamese landscape. Paralyzed by the foreign terrain, she looks to her daughter as her guide. Mai concedes that she must navigate her mother "through the hard scrutiny of ordinary suburban life" and teach her how to

115 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 209.
116 Y. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 144.
negotiate "exterior world" outside of their home. Her comments suggest that the mother/daughter relationship is reversed as the younger Mai attempts to nurture the older Thanh. This reversal further spotlights the ways in which place plays a central role in shaping one's identity. While Mai's coming of age in the United States allows her to be more at ease in northern Virginia, Thanh's lifelong experiences in Vietnam leaves her struggling to navigate the suburban spaces of Falls Church.

Thanh and Mai attempt to find a balance between adapting to their new suburban surroundings and transforming their living space into a reminder of their past. Among the few possessions in the apartment are prominent reminders of Vietnam and its culture that Thanh hopes to preserve in America. She constructs an altar for her ancestors out of incense sticks and an old condensed-milk can. The altar reaffirms her connection to the past and her native heritage by allowing her to maintain a visible and spiritual connection to her family and its roots in Vietnam. Thanh also keeps a painting of a Vietnamese rural scene. The simple image provides her with comfort especially in light of the foreign landscapes that surround her. Mai is initially skeptical of her mother's efforts to accept life in the United States. She criticizes the ways in which Thanh reinvents American culture in "the refugee way" that marks a "step backward." Feeling trapped by the older residents' desire to retain the traditions of Vietnam, the young narrator sees college as a space where she can learn to love her new country and her new identity. Here *Monkey Bridge* replicates the assimilationist-separatist trope stereotypically associated with Asian American fiction whereby the younger child seeks complete integration into

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118 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 35.
119 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 92.
American society while the older immigrant resists complete Americanization. While Mai appears to wants to break free from the Vietnamese past in order to succeed in the United States, Thanh believes her survival in a foreign country relies on her Vietnamese roots.

But Mai eventually comes to recognize the fortitude of Little Saigon’s residents and the possibilities reconstructions of the past provide for the future. Although they initially retreat to their apartments to escape the pressures of American life, Thanh and the other elder refugees learn to use their homes as sites to develop a communal identity needed to counter the hardships of American life. Private space becomes public space as the refugees open their homes to fellow Vietnamese and share stories and meals. Mrs. Bay and other residents become regular visitors as the apartment is transformed into a neighborhood kitchen and makeshift café. Coming together to cook traditional Vietnamese dishes and discuss the happenings of both Vietnam and Falls Church, these women convert the shabby dwelling into a safe haven for the community. Mai reveals that while it was “still a parsimonious and unextraordinary space,” her apartment was now bustling with “real life and real dreams” that established an “incipient hope in its walls.”

The daily social interactions that take place in these apartments allow refugees living in the United States to construct a new narrative of survival. Forced to flee their birthplaces by war, Cao’s Vietnamese characters come together in their meager homes and attempt to recreate a cohesive community in a new country. Sharing stories of their past and preparing traditional Vietnamese dishes are simple yet meaningful activities that

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120 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 143.
transform the unfamiliar geographies of suburban northern Virginia into a more welcoming place. Refusing to allow their new surroundings to erase their memories of Vietnam, the older residents of Little Saigon band together in a place where insecurities give way to optimism.

The inextricable link between memory and place is more challenging for Mai, who finds herself still on the journey to understand where her home truly is by the end of the novel. Although impressed by the elder refugees' ability to unite through their shared past, she asks herself, "[W]ould I fail to make an essential connection that would truly sustain?" Her Vietnamese birth coupled with her American upbringing complicates her ability to lay claim to either nation. She is caught between "the transplanted ancestral community" of Little Saigon and "the promise of another escape, to college" away from the immigrant neighborhood. In the novel's penultimate chapter and Thanh's final letter to her daughter before her suicide, Mai's mother reveals the true story of her troubled past. Shedding light on Mai's true history becomes a cleansing process. At the end of the letter, Thanh describes her memories of the Vietnamese rice fields as a "rebirthed expanse of flat, flat green, answering the call of my heart." She explains that their reality "is a simultaneous past, present, and future." Little Saigon reflects her sentiments as it is not so much a place suspended in a fixed time but a space defined by the constant flow of multiple cultures, people, and histories. The neighborhood constantly shifts to account for the community's own growth and development.

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121 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 226.
123 Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 252-3.
socio-spatial practices of Little Saigon’s residents centered on the memories of their experiences in Vietnam are crucial acts that allow them not only to preserve their longtime traditions but also to offer new perspectives of community in the post-Vietnam South. These simple landscape changes and social and economic exchanges function as narrative interventions that infuse the northern Virginia suburbs with the stories and experiences of Vietnamese refugees.

In addition, her mother’s and the rest of Little Saigon’s understanding of the past connects her to “the memory of a certain national history that Mai never directly experienced.”124 Vietnam and the Falls Church’s refugee community will always be a part of her. Like the narrator in Butler’s story “Relic,” Mai seeks to find the place where she belongs as she straddles between two countries, two cultures, and two histories. But Little Saigon’s dogged efforts to reconstruct the Vietnamese past in their new southern surroundings suggest that place is dynamic and fluid. If the ghosts of the Confederacy play a prominent role in defining Falls Church, Virginia, as Mai notes, so too do the Vietnamese refugees whose visible presence exposes the memories of more recent traumas. The development and resiliency of Little Saigon reshape southern spaces and in doing so realign the trajectory of southern history and identity. Returning to Michael Kreyling’s notion that American involvement in Vietnam has far-reaching effects on the American South, texts such as Monkey Bridge and A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain force us to look at the region from a transnational perspective that reveals alternative histories of loss and displacement. The refugees in both works carry with them

the memories of a different South and use these reminders of the Vietnamese past to help them adjust to their new foreign surroundings.

The appearance of the Asian immigrant on the southern landscape does not overshadow or supplant the prevailing images of the region’s histories, culture, and/or sense(s) of place. Instead, the growing visibility of Asians in the American South points to a larger, more complicated narrative about place, the past, and migrations. Susan Choi, Robert Olen Butler, and Lan Cao reveal the ways in which the South, not the Asian immigrant, is seen as “foreign” by spotlighting the challenges that newly arrived Asians face as they attempt to adjust to unfamiliar socio-spatial practices of a new country. Home may simply emerge from the southern landscape’s resemblance to their former surroundings. For others, the search for home involves a far more complex negotiation of unfamiliar social structures and histories. Yet all of the Asian immigrants depicted in these novels carry with them the memories of the past that continually inform their present lives and those around them in a new country. Evelyn Hu-Dehart notes that the Asian immigrant’s migration to the United States involves “both forgetting and new acquisitions” and reveals that “the past is not erased...but rewritten” in new spaces. Confronted with the daunting task of starting anew in a foreign country, Asian immigrants reconstruct past homes and renew familiar social practices in hopes of finding a place in their new southern communities.

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125 Hu-Dehart, “Introduction,” 47.
CHAPTER FOUR

OLD WOUNDS, NEW BATTLES: POST-VIETNAM CONFLICTS

There's too many of them and there's not enough room for them and there's going to be lots of hard feelings if they don't get some of them out of here and teach the ones that they leave how to act and how to get along.
- White fisherman from Seadrift, Texas, 1979

In *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), Albert Murray reflects on the paradoxical nature of hometowns as he journeys back to his southern origins. He notes that the nostalgic pleasures of going back home “are always interwoven with a return to that very old sometimes almost forgotten but ever so easily alerted trouble spot deep inside your innermost being.” Murray’s comments suggest a curious paradox in terms of our understanding of “home.” While a return to this intimate place evokes a sense of security and comfort that the familiarity of home offers, this homecoming can also intimate the oft-ignored and/or hidden dangers of a home place. The enforcement of unspoken yet unmistakable boundaries that define Southern communities can often lead to tense and even violent confrontations between natives and newcomers despite their mutual desire to claim these spaces as their own. So how can such a place provide both solace and discomfort? What sorts of conflicts emerge when a community feels threatened by the arrival of new inhabitants?

Murray’s ruminations on going home take on heightened meaning for the early Vietnamese refugees driven from their birthplace and transplanted to the American South. While the journey to a new country brings hope of establishing a safe and

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permanent home, the search for acceptance also involves uneasy encounters with southerners still reeling from the violent events of both a failed war abroad and the long battle over civil rights at home. The influx of thousands of Vietnamese refugees in the region during the 1970s transformed the South into a new battleground where the memories of foreign and domestic conflicts establish new communal boundaries and challenge others. For many southerners, the Vietnamese reopened old wounds from what they perceived as a costly and unnecessary war. Linda Trinh Vô notes how the refugees were a “reminder that America had suffered high casualties and had been defeated by those they considered to be ‘backward peasants.’”3 But the Vietnamese also represented a new foreign threat to long-held traditions and established communal identities. Many white southerners projected their frustrations over rising unemployment and the end of segregation onto the region’s newest residents. Vietnamese refugees soon discovered that their search for home and permanence would involve the complex, and at times, dangerous negotiations of their new surroundings. Mounting tensions between local-born southerners and refugees escalated into physical violence in cities like Seadrift, Texas, as the South experienced a painful period of adjustment in the years following the war. Vietnamese immigrants were forced quickly but carefully to make sense of southern racial ideologies that continued to put emphasis on racial and ethnic difference even after the end of legalized segregation.

Writers and filmmakers who witnessed the traumas of both Vietnam and the civil rights struggle portray the South as a precarious contact zone where regional and

transnational anxieties play out in everyday exchanges between longtime residents and
the newly arrived Vietnamese. In *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination*, Owen Gilman,
Jr., notes how southern writers have “brought the unsettling war in Southeast Asia home
to their land” through their depictions of Vietnam veterans whose experiences overseas
have a lasting impact on their lives back home in the South. Yet other writers and
filmmakers reveal how Vietnamese refugees who now call places like Galveston, Biloxi,
and Greensboro home play a pertinent role in the transformation of southern communities
in the post-Vietnam era. Displaced by war and confronted with unfamiliar environments,
cultures, and traditions, these immigrants have become an unsettling presence for long­
term southerners whose attitudes and opinions had primarily been shaped by the horrific
accounts of the war’s violence and bloodshed. The constant stream of graphic images of
the military conflict on television and in newspaper reports convinced many Americans
that Vietnam and its native population were dangerous and destructive. Refugees were
viewed as nothing more than the enemy despite the fact that the majority of them
supported South Vietnam rather than the Vietcong forces of the Communist North.
Arriving in the United States at a time when the nation was still trying to come to terms
with the arduous battle over civil rights, the “foreign” Vietnamese found themselves as
new targets of the racial and ethnic prejudices once directed at African Americans.

The works discussed in this chapter highlight the ways in which southern
anxieties about the socioeconomic transformations that result from the growing visibility

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4 Gilman’s book specifically focuses on southern narratives written by and/or involving the experiences of
white and African American Vietnam veterans (Owen W. Gilman, *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination*
[Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992], 8).
of Vietnamese refugees lead to the renewal of segregationist practices as a means of controlling local and national borders. For local-born southerners, the Vietnamese serve as painful reminders of an unpopular war and the racial conflicts of the Civil Rights struggle. Refugees carry their own memories of violence and displacement as they attempt to make sense of their abrupt departure from Vietnam. Narratives about the post-Vietnam South reveal the ways in which the southern and Vietnamese past intertwine and establish southern communities as new battlegrounds where longtime residents and recent arrivals struggle to coexist peacefully. Monique Thuy-Dung Truong’s short story “Kelly” (1991), Mary Gardner’s novel *Boat People* (1995), and Louis Malle’s 1985 film *Alamo Bay* show how Vietnamese refugees’ search for new social and economic opportunities often results in a contentious relationship with their new southern communities. Truong’s story, based in part on her own experiences immigrating to rural North Carolina as a child in the 1970s, utilizes the perspective of a young refugee to explore the ways in which southern racial divisions magnify anti-Vietnamese sentiment. Her young female protagonist learns how her Vietnamese identity excludes her from claiming or sharing a sense of southern femininity, a virtue only granted to whites. Set in Texas in the 1990s, Mary Gardner’s *Boat People* also engages with adolescent Vietnamese refugees. Her child characters contend with southerners’ misperceptions of Vietnamese culture as these young refugees experience alienation and racism from both whites and African Americans. Malle’s film depicts the plight of Vietnamese shrimpers living along the Texas coast and the backlash from white residents who view their arrival as both an economic and cultural threat. Fueled by their misgivings over the Vietnam War and an increasingly competitive shrimping market, the film’s white fishermen wage war on their
Vietnamese counterparts in an attempt to preserve their way of life. All three works reveal that the war did not end with the Fall of Saigon in 1975 as Vietnamese refugees encounter a new brand of violence in their new southern surroundings. Cultural and physical conflicts between refugees and local residents suggest that the arrival of the Vietnamese has reopened old wounds for both natives and newcomers who seek to move past the traumatic memories of war.

**Children of War: Monqiue Thuy-Dung Truong’s “Kelly” and Mary Gardner’s Boat People**

The experiences of refugee children underscore the anxieties about the South’s ongoing multicultural transformation and ways the increased visibility of Asian Americans point to the ambiguities entrenched in normative constructions of race, class, and gender. I follow Patricia Yaeger’s notion that children play a central role in depicting and questioning the South’s societal norms and gender relations. She suggests that children in fiction can serve as a “tragic center for exploring the effects of the political in everyday life.” Caught up in the processes of the society’s construction and assessment of values, the child character becomes “a vivid, painful pressure point, a site of strain and unrest within an unjust social system.”5 Suzanne Jones offers a similar argument for the advantages of utilizing the child’s perspective and experience as a critical lens to explore the South’s social structure. She contends, “The child’s perspective allows a writer to

question a society’s shortcomings from a vantage point of someone incompletely trained in a society’s assumptions and customs.6

But what happens when these children emerge from a marginalized community? How do they engage with the issues of race, ethnicity, and region? Attuned to feelings of displacement, acceptance, and alienation, the child characters discussed here reflect the experiences of the larger Asian American community as they discover their place in the South, a region still coming to terms with its own place in the national framework. These children not only confront the unfamiliar landscapes and social customs of a new country but also contend with the lingering presence of southern racism and the simmering anger over the United States’ failures in Vietnam.

In the notes to her semi-autobiographical short story, “Kelly,” Monique Thuy-Dung Truong describes the narrative challenges she confronts while writing about her childhood in North Carolina. She asks, “How to write about the Southern [sic] United States when you are not White or Black? How to write about a place that is you but one that you have to go back, call out and claim because no one there will ever claim you as their own?” A Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States in the 1970s, Truong reveals how a dual sense of home informs her sense of self as she jokingly refers to herself as a “southern girl twice over.”7 Yet the childhood experiences that guide “Kelly” suggest an uneasy relationship with the American South. The story’s engagement of the


curious paradox that emerges from Truong’s southern homecoming reinforces her ambivalence. On the one hand, she recognizes the undeniable influence of the South on her sense of self. She explains how she relates to Hank Williams’s music and finds more in common with William Faulkner than Maxine Hong Kingston. Yet Truong simultaneously acknowledges the pain of growing up in a “region of the United States that did not want to see me then in 1975 nor now in 1990.” Boiling Springs and communities like it across the South became places where Vietnamese refugees were defined as “a Chink, a Jap, and a Gook” and where they learned that they were “physically different, ugly, and a target.” Her story represents a homecoming to the “trouble spot” of her childhood as she attempts to reconcile her Vietnamese identity with her southern childhood.

But “Kelly” reveals that animosity toward Vietnamese refugees was not simply a consequence of southern racism as Truong highlights the ways in which Americans’ frustrations over the United States’ involvement in Vietnam escalated racial tensions. The anti-war movement in the 1960s quickly shifted to widespread anti-Vietnamese sentiment as approximately 130,000 refugees entered the United States following the Fall of Saigon to the Communist North Vietnamese army in 1975. Fifty-four percent of Americans strongly opposed Vietnamese resettlement in the United States despite the federal government’s promise to slowly and carefully integrate the refugee population without

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10 Boiling Springs is also the setting for Truong’s second novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010). Like “Dear Kelly” the narrative centers on a woman’s recollections of her childhood in rural North Carolina. Truong described how the writing process became a cathartic experience for her by noting how “I knew I was finally leaving that painful place behind, and of equal importance was that I was finally seeing many of the other stories within Boiling Springs, not only my own,” (Ibid).
disrupting existing communities.\textsuperscript{11} The lingering memories of the war and growing concerns over immigrants’ effect on job opportunities and public housing left many leery of the Vietnamese presence in the United States. The South witnessed a particularly large growth of refugee populations because three prominent relocation centers were located in the region: Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Refugees were first sent to live on military bases and in resettlement camps across the United States. While these camps were meant to ease Vietnamese’s transition to life in a new country, they also served to establish and enforce a regulated sense of place within the South that would safeguard local communal relations. Camp officials could educate refugees on local customs and American values within a government controlled space and maintain a sense of separation between the Vietnamese and southerners. After procuring enough income or securing a family/organizational sponsor, they were eventually permitted to move off of the relocation centers with many finding homes in nearby towns or cities. New Orleans, Louisiana, soon claimed the nation’s third-largest Vietnamese population while Fayetteville, North Carolina, home to Fort Bragg, saw such a drastic increase in its Vietnamese population that many renamed the town “Fayettenam.”\textsuperscript{12}

Leaving behind their birthplace in search of communities ripe with new social and economic opportunities, many refugees discovered that the post-Vietnam South was a place of constant struggle and social scrutiny. Truong notes that the North Carolina


\textsuperscript{12} George Tindall provides one of the few texts that analyze contemporary immigration specifically in the South. George Tindall, \textit{Natives and Newcomers: Ethnic Southerners and Southern Ethnicities} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).
community of her childhood “did not simply consist of an inside and outside” because her story reveals the significance of strict racial, class, and gender divisions that are central to social privilege and acceptance. In depicting the challenges of fitting in with her classmates, Truong uncovers the ways in which white, middle-class womanhood serves as the benchmark of true southernness. The threat of alienation is only one of the challenges that the story’s protagonist faces as she experiences racism by fellow students and teachers while also learning about the strict parameters of southern womanhood. In utilizing the perspective of the child refugee born without the knowledge of traditional customs associated with the South, Truong foregrounds the limitations of southern community and the racial antagonism immigrant populations faced as they searched for acceptance. Her story reveals that social acceptance requires ethnic and cultural erasure as her young protagonist learns that being a poor Vietnamese refugee makes it difficult, if not implausible, to gain access to the social circles of her rural North Carolina community.

“Kelly” takes the form of a letter from a Vietnamese woman to a former classmate that recounts their experiences as social outcasts in elementary school. Thuy Mai, the letter’s author, struggles with her Vietnamese identity while Kelly is ostracized for being overweight. Although Thuy longs to erase the painful memories of her childhood, she feels compelled to preserve and revisit her past. She believes that both women are “still entwined in a childhood we would rather forget.” Regardless of whether Kelly will read the letter or not, she makes her white classmate complicit in the

act of remembering by simply writing to her about the past. As Truong suggests, a letter "cannot be interrupted" and allows at least one communicant to complete the process of emotional release. Writing about a traumatic memory helps Thuy come to terms with her sense of self as she forces both herself and possibly Kelly to explore the past's influence on their respective lives. Dominick LaCapra suggests that "when the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma." For Thuy writing functions as an acknowledgement of past pains and an act of release as she attempts to move beyond the emotional struggles of her childhood. The letter and the dialogue established between Thuy and Kelly become a potential healing space where both women must revisit painful memories in order to come to terms with their present identities. In turn, Truong uses the letter to bear witness to past traumas of racial and ethnic antagonism experienced by refugees living in the post-Vietnam South.

Uncertainty and disappointment characterize Thuy's arrival in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, as she begins her new life in the United States. Before leaving Saigon, she excitedly dreams of living in the urban dreamscapes that she had read and heard about. For the young Vietnamese girl, America was a landscape of large cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Yet the illusion crumbles when she and her family arrive in rural North Carolina. Finding no recognizable landmarks, she and her family

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15 Truong "Notes to 'Dear Kelly,'" 48.
16 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 89.
view Boiling Springs as “a place they had never heard of and had never planned to be.” The disorientation Thuy experiences in her new surroundings suggest the role the South plays as an aberration in visions of American utopias for some immigrants. Rural charm and the promise of southern hospitality mean little to Thuy since Boiling Springs is merely a forgotten or overlooked “footnote” of the United States for refugees.\(^{17}\) In describing the origin of the town’s name, she sarcastically notes how she only “saw that damn spring boil once during my four years of paying homage to the South and to its fine and hospitable families.”\(^{18}\) Her immediate exposure to life in the United States conveys a sense of failure, a dream unfulfilled, and an uncertain future.

Enrollment at the local elementary school introduces Thuy to a new set of problems as she learns the painful lessons of racism and alienation from both her teachers and her peers. Her homeroom teacher Mrs. Hammerick exudes American patriotism and motherly care. But the young refugee discovers a deep resentment of the Vietnamese behind the teacher’s sweet demeanor. As the class learns about the events surrounding the attack on Pearl Harbor, Thuy feels the burden of the guilt placed on her shoulders. Her teacher implicitly positions the Vietnamese girl as an indistinguishable outsider and, more specifically, as a vague Asian threat to the United States. She recognizes that “while [Mrs. Hammerick] was teaching us history she was telling, with her language for the deaf, blind and dumb; she was telling all the boys in our class that I was Pearl and my last name was Harbor.”\(^{19}\) Mrs. Hammerick’s history lesson introduces Thuy to a new

\(^{17}\) Truong, “Kelly,” 41.
\(^{18}\) Truong, “Kelly,” 42.
\(^{19}\) Truong, “Kelly,” 42.
form of politics that foregrounds simplified binaries of good/evil, white/non-white, and ally/enemy. In this context, difference is solely defined by race as the “official” history taught in the classroom renders the young Vietnamese child an outsider. While the classroom serves a site of learning, the education students receive centers on the mechanisms behind racial subjectivity and (mis)information. In failing to explicitly acknowledge the historical context of the Pearl Harbor attack, Mrs. Hammerick implicitly suggests that Vietnamese refugees are a potential threat and danger to the safety and integrity of nation and local community. Thuy fears the unspoken yet perceptible threat of physical violence:

…I would understand that Pearl Harbor was not just in 1941 but in 1975. Mrs. Hammerick wanted to hit me for everything in between for all the changes in her husband’s town and in her little school house. I wasn’t the little black girl with twisted hair and silent reserve. Mrs. Hammerick knew what to do with them, and they knew what to do with her.20

The mere presence of a Vietnamese girl in the classroom signals a marked and threatening shift in the southern population, a change met with the passive but noticeable resistance of adult figures like her teacher. The Southeast Asian refugee represents an unfamiliar and unwanted figure whose presence compels southern whites to establish new modes of control and surveillance. While Boiling Springs represents a foreign place to Thuy, the town now feels foreign to Mrs. Hammerick because of her arrival. Here both immigrant and southern-born struggle with a sense of dislocation. While Vietnamese children struggle to gain acceptance from their peers and teachers, local-born residents grow increasingly anxious over the consequences of the refugees’ arrival. Truong’s

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20 Truong, “Kelly,” 42-43.
depiction of Thuy’s and Mrs. Hammerick’s anxieties suggests that perhaps the most significant consequence of post-Vietnam immigration is a fractured or lost sense of home for both newcomers and natives. The economic and cultural shifts resulting from the influx of Southeast refugees upend long-held social and spatial boundaries and forces residents to discover new iterations of community.

Like Chang in *The Foreign Student*, Thuy finds herself faced with the constant scrutiny of southern whites angered by a foreign presence in their communities. What becomes apparent is that the black-white racial binary obstinately remains despite the South’s increasingly globalized identity. Although Mrs. Hammerick “knew what to do with” African American children and vice versa, the same does not apply to children of other ethnicities. Thuy, like many other Asian characters living in the South, falls outside the boundaries of traditional race relations and thus is exposed to the potential for violence and complete social exclusion. Thuy’s ethnic identity becomes more rather than less pronounced despite her attempts to blend in with her classmates.

The challenges not only of being different but altogether unclassifiable, become more evident as Thuy learns the strict parameters of southern femininity and womanhood. “Kelly” reveals how a child’s sense of belonging relies heavily on how one is perceived by others. Assessment by a group or community determines one’s identity and social status. Racial and ethnic difference makes this process of self and group identification more difficult for Thuy as she attempts to fit in with her white classmates. Analyzing W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, Shawn Michelle Smith suggests that the “discovery of racism reveals a split and divided identity construct” whereby the racialized subject is “forced to see the gulf that divides self from idealized

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In Thuy’s case, she recognizes that her Vietnamese identity prevents her from being accepted by her classmates. Her friendship with Kelly is almost entirely based on their position as social outcasts. Throughout the letter, Thuy refers to herself as “the freak” while she describes her friend as “the fat girl.” These labels imply the presence of a standard mode of southern girlhood against which all girls judge themselves. Thuy and Kelly become victims of the playground politics that employ outward appearance to delineate the lines between acceptance and alienation. Lisa Lowe contends that both girls are “thrown into tentative but sympathetic intimacies based on their quite different exclusions.” But while both characters forge a friendship based on their physical differences, Kelly can still claim whiteness, an attribute that further alienates Thuy from her classmates. Thuy notes that “when people like you looked at me and my yellow skin, you didn’t see color you saw dirt.”

Truong reveals how the Vietnamese refugee is the unwanted excess of the southern landscape. Patricia Yaeger’s exploration of the grotesque in her groundbreaking 2000 study *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* provides a helpful framework to consider the experiences of Vietnamese refugee children who hope to gain access to their southern communities. She suggests that the grotesque

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23 Truong, “Kelly,” 43.
can serve as a “shorthand for unwitnessed trauma” and a “sign of nonintegration, a signal from a world that practices segregation without reprieve.” While Yaeger focuses on white and African American bodies, I would argue that the Asian immigrant also embodies the grotesque as a symbol of exclusion and undesirability. As a relatively unknown population in the South, early Vietnamese refugees disrupted established categories of difference and forced local-born residents to cast them as outsiders in order to maintain traditional social and cultural boundaries. Truong uses the simple teasing of a Vietnamese girl to point to a larger yet equally troubling bullying of individuals who do not easily conform to racial and ethnic normative structures. While Kelly has the ability to grow out of her childhood looks, her Vietnamese counterpart cannot shed her ethnic body, one marked as foreign and unwanted.

Associated with dirt and ostracized by her peers, Thuy allies herself with another alienated southern populace: poor whites. She befriends Michelle, a classmate who lives in a nearby dilapidated house with her numerous siblings. With a face “covered in a light layer of gravel, dirt, and dust every day of the year” and smelling “like a mattress left outside in the elements for far too long,” Michelle symbolizes the abject poverty of the town’s ‘lowliest’ residents. Her reputation precedes her since “even . . . the fat girl and . . . the freak knew that Michelle was something that the good people of Boiling Spring didn’t want to see.” Like the Vietnamese refugees, the poor whites in the story are an unwanted presence that threatens the sanctity and purity of the town’s white elite.

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Michelle’s classroom behavior is disruptive and violent and therefore aggravates the school’s administrators. While somewhat bewildered by her actions, Thuy ultimately appears to approve of Michelle’s rebelliousness as an aggressive and necessary resistance to societal norms, an act that she herself is too scared to emulate. Bound together by their ‘atypical’ appearances and backgrounds, the Vietnamese and poor white children find themselves on the peripheries of society. Moreover, the need to maintain a sense of white purity and superiority renders these perceived outsiders invisible.

Thuy’s experiences at a schoolmate’s birthday party most clearly outline the exclusivity of a privileged southern girlhood. Jennifer, an eight-year-old with pristine hair and fancy clothes, represents all that the young Vietnamese refugee is judged not to be: rich, feminine, and most explicitly, white. Even her house emphasizes the stark contrast between the southern belle-in-training and the throwaway refugee. Thuy describes having “never felt as much longing” as when she sees an entire room filled with dresses and a bed that “Sleeping Beauty or I Dream of Genie would have slept in every night.”26 Compared to her first home in North Carolina, a cramped and uncomfortable metal trailer, Jennifer’s house resembles a palace, a fairy tale space that the young Vietnamese girl can only dream of. But as the party begins, Jennifer excludes both girls from her tea party by forcing them to stay in the kitchen with the adults. Thuy’s and Kelly’s confinement in Jennifer’s kitchen parallels the experiences of black, female domestic workers during the era of segregation. Grace Hale suggests that “the white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity.

26 Truong, “Kelly,” 46.
precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world."27 Despite the fact that African American women “imaginatively as well as physically supported” the everyday needs of white southern families, they remained limited in their accessibility to and mobility within the white, domestic space. Thuy’s inability to freely move within Jennifer’s home reinforces her detached position within the North Carolina community. The southern household becomes a site of racial and ethnic learning, a site that symbolically and physically defines Asians as being incompatible with southern femininity.

What is made explicitly clear is that Thuy is only a temporary and unwanted guest in the white feminine world that Jennifer occupies. The reader learns that Jennifer’s mother invited the alienated children only as a courtesy, an empty gesture to save the face of southern hospitality. Truong’s semi-autobiographical story ultimately suggests that the appearance of the Southeast Asian refugee in the South does not necessarily lead to diverse, more inclusive modes of community but rather to more restrictive and carefully regulated sets of boundaries that preserve established cultural ideals of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Thuy’s failure to find acceptance in Boiling Springs reveals that the simple act of moving to a new place does not guarantee the promise of a new sense of home.

Like “Kelly” Mary Gardner’s novel Boat People underscores the struggles of Vietnamese children straddling two cultures while growing up in a foreign and sometimes hostile southern environment. The novel situates the dislocation/displacement

27 Hale, Making Whiteness, 95.
story of Vietnamese refugees in the low-income housing projects of contemporary
Galveston, Texas. The novel’s prominent child characters, Linh, Xan, and Trang, all
contend with their own hardships in adjusting to life in Texas. Faced with a growing list
of familial responsibilities after her mother suffers a mental breakdown upon arriving in
the United States, Linh is forced into a parental role. Meanwhile, Xan displays erratic
behavior in the classroom as a response to the antagonism of his schoolmates. Trang, a
fifteen-year-old refugee, faces a different kind of challenge as she hopes to find her place
in the world as a half-Vietnamese, half-American girl living in an abusive family. In
spotlighting the hardships of Vietnamese children and other refugees as they find
themselves on the peripheries of their new Texas home, the novel uncovers the
distressing link between anti-Vietnamese sentiments and southern racism used to enforce
strict communal boundaries. *Boat People* illustrates how Jim Crow ideologies resurface
with the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees as southern whites use psychological and
physical violence to maintain strict control over the spatial practices of those residing in
their communities. While American involvement in Vietnam and the Civil Rights
Movement ushered in significant cultural changes across the South, the traumas of both
events also reinforced racial and ethnic divisions. Concerns about postwar economic
recession and a changing cultural landscape generated new conflicts between local-born
southerners and newly arrived refugees. Instances of violent confrontations such as those
between longtime Gulf South fisherman and Vietnamese shrimpers in Texas in the early
1980s (which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter) underscore the ways
in which the South remains a contested site in the post-Vietnam and post-Civil Rights
era. Gardner reveals how the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants spurs new anxieties not
only over local but also over national borders as her refugee characters confront persistent physical and psychological harassment by local-born residents.

But *Boat People* also offers the possibility of communal healing through the novel’s depiction of the alliance forged between African Americans and Vietnamese refugees in the projects of Galveston. Faced with similar economic and cultural challenges, the residents of the Beach Terrace housing projects develop a level of mutual understanding and in the process undermine a communal identity defined by white superiority. In doing so, the residents of Beach Terrace forge a new post-Vietnam and post-Civil Rights definition of community that centers on cultural exchange and the shared experiences of loss and suffering. The novel’s black and Vietnamese characters discover the hidden parallels between their respective experiences with white racism and foster new multiracial and multiethnic alliances to counter prejudice and protect themselves from possible violence. Gardner offers both a criticism of a region reluctantly acknowledging its multicultural makeup and an optimistic portrait of a southern community breaking down its rigid racial, ethnic, and class divisions.

‘Boat people’ refers to the Vietnamese and Chinese who fled Vietnam and Communist rule during the third wave of immigration between 1978 and 1982. Boarding makeshift rafts and boats and venturing out into the South China Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin, this diverse group of refugees faced dangerous sea conditions and countless pirate attacks. Those who survived were sent to refugee camps across Southeast Asia and subsequently relocated to countries like the United States. Legislation such as the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 and the 1980 Refugee Act
provided federal assistance for housing, job placement, and basic needs. Although refugees received support at the national level, they faced greater obstacles in their local communities. For one thing, most of these refugees possessed little or no English language skills, thereby complicating their adjustment to life in the United States. Limited language comprehension and unfamiliarity with American culture were perceived as an unwillingness to assimilate and a determination to remain an insular ethnic population. For another, Vietnamese exploited local and national social programs aimed at assisting lower-income families with job placement and housing. As outlined in Chapters One and Two, Southeast Asian immigrants, particularly in coastal southern cities, clashed with local-born fishermen who expressed their frustration over increased economic competition and blamed the Vietnamese for declining in demand for domestic seafood. Cultural misperceptions coupled with lingering discontentment with the failures in Vietnam created an added challenge to the refugees’ attempt to resettle in a new country. Not only did the Vietnamese carry with them the burden of losing their former homes to violence and bloodshed, but they also faced the resentment of Americans who viewed refugees as a painful reminder of a costly and unpopular war.

The adversity facing boat people refugees played out in great relief in the South. Equipped with fishing skills they learned in Vietnam, many of the refugees settled into coastal towns such as Biloxi, Mississippi, and Galveston, Texas, in hopes of finding work in the Gulf South’s lucrative fishing and shrimping industry. They soon prospered, but

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their success was met with resistance from local white fishermen as the combination of
miscommunication and misperceptions resulted in growing hostility toward the
Vietnamese. Thao Ha notes that “negative images and stereotypes of Vietnamese
people…only exacerbated the tensions created by economic competition.” Most
Americans were completely unfamiliar with the refugee population because their only
exposure to Vietnamese culture was news reports and soldiers’ accounts of the war.
More importantly, lingering frustrations over the United States’ involvement in Vietnam
created a hostile environment for refugees. As discussed in Chapter Two, many
Americans mistakenly aligned South Vietnamese refugees with the Northern Vietnamese
Vietcong and blamed them for the causalities and traumas suffered by American
servicemen and their families. The misperceptions of refugees as a foreign threat further
challenged their attempts to establish a new sense of home in the United States.

Much of the violence experienced by Gardner’s Vietnamese is psychological as
they contend with the sudden displacement from their home and the scrutiny of a society
unfamiliar with their culture. Linh is forced to grow up quickly as she takes on the tasks
her mother is unable to accomplish. The mother-daughter role is reversed as the young
girl’s responsibility to her family extends well beyond what is typically required of a ten-
year-old. Hospitalized due to the emotional traumas she suffers from the sudden
displacement from her birthplace, Linh’s mother is absent from home and therefore
disrupts the nurturing environment provided by a stable familial unit. Linh cannot enjoy
the typical freedoms of children as she is forced to take on the responsibilities of feeding

29 Thao Ha, “Troubled Water,” special issue of Southern Exposure 33.1-2 (Summer 2005), 53.
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her family and caring for her father and her siblings. Frequently missing school in order to fulfill her mother’s duties at home, she considers herself as a “bad girl.” But she is only “bad” in the sense that her duty to family prevents her from being a girl at all. The importance of family within Vietnamese culture forces Linh to sacrifice her own aspirations in order to look after her parents and younger brothers. Min Zhou and Carl Bankston III argue that “tension between the individualism of American society and the collectivism of Vietnamese culture lies at the heart of the conflicts between Vietnamese refugee parents and their children.” Linh’s new life in Texas solely revolves around the home as she is thrust into the role of the matronly figure because of her mother’s illness. While she longs to experience the freedoms of life in America, Linh is bound to the home where familial duty prevents her from defining her own sense of self.

Gardner also reveals that the typical adolescent pressures to fit in are magnified for immigrant children who are denied the social and educational services needed to adjust to life in a new country. Xan’s problems primarily occur in the classroom, where his teachers and classmate misinterpret his struggles as unwillingness to adapt to American customs. Like many immigrant children lacking needed resources to improve their English skills, he is placed in a lower grade level, one that he refers to as the “baby class.” He immediately becomes the target of antagonism despite the racial and ethnic diversity of his class. The students “poke [him], they laugh, they put fingers in mouth . . .

32 Gardner, Boat People, 60.
they say dirtychink-dirtychink” and “nobody [can] say [his] name right.” By presenting these thoughts in the form of a monologue, Gardner provides Xan with a voice and a space to express his true emotions. Unable to articulate his concerns without the backlash from his peers, the young boy uses “kung fu” to convey his frustrations. His erratic behavior functions as a defense mechanism to protect himself from racial taunting and to maintain his self-identity. For Xan the inability to use language forces him to employ physical violence as an alternate form of communication.

Gardner points to the ways in which the physical and social hardships facing recently arrived refugees take a significant toll on immigrant children. Throughout the novel she describes a deep-seated hunger that torments Xan and causes him to act out in and out of the classroom. His literal and symbolic need for physical and emotional nourishment reveals how the economic and social disparities suffered by impoverished African Americans during segregation now plague refugees of the post-Vietnam era. Characterized by abject poverty and social alienation, Xan’s experiences become the immigrant version of Richard Wright’s struggles with the “hunger [that] was always with us” in Black Boy. The parallels between Wright and Xan underscore the uneven distribution of vital resources within certain southern communities that often deny minorities the opportunity for physical and emotional growth. Gardner suggests that race still continues to be a significant factor in who can and cannot gain access to basic human needs in the post-segregation and post-Vietnam South. Only now the Vietnamese have taken the place of the racial Other that poses a danger to white authority.

33 Gardner, Boat People, 120.
Further complicating the Vietnamese children’s adjustment to life in Galveston are the misperceptions by adult authority figures who interact with them on a daily basis. Influenced by their own biases, the teachers and administrators at the elementary school fail to assess properly the needs of refugee students. Gardner’s adult characters articulate the frustrations and fears of the refugee population through white mistreatment of the Vietnamese children who rely on them for guidance and support. The misperceptions of teachers and administrators primarily stem from a limited knowledge of Vietnam. Their only familiarity with its culture and people comes from the horrific stories and images of war they see on television or in the newspapers. The novel foregrounds the southern community’s reluctance to embrace the refugees and reveals that the war was “not much of a way” to learn about the Vietnamese.35

Like Monique Truong, Gardner illustrates how adults fail or are unwilling to understand the needs of their Vietnamese students. Frustrated by her inability to control his disruptive behavior, Xan’s teacher, Mrs. Fillmore, recommends the school’s instructors readjust their teaching methods appropriately to manage the refugee students. She implies that teachers should forgo teaching the Vietnamese children English and seek the assistance of interpreters. Mrs. Fillmore’s recommendations suggest that the true victims of these classroom conflicts are the instructors rather than the students who require additional assistance. For these adults, the immigrant children are altogether foreign, a population that they have rarely encountered on a personal level.

35 Gardner, Boat People, 268.
Gardner reveals how anti-immigrant sentiments rather than a desire to help the Vietnamese students influence the teachers' classroom strategies. While the school's principal expresses sympathy for the hardships that the refugee children endured, Mrs. Fillmore proclaims that the challenges facing Vietnamese students are no excuse for their actions. She goes on to express her exaggerated belief that "the whole country of Vietnam is moving to America, and Galveston, in particular" and as such reveals her fears that immigration will radically alter the social makeup of her southern hometown.36 Like Mrs. Hammerick in "Kelly," Gardner's white teachers fear that Vietnamese refugees will disrupt their way of life and more importantly take away resources from the white middle class. Mrs. Fillmore offers a more scathing (and inaccurate) criticism by suggesting that the Vietnamese have moved to Galveston solely to exploit welfare programs. Relying on misinformed stereotypes, she mistakenly defines Xan's cry for help as an act that warrants discipline. For white Texans like Mrs. Fillmore, racial and ethnic identities become the markers of who does and does not belong in Galveston. The false assumptions about the Vietnamese's inability or unwillingness to exhibit "proper" behavior reinforce racial attitudes that prohibit Asians from full inclusion at both the local and national level. While Mrs. Fillmore does not explicitly acknowledge race, her sweeping generalizations of Vietnamese refugees' insubordination suggest that they will never be completely integrated into the community as long as whites remain in control of Galveston's social and physical borders.

36 Gardner, Boat People, 73.
Even those sympathetic to the Vietnamese convey stereotypical attitudes that threaten to further alienate the refugees from their Galveston community. Lang Nguyen, a young immigrant doctor, contends with the misperceptions of and generalizations made by his white companions throughout the novel. Karl Mike, his roommate, and Shirley, a nurse who works with him at the local hospital, attempt to help him adjust to life in Texas. But their compassion for the refugees is tempered by an inability to view them as individuals rather than a homogenized group. Karl Mike, Lang’s oafish roommate, expresses interest in his ethnic heritage and culture. While his questions seem to stem from genuine naiveté, his viewpoint remains firmly entrenched in the belief that “all the little yellow people still looked alike.”37 Meanwhile, Lang’s assistant nurse Shirley shows great compassion toward the immigrants but those feelings are mired in simplistic generalizations of Vietnamese culture. Attempting to help wipe away some dirt on his face, she explains how she knows that “Vietnamese are always clean.” While Lang recognizes that Shirley is trying to help, he cannot understand how she could “lack all perception” and fail to acknowledge differences within a specific ethnic group.38 The novel reveals that even the best intentions of southern whites can be rooted in stereotypes and the inability to overcome these generalizations prevents true cross-cultural understanding.

While some residents express ambivalence over the influx of Vietnamese refugees, others greet their arrival with blatant hostility. Maureen Ryan notes that contemporary writers show how the “southern racism typically directed . . . against

37 Gardner, Boat People, 40.
38 Gardner, Boat People, 91.
African Americans is transposed to the Vietnamese." The racial logic of Galveston’s white residents may echo those of a previous generation clinging to Jim Crow ideologies, but that logic also exemplifies the disturbing anti-immigrant sentiments stemming from the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. The introduction of a new foreign population destabilizes the racial binary of Jim Crow and requires increased surveillance of and control over the South’s newest residents. What is at stake for white Texans in *Boat People* is control of the community’s geography. Lang’s encounter with a Galveston Bay police officer exemplifies how Vietnamese immigrants find themselves under constant surveillance by white authority. Pulled over for speeding, Lang presents the white officer with his license, registration, and insurance. But these documents are not enough and the policeman demands that he provide further proof of identification. The ordinary traffic stop transforms into a far greater display of scrutiny and antagonism that highlights white mistrust of Galveston Bay’s newest residents. The white officer looks over Lang’s hospital I.D., comments that he is just “another gook doctor,” and offers his views on Vietnamese refugees living in the United States:

> You guys, you come to our country and we put you through school, feed you, give you a good life you’d never have in that Vit-nahm... Buy your cars, drive down our streets, send our good money back to all your gook family in that Vit-nahm. You can take this here ticket to the judge and buy him off, you got plenty of cash to do it. You think you run this place, don’t you?  

The white officer’s comments reflect a sense of frustration over the handling of Southeast Asians following the Vietnamese conflict. For him, the Vietnamese have exploited the


40 Gardner, *Boat People*, 90.
United States’ compassion and assistance; they are the greedy and ungrateful orphans of an unpopular war. But the officer’s statement also offers a subtle but poignant display of how recent immigrants like Galveston Bay’s Vietnamese refugees are subjected to a rejuvenated form of southern segregation. But this new brand of racism brings global issues to the local level. Put another way post-Vietnam segregation is about protecting national borders and a white American identity from a foreign Asian threat. Rather than acknowledging Lang as a rightful member of the community (and the nation for that matter), the officer establishes a stark division between insider and outsider. The repetitive use of contrasting “your” (Vietnamese) and “our” (white America) suggests an uneven relationship between the white officer and the Vietnamese doctor. More importantly, the statement establishes a more narrowly defined notion of community that excludes immigrants like Lang.

The novel also reveals how mixed-race heritage further complicates the search for communal belonging. Suzanne Jones suggests that “other biracial identities and even more multiracial complex identities” may soon outnumber biracial black-white identity “given the influx of Latinos and Asians into the South in the 1990s.”41 A number of Amerasian children born out of the war made their way to the region in search of a new life. Fifteen-year-old Trang spends the novel attempting to escape the abuses of her aunt and uncle while desperately searching for her American father whom she has never met. While multiracial and multiethnic individuals like Trang destabilize strictly defined racial and ethnic categories, these same boundaries pose significant challenges for Amerasian

41 Jones, Race Mixing, 211.
refugees seeking acceptance in their southern communities. Here the struggles of mixed-raced children born out of the Vietnamese conflict parallel the experiences of mixed-raced African Americans during segregation. Barbara Ladd contends that mixed-raced individuals personify “the threats and promises of integration in a racist culture.”

Trang’s position as a mixed-race child complicates the simple distinction between white and non-white. Conversely, Amerasians are often denied approval by whites or Asian precisely because they do not fit into simple racial and ethnic categories. Paul Spickard argues that multiracial Asians are forced to “defend themselves against the dominant discourse imposed by white America” while also defending themselves against “the subdominant discourse imposed by Asian Americans.” Amerasian children find themselves in a precarious position as they face scrutiny from both their own families and the larger society to which they seek to gain access.

*Boat People* reveals how this dilemma is particularly true for the mixed-race children coming out of Vietnam War. Trang represents the approximately 50,000 children born to Vietnamese mothers and American servicemen fathers left behind after the United States’ withdrawal. While some are the product of genuine unions, many others were the result of rape. The Vietnamese referred to these children as “my lai” (half-Vietnamese, half-American) or popularly as “bui doi,” which roughly translates to “the dust of life.” Rejected by their families and abandoned by their American fathers, many bui doi became homeless street children. Over a three-week period in April 1975


more than 3,000 Vietnamese children, many of whom were Amerasians, immigrated to the US through Operation Babylift, a controversial plan enacted by the federal government to help orphans escape North Vietnamese forces. While government officials believed that the program was necessary in order to protect innocent children, many Americans questioned it politically and morally.

Some wondered whether Operation Babylift was merely implemented to gain more support for war efforts while others raised concerns over the well-being of the Vietnamese children. In a 1976 article in *American Psychologist*, Yale psychologist Edward Zigler highlighted the psychological traumas associated with the American adoption plan by noting that “the separation from a person to whom a child is attached can have irreparable effects.”

Amerasian orphans who made their way to the United States struggled to find their place in American society and many failed in their search to find their American servicemen fathers.

These mixed-race children occupy a unique place within the South; Maureen Ryan argues that while they are “ethnically as much American as Asian, they straddle two worlds and belong to neither.” If the South places such a great premium on race and ethnicity in terms of social rank, then the presence of bui doi children disrupts the static demarcations between inclusion and exclusion.

Through the character of Trang, *Boat People* suggests that mixed racial identity results in social isolation as the young Amerasian teen struggles to feel wanted in

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45 Approximately 23,000 immigrants entered the United States through the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1988 that granted U.S. visas to Amerasian children. While the statistics may not be fully accurate, only three percent of these children were able find their American fathers.
Galveston. Abandoned by her Vietnamese mother and American father, she experiences complete rejection from her family. For Trang a deep connection with those around her enables a strong sense of self-awareness. Trang only wishes to find "someone, somewhere [that] could make her an entire person again." The statement suggests how mixed-raced status serves to reinforce a fragmented sense of self. She comes to Galveston to live with her aunt and uncle but finds that her new southern surroundings fail to provide a stable and nurturing home environment since she is subjected to constant verbal abuse. Her domineering aunt refers to Trang's father as an "American devil" throughout the novel and accuses her mother of prostituting herself to American soldiers. She emphatically states, "You break my family! You make the bad waves come! You tear our family!" The damage caused by her aunt's verbal tirades is apparent, but her aunt's fierce resentment also denies the young teen her Vietnamese identity. Her relatives view her as symbol of impurity and familial disgrace. Trang cannot be a "real Vietnamese girl" in the eyes of her own family because of the American blood that runs through her body. The painful rejection by her aunt and uncle reveals how the Amerasian child represents a discarded figure and painful reminder for the Vietnamese of the atrocities of war.

Rejected by her Vietnamese family, Trang turns her attention to her unknown American father in hopes of discovering a sense of belonging. She spends much of her days envisioning a joyful reunion with the father she never knew. Despite the fact that

48 Gardner, *Boat People*, 70.
she has never felt his embrace, Trang believes in a deep connection with her nameless father. She could feel how “his blood stayed deep inside her body” and imagines that she will find him when she could begin to “feel its warmth.” Her desperate search takes her to the local library, which becomes a safe haven. Trang carefully runs her fingers through history books, biographies, and phone directories in hopes that “she would feel it if the right name came against her skin” and uncover the true identity of her father. But the bodily and psychic bond she feels fails to reveal her father’s identity. The absence of an American family and the rejection she feels from her Vietnamese aunt and uncle leaves her feeling utterly lost and alone.

Trang’s biracial status not only reinforces her sense of dislocation from her family and community but also leaves her feeling “out of place” within her own body. Here the body becomes a site of cultural divide and ambiguity. The physical features she inherits from her Vietnamese mother and white American father become visible markers of her fractured self-identity. Her aunt’s severe resentment and rejection coupled with her American physical features convince Trang that she cannot legitimately claim a Vietnamese identity. Consequently, she seeks to conform to a white, American standard of beauty and womanhood. Gardner notes how the teen “widened her eyes so that she appeared more like an American and pushed her hair back from her cheeks the way the American girls did.” Like Truong’s character Thuy, Trang believes that her physical appearance prohibits true integration into her new community. Having been denied by

50 Gardner, Boat People, 68.
51 Gardner, Boat People, 68.
52 Gardner, Boat People, 67.
both Vietnamese refugees and southern whites, she internalizes the anxieties about the biracial body. Group disavowal manifests into self-hatred. Anne Cheng suggests that the racialized child’s first awareness of racial discrimination involves “the imaginative loss of a never-possible perfection,” a loss the child acknowledges as “a reflection of the self.” Thus Trang’s self-hatred of her Vietnamese physical features reveals “an anxiety about a racial body” that cannot conform to white notions of American femininity and womanhood. The ethnic body becomes a physical marker of both self-hatred and exclusion from both the Vietnamese and local-born residents of Galveston.

Desperately seeking acceptance, Trang takes drastic measures to alter her appearance. She soon grows attached to Lang whose compassion for the young teen leads her to believe that he may be someone who can finally make her feel wanted. Seeing the Vietnamese doctor with Shirley, Trang is convinced she must look “American” in order to win his affection. Believing that a physical transformation would lead to social acceptance, she douses her hair in yellow school paint in an attempt to look more like Shirley and the other white Texans around her. In many ways, Trang’s attempt at metamorphosis evokes the act of “passing” most commonly associated with African American characters attempting to pass as “white.” Judith Berzon contends that the central issue of passing is “whether or not the passer can achieve a healthy identity.”

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53 Anne Anlin Cheng, The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17, 74. Cheng’s book examines Asian American identity by considering race as a melancholic construction that serves to define white dominant culture and racial others through the processes of desire and abjection. She argues that melancholia can be a productive way of thinking about racial discourse because it theoretically accounts [sic] for the guilt and the denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence in the racist imaginary” (12).

While Berzon specifically explores white-black mulatto characters, I would argue that the same logic applies to Amerasians. Trang’s rejection by her Vietnamese family forces her to pass as white in hopes of gaining some form of social and cultural belonging. Put another way, her hope to be an “entire person” hinges on her ability to become “white.” But Trang painfully discovers that it was “not enough to change her into an American yellow-head” and frantically begins cutting off her hair.55 The tragic scene underscores the physical and emotional toll that strict racial and ethnic divisions have on Amerasian children born out of the Vietnam War. Repudiated by both her Vietnamese and American families, Trang believes that she must reject her own body.

Left with few options to escape the pains of complete rejection, Trang nearly drowns in the Gulf waters in an attempt to swim back to Vietnam. She hopes that reconnecting with her Vietnamese family would provide a sense of inclusion that she struggles to find in Texas. But for those Amerasian children who are able to go back to their birthplace, the return journey may sometimes prove to create a new set of challenges to their own identities. In the 2002 documentary Daughter From Danang, filmmaker Gail Dolgin follows Heidi Bub, an Amerasian woman born during the Vietnam War and raised in Pulaski, Tennessee, as she travels to Vietnam to meet her mother for the first time. While Bub expresses gratitude for having had the opportunity to meet her Vietnamese family, she cannot establish a deep connection with them because of her upbringing in the United States and her detachment from Vietnamese culture.56 For Trang, the challenges of going back to Vietnam are further enhanced by the fear of

55 Gardner, Boat People, 214.
56 Daughter From Danang, directed by Gail Dolgin (Balcony Releasing, 2002), DVD.
disavowal by her extended Vietnamese family, a fear that has already been realized through her aunt's hostility. Later in the novel, Linh discovers Trang hiding in an abandoned fishing boat that she has transformed into her own sanctuary. Trang reveals that she hides there "because I need to belong." Feeling at home neither in Vietnam or Galveston, she finds safety in complete seclusion, an uninhibited space removed from societal pressures to claim a specific racial or ethnic allegiance. Physical isolation and complete detachment from whites and Vietnamese become the only means of overcoming her feelings of being unwanted and unloved.

Gardner does provide a glimmer of hope as the refugee children attempt to cope with the hardships of growing up Vietnamese in Galveston by developing a level of kinship with African Americans who share a similar history of oppression. Like Christine Wiltz's *Glass House* (1994) and Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full* (1998), *Boat People* clearly illustrates how communities like her fictional Galveston Bay remain racially segregated in the 1990s South. Low-income African Americans and Vietnamese refugees primarily make up the Beach Terrace housing projects located on the edge of the town and away from its main thoroughfares. Looking out at the bleak row of rundown apartments, littered streets, and drug dealers from her front porch, Azelita Simpson, a black school aide who has called the projects home all her life, suggests that "slavery days ain't died out yet." For current and former residents, Beach Terrace is a place of neglect and hardship that remain entrenched in their memory:

Nobody'd forget the children banging rocks off your house, and the worn linoleum, and the inspections from the welfare to make sure you had just

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57 Gardner, *Boat People*, 244.
the amount of beds you were signed up for and just the right people in them. . . . In the summer the dust and the dirt and the broken bottles and the dealers with their big cars and their big shoulders, and in the winter the layers of fog that knew what to hide and came down so thick around the project houses that the damp ate your insides when you went out into it.58

The Vietnamese refugees who reside in Beach Terrace feel the same underlying sense of despair. Trang observes the weatherworn and dilapidated buildings of the projects and notes that “this is a cold place.”59 The “cold” descriptor not only reflects the contrast in climate with that of Vietnam but also the abject living conditions of Galveston’s low-income residents. Burdened by inadequate housing, crime, and constant police surveillance, the Vietnamese refugees and low-income blacks of Beach Terrace experience the lingering presence of segregation.

Despite these challenges both groups find common ground in their struggles. In doing so, Galveston’s African Americans and Vietnamese immigrants establish what Suzanne Jones calls a “broader definition of community” that does not merely entail “a group of people who live in the same locality and under the same government but a group of people who because they live in the same locality share common interests and connections.”60 Gardner presents a new sense of place and belonging that draws upon mutual understanding and cross-cultural exchange. Rather than emphasizing their differences, the novel’s black and Vietnamese characters embrace their similarities in order to lay claim to the greater Galveston community. Residents manage to transform

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58 Gardner, Boat People, 53-54.
59 Gardner, Boat People, 23.
60 Jones, Race Mixing, 295.
adverse conditions into a means of alliance formation to help overcome their individual and communal challenges.

While the class and racial divisions that separate Beach Terrace from the rest of Galveston Bay act are detrimental to both groups, the spatial boundaries also open up new avenues of communal solidarity. Learning more about American history, the Vietnamese children begin to see the parallels between their experiences and those of African Americans. Trang scolds a Vietnamese boy who questions her association with the African Americans in Beach Terrace. In describing the hardships endured by blacks under slavery, she explains that “black people came here by boat too.” Similarly, Azelita recognizes the challenges facing the Vietnamese and helps the children adjust to life in Galveston. Having grown up in the era of segregation, she sympathizes with the refugee children forced to confront the unfamiliar social systems that mark them as outsiders. Her compassion for the Vietnamese offers a form of kinship and understanding that the children do not receive from their peers or teachers. She believes that the refugees “got their own kind of slavery to grow out of,” an attitude suggesting a similarity between the Vietnamese’s and African American’s respective histories of oppression, violence, and trauma.

Avoiding an overly simplistic portrait of interracial solidarity, Gardner reveals how some African Americans are less willing to acknowledge the shared experience of exclusion. Wilson, Azelita’s boyfriend and a Vietnam veteran, is initially reluctant to share her sympathetic perspective. Like many Galveston residents who base their

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61 Gardner, Boat People, 254.
62 Ibid., 166.
opinions of the refugees on racial and ethnic stereotypes, he simply views the Vietnamese as the ambiguous Asian foreigner. The inability (or unwillingness) to acknowledge properly their specific ethnic identity is made more apparent through his constant use of “Chinee” to describe the immigrants. But while the disdain for the Vietnamese held by many stems from anxieties over perceived threats the newcomers pose, Wilson’s animosity originates from his firsthand encounters with true danger during combat. He rationalizes his mistrust of the refugee children by evoking the traumatic memories of violence he experienced in Vietnam. Wilson explains how “most of [the children] I seen in Nam came with grenades under their shirts, and I was the one they was throwing them at.”

But the Vietnam veteran begins to develop a more tolerant attitude toward the Vietnamese by learning more about the children’s hardships. Azelita serves as an unbiased filter that allows Wilson to see the refugees from a perspective detached from the violent memories of his experiences in Vietnam. During the climatic hurricane that sweeps through Galveston, he finds Trang hidden in her boat and informs her that “it doesn’t matter who your daddy is, sugar. What matters is who you are... We boat people, we all special... We work so hard and hurt so much, we gonna get every single thing we got coming to us.” Like Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student, Boat People acknowledges new definitions of community and belonging that ignore established social structures restricting social access on the grounds of race, class, and ethnicity. Community in both texts is not defined by the socially inscribed borders themselves but

63 Gardner, Boat People, 191.
64 Gardner, Boat People, 272.
by the act of crossing these borders. The shared experience of survival in a hostile environment allows both Vietnamese refugees and African Americans to find common ground and establish an ongoing dialogue of cultural understanding.

Gardner's uplifting if not overly optimistic portrait of contemporary race relations in the post-Vietnam South opens up the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation between two marginalized communities. While *Boat People* highlights the difficult challenges facing refugees confronted with unfamiliar environments and cultures, her novel destabilizes ethnic and racial divisions by uncovering the alliances and relationships that recast the South not in terms of black and white world but as a multicultural space. The younger generation of Southeast Asian immigrants who grow up with the memories of a former home in a potentially alienating new environment are often torn between the traditional values of their ethnic heritage and the pressures to assimilate completely to American culture. The typical rigors of adolescence compounded by their status as foreign outsiders make the search for a sense of belonging all the more challenging. Yet Gardner's young refugees bring with them a perspective on contemporary southern communities untainted by the long history of racism and exclusion. While they carry the burden of their own painful past, these young Asian immigrants offer the hope of transforming the perceptions of a divided post-Vietnam South. The youthful curiosity of the child protagonists allows them to look beyond racial and ethnic difference and work toward a greater understanding of Southern race relations. In doing so, these children become agents of social change by compelling adult readers to confront their own biases and misperceptions.

"This is a gringo bay" - Territorial Conflicts in *Alamo Bay*  
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French filmmaker Louis Malle similarly takes up the subject of uneasy relations between Vietnamese immigrants and native Texans in the years following the Vietnam War in his film *Alamo Bay*. Whereas Gardner centers on adolescent pressures of fitting in, Malle highlights the ways in which post-Vietnam economic tension exposes larger cultural conflicts that emerge as Vietnamese refugees attempt to immerse themselves in a small Texas community. The fictional town of Port Alamo becomes a volatile battleground where the promises of new social and economic alliances in a post-Vietnam and post-Civil Rights era give way to the violent conflicts over communal borders. Dinh (Ho Nguyen), a young immigrant from Vietnam, moves to Port Alamo to begin his new life in the United States. With the help of fellow Vietnamese immigrants and local businesswoman Glory (Amy Madigan), he finds a job in the shrimping industry, Port Alamo’s main economic source, and works toward his American Dream of owning and operating his own boat. But local white residents led by Shang Pierce (Ed Harris), a Vietnam veteran and longtime shrimper, object to the increased immigrant presence and attempt to drive out the Vietnamese by force. Verbal confrontations deteriorate into a climatic shootout between whites and immigrants that underscores the violence resulting from the growing visibility of Vietnamese refugees in rural southern communities. The arrival of the Vietnamese signals a marked socioeconomic shift as newly arrived refugees and working-class whites now work alongside each other to haul in the Gulf’s prized shrimps. *Alamo Bay* reveals that while legalized segregation is a thing of the past, new racial and ethnic divisions emerge out of American involvement in Vietnam and the loss of white authority resulting from integration.
Malle’s fictionalization of the real-life clashes between white Texans and Vietnamese refugees reveals how a new brand of segregation emerges in the post-Vietnam South. National borders took on heightened meaning in local communities along the Gulf Coast where longtime residents viewed the influx of Vietnamese immigrants with skepticism and anger. Economic recession coupled with dissatisfaction over the United States’ involvement in a foreign war strained an already uneasy relationship between local-born residents and the newly arrived Vietnamese as many refugees began working in the region’s struggling seafood industry. Tensions reached a tipping point when several Vietnamese shrimping boats were set on fire in Seadrift, Texas, a town of approximately 1000, 130 of who were refugees. An altercation between the Vietnamese and local residents left one white crabber dead while the two Vietnamese fisherman accused of his murder were acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. Angered by the verdict, fishermen organized a rally in February 1981 where residents stood alongside the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to protest the court’s decision and show a sense of white solidarity against the Vietnamese. On March 15, the first day of the fishing season, Grand Dragon Louis Beam led a parade of boats accompanied by armed Klansmen around Seabrook, Texas, to send a clear warning to immigrant fishermen to leave the area. Concerns over the escalating violence led to the departure of two thirds of the Vietnamese population.65 While many fled the Texas coast, others decided to take legal action and in May 1981, a federal district court determined the Klan’s intimidation

65 See Freeman, Changing Identities.
tactics to be in violation of civil rights laws. Andrew Chin notes that the "unorthodox strategy of using business laws to provide the necessary legal support for a civil rights injunction" helped clear the way for Vietnamese shrimpers to continue their operations without the fear of harassment by groups such as the Klan. The economic anxieties and racial conflicts that undergirded the events of Seadrift became the focal point of Malle’s portrait of Vietnamese refugees. His film reveals how much more is at stake in the Gulf waters than economic success as the residents of his fictional Texas town engage in a fierce, physical and psychological battle over the community’s cultural, racial, and ethnic identity.

Port Alamo, Texas, a small coastal town that “lives off Texas shrimp,” serves as the picturesque backdrop for the film. The film opens with a shot of Dinh walking on a deserted road alongside a lush green field, a scene that could easily be of rural Texas or rural Vietnam. Malle quickly reveals the location to be south Texas when a white female passerby who stops to pick up the young hitchhiker suddenly drives away after seeing that he is Vietnamese. Dinh eventually finds a ride from Leon, a local deliveryman who works with many of the Vietnamese immigrant fishermen. Learning that the hitchhiker is Vietnamese, Leon offers a contrasting opinion to that of Wilson in Boat People when he

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66 Alabama civil rights attorney and co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center Morris Dees filed the lawsuit on behalf of the Vietnamese fishermen in April 1981. Louis Beam attempted to have the case thrown out on the grounds that Judge Gabrielle McDonald, who would oversee the case, would be biased against the Klan because she was African American. McDonald’s May 1981 injunction was made permanent in June 1982 and led to the withdrawal of the Klan and the disbandment of the Texas Emergency Group, a local militia group with ties to the Klan who supported the anti-Vietnamese fishermen efforts. For more information see Vietnamese Fisherman’s Association v. Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 518 F. Supp. 993, 1010 (S.D. Texas 1981)

67 Chin, “The KKK and Vietnamese Fishermen.”

68 Alamo Bay, directed by Louis Malle (Tri-Star Pictures, 1985), Videocassette.
states, "It’s alright, [I] had a good time over there myself." The film then depicts a conventional act of camaraderie as the two strangers laugh over some beers as they make their way to Port Alamo. Although Leon’s gesture exhibits a level of acceptance and compassion, Dinh quickly learns that the Texas shrimping town remains a divided community where longtime residents resent the new immigrant presence. In a stark contrast to this friendly interaction, Dinh’s initial encounter with Shang reveals the strong anti-Vietnamese sentiments held by many residents. The Vietnam veteran directs a sinister gaze on Dinh and states, “You’re standing on my damn lawn. I outta shoot you.” Shang’s blatant threat not only suggests a violation of private space but also establishes a sense of white authority. Although Dinh fails to fully understand the warning, the message remains clear: whites dictate who can and cannot enter the Port Alamo community. Shang’s warning represents a viable threat of physical violence against the Vietnamese if they attempt to overstep the boundaries established by the town’s white residents.

Despite the cold reception he receives from local whites, Dinh finds comfort in the communal spirit of the Vietnamese shrimpers. His fellow immigrants assist him in attaining a shrimping job and warmly welcome him into their homes. For these immigrants, the coastal waters of eastern Texas not only provide a nostalgic glimpse back to the fishing villages of Vietnam but also a new space in which they hope to attain economic success. Dinh begins work in the shrimping industry in hopes of eventually operating his own boat. He notes, “In American, everybody want[s] to get rich.” But getting rich is not necessarily about financial excess. Rather, making money is simply a means of survival. Unlike Robert Olen Butler’s middle-class immigrants who seek to
amass a vast fortune, Malle’s Vietnamese only desire equal access to the rights and freedoms of all Americans. As Father Ky, the town’s Vietnamese priest, states, “We just want to have a chance to make a living to be Americans.” *Alamo Bay* suggests that a sense of belonging and home simply entails a fair opportunity at attaining financial stability.

The mounting economic pressures affecting the entire Gulf region further divides the Port Alamo community as white residents direct their frustrations over diminishing profits toward the Vietnamese. Poor shrimping seasons have led many of the white shrimpers to scale back operations or lose their businesses and boats altogether. Struggling to make due on his outstanding loan payments, Shang loses his boat to the bank. Frustrated by his financial woes, he contends that the federal government provides “no protection for the American” struggling to make a living. Shang’s criticism reflects the sentiments of many Americans, particularly Vietnam veterans, frustrated by the lack of support for returning soldiers and the assistance provided for incoming refugees. Yet the statement also subtly suggests the increased pressures of American-based shrimpers, particularly those in the Gulf South, as they attempt to keep up with foreign competitors (particularly those from southeast Asia) and the expanding global market.69 Despite the fact that Port Alamo’s Vietnamese will ultimately help bolster the region’s shrimping industry, Shang and his fellow white shrimpers simply view their presence as an economic liability. The influx of immigrant-operated boats becomes an unwanted consequence of globalizing processes.

69 See Chapter Two for a more detailed analysis of globalization’s effect on the Gulf South’s fishing industry in the 1980s.
As tensions continue to grow between Vietnamese and white shrimpers, Malle reveals that much more is at stake than economic gains. Port Alamo becomes a contested site where battle lines are drawn on the basis of race and ethnicity. Despite their attempts to adjust to life in the United States, the town’s Vietnamese immigrants face constant hostility from whites for failing to understand the “American way.” Early in the film, gaming officials confront the Vietnamese fishermen for violating shrimping ordinances. Dinh apologizes, asks for a guideline book, and asserts that he and the other Vietnamese “want to know the rules.” But knowing proper fishing protocol is not enough. Residents inform the immigrant shrimpers that they must learn and adhere to the “rules” of American culture that require the refugees to reject their ethnic traditions and acknowledge the authoritative control of whites. The local gaming official suggests that Dinh and the other Vietnamese rename their boats to avoid confrontation. Pointing to a boat labeled “Mr. Ed,” he informs them that the names should be “something American.” The act of renaming appears to be less about the safety of Vietnamese shrimpers than about a desire to erase markers of ethnic difference. White community members view the inability or unwillingness to assimilate to American culture as a viable threat to their community’s traditions and identity. The local grocery store manager argues that the government “abandons these people in our town without educating them on how we do things.” Whites’ frustrations over the refugees’ unfamiliarity with American culture suggests their steadfast determination to preserve the town’s cultural and racial identity. Simply put, Port Alamo by their rights is and always will be a white shrimping community. *Alamo Bay* shows how white residents misinterpret the desire to preserve traditional Vietnamese culture as an attempt to supplant Port Alamo’s traditions and way of life.
of life. As the film progresses local-born Texans become more aggressive in their attempts to restrict the movements of Vietnamese shrimpers. And as Shang's warning to Dinh early in the film illustrates, Port Alamo's white community is not afraid to use physical violence to defend what they consider to be their rightful territory.

But *Alamo Bay* resists the urge to cast the Vietnamese solely as innocent victims. Malle shows how some of the immigrants utilize questionable shrimping practices to gain advantage over their competition. Vietnamese shrimpers are seen taking to the waters after designated hours, intruding on areas already occupied by other boats and overfishing the waters. While unfamiliarity with the game warden's guidelines may explain their actions, it is unclear whether the Vietnamese are consciously ignoring local regulations in order to improve their economic opportunities. In giving some weight to white shrimpers' complaints, Malle reveals the complexities behind economic and communal negotiations. *Alamo Bay* resists the urge to portray the conflict between whites and the Vietnamese simply as one of good versus evil, right versus wrong. The defensive posture of Port Alamo's white shrimpers in maintaining control of the Gulf waters and the aggressive shrimping practices of Vietnamese boats highlight the ways in which anxieties over an increasingly profitable foreign seafood industry and a changing social landscape produce fierce competition among Gulf South shrimpers. Despite the fact that both white and immigrant families share a common goal of financial stability, the mounting pressures to haul in the best and largest catch coupled with cultural misperceptions lead to rising tensions in post-Vietnam Texas.

Cultural misunderstandings also expose the significant power struggles that continue to divide Port Alamo into separate white and Vietnamese communities. Scott
Romine suggests that fictional southern communities are often depicted by indisputable boundaries that “define the limits of social responsibility and social agency.” Thus the idea of “community” centers on a space where “order can and must be actively maintained.”70 For Port Alamo’s white residents, community hinges on their ability to maintain spatial and cultural boundaries. More specifically, property acquisition and claims to ownership determine one’s communal status. For the newly arrived Vietnamese, ownership functions as a means of establishing permanence and attaining social power. Throughout the film, Dinh describes his hopes of purchasing his own boat so that he can be his own boss. But it is precisely this desire for proprietorship that troubles local whites. At a meeting to discuss the town’s escalating tensions, Reverend Disney informs the Vietnamese that residents are upset because they did not anticipate that “your people wanted to own boats.” The reluctance to extend entrepreneurial privileges to refugees signals white anxiety over the potential loss of power. Implicit in Reverend Disney’s statement is that membership in the Port Alamo community is only granted to those born into it. Groups like the Vietnamese immigrants are permitted access to the town but only as laborers and not property owners. Put another way, Southeast Asian refugees are simply temporary guests of the Gulf South.

Luis, a Mexican immigrant who works for Glory’s father’s shrimping business for over twenty years, attempts to educate the Vietnamese on the racial and ethnic politics that govern the community. Although he has gained the respect and trust of the town’s

residents, he understands that non-whites do not share the same economic and social privileges as his white counterparts. When Dinh informs him of his desire to own and operate his boat, Luis cautions him that “this is a gringo bay.” The blunt warning underscores the centrality of race and ethnicity to status within the Texas community. Malle’s immigrant characters painfully learn how the significant social and economic changes in the post-Vietnam South do not eradicate the communal boundaries that reinforce white authority and limit the opportunities of those marked as outsiders.

Economic self-sufficiency and survival are only part of the equation behind the escalating battle for ownership as the concept of honor drives both whites and Vietnamese immigrants. In his well-known study on southern honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown defines honor as the “moral property of all who belong within the community, one that determines the community’s own membership.” The importance of family, understood hierarchies, and well-established ethics and values has been well documented as prominent features of southern society. Malle shows how Vietnamese immigrants uphold the same values as their white counterparts. Throughout the film, Vietnamese residents engage in various social events such as large, family meals, baseball games, and church services. While minor these scenes that spotlight the centrality of family, faith, and communal spirit reveal the strong parallels between Port Alamo’s immigrant and white inhabitants. The simple act of engaging in everyday social practices suggests that

the Vietnamese simply want to maintain their communal identity without disrupting or violating established, local traditions and customs.

Yet Port Alamo’s whites and Vietnamese residents fail to find common ground in their reverence for family and communal honor. Whites consider the Vietnamese shrimpers’ penchant for hard work and long hours merely scheme to completely overtake all of the town’s fishing and shrimping operations. Shang angrily contends that “these gooks are raping the bay” although it is quite clear that the Vietnamese are merely having greater success with their catches. The invocation of sexual violence suggests an assault on the community’s morals by the Vietnamese. The Gulf South’s waterways function an important symbol of Port Alamo’s white communal identity, one that requires constant protection from any perceived threats. For residents like Shang foreign-born shrimpers represent dangerous predators whose presence tarnishes the purity of the land that has been central to their way of life for generations. Simply put, the immigrant shrimpers cannot be a part of this community because of the danger they pose to its sense of honor.

But the fears derived from increased economic competition and the loss of white authority manifest into larger (and unfounded) concerns over the physical danger that the refugees pose; a perception that threatens to ignite a violent turf war. Despite the lack of any evidence of danger, white residents grow increasingly suspicious of their immigrant counterparts, lock their doors, and avoid contact with the Vietnamese. Diane, a waitress at the local bar, suggests, “These gooks could have dynamite in their bags.” This exaggerated sense of danger serves as an example of how racial and ethnic generalizations define the ways in which Port Alamo whites view their Vietnamese counterparts. Homi Bhabha contends that racial stereotypes establish a sense of identity
that is “predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence [sic],
for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and
disavowal of it.”

Racial animosity and the fear of violence at the hands of immigrant shrimpers suggest the same sentiments felt during the Vietnam War have not abated. Traumatized by the memories of the war, local whites view the Vietnamese as a common enemy regardless of their involvement in the Vietnam. As one local woman claims, “My boy fought the VC [and] now they’re here in Texas taking the bread out of our mouths.” Like the southern-born characters in Truong’s and Gardner’s texts, whites in Malle’s film cannot or refuse to acknowledge the distinctions between North Vietnamese sympathizers and the refugees who sided with the South Vietnamese that fought alongside, not against, American soldiers. Instead, Southeast Asian immigrants are simply viewed as a common enemy, a misperception that fuels racist ideologies. The Vietnamese displaced by war who migrate to Port Alamo represents a new domestic threat further strengthened by the widespread disapproval of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and the significant casualties suffered by American forces. Dressed in his “Nam Vets of Texas” shirt and armed with a rifle, Shang reprises his role as soldier, only this time, in his own backyard as he patrols the town’s waterways. His clothing and weapon become a clear, visible warning for immigrant shrimpers. The appearance of the Vietnamese figure reawakens past traumas of military conflict and suggests that for many Vietnam veterans, the violent and destructive war they fought in years ago continues.

72 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 107.
The arrival of the Ku Klux Klan, who volunteer their services to local shrimpers, only exacerbates tensions and reinforces white residents’ strict governance of communal boundaries. Echoing the anti-Vietnamese sentiments voiced by many Americans during the war, the group casts the refugees as both a physical and ideological threat to the community and its traditions and values. Echoing sentiments used years ago to spread their anti-African American propaganda, the Klan’s local organizer explains that “these IndoChinese are creating all the danger in the community” and suggests that their arrival masks a larger ploy by Catholics and Communists to take over Port Alamo. The distorted logic that dictates the white community’s response to Vietnamese immigration demonstrates how cultural misunderstanding results from a narrowly-defined viewpoint exclusively based on racial and ethnic identity. That is, racial divisions still dictate who does and does not belong in the post-Jim Crow South. The Klan leaders urge community members to protect their borders with whatever means are necessary. If the “history [of Alamo Bay] is with the white race” as the Klan suggests, then it is the responsibility of its residents to preserve their communal identity. The partnership between Port Alamo’s whites and the Klan exposes the lingering racist logic that continues to restrict access to community based on racial and ethnic difference.

Shang’s brand of vigilante justice becomes all too real when he parades around the town’s harbors with a fleet of Klan-occupied shrimping boats. In a scene that clearly evokes Louis Beam’s 1981 show of force in Seabrook, Texas, Leon is stopped before reaching Port Alamo’s docks by white residents who inform him that he cannot proceed because “the road ain’t safe.” He looks out onto the water to see Shang’s band of white shrimpers and Klansmen heading out to patrol the harbor. The scene cuts to close-ups of
a militant Shang and the Klansmen (and women) armed with high-powered assault rifles
and dressed in traditional robes and "white power" t-shirts. Another quick cut reveals an
effigy of a Vietnamese man hanging from a noose while an additional shot shows a boat
flying an inverted American flag and a Confederate flag below it. The startling shots of
the shrimpers-turned-militia become a powerful display of white authority. The armed
patrol of the town's waterways reinforces the need to protect and enforce the
community's racial and ethnic divisions with whatever means necessary. The film
further elaborates the physical boundaries between insider and outsider when Shang
approaches a group of Vietnamese shrimping boats and emphatically announces that "this
harbor is closed" to non-white shrimpers before ramming his boat into them.

Traumatized by the Klan's show of force, the refugees begin to pack their belongings and
leave town by the busload. Malle underscores their sense of defeat by depicting a group
of Vietnamese lowering an American flag from their neighborhood's flagpole. The scene
not only illustrates the refugees' attachment to the United States but also the rejection of
their allegiance to nation.

*Alamo Bay* 's violent conclusion sends a mixed message about the future of
southern communities in the post-Vietnam era. Fueled by alcohol and convinced that a
more forceful approach is necessary to defend their community from ethnic outsiders,
Shang and a group of militant white shrimpers arm themselves with rifles and firebombs
and plan an evening assault on Vietnamese boats. But the immigrant shrimpers, who
recognize the potential for hostile conflicts, brandish their own rifles and both groups
exchange gunfire. Malle fittingly ends the conflict with a confrontation between Dinh
and Shang. As white and Vietnamese shrimpers continue to fire upon one and other, both
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men find themselves face to face in a symbolic battle over Port Alamo. But while Shang’s motivation is control, Dinh takes up arms as a means of self-defense. Glory’s attempt to talk sense into both men fails as Shang dies at the hands of Dinh who shoots him in self-defense.

While a somewhat forced, conventional ending, the climatic shootout stresses the fact that much more is at stake than finances for southern whites and their new Vietnamese neighbors. Just as Vietnamese refugees are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for a chance at attaining their American dream, so too are white southerners willing to shed their own blood for the sake of protecting their communal borders. While Wilson’s change of heart at the conclusion of *Boat People* shows that reconciliation and acceptance are possible, Shang’s defiant and hostile attitude even in death reveals that some southern veterans cannot overcome the pain they suffered while fighting in Vietnam. The violent and deadly conflict with which *Alamo Bay* concludes suggests that the post-Vietnam South will remain a divisive place if natives and newcomers cannot find a means of engaging in cross-cultural exchange. Malle underscores this sentiment by showing most of Port Alamo’s Vietnamese community packing up their belongings and leaving a town that they hoped to call home. The persistent presence of southern racism augmented by frustrations with American involvement in an unpopular war prove to be too much for refugees who find themselves displaced once again. The aftermath of the violent battle between whites and Vietnamese leaves viewers with a fractured sense of community.

While it is unclear whether the Vietnamese will ever return to Port Alamo, Malle ends his film with a sense of hope for Vietnamese refugees as a closing epilogue states.
that “more than 15,000 Vietnamese live and work on the Gulf Coast of Texas,” a statement made more profound given the rebuilding efforts of Vietnamese communities after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the BP oil spill in 2010 as discussed in Chapter Two. But the film’s dual ending suggests that there is no easy resolution to the turf battle as both Vietnamese refugees and southern whites pay dearly for a share of communal space. Alamo Bay reveals that an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic South does not guarantee the promise of peaceful coexistence. Redefining community and belonging in the post-Vietnam era requires candid discussions of past conflicts and a willingness to look beyond preconceived notions of cultural differences to discover a common ground. Rather than lending his sympathies to one group or the other, Malle instead uses the film to expose the personal struggles of both Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnam veterans who contend with a new set of traumas following a deadly and costly war. Refugees must not only redefine their sense of home after being displaced but must also do so while confronting the unfamiliar social practices and traditions of the American South. Meanwhile, southerners who fought in Vietnam struggle to reintegrate themselves in society especially as their hometowns experience economic and cultural transformations. Alamo Bay reveals how both groups face similar challenges as they seek to rediscover a sense of home. And while the film highlights the violence that can erupt from the search for home, the faint optimism of its epilogue indicates that perhaps the refugee and the veteran can coexist.

The 2008 Congressional election of Ahn “Joseph” Cao, a Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States shortly after the Fall of Saigon, suggests relations between local-born southerners and Vietnamese immigrants have improved since the 1970s. A
Republican without an extensive political background, Cao not only found himself the first Vietnamese American to serve in Congress but also the voice of a New Orleans congressional district predominantly made up of Democrats and African Americans.\textsuperscript{73} The continued growth of Vietnamese American populations across the South, particularly in the Gulf Coast region, has led to new communal alliances that reach across racial, ethnic, and class lines. While their characters struggle to overcome the prejudices and hostility of longtime southerners, the texts discussed in this chapter offer a brief but optimistic glimpse at the potential for communal healing following the traumas of war and displacement. Writing about and living in the post-Vietnam South involve the dynamic interplay between forgetting and remembering as immigrants and local-born southerners attempt to forge new iterations of community and belonging based on cultural exchange. Both groups discover that in order to make sense of the region’s socioeconomic shifts and the multiracial and multiethnic transformations, they must recall the painful past not only to uncover a shared commitment to family, place, and survival but also to work through lingering fears and frustrations. Narratives about the Vietnamese experience in the South engage audiences in a dialogue that acknowledges the converging histories of longtime residents and newly arrived refugees who both call the region home.

\textsuperscript{73} Cao failed in his reelection bid in 2010, losing to Democratic State Representative Cedric Richmond.
CHAPTER FIVE
A GLOBAL TURN IN THE SOUTH

My father comes from the south of India, my mother comes from the south of Japan, so we’re a family of Southerners.
- Ram Uppuluri, former Tennessee Congressional candidate (1994)

When Kia Motors broke ground in 2006 on a new auto plant in West Point, Georgia, the Korean auto manufacturing company brought promise of renewed hope for economic stability. The small town 80 miles southwest of Atlanta was on the verge of extinction since many textile mills in the region, central to the town’s economy, closed in the late 1990s and forced residents to seek jobs elsewhere. By 2000 the population had plummeted from over 9,000 to approximately 3,500. But Kia’s arrival prompted optimism because the new plant spurred job growth. The foreign auto manufacturer hired 1,900 residents to work in the plant and created close to 4,000 new jobs locally with auto-supply companies. Grateful for the arrival of the foreign auto manufacturer, residents began to refer to their small southern community as “Kia-ville.” More interestingly, the construction of the new automobile plant led to a significant transformation of the town’s cultural identity. Korean businesses now stand beside family-owned stores and longstanding barbeque joints introducing residents to an array of foods, cultures, and people once absent in their community. Christy Magbee, a longtime West Point resident, notes, “You got the culture coming in. You don't have to travel to Atlanta anymore. It's starting to come here.”

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illustrate how contemporary globalization continues to transform southern towns and cities into increasingly multicultural and transnational spaces, a process that a number of southerners accept as a necessary means of not only preserving their communities but also further linking the region to the rest of the world.

Yet others express more ambivalent, even unfavorable, opinions about globalization's effect on the American South. The arrival of foreign-based companies, coupled with the explosion of immigrant populations, has become a troubling phenomenon to southerners who cling to a narrowly defined vision of their communities. Historian James C. Cobb notes that numerous right-wing organizations like the Alabama-based League of the South point to globalization as the main culprit behind the South's diminishing family values, weakened economy, and changing demographics. While these groups deny that race and ethnicity are factors in their criticism, their language appears "redolent of the rhetoric that fueled a wave of racial violence in the post-


Globalization and illegal immigration have emerged as primary points of concern for groups like the League of the South and the Council of Conservative Citizens (the contemporary iteration of the White Citizens Council). Both organizations, defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center as neo-Confederate hate groups, criticize the influx of foreign businesses and illegal immigrants in the American South, particularly from Mexico, and utilize ideologies rooted in white racial purity to support their secessionist movements. Recent immigration debates at the state level further illustrate the growing anxieties over globalization's impact on southern communities. In 2011, Georgia and Alabama passed some of the strictest immigration laws in the United States that call for local police to increase efforts to detain alleged illegal immigrants and for stricter requirements for English language proficiency. See Southern Poverty Law Center website. www.splc.org.
Reconstruction South." The most recent targets of criticism are Latino migrants who make up a significant portion of the South’s low-skilled and low-wage workforce, particularly in fields like agriculture and poultry. Proponents of stricter immigration laws have begun to employ increasingly hostile rhetoric in their attacks on alleged illegal Latino immigrants. The 2009 documentary *9500 Liberty* highlights the growing tensions involving Latino immigration in Prince William County, Virginia, an increasingly diverse suburb of Washington, D.C. In one scene, co-director Annabel Park, a Korean American, speaks with a white, elderly resident who is engaged in an argument with a group of predominantly Latino residents. He vehemently argues that Vietnamese and Korean immigrants living in the region quickly assimilated while “Hispanics come [and] don’t want to be part of the culture. They just want to rape it.” This statement and the “Help Save Manassas” campaign led predominantly by white residents not reflect not only the growing anger over the South’s changing economic and cultural identity but also the ways in which contemporary immigration debates threaten to pit various ethnic groups against each other by reinforcing the “model minority” myth associated with Asian Americans.

The ongoing internationalization of southern cities and the conflicts that arise from these transformations demand new approaches to exploring communal relations and

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6 *9500 Liberty*, directed by Eric Blyer and Annabel Park (Interactive Democracy Alliance, 2009), DVD.
place-bound identities in the twentieth- and twenty-first century-South. This chapter focuses on narratives that depict the global movements of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans and their experiences in southern communities undergoing significant socioeconomic change. Whereas works like Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full* (1998) focus on the growing influence of global economic and cultural movements on larger, urban spaces like Atlanta, Cynthia Kadohata’s *Kira-Kira*, Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala*, and Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox* concentrate on smaller, more rural locales and the ways in which the transnational flows of capital, cultures, and people unmoor boundaries (regional, national, racial, and economic) that have traditionally divided the local from the global. In their preface to the December 2006 special issue of *American Literature* on southern studies in a global context, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer convincingly argue that the interlocking of “the global” and “the local” intimates a “two-way process” highlighting the ways in which the South “imports goods, foods, and culture from everywhere in the world while also globally exporting its own local specialties.”7 The works discussed in this chapter represent a growing body of texts that point to the cultural, economic, and physical transformations that resituate the American South in a larger, more global context. While these narratives acknowledge how the transnational flow of peoples and cultures can revitalize and strengthen the region, they also suggest that the emergence of an increasingly globalized South reestablishes and produces new forms of economic and racial inequalities that threaten to fracture southern communities.

Given the prominence of globalization in this chapter and its growing influence on the field of American Studies, it is important to briefly unpack the multiple meanings of the term itself. On the most basic level, I use “globalization” to mean the series of economic, political, and cultural processes that establish a more integrated global socioeconomic framework. The continuous movement of capital and people within and across multiple nations creates a dynamic and complex set of relations and transactions that reinforce or disrupt existing historical, cultural, and geographical continuities. These global movements also involve the continuous practice of redefining place-bound identities. Robert Gross suggests that the contemporary global movements of capital and culture capture “a world of fluid borders, where goods, ideas, and people flow constantly across once-sovereign space.” However, as J. Javier Rodriguez notes, contemporary globalization “also activates traditional boundaries” in order to safeguard traditional notions of community. The ongoing relaxing and reinforcement of local, regional, and national borders suggest that the concept of place has become increasingly important in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.

As discussed in earlier chapters and as the following analysis hopes to illustrate, globalization is not a new phenomenon. Instead, the rise of multinational corporations and the dispersal of goods, labor, and cultures over the past few decades serve as an

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10 David Harvey offers a succinct explanation of globalization’s long history in *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. He suggests that globalization is a “long-standing process” that dates back to at least 1492, one that is “always implicit in capital accumulation rather than a political-economic condition that has recently come into being” (*Harvey, Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 420-21).
extension of similar processes that have been occurring for centuries. The South’s increased economic and cultural reputation continues to attract immigrants seeking new social and economic opportunities. As discussed in the previous chapters, the growing presence of immigrants enacts physical and cultural transformations that signal an increasingly transnational southern landscape, one that incorporates the sociospatial practices found in other parts of the world. Donald M. Nononi rightly suggests that the region “now falls more clearly within the ambit of transnational diasporas—of Mexican and Central Americans, South Asians, and Southeast and East Asians . . . and peoples from the Caribbean.” Further, the transnational connections that result from these shifts establish “new modes of dislocated living, new daily practices associated with expatriation and exile, and qualitatively distinct forms of mobility in crossing national boundaries.”

Recent immigrants have established communities across the American South centered on the shared experience of migration and the search for new economic and social opportunities that have taken them away from homes across the world.

Yet the pressures of sustaining and expanding the region’s global economic reach place a strain on immigrant laborers who often work long hours for limited wages. Examining late-twentieth century capitalism and human and physical geographies, David Harvey describes globalization as a “process of production of uneven temporal and geographical development.” Similarly, Edward Soja suggests that while these global shifts have benefited many, globalization also reinforces existing economic, cultural, and

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spatial boundaries that continue to divide social groups. He argues, “These developments have magnified many existing inequalities in contemporary society, such as between the rich and the poor, between men and women, and between different racial and ethnic groups.” The increased presence of transnational corporations and the rising demand for low-wage labor to sustain and increase operations have led to new issues surrounding land redevelopment, environmental policy, and workers’ rights. While the growth of industries such as agriculture, textiles, and auto-manufacturing has provided immigrants with new employment opportunities in the South, the increased production of goods also threatens to expose them to unjust labor practices, including substandard wages, dangerous working conditions, and limited accessibility to social resources.

Moreover, growing concern about the potential effects that changing demographics will have on longstanding cultural traditions create uneasy relationships between longtime residents and recent immigrants across the American South. The influx of immigrant populations has in many ways made southern communities more permeable and accessible, a process that sparks new fears over the ways in which public spaces and communal borders are developed and controlled. The growing presence of foreign companies and populations in the South has the potential to produce a new “fear of the ‘other’ who now seems so threateningly close everywhere around the globe,” a fear that can “lead to all sorts of exclusionary territorial behavior.” Voluntary segregation, public housing restrictions, and increased surveillance of minorities are some examples of the attempts to contain and control the movements of new populations and cultures. Like the

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13 Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice, 22.
Vietnamese refugees discussed in Chapter Four, the growing number of Asian (as well as African and Latin American) immigrants who come to the region as a result of the global redistribution of capital and labor face the scrutiny of southern whites and blacks at least some of whom hope to preserve the racial, ethnic, and class divisions that have defined their way of life.

While global economic and cultural forces pose the threat of resurrecting segregationist spatial practices that divide longtime southerners and new immigrants, they also offer the possibility of a reimagined and more inclusive sense of southern community. In cutting across racial, ethnic, and class lines, the fight for equal rights helps “bring together the diverse movements built around each of these specific axes of unequal power relations in a common project” to achieve individual and communal justice.\footnote{Soja, \textit{Seeking Spatial Justice}, 23.} Focusing on Kadohata’s, Nair’s, and Shearer’s respective narratives about Asians living in an increasingly global American South, I argue that these texts hint at the possibility, but not necessarily the realization, of new multiracial and multiethnic coalitions through the collective efforts of seeking social and spatial justice.

Recent narratives depicting Asian immigrants migrating to the South point to the ways in which alternative modes of community based on shared experiences of discrimination and exploitation attempt to destabilize the racial, ethnic, and class divisions that reemerge from contemporary global flows of capital and people. Asian immigrants attempt to work with southern whites and blacks in an effort “to mobilize and organize across geographical scales and to learn from comparable experiences in other
countries, regions, cities, neighborhoods, and households” in order to achieve a sense of social justice.¹⁶ The uneven economic, cultural, and spatial shifts that take place in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century American South bring together longtime and newly arrived inhabitants in an attempt to secure full political, economic, and social participation. David Harvey defines social justice as a “particular application of just principles to conflicts which arise out of the necessity for social cooperation in seeking individual advancement.”¹⁷ Edward Soja expands upon Harvey’s analysis through his insistence on acknowledging geography as an entity that is socially produced. He argues that we possess “an awareness that the geographies in which we live can have both positive and negative effects.” Furthermore, these geographies can “provide advantage and opportunity, stimulate, emancipate, entertain, enchant, [and] enable” while also posing the potential to “constrain opportunity, oppress, imprison, subjugate, disempower, [and] close off possibilities.”¹⁸ The works discussed here point to a new civil rights struggle, one that centers on securing full access to vital societal resources and public spaces for all southerners regardless of their racial, ethnic, or class affiliation.

Recent demographic changes resulting from the arrival of new Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants and ensuing conflicts between natives and newcomers become more pronounced in the American South when one considers the region’s long history of racial strife. Ellen Griffith Spears explains that “the increases in immigration and anti-immigration sentiment that have paralleled a prolonged assault on hard-won

¹⁶ Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 199.
¹⁸ Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 104.
civil rights gains" define the late-twentieth century United States. Cynthia Kadohata’s children’s novel *Kira-Kira* takes the viewpoint of a young Japanese American girl as her family moves from the Midwest to rural Georgia to work as poultry workers. Set in the 1950s, the novel illustrates how globalization is not merely a modern phenomenon as Kadohata exposes readers to the collective efforts of both white and Japanese immigrant workers to challenge exploitative labor practices in one of the South’s largest and most lucrative industries. A different type of global alliance serves as the basis for Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala* that depicts the experiences of South Asian immigrants who move to the Mississippi Delta after fleeing the political turmoil of Uganda following Idi Aman’s military coup. Presented as a modern-day romance between the daughter of a South Asian hotel manager and a black Mississippi native who has given up his dreams to take care of his family, the film attempts to introduce a form of communal healing that emerges out of the shared experiences and histories of two contrasting yet connected sets of southerners: African Americans and Ugandans of Asian descent. While Nair attempts to illustrate how mutual experiences of racial discrimination can bring southern blacks and South Asian immigrants together, her film’s depiction of persistent anxieties surrounding interracial romance also reveals the limitations of multiracial and multiethnic alliances. Cynthia Shearer also employs the Mississippi Delta as the setting for her novel *The Celestial Jukebox* to spotlight the formidable socioeconomic shifts taking place in the rural South as global corporations and new immigrant populations flow into the region.

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during the twenty-first century. At the center of these sweeping changes is the Celestial Grocery, owned and operated by an elderly Chinese immigrant, where longtime residents and newly arrived immigrants converge. Rather than simply presenting the familiar story of the agrarian versus industrial South, Shearer frames her narrative around the parallels that emerge between contemporary globalization and the long history of multiracial and multiethnic collaboration in the Mississippi Delta.

Shearer, Nair, and Kadohata portray the American South’s global turn as an extension of ongoing processes that have transformed the region since the early twentieth century. Even so, their respective narratives shed light on the inequalities and injustices that result from changing demographics, capitalist redevelopment, and political conflicts. While sweeping socioeconomic changes such as the growing presence of immigration populations and transnational corporations pose the risk of disrupting the unity of community, the transformations occurring across southern locales also uncover the ways in which the transnational and transhistorical can establish new place-bound identities that center on working-class solidarity and shared histories of loss and survival.

“Where Do I Sit?”- Cynthia Kadohata’s *Kira-Kira* and Japanese Migrants under Jim Crow

Located a few miles south of Dermott, Arkansas, on Highway 165 is a small concrete monument marking a stretch of land that served as the Jerome Relocation Center during World War II. Three hundred miles northwest of Dermott is the headquarters of Tyson Foods in Springdale, Arkansas. Linking these two rather disparate sites are Japanese American communities that played a significant role in the development of the southern poultry industry and in the history of segregation. The expansion of poultry
production in the South occurred at a time when Japanese Americans faced uncertainty following World War II internment. Struggling to reintegrate themselves into their former communities, many chose to travel across the country in search of work and a viable home. Among their destinations was the South because poultry businesses sought cheap labor for their growing operations.

Cynthia Kadohata’s 2004 children’s novel *Kira-Kira* provides crucial insight into the overlooked experiences of Japanese Americans living in the post-World War II South as they grapple with exploitative labor practices and segregation. The novel depicts a young Japanese American girl as she moves from Iowa to a predominantly white Georgia town after her parents become migrant laborers. She witnesses the alienating effects of segregation through the mistreatment of Japanese poultry workers but also discovers a sense of community beyond race-based affiliation as the migrant workers forge an alliance with working-class whites. Unlike more common coming-of-age narratives set during Jim Crow that operate within a distinct white-black racial binary, *Kira-Kira* exposes the inconsistencies found within the cultural and legal systems of segregation through its focus on the Japanese American experience and the formation of new modes of association and acceptance. Asians living under Jim Crow often struggled to identify their place in society as segregationist politics failed to account for populations outside of this white-black paradigm. Kadohata’s novel provides an alternative story of the region’s racial past, one that highlights the power of Jim Crow while also contesting its logic of difference.

In the years following World War II, poultry production emerged as one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States; chicken became a viable option for
inexpensive and available meat. Following a vertical integration model, large-scale companies such as Tyson Foods merged with smaller, more localized businesses. Crucial to the industry’s expansion was the cluster of hatcheries and processing plants across the South. Seventeen states stretching from Texas to Delaware make up the region commonly referred to as the “Broiler Belt” for its high production of broilers: chickens specifically raised for table consumption. Faced with failing cotton and apple crops, numerous rural southern farmers transformed their businesses into poultry farms.20

By 2004, Broiler Belt states made up 90 percent of the total production; Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas were the top four states.21 Japanese migrant workers became a valuable labor source because many of the techniques and procedures utilized by the major poultry companies originated in Japan. In the early 1930s the Japanese invented vent sexing, a method by which male and female chicks are distinguished and separated at an early age. Given the efficiency of this method as opposed to the traditional and slower practice of feather sexing, American hatcheries and processing plants brought over Japanese representatives who would provide courses on sexing techniques to both American and Japanese American laborers. While Latino workers make up a large percentage of the lower-level and more dangerous positions in today’s

20 No specific corporation controlled a single component of the poultry industry in 1950. By 1960, the industry had shifted toward larger contracts and a greater concentration on larger companies overseeing specific aspects of poultry production and distribution. Steve Striffler, “We’re All Mexicans Here: Poultry Processing, Latino Migration, and the Transformation of Class in the South,” in Peacock, The American South in a Global World, 154.
poultry plants, Japanese Americans have been a pertinent fixture in the ever-growing Southern poultry industry.  

*Kira-Kira* documents how Japanese Americans contended with exploitative labor practices of the South’s poultry industry and negotiated the intricacies of Jim Crow segregation. Kadohata subtly but poignantly complicates southern race relations by highlighting groups like Asian Americans who fall outside of the traditional black-white racial binary. Unfamiliar with Southern racial divisions, Katie Takeshima, the novel’s twelve-year-old Japanese American narrator, attempts to make sense of where she does and does not belong. *Kira-Kira’s* focus on Japanese Americans living in a small Georgia town also recasts regional identity into a larger global framework by uncovering the significant impact of immigrant populations on one of the South’s more prominent industries. The influx of migrant workers not only transformed small rural communities into vibrant multiethnic spaces but also challenged racial divisions by creating possibilities for a strong working-class collective identity. The tangible qualities of what Richard Schein calls the “scene/seen” of the physical space help to contextualize the experiences of Japanese Americans in segregated rural Georgia.  

Kadohata’s portrayal of the substandard home spaces and dangerous work environments points to the ways in which Asians become marginalized under Jim Crow. Private dwellings and public

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23 Schein’s idea of the “scene/seen” centers on the notion that the visible and tangible qualities of the local landscape are central to the ways in which a specific place or community gets defined (Richard Schein, *Landscape and Race in the United States* [New York: Routledge, 2006], 5).
workspaces become palpable markers of status, and more specifically, racial and ethnic difference. Or, as James L. Peacock notes, “racism is spacism.” But while *Kira-Kira* highlights the spatial inequalities that Japanese Americans face under 1950s segregation, Kadohata’s novel also reveals how these injustices engender new class-based alliances that bring together southern whites and Japanese migrants in an effort to secure equal access to vital social resources for southerners regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Katie’s narration heavily relies on her sensory perception of the physical environment. Throughout the novel, she meticulously describes visual objects and spaces in order to better understand her surroundings and situate herself in a new environment. Additionally, the visible qualities of specific locales serve to imbue place with personal memory and meaning. Katie keeps a diary in which she records important events during her time in Georgia. Many of the entries include brief descriptions of various locales that entrench her memories in a specific time and place. Place also takes on a much deeper meaning as she soon discovers how her family’s living and working conditions reflect their social rank. Becoming more familiar with the layout of the town, she analyzes the marked difference between the dilapidated apartments and workspaces of the Japanese American workers and the pristine homes of upper-class white families. Dirt and decay become signifiers of her family’s marginalized status in the segregated South. As Fitzhugh Brundage argues, to “use and control one’s physical surroundings is an essential measure of both personal freedom and collective power.” For many Asian Americans, the US South represents a site of acceptance, contestation, and ambiguity wherein the

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politics of race and ethnicity are played out in both public and private spaces. From accessibility to public housing to segregation in the workplace, the use and inhabitation of physical spaces serve as benchmarks of individual and communal strength. Yet *Kira-Kira* reveals the challenges for Japanese Americans as they attempt to navigate the points of accessibility and exclusion in the Jim Crow South. The overriding question is how did Asian Americans reconcile the contradictory nature of living within and outside the system of segregation?

The narrative centers on two major events: the terminal illness of Katie’s sister, Lynn, and the challenges her family faces in finding a permanent home in the Jim Crow South. Her novel not only traces the rigors of adolescence, like a beloved sibling’s death and the difficulty of making friends, but also the alienating effects of being one of the few Japanese Americans children in a predominantly white southern town. *Kira-Kira* strays from more widely-known Japanese American coming-of-age novels like Janine Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973) by framing issues of belonging and acceptance not through the experience of World War II internment but through the negotiations of Jim Crow segregation. The novel also takes a different approach to the southern bildungsroman like Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) by exploring race relations from the perspective of a child positioned between racial identities.

*Kira-Kira* serves a valuable tool for analyzing how Asian identity functions in the South’s social relations as Katie’s innocent observations of her surroundings provide an unfiltered perspective of how racial and class divisions are encoded in the physical spaces of a small Georgia town. Jim Crow segregation disrupts, and in some cases,
destroys the innocence of childhood as young characters confront the harsh realities of southern racism. But the novel also undermines assumptions of strict racial divisions by exposing the indeterminate status of those classified as neither “white” nor “colored.” As a child born outside of the South and the white-black binary, the novel’s young narrator provides a unique and insightful perspective on racial politics and their manifestation in the South’s physical spaces. Katie’s boundless curiosity and willingness to constantly question societal values make this children’s novel a valuable lens through which to explore how racial divisions were constructed and challenged in the region’s segregated past.

Japanese Americans who migrated to the South in the 1950s faced questions of belonging long prior to their first encounters with Jim Crow racism. While World War II internment was arguably the most pronounced violation of Japanese American rights, a number of legislative measures severely limited the freedoms of Japanese Americans and other Asian populations in the United States prior to the war. As noted in previous chapters, the Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924 or the National Origins Act) limited the number of immigrants allowed from European nations while completely excluding all immigrants from Asian countries. The new law sparked fierce resentment of the United States among many Japanese who viewed Asian exclusion as an inexcusable insult to Japan’s culture and people. An April 19, 1924 editorial in the Japan Times and Mail revealed Japan’s frustration by characterizing the Act as an “unnecessary and ill-judged” response from a misinformed American public.26 Only after the passages

26 “The Senate’s Declaration of War,” Japan Times and Mail. April 19, 1924. 4.
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of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952, which removed Asian exclusion, and the Nationality and Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished all country of origin quotas, did Asian immigration levels become comparable to those of regions like Europe.\textsuperscript{27}

While many early Asian immigrants settled in larger urban areas like San Francisco and New York because of the presence of sizable ethnic enclaves in these locales, others moved elsewhere in search of new economic opportunities. In the years following Reconstruction, Chinese and Japanese immigrants made their way from western states to the South only to discover the expanses of Jim Crow's authority. James Loewen suggests that many Chinese Americans aligned themselves with whites in order to evade the economic and social restrictions associated with "colored" status. Numerous southern states such as Mississippi revised miscegenation laws to prohibit marriage between whites and individuals who were at least 1/8 Asian. As we will see in Kadohata's novel, southern segregation perpetuated racial discrimination and social ambiguity because Japanese American characters found themselves uncertain exactly where they fell on the South's color line.

Kadohata's own experiences growing up in the South shape her novel's exploration of the anxieties affecting racial identity of Japanese Americans living with Jim Crow. Like Katie, Kadohata was born in the Midwest. Her second-generation Japanese Americans moved to Chicago from California shortly before her birth in 1956. At an early age, she moved to Georgia, where her father was employed as a chicken sexer. Her family then moved to Arkansas, where her father found another chicken-

\textsuperscript{27} Takaki, \textit{Strangers From a Different Shore}, 420.
sexing position.\textsuperscript{28} Kadohata’s experiences in adjusting to, embracing, and questioning southern culture resonate throughout the novel as young Katie learns what it means to be Japanese American in 1950s Georgia.

The novel begins in Iowa with Katie’s innocent mispronunciation and misuse of a Japanese word. She explains her difficulties saying ‘kira-kira,’ which is loosely translated as ‘glittering’ in English. She grows fond of the word and begins to use it to describe anything from the blue skies of the Midwest to Kleenex. Troubled by how “un-Japanese [Katie and her sister] were,” Katie’s mother chastises her for inappropriately using the word to describe everyday objects like tissue paper and vows to send them to Japan for their formal education.\textsuperscript{29} In her study of Asian American childhood autobiographies, Rocío Davis suggests, “The question of language obsesses the child or parents, who fear that the acquisition of English will lead to the loss of the heritage language.”\textsuperscript{30} Katie’s grammatical mistake is harmless but nonetheless positions her as neglecting her Japanese heritage. Born in ‘America’s Heartland’ yet too American for her mother’s liking, she is the product of two cultures but still coming to terms with each one.

While a grasp of proper Japanese American grammar escapes Katie, her sister appears to understand more readily their cultural hybridity through their relationship with the Iowa landscape. Lynn records in her diary that “the corn was so pretty” and that

“when it was around me, I felt like I wanted to stay there forever.”31 Yet she believes that her Midwest home lacks the means to establish what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls a “desirable immobility . . . of having created a permanent home and cast[ing] down roots.”32 Katie states, “I always liked our little rented house, but Lynn always told me I would love our very own house.”33 Lynn desires the stability and connection to a specific place through a sense of ownership, one that a rental home cannot provide. Katie also longs for a sense of rootedness as she questions the motives behind the impending move. She states how she was “perfectly happy in Iowa” and “did not see why we had to move to a southern state . . . [and] leave our house for a small apartment.” Yet a bleak economic outlook in Iowa forces the Takeshimas to seek a home elsewhere. Their Asian grocery store goes out of business because “there were hardly any Oriental people in Iowa.”34

The lack of a discernible Asian American community not only limits the Takeshimas’ economic opportunities but also challenges their sense of belonging in the small midwestern town. Cultural and ethnic isolation ultimately forces the family to uproot from Iowa and seek work and a home elsewhere. Like many Japanese Americans during the post-World War II years, the Takeshimas become a migrant family in search of greater economic and social opportunities. As Katie’s father simply states, “If it’s time to move on, it’s time to move on.”35 They learn of possible work in the poultry plants in

31 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 5.
32 Wong, Reading Asian American Literature, 120.
33 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 7.
34 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 21-22.
35 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 235.
Georgia from Uncle Katsuhsisa, who is already employed there with several other Japanese Americans.

Although the lack of a visible Japanese American community in the Midwest creates economic and cultural challenges, the politics of segregation in the South pose an even greater challenge. The family’s first glimpse at southern racial politics occurs during a stopover at a motel in Tennessee. The motel manager informs Katie’s father that “Indians stay in the back rooms.” After Mr. Takeshima explains that he and his family are not Indians, the employee states that Mexicans stay in the back as well. In this culture, Asian, Native American, and Latino are blended together as an undistinguishable and inferior racial category. Denied access to rooms and ethnically misidentified, Katie and her family are positioned as being un-American although they claim an American birthright. The Takeshimas experience similar confusion in negotiating segregated spaces upon their arrival in Georgia. At a restaurant displaying a “COLORED IN BACK” sign, Katie notes that whites sat in the front but her family orders their food to go because “we didn’t know where to sit.” Unable to claim privileges granted to whites, the young girl becomes painfully aware of racial difference. Yet the ambiguous status of Japanese Americans within the structures of southern race relations leaves her unable to comprehend fully the line between acceptance and exclusion.

The Takeshimas’ confusion over where they belong reflects the lingering struggles for acceptance Japanese Americans faced during and in the years following World War II. The displacement and internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans

challenged their rights as American citizens and their sense of belonging in a national context. Marked as an internal threat solely by their racial identity, Japanese Americans became prisoners in their own country. The Takeshimas' struggles in navigating public space draw attention to the traditional white-black binary that has long characterized the South. Groups like Asian Americans found themselves in an indeterminate space under Jim Crow. While the demarcations between whites and African Americans in the public spaces of the segregated South were clear, the parameters of permitted and prohibited spaces for groups outside of this binary were more ambiguous, given their inability to claim white status and their refusal to accept being identified as colored.

This vague sense of the proper place for non-white or black ethnic groups, coupled with the absence of Japanese Americans, subjects the Takeshimas to the scrutiny of the white gaze. Katie describes how she and her family “got stared at quite a bit” and how some whites “touched our faces, as if they weren’t sure we were real.”38 Objectified by the white gaze, Asian American bodies become exoticized and artificial. At times, curiosity manifests into apprehension. Maureen Ryan notes how for many southerners the presence of Asian immigrants in the region “evokes and echoes not reassurance that the newcomers revere [their] history . . . but fear of the Other.”39 But for Katie, these same white southerners are foreign and peculiar themselves. She describes how their southern accents seemed strange. Katie’s initial encounter with whites in the South is an interesting reversal of Kadohata’s own experiences of growing up in Georgia and Arkansas and moving to the North. She notes in her online biography that she “spoke

38 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 34.
with such a heavy Southern accent that when I moved up north nobody could understand a word I said. My teacher threatened to put me in speech therapy if I didn't lose my accent.  

Yet later in the novel, Katie herself develops a distinct southern accent. She finds herself at the center of attention as local residents find amusement in the “little Japanese girl who said ‘you all’ instead of ‘you.’”\footnote{Kadohata, \textit{Kira-Kira}, 48.}\footnote{Quoted in Hsiu-chaun Lee, “Interview with Cynthia Kadohata,” \textit{MELUS} 32, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 173.}\footnote{Looking Asian but \textit{sounding} southern, Katie becomes a figure trapped in an interstitial space and unable to appear ‘normal.’ Much like her earlier experience mispronouncing “kira-kira,” this event once again positions her body and her voice as contested. Rather than masking it, Katie, with some prodding by her older sister, flaunts her ”East meets South” exoticism and begins to charge community members money to watch \textit{and hear} her speak. The self-exploitation of her own ethnicity for economic gain is forgivable if only because she is a child. Yet the reality is that the southern social system, governed by strict racial, ethnic, and class divisions, does not make her a celebrity so much as a peculiar figure who does not quite fit in.

Katie comes to the painful realization that difference does not mean popularity as she learns of the discrimination and alienation that the town’s Japanese Americans experience. Lynn informs her sister that the students at the predominantly white school may not want to associate with her. Confused as to why students would ostracize her when the Japanese American community embraces and loves her, Katie innocently asks, “Why wouldn’t they want to know me?” Lynn attempts to provide an answer that her
young sister would comprehend: “Because, there’s only thirty-one Japanese people in the whole town, and there’s more than four thousand people in the town, and four thousand divided by thirty-one is . . . a lot more of them than of us . . . They think we’re like doormats—or ants or something!” Lynn’s statement stems from the fact that those in the majority, that is, the white population, control the social spaces of their southern town. Simply being outnumbered is to be outclassed. However, Katie cannot make sense of the psychic violence toward Japanese Americans in the South. Only later do we learn how she begins to see the divisions within the public spaces she occupies. While she attends a racially integrated school, she finds herself socially segregated when her fellow students ignore her in schoolyard. Katie notes, “White people were not really mean to me, but they were rarely nice, either.” In many ways, her description implies an indifference toward Japanese Americans from local residents. Her words also suggest a level of insignificance, that somehow these migrant communities were essentially invisible.

In an attempt to establish a more tangible understanding of her new surroundings, Katie carefully explores the landscape. Yet the physical South fails to impress her senses. She takes note of the numerous billboards that read “Home of the Sweetest Onions in the World” and “The World’s Best Peaches.” While the road signs boast the state’s gift for agriculture, she concludes, “Georgia didn’t seem so different from anyplace else.” She initially believed that her new southern home would be full of beautiful mansions and

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orchards ripe with nuts and fruit. Upon further review, she contends that the antebellum homes seem indistinguishable and the signs claiming the world’s best barbeque seem repetitive. Georgia becomes less of a land of beauty and distinctiveness and more of parity and the ordinary. Katie describes missing the cornfields, blue skies, and snow of Iowa as they settle into Chesterfield. She begrudgingly accepts the fact that rural Georgia is hardly the kira-kira landscape of the Midwest.

Although the Takeshimas find new economic opportunities in Chesterfield, their new surroundings and occupation present new challenges for their social status. Katie’s parents travel an hour to a windowless hatchery and processing plant made out of concrete and aluminum. Inside the cold and uninviting building, the migrant laborers work twelve-hour shifts under dangerous working conditions. Katie observes how her mother’s once “delicate hands” were now marred by series of cuts suffered from her work at the plant. 45 Perhaps more troubling to the young narrator is the social ostracism outside the plant walls. She reveals that while the poultry industry was vital to Georgia’s economy, “that didn’t stop many people who did not work with poultry from looking down on those who did.” 46 Her status as both a Japanese American and a daughter of migrant workers makes her an outcast among her white classmates.

The substandard living conditions help Katie better understand the social divisions that position her family and the other Japanese Americans on the periphery of the social landscape in Georgia. The Takeshimas move into a “cheap apartment

45 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 89.
46 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 88.
building” occupied by the other Japanese migrant workers.47 Unlike their Iowa home, their new southern dwelling feels unwelcoming. Katie notes how “obviously unhappy” her parents were as they observed the dirty rooms and mold-covered walls of their new home.48 The small two-bedroom apartments fail to accommodate larger families and ultimately force most residents to spend their free time congregating in the outdoor courtyard. Despite observing her parents’ frustrations over their substandard living conditions, Katie cannot fully grasp the class and racial inequalities that plague the Japanese migrant workers and their families. But her playful conversations with Lynn at bedtime help her become increasingly aware of class differences. The sisters agree to save their meager allowances to help their parents purchase a home. Lynn informs Katie, “instead of just wishing for a house, we’re helping to really get one.”49 Many of the novel’s Japanese American workers recognize that the only means of improving their living conditions is to become homeowners. Uncle Katsuhisa is the only Japanese American to own a house in Chesterfield— a privilege afforded to him by a large sum of money he inherited. Most of the poultry workers, though, can afford only to rent shoddy and cheap apartments despite their integral role in one of the South’s leading industries. The family’s struggles reflect the limited opportunities of Japanese Americans following internment. Jere Takahasi argues that while a changing post-World War II labor market created new opportunities in skilled occupations, “unions, the more lucrative trades, and

many professions continued to deny access to Japanese Americans.”50 The challenges of securing living wages highlight the ways in which race and class intersect as Japanese Americans continued to be denied opportunities to enter mainstream American society in years following the war.

While the Takeshimas’ struggles in finding steady employment and a permanent home illustrates the challenges of postwar life, Katie’s observations of the living spaces of the town’s upper-class whites underscore the ways in which Jim Crow segregation further marginalizes Japanese Americans. Mr. Lyndon, the owner of the chicken hatchery and processing plant, wields significant power over the town and its inhabitants. Although he makes only brief appearances throughout the novel, his presence and authority are clearly marked by his control of property. Katie is immediately struck by the opulence of the Lyndon estate. Located on a private road across town from the Japanese American apartments, the former plantation mansion resembles a castle to Katie with its enormous azalea garden and ceilings covered in bright blue murals of the sky that stand “twice as high as the ceiling in [her] house.”51 Though unimpressed with much of the Georgia landscape, Katie is struck by the expanse of Lyndon’s domestic space and says that “such a world they lived in was difficult to imagine.”52 The stark contrast between the white plant owner’s pristine home and the rural decay of the Japanese Americans’ apartments makes racial, ethnic, and economic divisions visible and thereby reinforces Yi-Fu Tuan’s contention that “the built environment clarifies social roles and

51 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 232-33.
52 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 86.
relations." As visible and tangible objects, man-made spaces such as houses reaffirm socially constructed modes of belonging and exclusion. The act of constructing living spaces serves as a means of maintaining order by establishing a spatial consciousness based on racial, ethnic, and class difference. The disparate housing conditions reinforce the Japanese American employees as subordinates to the dominant white upper class.

With its white pillars, sheer size, and presence of an African American maid staff, the Lyndon mansion calls to the mind the plantation homes of the antebellum South. Katie notes how they had “torn down the old slave quarters” and placed an azalea garden in its place. But the idyllic floral scenery fails to obscure the racial and class divisions that the immaculate space of white privilege exhibits. Kadohata repositions the plantation home to symbolize 1950s white authority; only here white racism is transposed from African American slaves to Japanese American employees. Similarly, the mansion articulates class difference as the lavish home space distinguishes Lyndon from working-class whites who live in more modest home. Not only do whites outnumber the Japanese in rural Georgia, but their homes out-size and out-class their Asian American counterparts. Private space serves to reinforce the social and enforced segregation of public places.

Yet Kadohata shows glimpses of Japanese Americans in the South overcoming a “geography of racism.” The Japanese families living in Chesterfield congregate at Uncle Katsuhisa’s home to celebrate the arrival of the Takeshimas. They enjoy

53 Y. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 102.
54 Kadohata, *Kira-Kira*, 86.
traditional Japanese cuisine such as fish cakes and onigiri as well as classic southern fare like barbecued chicken. Katie also describes how the families would gather on New Year’s Day in the empty lot by their apartment complex to take part in the Japanese tradition of watching the sunrise. Though geographically separated from the rest of the Chesterfield population, these activities and celebrations reaffirm their Japanese heritage while simultaneously transforming their decrepit surroundings into sources of kinship and power. As Kate Berry and Martha Henderson observe, the “strength of the ethnic group to re-create the landscape with material and nonmaterial symbols and forms of social interaction” helps establish a sense of community. While their rundown dwellings fail to provide everyday comforts, the social interactions within these spaces create a sense of home. Recounting her own migratory experiences, Kadohata comments that “a relationship can give people a type of safety that environment won’t be able to give. Safety is produced through making human connections.”

Katie also discovers the magical possibilities of the natural environment much like her experiences in the Iowa cornfields. Stumbling upon a large open field on Lyndon’s property, she notes that it was “a magical place” where she could “imagine what the past held: cows grazing, a Civil War battle, maybe dinosaurs.” Katie’s innocent ruminations on history resemble the South’s own complex fascination with its past. But her “backward glance” looks beyond the mythologized constructions of the Old South and the ghosts of the Confederacy. Instead, her exploration into the past, albeit a

57 Lee, “Interview with Cynthia Kadohata,” 173.
58 Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 140.
playful one, realigns southern history so that the Civil War no longer serves as its center. Katie’s fantasies suggest that the southern past bears little consequence for migrant families like the Takeshimas. The open terrain of the Georgia wilderness provides a sense of freedom and mobility denied to her by Jim Crow segregation. Conjuring up a prehistoric South allows her to imagine a place and time devoid of racial prejudice and class disparities. Like Chang in The Foreign Student, Katie asserts a sense of control over her natural surroundings, an act that establishes a new spatial narrative. For Kadohata’s young Japanese protagonist, childhood play takes on a more meaningful function as her exploration of the Georgia wilderness transforms the restrictive spaces of the Jim Crow South into a more liberating space.

Still, the disparities in working and living conditions between employer and employee force working-class citizens in the novel to reach across class and racial lines and challenge the unfair practices of the white elite. James Clifford contends that the “negative experience of racial and economic marginalization can...lead to new coalitions” that work to combat workplace exploitation. The Takeshimas, for instance, form a friendship with Hank Garvin, a working-class white, after he rescues Katie’s younger brother from a hunting trap left on Lyndon’s property. Garvin is familiar with the Japanese American families since his wife works to unionize the migrant workers at the poultry plant. His connection to union activity initially leaves Katie suspicious of him as she recalls her parents’ anxiety over unionizing and its potential threat to their job security. But she quickly recognizes his sincerity when she sees him treating her family

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59 Clifford, Routes, 256.
as if they “were the most important people in the world.”° Garvin’s willingness to assist and look after her family convinces Katie that the true source of her family’s hardships lies not with working-class whites but with Lyndon. Observing how workers rarely convene outside of the work space, she learns how the powerful plant owner “doesn’t let any of the employees gather in the parking lot, even if they’re not talking about the union.”°

Lyndon’s rejection of the Takeshimas’ request for paid leave after Lynn’s death serves as the final impetus for the Japanese Americans’ decision to work with union supporters against the plant’s exploitative labor practices. The union proposes a plan that would provide workers with a three-day grievance leave. Although Katie’s mother states that it is “a little too late for that,” Katie reveals that the union surprisingly wins by a single vote: a vote cast by Mrs. Takeshima.° Despite the geographical divide that separates them, the poultry employees unite across racial and ethnic divides to form an integrated working-class community in order to contest the exploitation of local and global labor forces. On a more intimate level, Katie sees the formation of more personal connections between the Japanese American employees and their white counterparts. She notes that she did not “think it was any of the speeches [her mother] heard that made her vote for the union” but rather the shared experiences of working-class parents.° Katie suggests that the sight of a child at the meeting who was suffering from cancer ultimately persuaded her mother to vote in favor of the union. Mrs. Takeshima hopes her vote will

° Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 154.
°° Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 92.
°°° Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 237.
°°°° Kadohata, Kira-Kira, 237.

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help ensure that "it would not be too late for the next family suffering grief."\textsuperscript{64} The spatial inequalities and labor issues that affect not only Japanese migrants but also southern working-class whites help break down racial and ethnic barriers as both groups ultimately come together to seek communal justice.

However nuanced, Kadohata’s treatment of Japanese Americans’ union activity points to overlooked connections between an immigrant workforce and local labor relations. In his study on the South’s increasingly expanding poultry industry, Steve Striffler examines the challenging working conditions that employees at an Arkansas Tyson Foods plant face. Like the characters in Kadohata’s novel, the workers at the center of his analysis are not predominantly southern whites or African Americans but rather immigrants who are drawn to the region for its wealth of job opportunities. Witnessing the difficult conditions and long working hours that laborers from South and Central America and Asia face in the Tyson plant, Striffler argues that “we must consider, or pose as a problem, that globalization can lead not only to the internationalization of capital but to the internationalization of workers.”\textsuperscript{65} Despite the fact that the growth of industries like poultry production continues to bolster the South’s economy, these advances have dangerous consequences. The region’s increasingly foreign workforce is subjected to unsafe working conditions and low wages simply because there are no other jobs available. David Harvey notes that while immigrants living in rural areas depend on “Broiler Belt” businesses for economic survival, they become “easy prey for an industry seeking a cheap, unorganized, and easily disciplined

\textsuperscript{64} Kadohata, \textit{Kira-Kira}, 238.
\textsuperscript{65} Striffler, “We’re All Mexicans Here,” 164.

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labor force. But Kodohata suggests that immigrant laborers in the South do not always remain passive in the face of labor exploitation and racism. The relationships that develop between her Japanese and southern white characters point to the possibility of multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that work to dismantle the economic and social processes restricting the power of the region’s working class.

Forbidden Love in the “New” South— Mira Nair’s Mississippi Masala

After receiving an Oscar nomination for best film in a foreign language for Salaam Bombay in 1988, Indian filmmaker Mira Nair turned her attention away from India to other parts of the world. The expulsion of Asians, particularly those of Indian descent, from Uganda in 1972 and their experiences migrating to a new country inspired her to explore how Indian immigrants adjusted to life in the United States. Her 1991 Hollywood debut Mississippi Masala depicts these hardships through a revisionary narrative of tabooed interracial romances in the American South. Nair’s shift from the more conventional white/black romance to a courtship between a black southerner and an African immigrant of Asian descent illustrates how apprehension over interracial intimacy is not uniquely southern as her South Asian immigrant characters express their own reservations about race mixing.

While Nair originally planned for her film to center on an Indian immigrant attending Harvard, she turned her attention to how immigrants contend with the ever-changing racial politics of the American South. In a 2002 interview with The Guardian, Nair explains how the dispersal of African immigrants of South Asian descent raises new

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questions of community and race when they find themselves in a region marked by its own troubled racial past. She asks, "What was it like to be African, but of Indian skin who believed India to be a spiritual home without ever having been there and to be living in Mississippi" and what occurs when "this world collided with that of black African Americans who believed Africa to be their spiritual home but had also never been there?" The increasing presence of global forces, whether cultural, economic, or political, heightens concerns over the ways in which local communities, particularly smaller locales with a relatively homogeneous population, move forward. The question that emerges is how do longtime southerners and newly arrived immigrants coexist? Nair's film responds to this question with a depiction of the cultural misunderstandings and conflicts that emerge between newly arrived South Asian immigrants and longtime African American residents of a small Mississippi town. Barbara Ellen Smith notes how "new immigrants have become in many Southern places the human embodiment of globalization, thereby symbolizing all of its threats as well as, at least for some people, promise." Mississippi Masala attempts to show how global politics of race implicate both longtime residents and newly arrived refugees in a difficult yet illuminating engagement with the histories of multiple "Souths." African American southerners and Ugandans of South Asian descent find themselves intertwined with the painful reminders and lingering presence of the segregated past. The film reveals how Mississippi's black community continues to feel the restrictive measures of Jim Crow while simultaneously

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68 B. Smith, "Place and the Past in the Global South," 694.
spotlighting the ethnic tensions that forced South Asians immigrants to leave their
African home. What emerges when Nair weaves together the political upheaval of 1970s
Uganda and the persistent influence of southern racism is a more expansive portrait of
race relations in a global world that underscore the ways in which the shared experiences
of exclusion and oppression can both unite and divide diverse populations.

When United States government officials overhauled immigration policies in
1965, many did not expect significant changes to the American population. But political
upheaval in countries across the world in the early 1970s led to the significant influx of
new refugees like Southeast Asians. Another prominent group to migrate to the United
States as the result of volatile conditions was Africans of Asian descent who fled Uganda
after Idi Amin seized power in 1971.69 Indians, mainly Gujaratis, had been living in the
African nation for several generations after having arrived during British rule. Uganda
won its independence in 1962. Despite their Indian roots, they defined themselves as
Africans and attained prominence in the nation’s economic and social milieu.70

But Amin’s takeover signaled a dramatic shift in power and ideology as the
former military commander initiated a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing across
Uganda. He argued that Asians were corrupt and detriment to Uganda’s economy. He
also maintained that Indians living in the country had no rightful claim to Ugandan

69 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, The State of the World’s Refugees: Fifty Years of
Humanitarian Action (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69
70 The Gujaratis originate from Gujarat in western India. Today, over 90 percent of African of Indian
descent living in Uganda are Gujaratis. Similar outbreaks of violence continue to plague the nation’s
Gujarati community as Ugandans have expressed anger over their involvement in new entrepreneurial
endeavors, particularly their role in the acquisition of rainforest land for sugarcane cultivation (Sreenivas
Janyala, “Nightmare in Kampala, Sleepless in Saurashtra,” Indian Express, April 15, 2007, accessed March
citizenship given that they were not of African descent. "Indophobia" became widespread as Amin's power increased. In an attempt to restore ethnic purity, Amin ordered the expulsion of Asians on August 4, 1972. Indians, even those who were Ugandan citizens, had 90 days to leave the country that gave them limited time to secure jobs and housing. Approximately 29,000 possessed British passports and emigrated to the United Kingdom. Others moved to India, Germany, Canada, and the United States.71

Indians who arrived in the United States were admitted through the authority of Attorney General Richard Kleindienst and bypassed established procedures for political refugees because of the urgent nature of unrest in Uganda. With few or no relatives already living in the country, Indians from Uganda settled across the country, and many moved to the South because of its lower housing costs. David M. Reimers traces the ways in which the region's struggling motel industry in the 1970s and 1980s opened up new opportunities for South Asian immigrants to establish economic stability after immigrating to the United States. At first many purchased smaller, independent motels in states like North Carolina and Alabama but soon moved to operate larger national and regional chains. Chain migration patterns emerged as immigrants would send word of their success back to family members living outside of the United States. Reimers notes that the prominence of Indian-owned accommodations, particularly those with the last name Patel, led many in the South to refer to these facilities as "Potels," a pejorative term that highlights southerners' displeasure of the region's changing demographics.72 While South Asians rarely faced physical violence, they sensed the tensions surrounding their

72 Reimers, "Asian Immigrants in the South," 112.
place in southern race relations. Examining the experiences of South Asian immigrants living in contemporary North Carolina, Ajantha Subramanian suggests that many Indian Americans understand acceptance and exclusion “in terms of differentiated citizenship,” whereby ethnic and racial identity determines who can and cannot claim themselves as Americans. More specifically, Indian Americans believe that non-European immigrants will always be “permanent foreigners” because of the perception that American identity is equated to white identity.73 Despite achieving a level of economic success through their entrepreneurial ventures, many South Asians who immigrated to the United States after 1965 struggled to overcome this perceived outsider status as they worked to integrate themselves into their respective communities.

Boasting a major Hollywood actor and Academy Award winner in Denzel Washington and prominent stars of the Indian film industry, *Mississippi Masala* attempts to capture the communal tensions that arise between South Asian immigrants and African Americans as they attempt to work past their respective histories of racial and ethnic exclusion.74 Set in rural Mississippi in the 1990s, the story is a modern-day take on *Romeo and Juliet* as two lovers navigate the growing conflicts between their respective families. Mina Loha (played by Sarita Choudhury), a rebellious but responsible Ugandan immigrant of Indian descent who lives and works at a local Indian-owned motel, falls in love with Demetrius Williams (played by Washington), a straight-laced African American carpet cleaner who puts his own future on hold to stay in Greenwood to care

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74 *Mississippi Masala* was the first film set in the United States to feature an Indian female lead. Prior to starring in the film, Washington had received critical acclaim for his performances in the Civil War film *Glory* (1989) and Spike Lee’s *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990).
for his elderly father and teenage brother. The lovers keep their relationship hidden since both the Indian and African American communities disapprove of the interracial romance and in doing so reveal racial and ethnic tensions extending beyond the immediate circumstances of the romance. Although the film is ultimately a love story, *Mississippi Masala* is a complex and layered study of globalization’s impact on race relations in the contemporary American South. More specifically, the film explores the possibilities and limitations of multicultural and minority solidarity in the aftermath of significant social and political change. The forced expulsion of Asians from Uganda and the aftermath of southern segregation serve as the catalysts for tensions that emerge between South Asian immigrants and southern blacks as they attempt to learn to coexist in a small Mississippi community. Following the experiences of both Indians and Ugandans of South Asian descent who migrate to rural Mississippi, Nair highlights the struggles of late-twentieth century immigrants as they contend with questions of citizenship, ethnicity, and displacement.

*Mississippi Masala* immediately draws attention to the thorny relationship between place and race and ethnicity as the film begins in the chaotic streets of Kampala following Amin’s call for the expulsion of Asians. Jay Loha, an attorney of Indian descent and his black Ugandan friend, Okelo, share a heated conversation over Jay’s BBC interview in which he criticizes the Ugandan dictator. Having been born and raised in the country, an impassioned Jay asserts, “Uganda is my home.” His forceful statement reinforces an identity rooted not in ethnicity but rather in geographic location.

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75 *Mississippi Masala*, directed by Mira Nair (Columbia Tri-Star, 1991), DVD.
But Okelo denies his longtime friend a place in the Ugandan community. He informs Jay that his place-bound sense of self no longer holds true as “Africa is for Africans. Black Africans.” Urmila Seshagiri suggests that the film’s opening underscores the significance of “place” because she notes how geography “influences identity as fundamentally as ethnicity.”

Although Jay acknowledges and respects his Indian heritage, he strongly identifies with his African home. A later scene depicts him wistfully looking across the scenic Ugandan countryside from his backyard one last time. Nair also employs a series of flashbacks to further emphasize Jay’s attachment to Uganda and the profound affection that Indians have for their African home. Jay vividly recalls a more peaceful time as the film shows him as child playing with Okelo. Nair reinforces the interconnectedness of South Asia and Africa with a scene featuring Jay enjoying the sights and sounds of a black Ugandan band playing a Hindi song. But this latter memory undercuts the peaceful coexistence of the two cultures found in the previous flashback since it takes place in the days leading up to Asian expulsion. Denied the right to call Africa home and uncertain of what the future holds, Jay asks, “Where should I go?” as Uganda’s changing politics and his Indian ethnicity leave him without a stable geographic to which he can lay claim.

Cultural hybridity gives way to a far more complex image of race, ethnicity, and place as the narrative shifts from the chaotic streets of Kampala to the rural back roads of Greenwood, Mississippi. The opening credits track the movement of the Loha family on a map as the camera pans from Uganda, to the United Kingdom, and finally to the family’s arrival in Greenwood. The Hindi music in the background transitions into a

blues piece as we see Meena, who is now an adult, and her aunt in a Piggly Wiggly
grocery store, an iconic symbol of southern life. As the only South Asians in the store,
both characters seem out of place. Yet the film’s first scene in the small Mississippi town
also suggests that the American South is now home to an increasingly diverse population
as the store’s white cashier is taken aback not by Meena’s and her aunt’s presence but
rather the unusually large amount of milk they are purchasing (for an Indian wedding that
takes place later in the film).

Nair lays out Greenwood in a way that suggests the presence of unmarked
delineations that separate Indian immigrants, African Americans, and whites. Although
characters from each groups traverse these invisible but ever-present borders throughout
the film, the town’s social and economic framework allows only limited access to those
outside of their own race and ethnicity. While the days of legalized segregation are over,
Nair’s characters abide by unspoken racial boundaries that continue to separate whites
from non-whites. Situated along a highway on the outskirts of town, the Monte Cristo
Motel serves as the focal point of Greenwood’s Indian community. The building serves
as both an economic and domestic space to several Indian families, including the Lohas.
While the Monte Cristo is home to many immigrants, the motel also represents a hidden
space where Greenwood’s whites can partake in unsavory (and unlawful) behavior. In
one scene a rowdy group of presumably underage, white teens occupy a motel room
drinking alcohol and dancing to loud music. Later in the film a drunk white
businessmen, accompanied by a scantily-dressed female companion, inquires about the
motel’s hourly rates. In this light, the Monte Cristo represents the seedy, hidden world of

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Greenwood's white community, a place where whites can safely dabble in deviant behavior away from the public eye.

The communal activities of the motel's Indian residents stand in stark contrast to the unsavory activities that whites engage in at the Monte Cristo. Although the spatial distinctions between public and private, economic and domestic, are somewhat blurred, the living quarters do provide the immigrant families with a sense of familiarity and a communal identity centered on shared cultural traditions. Family and religion, integral aspects of both Indian and southern life, are emphasized in the motel's living spaces. Family portraits and religious iconography adorn their bedrooms walls. Preserving and honoring their Indian heritage is essential, particularly for the older immigrants in the community. Early in the film the immigrant families gather at the the Monte Cristo for a traditional Indian wedding between Anil, Mina's cousin and manager of the motel, and his bride. During the reception, Anil's father looks out at guests dressed in traditional Indian clothing and comments that "even though we are ten thousand miles away from India, we should not forget about our roots, our culture, our tradition." While they live in a new country, the older immigrants resist the urge to shed their ethnic heritage in lieu of a new American identity.

The film's younger immigrants are more eager to shed their immigrant status and embrace a more Westernized identity. Anil and his friend, Pontiac, favor the latest American fashion trends, drive Cadillacs, and appear to be more concerned with their own individual well-being rather than that of the collective Indian community. Nair's younger Indian characters attempt to forge new identities through their consumption of American goods. Much like the narrator in Robert Olen Butler's "Relic," Anil and his
friends believe that becoming American can be achieved through the material goods with
which they surround themselves. This desire to assimilate largely stems from their
newfound sense of place rooted in the United States. Anil’s father expresses
disappointment in his son for ignoring his cultural past and becoming “an American.”
The sentiment implies an adoption of a new place-bound identity and a disavowal of an
ethnic identity among the younger Indians living in Mississippi. For the older immigrant,
one can be either Indian or American but not both. Anil counters these claims by
proclaiming, “We are in America. If you don’t like it, you can go back to India.” His
logic suggests that one’s identity directly correlates to geographic proximity as he
assumes that national borders define his values and self-awareness. For Anil and a
number of the film’s younger South Asians, moving to the United States is a
transformative process in which one sheds one’s ethnic heritage in favor of an American
identity.

The conflicts between older and younger South Asian immigrants highlight the
ways in which transnational movements across and within racial, ethnic, and national
borders complicate identity politics. In many ways, Mississippi Masala draws attention to
the assimilationist-nativist trope associated with Asian American narratives. Patricia Chu
explains how Asian American fiction often “foregrounds and seeks to resolve the
contradictions of being Asian American in a country that has historically construed the
terms *Asian* and *American* as mutually exclusive.” For many of Nair’s South Asian characters, one’s identity is tethered to national allegiance or ethnic heritage.

Mina’s sense of self and place, however, illustrates how the film presents a more complex rendering of the expected assimilationist versus traditionalist immigrant narrative. Stuart Hall contends that cultural identity is “not an essence but a *positioning*” that involves an identity politics that “has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin.’” Mina’s constant movement from country to country, coupled with her numerous encounters with a variety of cultures and peoples, prevents her from claiming a specific racial, ethnic, nor place-bound identity. Born in Uganda as a child of Indian descent, violently forced to leave her birthplace for the United Kingdom, and now living in her adopted home of the American South, she cannot assert and refuses to claim allegiance to any single ethnic group. She describes herself as a “mixed masala,” a spicy blend of many cultures. Unlike the other younger immigrants like Anil, she does not consider economic success as the American Dream. Instead Mina’s sudden displacement as a child and the subsequent journeys that have taken her around the world compel her to seek a sense of belonging, a place to establish new roots regardless of ethnic, racial, or national identity. In some ways, her multiple migrations represent a powerful form of self-reinvention and cultural mobility. Rather than defining herself through a specific ethnicity or geographic location, Mina adopts a more fluid identity that continually adapts to the places and cultures she encounters.

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Geographic proximity and ethnic pride do not guarantee communal cohesiveness as Nair uncovers the intricate social hierarchies within Greenwood’s Indian population. Although Jay shares similar cultural values with Greenwood’s Indian immigrants, his Ugandan birthright distinguishes him and his family from the rest of the community. His attachment to his African birthplace positions him as an outcast. Jay’s lawsuit against the Ugandan government further alienates him as many consider his fight to reclaim a piece of his geographic and personal past a frivolous endeavor. The women, in particular, show disdain for the family. Their spiteful attitudes toward the Lohas become evident in an extended montage of phone conversations between the Indian women as they gossip over the family. The women denigrate Jay’s wife Kinnu for operating a liquor store in the predominantly African American section of the town and mock Jay for his persistent dreams of regaining his property. While the comedic nature of their conversations highlights the absurdity of the women’s gossip, the montage underscores the inferior status of the Ugandan-born family within Greenwood’s Indian community. The harsh comments made by the Indian women suggest that the Lohas fail to adhere to accepted class etiquette.

But the women’s critiques of Mina are the most scathing and reveal yet another indicator of status among the immigrants. Although they mock her parents for their financial matters, the women find greater issue with Mina’s appearance. More specifically, they ridicule her darker skin. The film further emphasizes the importance of physical appearance when Harry Patel, an eligible bachelor who is the envy of many of the women, asks Mina out on a date. The women laugh at the prospect of the two dating and argue, “You can be dark and have money, or you can be fair and have no money, but
you can’t be dark and have no money and expect to get Harry Patel.” Their explicit disapproval of Mina suggest that social status is determined by one’s wealth and proximity to blackness. Even so, the criticism of her Ugandan birthright and dark complexion reveals the complicated, and oftentimes problematic, relationship between place-bound and ethnic identities. While Mina is ethnically Indian, her African birth and upbringing deny her full access to and acceptance from the town’s South Asian community. In the eyes of Greenwood’s immigrants from India, Mina is not pure Indian. As we will see, this unstable dynamic becomes even more apparent when she crosses forbidden ethnic and racial boundaries.

While Mina’s and Demetrius’s blossoming romance follows the formula of a conventional romantic comedy, the relationship serves as Nair’s critical lens to explore contemporary southern race relations in a transnational context. The need to keep their romance hidden from their respective friends and families exposes lingering racial anxieties, particularly in terms of intimate relationships, that continue to preoccupy southerners in the post-segregation era. In this regard Mississippi Masala highlights the ways in which interracial sexual relationships remain taboo in southern communities. But in centering its story on the love affair between a southern black born and raised in the South and an Indian immigrant born in Uganda, the film also points to the growing concerns over the impact that global migration has on southern communities still contending with its history of segregation. The arrival of South Asian immigrants and their impact on the social and economic climate of rural towns reignite the memories of past racial conflicts. But Nair’s treatment of race relations in 1990s Mississippi also reveals that the legacies of southern racism are now intertwined with the racial and ethnic
biases that immigrants themselves possess. While her southern black and South Asian
characters try to coexist in their small rural community, they struggle to wrestle free from
the racist past as both groups attempt to maintain distance from each other. The anxieties
surrounding Mina’s and Demitrius’ interracial romance expose the ways in which
longstanding racial ideologies impede multiracial and multiethnic community building.

The relationship begins, quite literally, by accident as Mina rear ends Demetrius’s
cleaning van at a busy intersection. Later, she runs into Demetrius again when she and
Harry go out after Anil’s wedding reception and stumble upon the Leopard Lounge, a
predominantly African American dance club. Mina’s black friend Tadice is shocked to
see her there and playfully asks, “What are you doing here?” The question and the
“accidental” run-ins between Mina and Demetris reveal both a social and geographic
difference, one that limits interaction between Greenwood’s Indian immigrants and
African Americans. The film further reinforces this division through Harry. Despite his
casual demeanor when meeting Mina’s friend, he exhibits a subtle yet palpable sense of
discomfort while cautiously observing his unfamiliar surroundings. Even his physical
appearance stands out since his tuxedo seems out of place among the more casual attire
of the club’s predominantly black patrons. The Leopard Lounge scene suggests that
while Indian immigrants and African Americans can peacefully coexist, they adhere to
unspoken cultural and geographic boundaries reinforced by racial and ethnic legacies that
limit meaningful exchanges.

Despite these noticeable gaps between Greenwood’s blacks and Indian
immigrants, Nair hints at a sense of solidarity between the groups early in the film. Anil
fears that Demetrius will sue over Mina’s accident because he worries that the only thing
Americans know how to do is “how to sue.” But his friend, Kante Napkin, attempts to quell his concerns by talking to Demetrius and his friend, Tyrone. He argues that “honest people of color must stick together” in order to combat the common enemy of minorities: whites. Demetrius agrees and assures him that he will not sue. While Kante’s hopeful message of multiracial and multiethnic solidarity appear disingenuous, his sentiments weave together the strands of oppression and discrimination experienced by Indian immigrants and African Americans. The conversation exhibits a “shared sense of displacement [that] produces a seemingly mutual support system between African Americans and Indians in Greenwood.”

Although whites rarely appear on screen, their presence (along with their power) is discernible throughout the film. Often portrayed as comically ignorant, these characters display the sentiments of a region still mired in the racist ideologies of an older South. Early in the film, two white men call the police to complain about the noise coming from Anil’s wedding reception. The older character angrily suggests that they “send them back to the reservation” to which the younger male responds with, “They’re not that kind of Indian.” In another scene, an older white character describes the relationship between South Asian immigrants and African Americans as “nigger trouble.” Indeed, Nair’s depictions of southern whites are mired in stereotypes, but these characterizations reinforce the marginality of blacks and nonwhite immigrants as both groups remain the target of ridicule and scorn.

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79 Seshagiri, “At the Crossroads of Two Empires,” 185.
Demetrius's introduction of Mina to his family further suggests the possibility of a shared bond between South Asian immigrants and African Americans. He notes that while neither he nor Mina has been to Africa or India, respectively, they both share a spiritual connection to these places. While Demetrius's grandfather comically mistakes Mina as being from Indiana, the rest of his family openly welcome her into their home. Demetrius's younger brother, a somewhat naïve, outspoken teen who regularly preaches about minority solidarity, is especially friendly toward her and explains how southern blacks and Ugandan immigrants of South Asian descent have come to Mississippi under similar circumstances and are united by a strong connection to Africa.

But the portrait of unity between South Asians and southern blacks gives way to a more discouraging view of communal relations as the budding interracial romance exposes unspoken racial and ethnic anxieties held by both the newly-arrived immigrants and the longtime residents. *Mississippi Masala* hints at the ways in which many southerners remain ambivalent about race mixing in the late twentieth century. More specifically, the growing bond between the film's protagonists is tempered by their concerns over how their families and the greater Greenwood community might disapprove of an interracial romance between a black southerner and a South Asian immigrant. Given how protective their respective families are, Mina and Demetrius understand the potential backlash of making their relationship public. Displays of affection and intimate conversations only occur in private: alone in the Mississippi bayou, along a deserted beach, and behind closed doors.

The only locations where Demetrius and Mina find the freedom to further explore their relationship both emotionally and physically are those located outside of the racially
and ethnically regulated spaces of Greenwood. On a brief getaway to Biloxi, the couple shares their views on how traditional notions of race and ethnicity in the South influence their sense of being. Mina’s and Demetrius’s conversation on a deserted Biloxi beach provides a poignant and revealing glimpse of how global migration and post-civil rights attitudes have and have not changed race relations in the contemporary South. Mina describes how customers view her and her family as just “another goddamn Indian.” Demetrius, in turn, offers a more optimistic outlook. His claims that they live in a “new Mississippi” suggest that the rigid racial mores of segregationist politics have given way to more amenable attitudes in the post-civil-rights era. But he is quick to acknowledge that no matter how much things change, racism (which he mockingly refers to as “tradition”) will endure as it “gets passed down like recipes.” The only way to survive is to “know what to eat and what to leave on your plate.”

But the brief escape from Greenwood’s restrictive geographies turns out to be an explosive moment for Mina and Demetrius, and more importantly, for the community as a whole. In a fortuitous turn of events, Anil, Kante, and Pontiac also embark on a vacation to Biloxi, where they conveniently stumble upon the two lovers openly expressing their affection for each other. Angered by what he sees as Mina’s betrayal of the Indian community, Anil follows the couple back to their motel and storms into their room, assaults Demetrius, and demands that he “leave our women alone!” The confrontation illustrates the ways in which Mina and Demetrius remain trapped by the social attitudes shared by the film’s southern blacks and South Asian immigrants that one should not date outside of their race. Interracial romance cannot occur, even privately behind the closed doors of the bedroom.
The physical and verbal attack conjures up older narratives in which black masculinity represents a sexual and cultural threat. Whereas traditional white southern depictions of the black sexual predator allude to anxieties defining white masculinity and the virtues of southern white femininity, Nair's reworking of the narrative points to concerns over manhood and ethnic purity within the Indian community. Sayantani DasGupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta note that post-1965 South Asian immigrants worked to reinvent their idealized community in the United States by establishing model representations of Indian women. First- and second-generation Indian women were to be "chaste, modest, nurturing, obedient, and loyal," and their behavior "has become the litmus test of community solidarity." Nair's South Asian immigrants replay the older racial scripts of the Old South by taking up the concerns regarding "proper" behavior held by southern whites and the physical and social dangers that African American men pose. Despite the innocence of Demetrius's courting of Mina and her reciprocal attraction to him, their romance becomes a perceived threat to the sanctity of South Asian womanhood and community.

For the film's South Asian male immigrants, specifically Anil, Demetrius represents sexual prowess, something he cannot assert with his own wife. Earlier in the film, Anil's new bride ignores his sexual advances on the night of their honeymoon. Her rejection symbolically renders him impotent. Anil's inability to consummate their relationship contrasts with Demetrius's seduction of Mina. Nair further juxtaposes their sexual prowess through the rather graphic lovenaking scene that takes place in the

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interracial couple’s Biloxi motel room. *Mississippi Masala*’s treatment of black sexual masculinity suggests that the racial and sexual anxieties of the Old South continue to haunt the region. Only now South Asian immigrants rather than southern whites are the ones expressing concerns over perceived inadequacies and threats.

Rather than opening up the possibility for multiracial and multiethnic solidarity, the revelation of Mina and Demetrius’s relationship further reinforces ethnic and racial boundaries that separate southern blacks and Indian immigrants. Greenwood’s South Asians view sexual relationships with an African American as a shameful act, one that is detrimental to the integrity of the Indian community. The women view the romance as a “disease” and mock Mina’s belief that loving a black man “isn’t a crime.” Mina is vilified for endangering her social status by dating outside of her race while Demetrius is labeled socially and economically inferior. Upset by his daughter’s arrest after Demetrius’s scuffle with Anil and haunted by his family’s forced removal from his home by black Ugandans, Jay sees the growing racial tensions in Greenwood as confirmation that interracial and interethnic alliances have their limits. He attempts to reinforce this stance by forcing Mina to accept the fact that “people stick to their own kind.” His advice explicitly aligns the South’s history of racial strife with that of Uganda’s tumultuous past. The comment evokes the challenges that Jay and fellow South Asians faced under Amin’s regime and reinforces the notion that a shared geography does not guarantee a shared communal identity. While clearly influenced by his experiences of exclusion under Amin’s rule, Jay fails to recognize how his biases against Mina’s relationship with a black male serve to perpetuate the very segregationist politics he lobbies against in Uganda.

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Greenwood's African Americans similarly disapprove of the relationship, and their condemnation suggests that interracial romance remains taboo in the 1990s. Older blacks like Demetrius's father believe that segregation-era racial attitudes continue to inform contemporary communal interactions. Willie Ben contends that the same sexual and racial boundaries of the Jim Crow era still apply today. He disappointedly asks his son, "What's wrong with you? Don't you know the rules?" For those who grew up during segregation, the more progressive "new Mississippi" looks no different than the pre-civil rights Mississippi. Others like Willie Ben's brother, Rose, believe that times have indeed changed. She sees no harm in Demetrius's relationship and argues that "the days of slavery, they over!" Despite Rose's optimistic view of modern racial relations, the black community turns its back on Greenwood's favorite native son. Demetrius's choice of a romantic partner is perceived as a form of betrayal to his community. His ex-girlfriend, Alicia, accuses him of being a race traitor and tells Demetrius that "you let down your entire race" while adding that there is not a "shortage of black women in Greenwood" for him to date. Her comments parallel Jay's advice to Mina: that people should stick to their own racial and ethnic kind. The similar warnings that the interracial lovers receive from their respective communities point to the ways in which many of Nair's characters, both local-born southern blacks and immigrant South Asians, remain trapped by racial and ethnic ideologies that discourage integration.

Nair's depiction of escalating racial and ethnic tensions suggests that while the promise of a "new Mississippi" ostensibly offers Indian immigrants economic freedom and mobility, Greenwood's South Asians remain socially marginalized. Bailing Demetrius out of jail after the confrontation with Anil, Tyrone instructs his friend to
“leave them fuckin’ foreigners alone. They ain’t nothing but trouble.” Serving as a parallel to Idi Amin’s xenophobic decries, Tyrone’s warning further reinforces the idea of the South Asian as the region’s new maligned subject. He rebuffs Kante’s earlier call for solidarity as he angrily says, “United we stand, divided we fall. Ain’t that a bitch.” Others see the South Asian immigrants as an extension of white authority that continues to oppress blacks. Mina becomes a symbol of white superiority despite her Indian ethnicity. While she may be too dark within the Indian community, she is not dark enough for African Americans. Dexter, who supports Demetrius’s decision to pursue Mina, warns his brother that blacks in the community view him as “think[ing] he’s larger now because he got himself a white chick.” The substitution of “white” for “Indian” suggest that “minority status” means something very different for blacks than for Asian immigrants. Dexter’s comments reveal that while Asians can at times claim honorary white status, African Americans continue to be identified as subordinate. Moreover, black disapproval of the interracial romance implies that immigrants are just as guilty of discriminatory practices as whites despite their own experiences with racism. Demetrius himself expresses his anger toward the ways in which some Indians belittle blacks. In his confrontation with Jay, he suggests that African Americans remain at the bottom of the South’s social order:

Struggle? I’m a black man born and raised in Mississippi and there isn’t a damn thing you can tell me about struggle... I know you and your folks can come down from God knows where and be about as black as the ace of spades and as soon as you get here you start acting white and treating us like we’re your doormats.

He ends by pointing to his own face and notes that Indians are “nothing but a few shades from this right here.” For Demetrius South Asian immigrants refuse to acknowledge the
shared experiences of racial oppression. Rather than establishing a sense of minority solidarity, Greenwood's immigrants focus on upward mobility despite the additional hardships this social and economic elevation create for blacks.

Demetrius's and Jay's climatic confrontation exposes the social and racial boundaries that divide Greenwood's community by reinforcing the notion that the legacies of racial and ethnic oppression in Uganda and the American South continue to haunt the lives of those who lived under them. Nair ultimately provides a deeply ambiguous future for both South Asian immigrants and the American South by the conclusion of the film. The escalating tensions that result from Mina's interracial romance become the tipping point for Jay as he reevaluates his family's place in the United States. His experiences in the South become a painful parallel to his traumatic Ugandan past. Although he has made friends and provided a home for his family, he continues to feel out of place in his American surroundings. He suggests that Indians are "not wanted here" after witnessing the volatility of Demetrius and Mina's relationship.

Intent on reclaiming a sense of home, he attempts to move his family back to Uganda. Jay tells Kinnu that he does not "want to die in some stranger's country." But the hardships of finding a permanent home in both the United States and Uganda suggest that Jay may remain a stranger regardless of which place(s) he hopes to claim as a home. He journeys back to Uganda to proceed with his court case and discovers that much has changed and not necessarily for the better. Jay learns that members of Amin's forces have allegedly murdered Okelo and the once lush surroundings of his countryside home now stand in ruins. While he sees that it is a "new" Uganda, he comes to realize that the changing social and physical geographies of his former home cannot provide the sense of
happiness and permanence that he craves. Reflecting upon his painful past, he decides to
drop his lawsuit and return to Mississippi, and he writes to Kinnu that “home is where the
heart is. And my heart is with you.” While Jay’s affectionate statement suggests that he
has discovered a true sense of belonging, his constant journeys cast doubt as to whether
he will ever find a geographic equivalent. For diasporic groups like the South Asians
expelled from Uganda, the search for home and community entails constant movement
despite the promise of new economic and social possibilities that locales like Mississippi
offer.

Nair further questions the South’s ability to overcome racial and ethnic
boundaries in her final images of Mina and Demetrius. Having left Uganda as a young
child, Mina does not share the same nostalgic attachment to her birthplace as her father
and dismisses the idea of returning to Africa. But she also recognizes that staying in
Mississippi (and to a degree the South) is impossible. She calls her mother to inform her
that she plans to leave Greenwood with Demetrius to “see what we can do” (emphasis
mine). Despite her devotion to family, Mina fails to achieve the same sense of
attachment to her Mississippi surroundings. Demetrius decides to accept Mina’s
proposition and informs his father that he is “moving on.” But Nair does not provide an
answer to where exactly the interracial lovers end up. The film concludes like many
other conventional romance films with Mina and Demetrius lovingly holding each other.
Dressed in colorful Indian, African, and American clothing, the couple appears to have
finally attained the sense of freedom and mobility that allow them to prominently display
their affection and assert their multiethnic identities. Their clothing is a symbolic fusion
of cultures, a literal mixed masala. Yet Mina’s and Demetrius’s decision ultimately to
leave Greenwood (and the South presumably) suggests that despite its promise of a "new" racial attitude, the region remains haunted by its legacy of racial injustice. What remains unclear is precisely where the interracial lovers will find a sense of belonging. Will their experiences with rejection and hate continue to follow them? Is there truly "no mappable 'home' for Nair's multiply displaced characters?" Their uncertain journey for home echoes Jay's question from early on in the film, a question that resonates for all of Nair's characters: "where do we go?

1990s Mississippi is less a place for redemption and change than a site where the histories of racial and ethnic segregation continue to replay themselves with new actors. Demetrius's and Mina's decision to leave suggests that mobility rather than permanence may be the only way to find a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Perhaps a more optimistic view of this final image suggests that the strength of Mina and Demetrius's love for each other can challenge the restrictive geographies of the American South. While they leave Mississippi behind, their ability to express their love for each other may help the older generation recognize the futility of holding onto long-held beliefs that have hindered efforts to bridge communal gaps. The film's open-ended conclusion leaves the possibility of improved communal relations in places like Greenwood as residents begin to look past their preconceived notions of racial and national identities. Nair provides audiences with a strong interracial alliance through Mina and Demetrius, two young individuals who are able to move beyond the racial and ethnic misperceptions and stereotypes that plague the film's older characters.

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81 Shesagiri, "At the Crossroads of Two Empires," 193.
But the possibility of a more cohesive and compassionate Greenwood community remains speculative at best. Nair leaves viewers with a sense that southern blacks and South Asian immigrants will continue to live in an uneasy coexistence. While Mina and Demetrius are able to transcend racial and ethnic biases, Greenwood’s older residents struggle to break free from the segregated past. Suzanne Jones contends that contemporary narratives about interracial romance in the South often fail to treat “the life of interracial couples beyond the beginnings of interracial love.” While *Mississippi Masala* concludes with a passionate embrace between an African American and a Ugandan immigrant of South Asian descent, Nair’s film fails to offer a portrait of a “new Mississippi.” Nair may try to persuade audiences that love can conquer hate and loss, but her film ultimately fails to locate precisely where the work of overcoming the histories of racial and ethnic oppression takes place. Instead, viewers are left to wonder if the southern blacks and South Asian exiles can ever move beyond their troubled pasts.

Exposing the South’s lingering racial tensions while simultaneously depicting the hardships of postcolonial exile, *Mississippi Masala* offers a glimpse at the dynamic processes behind community formation as immigrants continue to migrate to South with the loosening of transnational boundaries. Nair reveals compelling parallels between 1970s Uganda and 1990s Mississippi as both South Asian exiles and southern blacks continue to struggle with the legacies of racial and ethnic discrimination. Amin’s expulsion of Asians from Uganda mirrors the same logic that continues to govern Greenwood: racial and ethnic identity defines and governs place and community. By

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interweaving the local and global through the similar histories of racial discrimination and segregation, *Mississippi Masala* hints at the possibility of racial harmony as southern blacks and South Asian immigrants attempt to coexist. But the film ultimately underlines the ongoing anxieties about interracial romance and racial and ethnic purity. Shared geographies and experiences do not bring the promise of communal solidarity as Nair’s southern blacks and South Asian immigrant characters continue to define themselves through lingering attitudes about the dangers of racial and ethnic mixing. Nair’s exploration of the relationship between race and place spotlight the lingering concerns over race, class, and national identities that perpetuate geographies of racism at the local and global levels. Her film reveals that the promise of a new, more inclusive Mississippi is tempered by the lingering fears that racial and ethnic mixing will only result in escalating tensions.

“Eat or We Both Starve”: The Chinese Grocer and Migrant Labor in Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox*

Like Nair, writer Cynthia Shearer identifies contemporary Mississippi as a place increasingly influenced by recent immigrants. Her 2005 novel *The Celestial Jukebox* not only spotlights the recent growth of foreign-born populations but also the long history of immigrant culture in the South through her portrayal of an aging Chinese grocery store owner. As Chapter One illustrated, Chinese-owned groceries were once vital consumer and social spaces in communities across the Mississippi Delta. But these groceries and other small, locally-owned businesses have dwindled due in large part to the rapid proliferation of larger box stores like Wal-Mart that have increasingly expanded their operations in regional and global markets. The increased visibility of globalization’s...
effects on southern economies and the growing demand for convenience and brand names have led to more and more Chinese Americans who live in the Delta to close up shops in favor of alternative sources of income. *The Celestial Jukebox* depicts the changing face of the Mississippi Delta as multinational corporations move into the region and bring in a significant number of immigrant (both legal and illegal) laborers who have transformed and continue to transform the Delta's social and cultural identity. Set in the fictional town of Madagascar, Mississippi, the narrative centers on the economic and social transactions that take place in the town's longstanding general store, the Celestial Grocery, a communal space run by Angus Chien, a Chinese immigrant who came to the Delta in the 1930s and grows to become the heart of the farming community. The novel's spotlight on the impact of new transnational economic ventures on Mississippi planters and the region's increasingly diverse population beg the question: What happens to the "most southern place on earth" when viewed through a less regional and more global sense of place?\(^3\)

In *The Celestial Jukebox*, Shearer situates the social realities of global capital and immigration in rural Mississippi at the start of the twenty-first century. Futuristics, a large global conglomerate, has channeled millions of dollars into the region and purchased a significant portion of farmland to construct casinos and retirement homes, a move that would transform the farming town into a tourist destination. Meanwhile, Dixie Barrel, a national-brand chain store, has begun construction on a gas station/convenient

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store that would serve as a massive, one-stop shop for both residents and casino guests. Faced with the urbanization and gentrification of surrounding areas at the hands of multinational corporations, longtime residents fight to protect their property, and more importantly, their way of life. They hope to retain the town’s identity as a small, rural farming community but struggle to keep pace with fast-moving land redevelopment.

Dean Fondren, a white farmer who has spent his entire life working on his farm, struggles to hold off Futuristics’ rapid expansion. Aubrey Ellerbee, a once successful African American landowner and Dean’s former protégé, similarly falls on hard times after gambling away much of his wealth at the nearby casino. Caught in the midst of the struggle between local planters and global businesses are the migrant workers from Africa and Central and South America who move into the Delta to earn money but in doing so become victims of exploitative labor practices. Longtime residents and newly arrived immigrants converge at the Celestial Grocery, an unofficial communal space governed by Angus, who immigrated to the United States from China in 1938.

Shearer’s novel not only highlights the growing number of immigrants settling into the Mississippi Delta in the twenty-first century, but more importantly, the novel uncovers the unsettling labor practices and racial profiling that accompany such demographic shifts. The novel’s depiction of the physical, economic, and cultural shifts in the increasingly diverse American South forces readers to acknowledge the ways in which capitalist redevelopment places immigrant laborers, who are central to the region’s economic growth, in precarious situations as they face long hours, dangerous working conditions, and the scrutiny of southerners uncomfortable with the growing presence of foreign-born inhabitants. Like the Japanese poultry workers in Kadohata’s Kira-Kira, the
migrant workers in *The Celestial Jukebox* become victims of exploitative labor practices and racial discrimination as a result of the development of southern industries. While frustrated by the global processes that threaten to destroy their rural way of life, longtime residents band together with the newly arrived immigrants to seek social justice and preserve their communal spaces. In doing so, they seem to suggest, as Shearer hints, modes of community that cut across racial, ethnic, and class lines and that value above all, perseverance and the shared experiences of loss and survival. *The Celestial Jukebox*, in fact, works to show how the collective efforts of local-born southerners and immigrants to protect workers’ rights become the crucial means of preserving place, both in its symbolic and physical senses, in the wake of economic and cultural transformation.

At first Shearer’s choice to frame much of novel around Angus seems curious as the elderly Chinese immigrant initially appears out of place in the small Delta town both to the novel’s characters and its readers. He first appears in the novel when an American soldier brings Boubacar, a young Mauritanian immigrant, to the Celestial Grocery for “good barbeque.” The novel describes how Angus, identified only as “the Chinese man,” spoke to them in a “southern drawl that did not match his Chinese face.”84 Like Katie in Kadohata’s *Kira-Kira*, Angus initially comes across as an anomaly despite having lived in the Delta for over sixty years. The perceived peculiarity of an ethnically Asian southerner not only reflects traditional visions of a white-black southern landscape but also serves to reinforce the South’s perceived racial binary by portraying Asians as being foreign or out of place.

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Non-locals' perceptions of the Chinese grocer reinforce the idea of Angus's dual foreignness. Shearer notes that drivers passing the Celestial would see a "gaunt Chinese man" smoking a cigarette like an "elegant European." Later in the novel, Peregrine Smith-Jones, a college student from Bowdoin who comes to the Delta to track down the history of her grandmother, takes a photograph of Angus smoking a cigarette "in the same way that old Vietnamese men smoked in certain neighborhoods in Paris." The description implies Angus's status as "not southern" and "not American." Critic Neil Segars contends that Peregrine views the Chinese proprietor as "generically Asian," and more importantly, as an "Asian out of place." But Shearer reveals through the course of the novel that Angus is indeed an anomaly but only in the sense that his presence remains one of the few markers of the "old" Delta as the small Mississippi town finds itself in the midst of remarkable economic and cultural shift.

Like its Chinese American owner, the Celestial Grocery seems out of place among the redevelopment projects transforming Madagascar into an increasingly urban tourist destination. The dilapidated building appears like nothing more than an antiquated relic of the Old South. With the neon glow of Futuristic's Lucky Leaf Casino and the expansiveness of the new Dixie Barrel convenience store prominently featured on Madagascar's landscape, the Celestial Grocery was "the kind of country store most casino tourists sped past without looking up." Yet Shearer establishes the unassuming, tarpaper shack as Madagascar's central communal space where white and black farmers

86 Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox*, 266.
as well as migrant Hispanic and African laborers converge. Most of the action in the novel occurs in and around the Celestial as visitors come to purchase goods from the region and around the world and discuss the latest news on the community’s happenings. The Celestial was “the unacknowledged heart of the little dying town” because local planters and road-weary truckers regularly seek temporary refuge in the small grocery.\(^8\) For many residents the store is a welcomed sight/site that stands in stark contrast to the unfamiliar gleam of transnational capitalist redevelopment. Dean Fondren regularly looks out from his farm to Angus’s store and believes it to be the only place that could help “locate himself in the vast black nights.”\(^9\) Despite its unassuming appearance, the Celestial remains a central aspect of the farming community for the simple fact that it remains unchanged amidst the continual transformations of the surrounding landscape.

More importantly, the Celestial Grocery serves as a symbol of Madagascar’s history and resistance to building contractors, retail chains, and casino tourists that threaten to erase the town’s farming identity. Despite the lure of better economic opportunities elsewhere, Angus remains in the Delta and in doing so becomes a steadfast symbol of the farming community’s history. Angus’s decision to remain in business is all the more remarkable considering the increased competition from larger national chains. He even manages to expand his customer base by drawing in the constant flow of migrant workers. As noted in previous chapters, southerners often identified Chinese grocers as money-driven entrepreneurs who had little interest in integrating themselves into their respective communities. But as Segars suggests, Angus is not a “rootless

\(^8\) Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox*, 32.
opportunist" whose sole reason for living in the Delta is to profit off of lower-income residents. Instead, Shearer shows how the aging grocer remains in Madagascar because of his emotional investment in the Delta community. The Celestial Grocery becomes a transitional space where Madagascar's agrarian past merges with the inevitability of a more modern South whose economy becomes increasingly dependent on global corporations and laborers. What is more surprising is Shearer's choice to situate the novel around Angus. In placing the perceived out-of-place Chinese immigrant at the center, she attempts to undermine the traditional racial logic that has long defined southern narratives. Even more to the point, Angus's importance to Madagascar's residents hints at a new form of community that spotlights an increasingly diverse population and acknowledges the region's long history of immigration. Throughout the novel, Shearer shows how the aging Chinese grocer helps Madagascar's residents, old and new, come to terms with life in twenty-first-century Mississippi through his commitment to the small farming town.

While Madagascar clings to its agrarian roots, the rural farming town witnesses a significant transformation as agriculture begins to give way to tourism as the community's main economic source. The arrival of Dixie Barrel and Futuristics has forced many residents off their properties as larger corporations push to purchase their land in order to expand their operations. Dean's and Aubrey's struggles to maintain their farms in the face of land redevelopment illustrate how global industries have replaced the longstanding socioeconomic order of the small farming town. Angus runs into similar

91 Segars, "How to be Chinese in Mississippi," 52.
troubles. Bombarded with pamphlets from Futuristics along with questions from his patrons about the newly constructed Dixie Barrel, the Chinese grocer questions the motives behind the massive changes. He angrily insists that “ain’t nobody around here need no twelve tanks of gas all at the same time.” The news of larger, economic competitors does not change Angus’s approach to running the store as he continues to look after his longtime customers. Despite his protests over the global business ventures transforming Madagascar, Angus cannot ignore the economic potential that the multinational corporations offer. He privately seeks advice from his son, who has left the farming town to work for a national food distributor in Memphis, on purchasing stock in Futuristics. Angus’s speculative inquiries into stock options of his competitors further illustrate the pressure to yield to the region’s changing socioeconomic framework.

In his analysis of postmodern capitalist abstraction, Fredric Jameson suggests that a means of countering alienation is the “practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along moments of mobile, alternative trajectories.” Place, in its physical and symbolic senses, takes on heightened meaning in the age of globalization and increased industrialization as the transformations that these two processes compel residents to retain a sense of familiarity in regard to their social and physical landscapes. Marytn Bone claims, “Capitalist land speculation and real-estate development play a major role in the reproduction—the creative destruction—of traditional ‘southern’ loci.” But this reproduction also produces new projects reimagining

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92 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 36.
93 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991), 51.

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place and community that both acknowledge the economic and physical transformations while simultaneously preserving a sense of the past. As Bone suggests, characters in recent southern fiction often undertake "the active and hopeful (if necessarily contingent) reconstruction of spatialized ontology, a revised sense of place, that allows them to live within their respective postsouthern worlds." 94

Despite his curiosity about the increasingly global flow of capital sweeping through the Mississippi Delta, Angus recognizes the dangers that the new economic order poses to communal cohesiveness. The grueling working conditions of migrant workers and the financial struggles of the town’s longtime planters convince him to increase the efforts to fight for the rights of both groups. Angus refuses to fully equate capitalist redevelopment and globalization with a loss of “place” and instead opts to redefine Madagascar’s sense of community by forging an alliance between the town’s planters and the immigrant laborers from Africa and Central America. As both a longtime resident and an immigrant himself, he acknowledges a shared sense of anxiety and courage that defines both groups as they face economic and social uncertainty.

While the global corporate redevelopment of Madagascar threatens to distance the town’s planters from the migrant laborers, the land itself serves to establish a sense of commonality between both groups. Many of Shearer’s characters, including newly arrived immigrants who bear no real connection to the Mississippi land, seem to represent a neo-Agrarian stance praising the simplicity of rural life. Boubacar is unsettled by the enormity of his new American surroundings when he lands in Memphis. Disoriented by

an unrelenting swarm of fluorescent lights and televisions, the teenager finds himself simultaneously terrified and intrigued by the city’s vastness and modernity. The novel compares his arrival to “stepping off a spaceship into an invisible headwind, America” (sic). But the foreignness of urban Memphis gives way to a more familiar landscape as he travels to Madagascar. He looks out his window and sees that rural Mississippi was a series of “infinite fields” occupied by few inhabitants, “just a farmer on a tractor in the long field.” While amazed by Memphis’s constant flow of technology and humanity, Boubacar feels more at ease with the quaint stillness of the Mississippi farmland. Madagascar’s residents express a similar connection to the land and the simple pace of a farming town. At the end of each day, Angus sits on the Celestial porch and looks out with contentment to the world surrounding him. Shearer notes how “nothing pleased [him] more than the sight of nature...going about its secret business.” The natural terrain of the Mississippi Delta serves as a soothing remedy for the aging grocer, a much-needed relief from the distractions of Dixie Barrel’s ongoing construction projects.

Indeed, The Celestial Jukebox employs the traditional trope of a southern farming community fiercely resisting increasing modernization. But Shearer is careful not to present the novel simply as a retelling of agrarianism versus industrialization, “sense of place” versus placelessness. Instead, she establishes a more nuanced critique of place by spotlighting the complex, and at times, uneasy alliance between local planters and global capital. Shearer reveals how the more traditional “southerners” share common

95 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 16.
96 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 24.
97 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 200.
experiences, histories, and challenges with their counterparts from a broader, more global South. The novel’s focus on increasingly diverse communities that develop between lifelong planters and foreign migrant workers provides an alternative portrait of globalization’s effect on rural southern spaces. Shearer frames this portrait of an increasingly diverse rural South around the Chinese grocery that served as an important site of cultural and economic work in the early twentieth century Mississippi Delta. In doing so, she acknowledges not only the obscured history of Chinese immigration in the American South but also the history of significant contributions of immigrants to the development of southern communities.

Angus arrives in Madagascar after political and military conflicts ravage his birthplace. He immigrates to the United States from Nanking (or Nanjing), China, with his father, Solomon, who opens the Celestial Grocery in 1938. While the rural South presents the challenges of readjusting to an unfamiliar environment, a new life in Mississippi also provides an opportunity to leave behind the horrors of the Second Sino-Japanese War that devastated his hometown and resulted in the death of his mother and his sister. Following the Japanese Imperial Army’s assault and eventually capture of Nanking on December 13, 1937, an estimated 250,000 Chinese civilians were raped, tortured, and/or murdered. The Nanking Massacre (also referred to as the Rape of Nanking) had lasting effects on Japanese-Chinese relations as tensions between both countries remain. Many contemporary Chinese continue to show animosity toward Japan.

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98 See Chapter One for a more in-depth discussion of Chinese grocers in the Mississippi Delta.
99 Nanking is the capital of the Jiangsu province in southeast China. “Nanking” is the westernized translation of Nanjing, which is the more commonly accepted and standardized name for the city.
for the atrocities committed by Japanese troops and the conflicts surrounding Japanese accounts of the events.¹⁰⁰

The memory of the Nanking massacre continues to haunt Angus some sixty years later. Although he believes that he could “barely remember it,” the past remains a heavy burden as he struggles to come to terms with the loss of his mother and sister.¹⁰¹ Resentment and hostility temper his pangs of grief and mourning as he attempts to distance himself from the memories of Japan’s cruelty. He chastises a group of Japanese tourists who stop by the store in search of southern relics and continually take photographs of the aging grocer. The blinding lights of Japanese camera lenses awaken the memory of his family’s brutal murder as Angus notes that “the last time I saw my mother and sister alive they were looking into a Japanese camera, and there was nothing I could do about it, not a goddamn thing.”¹⁰² Although he believes that it was “best to stay silent on the subject” of Nanking, he cannot escape its memory. But his new life in the Delta proves to provide healing qualities that allow him to acknowledge and embrace the memory of his family and life in China before the massacre. Angus takes great pleasure in looking out at the empress tree that has sat beside the Celestial since he first arrived to the United States as a young child. The aging tree, a transplant from China much like

¹⁰¹ Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 95.
¹⁰² Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 347.
Angus, serves as an organic shrine to his dead sister and to his former life.\textsuperscript{103} Since opening the Celestial, he and his father “always accorded it the same respect they’d give to any newborn or ancestor.”\textsuperscript{104} As a physical and symbolic tribute to his family, the tree allows Angus to root his own ethnic identity and personal past into the southern landscape.

Angus’s early years in the Mississippi Delta encapsulates the experiences of early Chinese immigrants who attempted to reorient themselves in the unfamiliar surroundings of the rural South. In an extended conversation with his daughter-in-law, Lisa, who visits him from Houston, he recounts the origins of the Celestial Grocery, a story that highlights the ambiguous status of early Chinese immigrants in the Delta. Upon opening the store, Angus’s father, Solomon, purchases a new Coca-Cola sign much like many of the small country stores across the region. But the complexities of cultural translations become apparent when Angus and his father see their new sign for the first time. They are dismayed to see their name misspelled as “Chen Grocery” while Solomon despises the playful yet sexually suggestive image of a woman in a bathing suit because it reminded him of the “worst sort of [Chinese] riverfront whore.”\textsuperscript{105} More disheartening was the bright red circle of the Coca-Cola label that reminded both father and son of the brutality of Nanking and the loss of their loved ones. The misspelling and mistranslation of the sign and its meaning for both the Chinese immigrants and their American

\textsuperscript{103} Empress trees first appeared in the United States in the 19th century. Its seeds were often used as packaging materials to protect porcelain shipped imported from China. These seeds often fell out of shipping crates and grew along roads especially in the eastern and southern United States.

\textsuperscript{104} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 96.

\textsuperscript{105} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 284-85.
customers leave Angus feeling out of place as he fails to make sense of his new American home.

But Marie Abide’s mother, a mysterious figure who often comes by the store and an important person tied to Madagascar’s history, leaves the father and son a new sign that reads “The Celestial Grocery,” which alludes to the meaning of the name Chien which Solomon describes as “celestial, like the flight of a thousand cranes.” Shearer reveals that Angus eventually installs a new Coca-Cola sign when he takes over the business, but one with a Chinese character that represents long life superimposed onto the once troubling red circle. While merging an iconic southern commodity with Chinese script may seem inconsequential, the simple act represents a mode of translation, one that allows the Chinese immigrants to acknowledge their new southern surroundings while also preserving their ethnic culture. Angus’s life in Madagascar illustrates how the Chinese immigrant experience in the Deep South is not merely the transition from unrefined foreigner to assimilated American. Instead, his experiences reflect an ongoing series of cultural negotiations and translations, experiences that help him guide the new group of African and Latino migrant laborers that now populate the town.

The novel’s depiction of Angus’s crumbling grocery confirms the waning visibility of Chinese immigrants in the modern Delta. The exodus of Chinese American families follows changing consumer habits as the majority of southerners now rely on larger, national-brand stores for their everyday goods. Shearer suggests that Angus is the lone holdout since Celestial Grocery was “the last of a constellation of Chinese-run

106 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 284-5.
country stores that used to exist in almost every river town between Memphis and New Orleans.”\textsuperscript{107} The absence of family and the daily demands of protecting his business leave him socially isolated. He silently suffers from persistent loneliness after the deaths of his father and wife, and he spends most of his time tending to the store itself. Standing alone on the Celestial’s porch after closing, Angus comes to the painful realization that his life now consists of “funeralizing over dead bees, with nobody to overhear and laugh with him about it.”\textsuperscript{108} Although most residents cannot remember a significant moment in their lives without recalling Angus being present for it, he feels an “essential strangeness,” still akin to being “solitary as some unnamed creature at the bottom of the sea.”\textsuperscript{109} But Angus’s loneliness is not necessarily the result of cultural isolation. The demands of running his business leave little room to establish bonds with those around him.

Yet Shearer reveals how economic transactions help forge meaningful social relationships between the Chinese grocer and his community. Angus alleviates his perpetual loneliness through his active engagement with the community. The centrality of the Celestial situates him as the unofficial guardian of the community. His ability and willingness to stay in business despite pressure from larger companies to sell his property provide residents with a sense of familiarity and a link to their communal past in the face of massive social and economic change. Angus’s grocery is a symbolic and physical means of maintaining the residents’ sense of connectedness. The store serves as the only place in Madagascar that brings together farmers, migrant workers, and passerbys. More

\textsuperscript{107} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 31.
\textsuperscript{108} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 39.
\textsuperscript{109} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 92.
importantly, Angus upholds and promotes the values of the town that residents hope to preserve: hard work, compassion, and fairness. As Neil Segars suggest, Angus is a champion of the down-and-out, a role heavily influenced by his own experiences moving to the United States and growing up in the Delta. The aging Chinese grocer is “emotionally dedicated” to the downtrodden, “regardless of potential financial, social, and even physical harm.” From his experiences during the Nanking massacre to his first moments in Mississippi, Angus empathizes with the plight of those just trying to survive regardless of their race, ethnicity, or nationality.

Angus grows more comfortable with his place in the community, he takes on a more assertive role in the town’s social politics despite the potential repercussions on business. The daily transactions that take place in the Celestial Grocery afford him the opportunity to become increasingly aware of the town’s economic and racial inequalities. White planters who represent Angus’s main customer base become upset when Dean Fondren decides to take a young Aubrey Ellerbee under his watch in the early 1970s. In a move that reinforces the middleman status of Asians in the South, Angus initially takes a neutral stance on the matter. His only action is temporarily to shut off the Celestial’s gas pumps because he fears that he would be complicit in racial violence “if the bok guey [white people] were going to burn Dean Fondren’s house down.” Yet the grocer takes a much firmer stance when a group of farmers confront Dean after he accompanies a nervous Aubrey on his first trip to the Celestial Grocery. Turning to Angus to see where his allegiance lies, the white farmers see the Chinese grocer brandishing a shotgun

110 Segars, “How to be Chinese in Mississippi,” 60-61.
111 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 196.
“pointed vaguely in their direction.” The understated yet bold action reverses assumptions of Asian American passivity by responding to white intimidation and turning the threat of physical violence back on the farmers. Rather than remaining uninvolved in racial matters as James Loewen suggests in his analysis of the Delta Chinese’s social relations, Angus becomes a willing participant through his powerful display of support for Dean and Aubrey. He views Dean’s act as one of compassion and humility and as a means of forcing those stuck in the racist past to be “shamed into entering the future” of southern race relations.

Angus finds himself at the center of another defining moment of the town when he confronts a new form of social injustice with the arrival of global corporations at the start of the twenty-first century. Shearer’s characterization of Madagascar as a “dying town” underscores the viable economic and social threat that larger-scale corporations pose to its distinct sense of place. The town’s planters find themselves losing profits, and more importantly, their own land, to transnational businesses like the Futuristics corporation that hope to transform the rural community into a glitzy tourist destination. While the construction of the Lucky Leaf Casino and the Dixie Barrel megamart brings the promise of financial growth, capitalist redevelopment primarily serves to benefit the recently arrived global corporations at the expense of Madagascar’s longstanding residents. A sense of futility looms over longtime residents who fear that they have no choice but to pack up and move on. Farmers sell off their land to Futuristics not for

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112 Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox*, 198
113 As noted in Chapter One, Loewen suggests that a number of Mississippi Chinese refused to engage in racial politics beyond their hopes of achieving white or “near white” status.
economic gain but out of fear that commercial redevelopment is inevitable. But the novel also reveals how the growing influence of larger corporations poses a significant threat to the ideological underpinnings that bolster residents’ morale. An American soldier who drives Boubacar to his Madagascar home seems perplexed that the young immigrant has come all the way from Africa to live in Mississippi and informs him that the “Delta is a good place to learn music, but ain’t no money there.” In the modern South, economic loss amounts to a form of geographic erasure. The rapid redevelopment of land by larger national and transnational corporations poses the risk of rebranding smaller rural communities, or in the case of Madagascar, eliminating them altogether. Looking out over the farming town’s desolate landscape, the soldier insists that Madagascar “ain’t even a place no more.” Once a profitable Delta community exemplified by Aubrey’s rapid ascent to financial success as a planter, the agriculture-based town faces extinction at the hands of capitalist redevelopment. The perception of Madagascar’s placelessness underscores the dramatic repercussions of global finance’s impact on southern communities.

Despite being swayed by the potential financial benefits of selling the Celestial Grocery, Angus ultimately decides to keep the store open. His defiant proclamation that he “ain’t going nowhere” serves as a direct challenge to Futuristics’s and Dixie Barrel’s redevelopment plans. Even Angus’s fellow residents recognize the Chinese grocer as a permanent fixture in the town. Aubrey, who faces the dire prospect of losing his property after gambling away much of his fortune to repay his massive debt, reaffirms Angus’s


place in the community. He describes how the Chinese grocer will “still be here with that broom on the porch when my ass has been cold in the ground for ten years.”

Angus’s steadfast presence highlights the long history of Chinese groceries in the Mississippi Delta and helps to further challenge claims that early Chinese immigrants were merely sojourners seeking economic gain. The Celestial becomes a symbol of his commitment to the farming community.

The decision to stay despite the financial repercussions suggests a deep attachment to the Delta, one that extends beyond its economic potential. While other Chinese grocers have left the region, Angus feels indebted to his community and the hard work and compassion extended to him since he immigrated there as a young child. In a 1985 collection about childhood in Mississippi, Sung Gay Chow, a Chinese American and former Delta resident, suggests that many Chinese Americans view the region as home because of its ability to reinforce Chinese cultural values and ideas. He suggests that while “the Mississippi Chinese seem to be disowned and dislocated, [they] are certainly not detached.” Having cultivated both economic and social connections in their communities, they have established “roots embedded in this place.”

Shearer makes clear that Angus’s decision to stay in Madagascar is the result of an emotional connection to the place itself. The land, its inhabitants, and the Celestial itself represent anchoring points that assuage his sense of dislocation as the compassion and friendship offered by Madagascar’s residents provide a network support and acceptance. In return, Angus

117 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 37.
remains committed to the values of hard work and loyalty at the core of the small farming community, and more importantly, to the people of Madagascar. Regardless of its changing socioeconomic framework, the Delta will always be home.

Angus recognizes though, that the future of Madagascar requires the renewed efforts of its residents to preserve the community’s core values of hard work, cooperation, and social justice. The growing presence of transnational corporations threatens to overwhelm the region’s planters through land redevelopment and limiting vital resources like labor and capital. Furthermore, the need to increase profits in order to keep pace with local and global competitors exposes longtime farmers and newly arrived immigrants to exploitative labor practices. Responding to these challenges, the community works to assert its working-class identity through an unlikely alliance with the migrant laborers who come to Madagascar to work on the redevelopment projects that threaten to erase the town’s rural identity. The growing need for cheap labor by both global corporations and local farms has led to the arrival of Latinos and Africans working under legal and illegal arrangements. Shearer’s dramatization of the influx of undocumented workers calls attention to the significant effects of globalization on the South’s workforce. Concerns over the exploitation of low-wage workers help establish new multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that highlight “the historical ubiquity of transnational circuits” and acknowledge “the uneven processes of citizenship and human rights.”

Madagascar’s longtime residents cannot help but take notice of the town’s African and Central American immigrants and their substandard living conditions. From

his porch, Angus regularly looks out to the immigrant laborers who now reside in makeshift shacks in the abandoned field next to the Celestial. What alarms him are the noticeable disparities between the working and living conditions of newly-arrived immigrants and those of transient workers arriving from nearby cities. He takes particular issue with the arrival of a new gang known as the Disciples who have made their way to Madagascar from Memphis:

Angus shook his head and walked to the window. He saw the lights at the old trailer. It seemed like such a senseless waste. A Memphis company that rented the property out to transient criminals when the workers who toiled the fields had to sleep wherever they fell. -- *Them people need to get on back to wherever they come from. Probably been run out of Memphis, I imagine. Now you take them Africans. Africans is good people.*

Angus’s sympathy for the African laborers emerges out of the shared experiences of coming to a new country in search of better economic and social opportunities. His frustrations over Madagascar’s increasingly desperate socioeconomic conditions are directed toward the corporations who exploit immigrant workers in order to maximize their profits. Angus speculates that these large businesses view newly arrived Africans and Central Americans as subservient laborers who do not require (or deserve) the same basic rights of American-born workers.

Angus’s more involved approach to the cause of the migrant laborers reveals a sense of connectedness with the Delta’s newest residents. Shearer draws a parallel between the Chinese immigrant’s early experiences in Madagascar with those of the African and Central American migrants through the close relationship that develops between Angus and Boubacar. Angus hires Boubacar as he recognizes the same air of

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120 Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox*, 35.
innocence and vulnerability that he felt as a child growing up in a new country. While he cannot pay the teen in cash (because Boubacar, like many of Madagascar’s immigrants, has come to Mississippi as an undocumented worker), Angus provides him with food and store goods in exchange for his help at the store. At first glance, the illegal arrangement mimics the exploitation of immigrants by the very corporations that Angus resents, particularly those who target undocumented workers as a cost-effective labor alternative. But the relationship between the Chinese proprietor and the young Mauritanian develops into something much deeper than that of employer and employee. Angus offers an unspoken yet palpable show of support and encouragement that helps further embed Boubacar into his Mississippi community. Despite the vast differences between their respective histories, the Chinese grocer and the Mauritanian teen are drawn to each other by their shared experience of sudden dislocation felt upon their arrival in Mississippi. Angus views Boubacar as a younger version of himself: an immigrant far from home adjusting to an unfamiliar, and at times, alienating environment. For the African teen, the Chinese grocer offers compassion and provides hope that he too can survive in America.

While the legality of their working relationship remains in question, the mutual respect they express for each other portrays their alliance as one centered on emotional connection rather than exploitation. Angus’s relationship with Boubacar mirrors that of Dean and Aubrey. Both involve the transformation of a straightforward economic agreement into a meaningful friendship. Angus’s small gestures toward the African teen reveal that a newfound support network and sense of companionship outweigh the potential financial benefits of hiring a new and eager employee. Not only are both characters connected through their immigrant past, but they share a their fascination with
and fondness for the grocery’s mythical Rock-ola jukebox. Their friendship begins in an unexpected manner when Angus plays Wanda Jackson’s 1957 song “Fujiyama Mama” while offering Boubacar a short, impromptu lesson on rockabilly. The song’s evocation of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima appears to appeal to Angus’s sense of bitterness toward the Japanese. Meanwhile, the intensity of Jackson’s musical stylings and the jukebox itself, “the most beautiful thing he had seen in all his fifteen years,” enthrall Boubacar, who dreams of owning a National steel guitar he saw at a local consignment shop. While separated by their age difference and nationalities, the aging Chinese grocer and young Mauritanian immigrant are connected by their parallel journeys to the rural Delta. And it is the Celestial that serves as a healing space for both characters, a space that eases the jarring feelings of dislocation that they both experienced during their arrival in Madagascar. The day-to-day operations of running the store provide an opportunity for both Angus and Boubacar to find common ground and acknowledge shared experiences as immigrants.

Angus’s resolve to assist the new immigrant labor force faces an unexpected and unprecedented challenge with the events of September 11. With Madagascar’s social and financial climate already volatile as a result of global economic shifts, the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., threaten to further jeopardize communal relations. Shearer foregrounds the ways in which the terrorist attacks threaten to further marginalize Muslim immigrants in the Mississippi Delta. Boubacar’s anxiety grows as residents once

121 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 45.
familiar with him now look at him "as if he were a stranger." The teen’s fears only grow when he discovers that many of the African migrant workers, including his uncle and his mentor, the Wastrel, have been detained by Immigration Officials in Memphis for questioning. But Boubacar finds a sympathetic figure amid the paranoia in Angus, whose own history of discrimination and ethnic profiling in the South compels him to side with the Muslim community. Whereas the reality of minority solidarity fails to materialize for the characters in *Mississippi Masala*, cross-cultural understanding becomes a necessary means of survival for those in *The Celestial Jukebox*. Longtime residents and recent immigrants rely upon each other not only to avoid their respective economic and cultural erasure at the hands of capital redevelopment but also to ensure the equal rights for all those who call Madagascar home.

While the events of September 11 threaten to undermine communal relations, the attacks force residents to confront the racial and ethnic misperceptions that continue to haunt not only the South but also the rest of the nation. Angus’s sympathy quickly morphs into anger as the storekeeper grows frustrated over the excessive surveillance and detainment of Muslims. More specifically, he suggests that the profiling of African Muslims unmasks the failure of American to recognize their own immigrant past. He bitterly argues that there “ain’t no such thing as original Americans... We all come off the same boat.” This sentiment reflects not only the current issues confronting Muslims but also the challenges faced by immigrants like Angus who have become mainstays of the Mississippi Delta. The anti-Muslim sentiment following the terrorists attack serves as

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123 Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox*, 413.
a painful parallel to both the history of Japanese occupation and to Angus's own experiences growing up as a Chinese immigrant in the predominantly white and black South. Unlike the older southern blacks and South Asian immigrants in *Mississippi Masala*, Angus acknowledges the ways in which racial and ethnic discrimination can affect anyone regardless of their national origin. The novel's portrayal of September 11th and its aftermath forces readers to consider how the economic, social, and political processes of the twenty-first century pose the danger of creating a new brand of southern racism rooted in growing anxieties about illegal immigration and national borders.

Shearer further spotlights the issue of illegal immigrants in relation to southern labor and communal relations through her depiction of Central American migrant workers who make up a significant portion of the modern South's labor force. Like the African migrants, Honduran laborers venture into Madagascar, legally and illegally, for its employment opportunities and low cost of living. On a national level, in fact, Latinos represent one of the largest, if not the largest, immigrant group entering the United States in the past twenty years. The 1990s witnessed a 61.2 percent increase of Latinos in the country as a whole. By 2003, Latinos had surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States.124 The South in particular has been an attractive destination for many Latino immigrants due to the increased demands for low-wage labor in areas like agriculture, textiles, construction, and auto-manufacturing. The 2000 Census shows an increase of close to 4.6 million Latinos living in southern states. These drastic demographic shifts are highlighted in the novel through its depiction of Honduran

immigrants and the questionable labor practices of both Madagascar’s longtime planters and global corporations. Shearer’s Central American characters are subjected to long working hours, low pay, and a lack of adequate housing. Yet rather than placing global businesses as the sole catalyst for labor exploitation, Shearer complicates issues surrounding immigrant labor by implicating the town’s planters hoping to stay in business. Local agribusinesses employ labor recruiters who provide farmers with cheap immigrant labor in order to contend with rising operating costs. Meanwhile, Futuristics takes advantage of the town’s growing Honduran population to expedite construction projects while African migrants become their main labor source for the Lucky Leaf casino. Although Madagascar’s increasing reliance on global capital provides migrants from Central America with much needed jobs, the growing need for cheap labor exposes them to substandard working and living conditions. Shearer reveals how the town’s immigrant laborers work long hours and often for insufficient wages while providing the main source of labor that allows local and newly-arrived global business ventures to maximize profits—a labor relation that replicate the industrial plantation economy of the early-twentieth-century South.

The novel’s portrayal of Honduran and African migrant workers in the Delta calls attention to ongoing debates on the South’s expanding immigrant workforce and concerns over immigration laws and human rights violations. By 2008 immigrants made up 15.6 percent of the United States’s labor force, the highest percentage of foreign-born workers since the 1930s. While many work in high-skilled job sectors like technology and business, immigrants, including undocumented workers, occupy 35 percent of the nation’s unskilled jobs. The South in particular has employed a significant number of
immigrant laborers who now make up 13.4 percent of the region’s civilian labor force. Martyn Bone suggests that the growing trend of companies employing immigrants to perform low-skilled, and at times, dangerous jobs reveals how “traditionally ‘southern’ manual labor is still being performed.” Smaller businesses in established southern industries like agriculture and textiles seek new labor sources that will help them keep pace with an increasingly competitive and more global market. Whereas southern blacks constituted much of the manual labor force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latino immigrants now make up a large percentage of workers hired for low-wage, physically demanding jobs. New racial disparities in the division of labor emerge as southern businesses expand. While middle-class whites and African Americans see advancements in attaining higher-level, managerial positions, newly arrived immigrants who lack language proficiency and have limited access to resources for new job skills are forced to take on lower level jobs. Lisa Lowe contends that racial inequality remains prevalent in the United States because the nation continues to employ “a system of property that profits through racialization.” Latinos and other immigrant populations have become the target of businesses, particularly in rural areas, that seek to maximize profits by employing groups they view as easily controlled and willing to work for minimum pay. Shearer’s novel attempts to show how the history of labor exploitation plays out on a larger, more global scale in the contemporary South as her Honduran characters are forced to work long hours for low wages.

126 Bone, The Postsouthern Sense of Place, 212.
The Celestial Jukebox highlights the ways in which the Delta’s changing socioeconomic conditions reinforce a racialized division of labor through Shearer’s depiction of the hardships suffered by Madagascar’s foreign-born residents. The Delta town’s Honduran workers bear witness to the physical and psychological violence associated with the exploitative labor practices employed by both newly-arrived global corporations and longtime planters. A number of Madagascar’s planters including Aubrey Ellerbee employ Honduran workers from Tomás Tulia, a cruel labor recruiter who transports workers to the Delta and contracts them out to local businesses. Aubrey’s decision to utilize Tulia’s services angers Angus, who believes that recent immigrants are subjected to mistreatment and inhumane working conditions. More importantly, he suggests that the exploitation of Latino migrants is equated with modern-day slavery. He reminds Aubrey that there is a “law against buying and selling whatever kind” of people and chastises him for not paying them “real wages.”

The Celestial Jukebox underscores the unsettling parallels between the questionable labor practices of modern southern businesses and the region’s troubling legacy of slavery. In depicting the challenging working conditions of Latino and African migrants, Shearer reveals the ways in which the South’s economy continues to rely on the exploitation of racial minorities. Whereas African Americans slaves served as the primary workforce during the antebellum period, low-wage immigrant laborers represent the crux of economic production in the twenty-first century.

128 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 135.
Angus’s frustrations reflect the tensions that result from recent immigration trends in the South (and in the rest of the United States), particularly in regard to the rapid growth of Latino populations. The influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central, and South America over the past twenty years has become a point of contention as southerners engage in debates over a variety of issues including immigration restrictions and human rights violations. Jamie Winders suggests that these conflicts have become “flashpoints for broader debates about resource distribution, social justice, and political visibility” and have “sometimes snapped lines of racial and ethnic alliances.” Aubrey’s decision to use Tulia’s services highlights the ways in which global economic pressures can hinder efforts to establish multiracial and multiethnic coalitions between southern whites and blacks and the South’s new immigrant labor force.

Angus attempts to persuade Aubrey to better understand the economic and cultural challenges facing Madagascar’s Central American migrants. He explains how the Hondurans’ situation is much like their own experiences growing up as racial and ethnic minorities in the South. Angus insists that while African slaves, Chinese immigrants, and recent migrant laborers “didn’t ask to come here,” their survival depends upon the communal efforts of Madagascar’s residents. Having witnessed the injustices of racial and ethnic discrimination in both China and Mississippi, Angus argues that the Hondurans deserve more humane treatment regardless of whether they have entered the United States legally or illegally.

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129 Winders, “Rethinking Southern Communities,” 700.
130 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 136.
Angus’s call for the mutual respect and compassion among Madagascar’s inhabitants suggests that the key to the town’s survival lies in acknowledging the shared experiences of loss and displacement among planters, businesses, and immigrant laborers and working together to fight for social and spatial justice in the wake of capital redevelopment. Shearer illustrates how wage inequalities, inadequate housing, and land redistribution impact southerners regardless of their race or ethnicity. Her working-class characters are bound together by their shared struggle for economic self-sufficiency and property rights. By interweaving the lives of Chinese immigrants, migrant workers, and southern whites and blacks, Shearer depicts the Mississippi Delta as a contact zone where people, cultures, and histories continually intersect. It is through Angus that she offers an optimistic glimpse of the Delta’s future and the region’s ability to contend with drastic socioeconomic change.

While Angus acknowledges that communal relations are bound to race and ethnicity, he insists that the willingness of its inhabitants to overcome difference is what defines the region’s true identity. The Chinese immigrant recounts how his first (literal) taste of America was a hot tamale from a black street peddler in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Shearer’s inclusion of the tamale further illustrates the Delta’s amalgam of cultures as the history of the tamale itself reflects the region’s diverse past. Numerous theories regarding its origins exist, but the hot tamale most likely emerged when migrant laborers from Mexico arrived in the Delta to help with cotton harvests in the early twentieth century. African Americans, recognizing the tamales’ main ingredients of corn meal and pork, created their own regional take on the dish. The result was the hot tamale, a Delta
product made famous by Robert Johnson’s 1936 song “They’re Red Hot.” What stands out from Angus’s first memory of the Mississippi Delta is not the tamale itself but the brief yet meaningful bond he and his father forge with the black peddler. It did not matter that he could not speak English because the “old colored fellow” only “had it in his mind to help” the Chinese immigrants. Confronted with the jarring unfamiliarity of a new home and the challenge to become part of an intimate southern community, Angus recognizes that he must provide the same sense of generosity that he received as a newly-arrived immigrant.

Indeed, Angus’s decision to support the Honduran immigrants is, in some measure, influenced by his attraction to Consuela, a migrant worker he hires as the Celestial’s cook. A former midwife (“la patera”) and naturalized citizen, she travels to Madagascar to look after her nephews who work for the global corporations and local planters. It is difficult to ignore the economic benefits of Angus’s decision to hire Consuela. Her intimate relationship with the Hondurans provides the Celestial with new clientele, and business steadily increases with migrant workers regularly visiting the store for Conseula’s food and the newly stocked items from Central America. While these workers have migrated to Madagascar to help construct the very store that could put him out of business, Angus nevertheless believes that they provide the potential for a new, steady customer base.

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The Honduran migrants, however, represent more than a new opportunity to help with the Celestial’s finances. Through his conversations with Consuela, Angus recognizes that Madagascar’s newest inhabitants seek the same economic and social opportunities that he and his father hoped to attain when they immigrated to the United States. Rather than simply viewing the Hondurans as potential consumers, he becomes “mesmerized with respect” for their hard work and determination to survive in an unfamiliar environment. Angus observes Consuela’s tireless efforts to provide comfort for the laborers and identifies her as a “survivor, much like himself.” His recognition of and appreciation for the parallels between his and the Hondurans’ experiences of adjusting to life in the Delta points to the potential to establish new multiethnic coalitions that center on hard work and economic survival.

For Shearer the key to cultural and economic survival in the Mississippi Delta in times of sweeping socioeconomic change lies in the ability to recognize commonalities across racial, ethnic, and historical differences. Angus’s determination to convince Madagascar’s planters to work with and not against the town’s immigrant laborers hints at the potential for multiracial and multiethnic alliances, ones that unite both groups in the common goal of preserving workers’ rights and spatial justice in the wake of global capital redevelopment. As in Kadohata’s Kira-Kira, a sense of community in The Celestial Jukebox emerges out of working-class values. Angus attempts to persuade local planters that immigrant agricultural laborers play a critical role in preventing the corporate takeover of their longstanding farms. But he also works to ensure that planters

133 Shearer, The Celestial Jukebox, 92.
recognize the migrants’ need for basic resources such as adequate housing, a need that compels him to work with residents like Dean Fondren to construct a bunkhouse for the town’s current and future immigrant laborers.

The housing project signals a much larger goal of preserving the town’s strong sense of community. Despite rising tensions along racial, ethnic, and class lines, byproducts of global economic and political turmoil, Angus recognizes the potential of the struggling town to reestablish itself as a site of collective healing by aiding those in need, particularly new immigrants. Just as those in the Delta came to embrace him and his father as Chinese immigrants, he hopes to show the same sort of compassion for the migrant workers. Shearer resituates the Chinese grocer and, to an extent, the Chinese grocery, from the social and cultural periphery of the Mississippi Delta, to the communal center by marking the Celestial as the essential space that brings together the region’s past and its future regardless of the changing socioeconomic conditions resulting from the increased presence of global capital and land redevelopment. While the Chinese grocery served as an integrated space that brought together whites and southern blacks in the early twentieth century, the store now becomes a site of global convergence where longtime Delta residents forge new economic and social relationships with the region’s growing immigrant population.

Madagascar’s survival can be ascribed to Angus’s ability to persuade town residents to transcend racial and ethnic differences and fight for the collective rights of the town’s working class. Recruiting Dean and Aubrey to help, Angus erects the bunkhouse in hopes of providing immigrant laborers with a viable living space, one that affords them the same comforts that Madagascar’s longtime planters possess. Echoing
Angus’s call for collective action to preserve their farming community, Dean notes that the three have “all come too far together . . . to just throw it all away.”\textsuperscript{134} Shearer’s depiction of longtime residents coming together to assist recent immigrants suggests that a working-class ethos, one rooted in cooperation, perseverance, and social justice, serves as the foundation of Madagascar’s communal identity. Despite their own misfortunes and struggles, Dean, Aubrey, and Angus recognize how their commitment to hard work connects them to the African and Central American immigrants who now populate the town.

At the bunkhouse dedication ceremony, fittingly held on the Fourth of July, Angus expresses great hope for Madagascar’s future by evoking the strong communal bonds that have helped establish the small Delta town as a permanent home. Speaking to a crowd of planters and migrant laborers, the town’s oldest resident describes the new building as a “little place where them that needs a leg up in this world can get their feet on the ground.”\textsuperscript{135} But Angus’s description of the bunkhouse applies to the Celestial as well. The longstanding general store has always been the center of the town, a communal space for all those who come through the small Delta town. The new bunkhouse functions as an extension of the unifying force of the Celestial as it brings together laborers from around the world. Both structures come to symbolize the multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that help sustain the community’s economy and culture. Thus, Angus ultimately emerges as the key to Madagascar’s survival. By situating him as the

\textsuperscript{134} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 208.
\textsuperscript{135} Shearer, \textit{The Celestial Jukebox}, 342.
town's primary merchant, mediator, and leader, Shearer reaffirms the importance of the Chinese grocery as a site of racial integration and cultural exchange.

Whereas *Mississippi Masala* and *Kira-Kira* conclude with ambivalent portraits of race relations in the contemporary American South, *The Celestial Jukebox* offers a more optimistic vision of southern community through Angus's hopeful message of understanding and compassion. The Chinese grocer expresses his deep appreciation for the determined spirit of those who call the region home as he opens the new bunkhouse. Standing before a diverse crowd of longtime residents and newcomers, he recounts the same story he told Aubrey about coming to Mississippi:

> If you like most of us, you come to America because your burden at home was too heavy . . . When me and my father first come to this part of the country, we was lucky to be here. I reckon you know what I'm talking about. And the first kindness ever showed to us was a hot tamale, give to us by a colored man on the street . . . We didn't speak no English, and he didn't speak no Chinese, so we had to find some other way to get through to one another, and that way turned out to be kindness. Don't matter where you come from, or how long you aimin' to be here. If you can speak kindness, then you can go anywhere you want in this country. Can't nobody stop you.¹³⁶

Angus's story works to show that communal survival in times of significant socioeconomic change is possible but only if each member can recognize and acknowledge commonalities that run across racial, economic, and cultural differences. More specifically, *The Celestial Jukebox* spotlights the ways in which labor exploitation and spatial inequalities resulting from transnational economic processes can reaffirm class solidarity. The construction of the bunkhouse not only provides new migrants with a viable living space but also helps maintain the tradition of cultural exchange that has been

an integral part of the region’s identity. By weaving together the experiences of a diverse group of immigrants who come to Delta to escape past traumas and establish a new sense of home, Shearer offers an alternative portrait of transnational capital redevelopment effects on southern community, one that reveals how globalization can forge new alliances, particularly ones that unite and strengthen the working class. The Celestial Jukebox, much like Kira-Kira, depicts labor exploitation and spatial injustices in order to underscore the critical role of immigrant laborers who perform the grueling and sometimes dangerous manual labor that helps keep the region competitive in an increasingly global market. Angus’s impassioned speech reveals how place informs one’s identity, but more importantly, how its inhabitants inform and preserve the places they occupy through their hard work and commitment to each other.

The Celestial Jukebox reveals that while the Chinese grocery has become a dying breed in the age of larger, more global retail stores, these small family-run businesses continue to provide the residents of the Mississippi Delta with a space to engage and interact with a diverse collection of cultures. More significantly, Shearer’s novel spotlights the ways in which immigrants like Angus Chien inherit the role of guardian to the region’s diverse historical and cultural legacy. Angus’s compassion for others directs the readers to the essential role that immigrants have played and continue to play in the South. The parallels between his experiences and those of today’s African and Latino immigrants highlight the continuity of community rather than its complete transformation or demise in the wake of contemporary globalization. The longstanding Celestial grocery and the newly constructed bunkhouse bring together natives and newcomers who learn to lean on each other in the face of socioeconomic change. These spaces and the interactions
that take place within them serve as a means of “integrating the global and the local” in a way that “energizes and sustains both.” Through Angus, Shearer informs readers of the oft-forgotten history of Chinese grocers in the Mississippi Delta while simultaneously pointing them to the people, places, and traditions that link the region to the rest of the world.

The writers and filmmakers discussed in this chapter weave together the experiences of Asian immigrants, southern whites and African Americans, and recent immigrants from Africa and Latin American to reveal an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic portrait of the American South in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While the shared goal of attaining financial stability and finding a place to establish roots for future generations unites these diverse groups, preexisting racial and ethnic misperceptions and the socio-spatial inequalities that result from the transnational flow of capital, labor, and cultures threaten to break up newly formed relationships between natives and newcomers. The task of overcoming these hardships proves to be too great for Kadohata’s Japanese laborers, Nair’s interracial lovers, and Shearer’s African immigrants who decide to move away from the South in search of a more inclusive place.

But these narratives also offer a more promising outlook for Asians and other immigrants living in the American South. The multiracial and multiethnic coalitions that Kadohata, Nair, and Shearer depict suggest that while the legacies of racial and ethnic exclusion continue to flow through southern communities, the meaningful relationships that develop between longtime southerners and new immigrants can enact a contrasting

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portrait of reconciliation. The search for socio-spatial justice destabilizes social and spatial divisions and provides a portrait of communal solidarity in the face of considerable socioeconomic change. In calling attention to the persistence of labor exploitation, racism, and spatial inequalities, the narratives discussed here compel readers to imagine new ways of eradicating latent and emergent forms of discrimination. Melanie Benson suggests that contemporary southern fiction compels readers “not to forget the South’s brutal crimes and its terrible revisitations upon generation after generation.” But the texts discussed here also force us to acknowledge that the region’s troubled history is part of larger, global narrative not only of loss and exclusion but also acceptance and survival. As southerners attempt to reconcile the segregated past with the increasingly diverse present, writers and filmmakers will continue to reimagine the South in ways that offer a more nuanced and more just sense of place and community.

EPILOGUE

Three years after Bobby Jindal’s historic victory in the 2007 Louisiana gubernatorial election that made him the nation’s first Indian American governor, Nikki Haley, the daughter of Sikh immigrants from Punjab, India, became governor of South Carolina. What is interesting about Jindal’s and Haley’s respective elections is the fact that both candidates claimed victory in traditionally conservative southern states and occupy positions that have been held historically by whites. The political ascension of two Indian American politicians highlights the changing demographics of the American South as the region claims a rapidly growing Asian American population. But Jindal’s and Haley’s elections also reveals how traditional southern ideologies remain in place. Both governors are Republicans who hold conservative positions on divisive issues like abortion and immigration. Moreover, Jindal and Haley have dealt with bigoted remarks from some of their constituents, an indication that the racial divisions that shaped the region under segregation remain in the twenty-first century South. What is clear is that the region remains a contested site where the politics of race, ethnicity, and place continue to play out on the political, economic, and physical landscape.

In her contribution to the 2006 special issue of *American Literature* that explores the global contexts of the new Southern Studies, Tara McPherson contends that “we need to think of Southernness and Southern geography as at best provisional, relational—as spaces that shift with various border crossings and that are all the stronger for these
processes.”¹ As the texts studied herein show, the global movement of people, cultures, and capital from Asia to the American South in the post-Civil Rights era has not erased southern distinctiveness but rather established a more nuanced and complex portrait of southern culture that further spotlights the networks that link the region to the rest of the world. The region is now home to Vietnamese restaurants, Korean churches, and South Asian civic organizations that help interweave the past and the present through spatial practices that incorporate both immigrant cultures and longstanding southern traditions.

This project, however, does not claim that Asians are the only or most influential group that redefines southern practices and spaces in the post-Civil Rights era. Nor does it suggest that Asians are the only ones subjected renewed segregationist practices. Rather, contemporary narratives about Asians living in the American South help point to a larger narrative of immigration, race relations, and global economies that destabilize the traditional dichotomies of inside-outside, white-black, region-nation that have long defined the region. Latino, Caribbean, indigenous, and Asian influences have shaped and continue to transform the South as both a place and cultural idea. These influences can be felt and seen in the region’s physical spaces and the social and economic exchanges that take place within them. But the South’s history is also marked by uneven economic development and material and social disparities that have led to labor exploitation, racial violence, and dispossession. While the flow of new immigrants and foreign capital into the region may provide a boast to the region, the intensification of globalization has often expanded rather than reduced social and spatial inequalities.

But the growing number of texts exploring the multicultural dimensions of the South helps expose the injustices that continue to divide the region along racial and ethnic lines. While these narratives do not guarantee the removal of racial divisions, they offer the possibility of a more hopeful future through their depiction of new coalitions centered on alternative axis like class, gender, and geography. At a time when the South relies increasingly on immigrant labor and transnational networks, it is important to consider the ways in which “the South” is comprised of multiple “Souths.” Asian Americans, along with others who fall outside of the traditional white-black racial binary, are becoming more visible and more vocal in the cultural and political processes that shape the South. Their continued presence in and influence on southern communities help ensure that the contributions of immigrant and indigenous populations are not erased from the region’s cultural memory.
APPENDIX

Figure 1- The entrance of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church in the Versailles neighborhood of New Orleans East. The building utilizes both English and Vietnamese text.
Figure 2- A large stage found in the open lot behind the church utilizes Vietnamese architectural designs such as the angular awning. The church utilizes the space for various community events such as the traditional Vietnamese Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, a traditional Vietnamese harvest celebration.
Figure 3- One of the two major Vietnamese American strip malls located on Alcee Fortier Boulevard in New Orleans East.
Figure 4- Restaurants represent a large portion of the retail spaces in the Vietnamese American strip malls in New Orleans. A number of establishments utilize a fusion of traditional Vietnamese and Gulf South cuisine including this store which offers both New Orleans po' boy sandwiches and Vietnamese bubble tea.
Figure 5 - The entrance sign to the residential section of Michoud Boulevard.
Figure 6- The entrance sign for the Vietnamese Martyrs Church on Oak Street in Biloxi, MS.
Figure 7- The Chua Van Duc Buddhist Temple located next door to the Vietnamese Catholic Church in Biloxi, MS.
Figure 8- A home that remains in disrepair following Katrina in July 2009. While most homes and businesses have been rebuilt, a number of properties remain uninhabited.
Figure 9- The proposed Viet Village Cooperative Urban Farm would be situated across the street from the Queen Mary of Vietnam Catholic Church. Spearheaded by the MQVN CDC in partnership with the New Orleans Food and Farm Network, the garden would be a self-sustaining, community-run farm that would cater to local residents and also supply fruits and vegetables for New Orleans restaurants and businesses.
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As a doctoral student in American Studies at the College of William and Mary, he focused on American literature and southern cultural studies. His work has been published in such journals as The Southern Literary Journal, The Global South, and The Mississippi Quarterly. He taught in the English Department and American Studies Program, including introductory courses on American literature and Asian American Studies, and advanced seminars on southern literature and Asian American literature and film. He also taught introductory composition courses at John Tyler Community College in Richmond, Virginia. He currently serves as an adjunct instructor in the English Department at William and Mary.