Judging the Book by Its Cover: 
Phantom Asian America in Monique Truong’s 
Bitter in the Mouth 

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Abstract 
Within the ongoing debate about what constitutes Asian America, recent “transracial adoption narratives” both act as a litmus test for “Asian Americanness” and introduce the ultimate Asian American phantom. Adoptees from Asia who find themselves in America, as new members of non-Asian families, may or may not feel Asian American, but they certainly “look the part.” In literary texts too, such adoptee characters represent the phantasmatic other for “true” Asian Americans, since they openly defy biologist assumptions underlying racial categories. Among Asian American adoption stories, Monique Truong’s recent novel Bitter in the Mouth (2010) is a case in point, in which its narrative complexity precisely highlights the issue of what constitutes Asian America. Truong’s stance in the novel apparently wavers between the quest for the primordial “fixed origins,” so common among adoption narratives, and a calculated elusiveness, translated in fictitious stories of origins. In this peculiar quest, the protagonist’s racialized body is silenced for most of the novel. It may be argued that the narrative strategy chosen by Truong, by withholding, if not erasing, the “racial traces” in the text, actually foregrounds the very issue of “race.” At the same time, Truong’s avowed aim in writing this novel is to move from such one-dimensional understandings of human identity. For that purpose, she chooses to highlight synesthesia as the most defining feature in the protagonist. I will examine whether this strategy is successful and what consequences it has for our understanding of Asian America. 

Keywords 
transracial adoption, synesthesia, race, Asian American literature, Monique Truong
Summer 1993. New York City. A young graduate student peruses the books she can find in the Asian American section in a huge bookstore. She spends a long time there, trying to decide whether she should also check the Asian Studies section to make sure she finds everything she needs for her dissertation on Chinese American literature (“You never know . . .”). Carrying—almost embracing—too many books in her arms, she stumbles towards the person at the desk and, after unloading her precious cargo, she hands her ID and credit card to the smiling woman. “I’m writing my dissertation,” stammers the student, somehow embarrassed by the unmanageable heap of books. The cashier is intrigued by the conspicuous “incongruence” of the obvious Latino surname on the ID (not to mention this girl’s dis-orienting looks) and the pile of Asian American texts before her. Quick question: “Why would you choose Asian American literature instead of Latino?” Quick answer: “Why not?”

The above scene is not unfamiliar to those scholars who are not “racially” marked by having their research interests described as being “as expected.” Fortunately, it is becoming less and less common to equate “insiders’ knowledge” with expertise. It is now generally agreed that both perspectives, insiders’ and outsiders’, are necessary and mutually complementary. The question of who is qualified to speak about Asian Americans can be tied to the increasingly urgent issue of what constitutes Asian American literature: that is, who can write as an Asian American? Some authors who had been labeled “Asian American” at the beginning of their literary careers, for example Chang-rae Lee or Sigrid Nunez, have chosen non-Asian-American protagonists for some of their later novels. Others, like Monique Truong, the writer we will be focusing on, do not want to be taken as spokespeople for or experts on their or their parents’ country of birth.¹

The true nature of the ethnic constituency signified by the label “Asian America” has been a debated issue since the very emergence of the field in the 1970s and 1980s. At the turn of this century, the question of who qualified as Asian American and its corollary—what issues should constitute the main object of

¹ In several interviews, Truong has confessed her uneasiness about being expected to be a Vietnam specialist. “I am no Vietnam expert. I am just a one-and-a-half-generation Vietnamese-American novelist, a peddler of fiction, who has not made the archetypal journey back to the land of her birth” (“Real” 687).
enquiry and research in Asian American Studies—became paramount, especially in the new context of diasporic consciousness and transnational mobility (Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht; Simal-González). One of the first scholars to note the challenges that globalization posed for Asian Americanists was Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, whose seminal “Denationalization Reconsidered” (1995) also warned of the dangers attendant on de-emphasizing the “American” ingredient in Asian American Studies. Lisa Lowe, in her equally influential “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity” (1991), later included in Immigrant Acts (1996), highlighted the dynamic, unstable and heterogeneous nature of Asian America, composed as it was of “men and women of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race, of refugees and non-refugees, of the English-speaking and the non-English speaking, of people of urban, rural, and different class backgrounds, and of heterosexuals as well as gays and lesbians” (Immigrant 43). The subsequent work of most scholars in Asian American Studies chose to emphasize the “intra-ethnic” diversity that Lowe had pointed out, as well as the transnational and diasporic perspectives (Palumbo-Liu; Rachael Lee), which some scholars saw as part of the general transnational turn in American Studies (Elliott).

Therefore, it can be safely argued that, while the earlier America-centered debates continue to be central to the emergence and history of Asian American Studies, these concerns now intertwine with the diasporic approach that became visible at the end of the twentieth century. The transnational impetus has been coincidental with and partially motivated by the demographic changes within Asian America (Wong 6-8; Koshy 315), which now includes a higher proportion of foreign-born Asian Americans (including adoptees) than it did at the time of the emergence of the field. Such a conjunction of circumstances translates into a more ambiguous and generally broader understanding of who can be considered an Asian American writer. In this context of social, demographic, and academic change, we find several possible scenarios: if place of residence is now used in lieu of birthplace as the main requirement for inclusion in the “Asian American canon,” Ha Jin would then be “as Asian American” as US-born Maxine Hong Kingston; if growing up in America is no longer a precondition for being an Asian American writer, Bharati Mukherjee or Salman Rushdie would then be “as (South) Asian American” as Jhumpa Lahiri. Therefore, the application of the diasporic framework along those or similar lines renders the question of the ethnic constituency of Asian America all the more complex, while the ghost of “denationalization” continues to haunt Asian American Studies. If, in order to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls, scholars or editors place thematic concerns above authorial ethnic ascription when deciding who “qualifies” as an Asian American writer, then those texts which are written by people racialized as Asian American but which do not feature Asian
American characters, or pay attention to specifically Asian American issues, would pose another taxonomic problem.\(^2\) Last but not least, those Asian American texts highlighting the instability of ethnic markers would themselves contribute to the probing and problematization of the Asian American label. As Karen Tei Yamashita ironically puts it in her latest novel: “Asian America (where’s that?)” (230).

Within the ongoing debate about what constitutes Asian America, recent “transracial adoption narratives” both act as a litmus test for “Asian Americanness” and introduce the ultimate Asian American phantom.\(^3\) Adoptees from Asia who find themselves in America, as new members of non-Asian families, may or may not feel Asian American, but they certainly “look the part.” Paradoxically enough, adopted children do not appear explicitly in Lowe’s call for addressing intra-ethnic heterogeneity, but they have clearly contributed to the demographic changes in Asian America. In literary texts, adoptee characters represent the phantasmatic other for “true Asian Americans,” a different version of Wong’s “racial shadow,” since they openly defy biologist assumptions underlying racial categories. International transracial adoptees, in particular, pose problems in that they are not easily accommodated by the usual paradigms: “Is the transnational adoptee an immigrant? Is she . . . an Asian American? Even more, is her adoptive family Asian American?” (Eng, “Transnational” 1-2). Understood as “an emergent form of Asian American subjectivity,” these transnational adoptees, as David L. Eng convincingly argues, should “be considered a ‘proper’ subject of Asian American studies.” This broadening of the ethnic constituency of Asian America must be coupled with the equally urgent need for Asian American scholars to engage in “a critique that does not rely upon an assumed and naturalized set of Asian American bodies” (“Transnational” 11).

Therefore, the potential of transnational adoption goes beyond its impact as a literal phenomenon that could be studied by the social sciences. Transracial adoption has also been used as a literary/cultural trope to signify not only mimetically but also symbolically. As such, it serves to address larger concerns about belonging and identity formation (Melosh 240; Callahan 18, 159, 166). In the American context, adoption narratives generally engage in direct or vicarious

\(^2\) For a discussion of such taxonomic predicaments, see Mark Jerng’s “Nowhere in Particular.”

\(^3\) The very term “transracial adoption” is a problematic label and some experts understandably have reservations about its use (Callahan 6).
explorations of ethnoracial and national allegiances (Callahan 18). Probable due to this rhetorical potential, transracial adoption stories are becoming more and more frequent in Asian American fiction as well as in non-fiction. Among these adoption stories, Monique Truong’s recent novel Bitter in the Mouth (2010) is a case in point, in which its narrative complexity precisely highlights the issue of what constitutes Asian America. If the protagonist of her first novel has been read as “a man without a nation” (Pelaud 39), the main character in her second novel can be read as “a woman without a ‘race,’” which translates into peculiar narrative strategies.

Supplementing what the book’s formal complexity can tell us is the very fact that, unlike what happens in earlier adoption narratives, Truong’s novel is not autobiographical in nature. Or rather, it is autobiographical in its southern location, in what it means to grow up as a Vietnamese American in North Carolina, but not in the adoption experience itself. What Linda and Truong have in common is “a childhood in that small Southern town” and “the profound lack of understanding of our bodies in that town” (“History” 3). This contrasts with Asian American adoption narratives where transracial adoption is part of the author’s real background. These texts are generally “structured as quests for lost biological origins, . . . understood as the key to a character’s identity” (Homans, “Trauma” 10).

Jerng contends that non-autobiographical novels like Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life are “[l]ess confined by the need to either justify or condemn the practice of transracial/transnational adoption, or the demand to construct a narrative of identity that is peculiar and particular to the experience of transracial adoption” (“Recognizing” 45). Such freedom from constraints is most visibly translated into narrative strategies that do not necessarily privilege the “return” to or the “discovery” of roots as the core of identity formation.

Indeed, several scholars have criticized this obsession with “fixed origins” in adoption narratives (Homans’s “Trauma” and “Essentialism”; Jerng’s

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4 Transracial adoption apparently resolves the paradox that consent-oriented America (Sollors) had to coexist with traditional descent-oriented kinship cultures: transracial adoption actually becomes the quintessential American form of kinship, a “family” of the will and not of the blood.

5 Books like Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life, Gish Jen’s The Love Wife, Aimee Phan’s We Should Never Meet, or Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth can be considered “transracial adoption narratives”; in all of them the presence of Asian (Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese) adoptees is central to their plot development. Other Asian American texts, like Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine, Andrew Pham’s Catfish and Mandala, or Karen Tei Yamashita’s I Hotel feature transracial adoptees, but they are secondary characters. As to non-fiction, many autobiographies, memoirs and documentary films can aptly be described as adoption narratives; for a representative list, see Jerng and Melosh.
“Recognizing”), but the centrality of the quest for origins in most adoption narratives is still a fact. Truong’s narrative stance in *Bitter in the Mouth* apparently wavers between such a need to fill the “void” in the protagonist’s past (212)—the primordial “fixed origins”—and the narrator’s silence about the actual fact of her transracial adoption, which she is aware of from the beginning. This willful silence can be read as merely a narrative strategy intended to build suspense and keep the reader going, or as “the ideological mobilization of formal devices” (Homans, “Trauma” 6) to endorse an anti-essentialist agenda. In what follows we will explore this narrative ambiguity, particularly by focusing on the manner in which the narrator meaningfully fluctuates between concealing and revealing these strategies.

**White Doves and Little Canaries:**

**The Dialectics of Secrecy and Disclosure**

Both in her celebrated debut, *The Book of Salt* (2003), and in her second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, Truong has tried to disrupt the usual preconceptions about and expectations of what a Vietnamese American writer should deal with in her texts. Some of the unusual elements in her first book, such as the setting—France and, only secondarily, Viet Nam—and the main characters—a multifarious range that includes a Vietnamese cook, but also his famous employers Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein, as the American writer is called in *The Book of Salt*—reappear in her second book, albeit in a transmuted fashion. In Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*, the main setting is neither Viet Nam nor France, but the American South, while the main characters belong to a wealthy white family. It is in this context that we encounter Linda, the autodiegetic narrator of the novel and the “open secret” of Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

The subtitle of this section, “Secrecy and Disclosure,” echoes the title of E. Wayne Carp’s influential book on adoption: *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption*. If it is not “Secrets and Lies,” echoing the well-known British film about transracial adoption, it is for a good reason. Secrets there are many in this novel, but outright lies are very rare. *Bitter in the Mouth* does indeed pivot around secrets that have been kept for a long time and will be disclosed, either in a “confession” or in a “revelation” (44). In the first part of the novel, the narrator keeps silent about her adopted status, dropping only some
oblique hints. It could even be claimed that the title of this part (“Confession”) and the narrative strategies used in it mislead readers into pursuing some other skeleton in the closet (Linda’s rape as a child or her great-uncle’s homosexuality). And yet, the narrator never tells an outright lie. As Truong reminds us, it is not the narrative voice that is unreliable here, but the reader: while her first novel is “about an unreliable narrator, Bitter in the Mouth is about the unreliable reader . . . Binh, the main character of The Book of Salt, certainly, is perpetuating some lies and half-truths. Linda Hammerick, the main character in Bitter in the Mouth, is perhaps not telling you everything in her life, but she certainly is not lying” (Silverblatt). In this novel, then, Truong has opted for a calculated taciturnity, using “articulate silences” to tell her story. As the narrator puts it in the first chapter, in giving us the basic facts about herself, she has thrown down her cards, face up; yet, she warns us, the figures can get all mixed up, so it is for us readers to “sort out the truth” by picking up the cards again, slowly, examining each one (5). That is what an informed reader can only do the second time (s)he approaches the book. This is what, to some extent, I will attempt to do in the following pages.

The novel opens with a peculiar, anti-Victorian deathbed scene where Linda and her grandmother, Iris, see and talk to each other for the last time. Iris’s parting words prove prophetic of the book’s narrative structure more than of Linda’s life: “What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two” (5, 12). This figurative “breaking” of Linda into two selves takes on a literal meaning when we learn that she will have to reconcile, if not two selves, at least two families: her adoptive family, and the biological parents (the “fixed origins”) that she has apparently erased from her memory. At the same time, the revelation of a secret—the name that Linda has kept secret from readers (“Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick”—will actually split the narrative into two clear sections which come before and after this revelation: the first (and longest) section of the novel, “Confession,” ends with the disclosing of the name, while the second section, “Revelation,” will provide the details of Linda’s life as a transracial adoptee, a crucial piece of information that obliges the reader to (re)interpret the novel “retroactively.”

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6 When she recounts her life, the narrator does not mention a birthplace, but only talks about where she grew up or when she “came along,” thus giving us such oblique hints (4, 41, 55, etc.).
7 See King-kok Cheung’s homonymic study, where she talks of imposed and reactive silences. Harper’s homosexual desires, suppressed for most of his life, are significantly described in the novel as “imposed aphasia” (166), in contrast to Linda’s chosen taciturnity as a student. Alternatively, the spare language can reflect the limitations of a child-focalizer, as Truong has recently suggested (Jolly 2).
However, readers soon realize that there is more to this novel than meets the eye. The narrative does not hinge on just one secret but weaves a whole tapestry of secrets, from the unnamable to the most innocent: Linda’s Vietnamese origins, her synesthesia, her great-uncle’s homosexuality, her close friendship with Kelly (kept secret during high school), their joint adoration of DP (Dolly Parton), Linda’s rape at the hands of Kelly’s cousin, or Luke (Kelly’s child given up for adoption) and his anonymous father. The two secrets that prove crucial with regard to Linda’s identity function as symmetrical opposites: while synesthesia is the hidden, invisible difference that no one around her notices, but that Linda tells us readers about almost from the beginning (15), her racialized body is the open, visible difference that Linda keeps silent about for 158 pages, even though it is no secret to the characters that interact with her, nor has it been erased from official documents (216). Only at the end of “Confession” do we hear the narrator’s given name, but the details of her adoption will have to wait until the last chapter.

“Words,” the narrator tells us, “were beautiful because they could reveal the truth and hide it at the same time” (141). This is precisely what she does in Bitter in the Mouth: all the clues are there, in the text, simultaneously hiding and revealing the truth. If “true” history is to be found “in the missing details” (53; “History” 2), it is through the cracks in an otherwise opaque narrative edifice that we will manage to glimpse Linda’s many predicaments. To make the task easier, the narrator has sparingly sown some clues from the very outset, although it will not be until the second part of the novel that the characters start “to show [their] true colors” (5), not only in metaphorical but also in literal terms.8

Raised in a purportedly color-blind context, the narrator chooses to tell her story in a similarly color-blind manner. Physical descriptions do not abound in “Confession.” Indeed, the Burch and Hammerick men are never explicitly racialized, so it is historical and socioeconomic characteristics, like their slave-owning past (48-55), which confirm that they are white. In contrast, the women in the family are occasionally associated with features that can be read as racial markers. Iris Burch Whatley, Linda’s grandmother, is said to have striking blue eyes (5); Linda’s mother, DeAnne, is often described as fair-haired (56, 112),

8 It is in the first chapter of this second section that we are explicitly told about the two separate worlds in Boiling Springs, black and white, the latter being the only one Linda was allowed to have contact with (170). Thus we have what Richard Lee calls the “transracial adoption paradox” (711): Linda can be read as a member of a “racial minority” within a white, privileged family. Hence, Truong exploits the narrative tension of Linda’s being simultaneously insider and outsider (Hoffman).
apparently from birth (111), and fair-skinned (128), letting us know she is white. In comparison, Linda’s physical portrayal is more ambiguous. What we know of her skin, for instance, is that it tans easily in the sun: “My skin deepened into a warm brown from all the afternoons of growing strong and tall underneath the North Carolina sun” (33). However, since this happens to many different skin types, this depiction could apply to either an Asian or a white child like Wade (84).

Other physical descriptions of young Linda prove equally inconclusive: “He [my father] began to tell me that my cheeks were pink like apple blossoms. That my eyes were the shape of hickory nuts. That the color of my hair was that of a river at nighttime” (33-34). Again, black hair or nut-shaped eyes turn out to be as ambiguous as the previous reference to the brown skin (cf. 171). The closest a reader can get to guessing that Linda has East Asian features is the hairdresser’s suggesting a “China chop” for the child’s hair (105), or Iris’s appellation, “little canary” (148), which readers may misconstrue as an affectionate, endearing term until the real reasons for Iris’s disappointment in her only granddaughter are finally exposed (166). At this point, we only know that Iris dislikes the child, but we do not understand why. Thus, the narrative clues revealing Linda’s adopted status and racialized body, if any, have to be looked for not in physical descriptions but in less tangible ones.

One such “intangible” trace can be found in the Southern master narratives that Linda reads as a child and is quickly enthralled by: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, and Walser Richard and Street Montgomery Julia’s North Carolina Parade. Despite, or precisely because of, the motherless family portrayed in Lee’s novel, Linda finds in it what Callahan terms an “idealized family” story (139). Her sense of affinity with the novel and some of its characters, however, sends contradictory messages as regards Linda’s ethno-racial description. If Linda imagines her own father to be Atticus, the lawyer and father figure in To Kill a Mockingbird, and she herself as his young daughter Scout, we can conclude that the narrator construes herself and her family as being white.9 However, two issues complicate this initial conclusion. The first has to do with Lee’s ostensive topic in To Kill a Mockingbird: prejudice, both racial and non-racial. The “racial” subtext in Truong’s novel will thus mirror Lee’s open text about racism in the American South. The second element that should reveal the truth to the reader—but only does so

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9 Like Scout, Linda is also her father’s “tomboy” (4, 32). See both Jehlen and González-Groba for an analysis of the relevance of cross-dressing and cross-gender behavior to the debunking of sexism and racism. For an investigation of the ways in which the presence of Asian Americans has affected southern identity and its literature, see Cha.
once we have read the entire novel—is the way the narrator phrases her comparison: “When I was eleven and reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I thought my father was Atticus Finch. That meant I was Scout” (28). The indirect manner in which she reaches that conclusion highlights her hidden insecurity: her father is definitively Atticus, and she is merely her father’s daughter. The parallelism is drawn from that single identification: Atticus-father. The other characters in the novel and in her life are just secondarily attached to that original coincidence, from which they derive their meaning. Last but not least, when Lee’s book is once again mentioned in the second part, the misidentification will become clear. Much though Linda wanted to identify with Scout, the white tomboy in the novel, it is the frightening Boo that she is finally compared with: “Instead of invisibility, Boiling Springs made an open secret of me. I was the town’s pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so. In Boiling Springs, I was never Scout. I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in plain sight” (171; emphasis added). And, like Boo, people have to learn to see her.

Similarly, *North Carolina Parade* proves to be a double-edged narrative. Explicitly intended as an instrument for anchoring Linda in her new family and in the new territory, it is read otherwise by the orphaned girl (52). In reading these “simple” stories, the narrator, consciously or unconsciously, foregrounds all the characters and incidents in the legends that remind her of her unique situation as an “abandoned” girl, to the point that she concludes that the book’s leitmotif was no other than the “forgotten child on the coast of North Carolina” (53), an effect of her own distorted lens.

In terms of its usefulness for little Linda, the most relevant story in *North Carolina Parade* is Virginia Dare’s legend. We first see Virginia as a baby girl born on Roanoke Island, among those pioneering settlers who had left England in order to start a new life in a new world, and in so doing “trespassing” and effectively stealing land from the native inhabitants of what is now North Carolina (52). Faced with adverse living conditions most of the pioneers choose to go back to England, among them Virginia’s grandfather, aptly named John White. This white man has to leave his granddaughter behind, presumably against his wishes, and the next thing we know is that Virginia “re-emerges” years later as a beautiful young woman, “raised by kindly Indians” (68). The shared situation of transracial adoption, especially Virginia’s “inexplicable abandonment and unquestioned adoption” (202), turns her into Linda’s Doppelgänger. Furthermore, the way Virginia’s legend is told

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10 Intriguingly enough, the story has all the trappings of a captivity narrative. For an overview of the reverse situation, extra-tribal adoption of Native American children, see Callahan 31-35.
proves equally significant: “Why and how [she] became an orphan was never addressed” (68-69). Such narrative taciturnity is mirrored by Truong’s chosen style and textual strategy. At the same time, such willful absence of factual information mirrors the actual void that Linda has in her memory: a narratively “convenient” amnesia has erased all of the details of her adoption and she only recalls certain tastes in a few synesthetic epiphanies.

Much like what happens to Lee’s novel, the legend of Virginia Dare becomes more transparent in the second part of Bitter in the Mouth. We now understand that Virginia functions as the first of Linda’s doubles not only because of her orphanhood, as we had surmised, but also because of her state of transfiguration. Virginia has been magically turned into a deer and only a piercing arrow can undo her metamorphosis (202). Much like Harper’s homosexuality, Virginia’s peculiar hybridity, her “flesh half animal and half human” (202), replicates Linda’s own in-betweenness: looking Asian but not feeling so.

Other abandoned and orphaned children appear in Bitter in the Mouth, either as real-life events, like Kelly’s little Luke, or as stories that catch young Linda’s attention. In most of the fairy tales that she reads as a child, parents are either non-existent or weak enough to imperil their children (104, 108-09). Mothers seem especially important in these stories (104): when they die or are forced to abandon their daughters, who is there to keep the children from harm? This is precisely what Linda faults her adoptive mother with. When it was necessary to do so, DeAnne did not protect her child from danger; on the contrary, she “hired a predator, lusted after him, trusted him to be alone with her daughter, and when the evidence of the predator’s crime [Linda’s rape] emerged, sought solace and explanation in the body of the victim” (109-10). It is at this point that Linda stops calling DeAnne mother. One last story that mirrors Linda’s life, this time from the repository of Greek mythology, is that of Athena’s birth. Hinted at earlier in the novel (68), the parallelism is finally made very clear, laid out before us with the other cards we have been dealt from the beginning: “Like Athena, I was born to my father, Thomas, fully formed” (163).

Together, the aforementioned stories, legends and fairy tales constitute fictitious narratives of origins, or rather, of a lack of origins. Just like more conventional “origin stories,” they help “sustain identity” for an adopted subject (Callahan 138), in this case Linda. Secondarily, they also act as micro-narratives that reflect, include, and announce the larger narrative in Bitter in the Mouth.
Judging the Book by Its Cover: Looking vs. Being (Asian American)

Transracial adoption “both requires and helps one to think beyond essentialisms of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and even the body” (Homans, “Essentialism” 257). In *Bitter in the Mouth*, Linda’s body is both central and elusive, starting from the book cover (Vintage edition, London 2011), which features a blurred fragment of a pale human face, both ambiguous in its features (female? white?) and, in terms of color, indistinguishable from the background except for the strikingly red lips. In fact, the choice of photograph for the cover is indicative of the whole narrative strategy. It does not lie, but it does not speak the whole truth either. By zooming in on a pale nose and mouth, but, significantly enough, not showing the person’s eyes, the photograph discloses only enough to lead the reader to some conclusions. If one thinks of the cover as announcing the main topic of the novel, the photograph draws attention to the organs associated with taste (mouth and nose) and the actions that an opening mouth first suggests, lips parting to speak or eat, translated in the novel as the central image of synesthesia, which effectively couples, in particular for Linda, language (the sounds of words) and taste(s). If one thinks of the cover as introducing the protagonist of the novel, readers are led to imagine a white woman, but they may also entertain some doubt. In its uncertainty, in its open secret, the book cover is certainly in keeping with the overall narrative strategy, which foregrounds the body—its visible features and its invisible characteristics—while at the same time hiding it.

As Eng reminds us, “race ultimately exceeds the logic of presence and absence” (“End(s)” 1488). Either as a desired absence or as a lurking presence, the centrality of the racialized body in *Bitter in the Mouth* is undeniable. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the most important and long-lasting human relationship she will ever have: “I fell in love with my great-uncle Harper because he taught me how to dance. He said that rhythm was allowing yourself to feel your blood coursing through you. He told me to close my eyes and forget the rest of my body. I did, and we bopped our nonexistent selves up and down and side to side” (3; emphasis added). The seven-year-old girl happily complies with Harper’s request and forgets her-self, becomes effectively “dis-embodied.” With the benefit of hindsight, this fantasy of disembodiment—and even the more unusual fantasy of dismemberment (162)—can be read as a psychological mechanism of defense that, according to Barbara Melosh, is common among real adopted children (229). At first sight, though, the narrator’s emphasis on “disembodiment” is
paradoxical, since both Harper’s and Linda’s lives will be highly determined by their bodies, or rather, by their embodied difference. The *bloody* rhetoric implied in the passing reference to “blood coursing through” Linda’s body is also open to different interpretations, as we shall see later.

Only a few paragraphs into the novel, we find another crucial reference to Linda’s body. This time, the narrator is trying to describe the effect that music and love have on her body: “. . . when my great-uncle Harper first placed the record needle onto a spinning 45 . . . I felt that everything deep within my body was rising to the surface, that *my skin was growing thin*, that I would *come apart*. If this sounds painful, it wasn’t. It was what love did to my body, which was to *transform* it” (4; emphases added). Here, the metaphor of disembodiment, or rather the painful tearing apart suggested by the first part of the narrator’s description, is later qualified by a positive interpretation of such a bodily upheaval: physical transformation instead of pain. This last description subverts the reader’s first impression that Linda is extolling the pleasure of forgetting the body, of becoming dis-embodied. Transcendence now turns into metamorphosis: Linda still escapes her body, but only to replace it with “a new one,” as it were. This desire for bodily transformation, for Virginia-like transfiguration, first read as the effect of platonic love, is open to more problematic interpretations once we know about the actual skin Linda seems eager to shed. It is her racialized body—her Asian features, which signify difference, that she wants to forget. But it is also a body that reminds her of her loss. Linda thus wants to erase such a difference that brings back memories of an obscure past, an unknowable origin.\(^\text{11}\)

From the moment she arrives in Boiling Springs, Linda knows that it is her body that “betrays” her: “I understood, without really understanding, that ‘Chink’ or ‘Jap’ or ‘Gook’ were intimately connected to how the children saw my body . . . At recess, . . . my classmates would pull up the outer corners of their eyes for ‘Chink’ and pull down the corners for ‘Jap.’ Precise and systematic, these children were” (172). Having no role in “the romances, the dramas, and the tragedies that [her] classmates’ hormones were writing for them,” Linda effectively disappears during her teenage years: “To be the Smartest Girl in my high school was to be disembodied, which was what I thought I had wanted all along. I was the Brain. Everyone else around me became their bodies” (173). Some years later, in college, Linda performs an even more stunning trick. She consciously tries to hide her body

\(^{11}\) Linda’s contradictory relationship with her body can also be read as the result of racial melancholia. For an excellent exploration of the “melancholy of race,” see Cheng’s homonymous article.
under an unusual combination of makeup and clothes (146), a “flagrant,” “transvestite” (Silverblatt) disguise that joins disparate popular icons and different genders: Katharine Hepburn’s Hollywood (androgynous) elegance and Sid Vicious’s punk rebelliousness. By giving herself an arresting makeover, the narrator actively engages in literal and metaphorical self-fashioning for the first time. Dressed in such incongruous apparel, Linda manages to impress her by-now-dead grandmother: “[t]he disappearing girl could no longer disappear. The little canary, as she [Iris] was fond of calling me, was therefore trying to transform herself into a white dove. In the process, I was becoming not invisible but nothing, and even with her eyes closed, Iris knew” (148; emphases added). Even though dead and lying in her open casket, Iris seems pleasantly surprised at Linda’s transformation, not only because her granddaughter looks “whiter” than ever, but because Linda has managed to pare herself into less than nothing: in trying to stand out from the crowd, she has effectively disappeared. What has started as a provocation, as a claim for the right of self-making or “self-fashioning,” is deflated by Iris’s deadly approval.

In a recent interview with Yi-Sheng Ng, Truong confesses that, growing up a Vietnamese American in a small town in North Carolina, she felt like a freak: “everyone around me [looked] at me as if I [were] a monster of some kind.” This, she adds, brought her closer to gay people: “we realized what we had in common very quickly: there was just something profoundly different about us, at least from other people’s point of view.” Such an autobiographical “confession” illuminates our reading of the mutual love and understanding that exists between Linda and her gay grand-uncle, an affinity predicated on the fact that both characters resented being “parceled” or “labeled,” be it on racial or gender terms. Essentialist understandings of race and gender/sexuality are so interconnected that debunking one ultimately leads to questioning the other (Jehlen 270-72; cf. Homans, “Essentialism” 270). I would argue that it is the destabilizing factor attendant on trans-racial adoption that enables Harper’s sexual crossover; conversely, Harper’s first oblique and then overt challenge to heterosexual and gender conventions will open a path for Linda’s own defiance of the labels she is given.

The affinity between Linda and her great-uncle takes many forms. As a biological male who felt as a woman is supposed to feel (another truism in itself), Harper was “a book that found itself inside the wrong cover” (120). He therefore

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12 The restrictive nature of ethnoracial categories is already discussed, albeit obliquely, when the narrator recalls the “small town’s proclivity for parceling difference, big and small” (63), and more specifically the absurd segregation in schools that disapproved of “open displays of cross-clique interactions” (24).
chose to live through Linda’s body, as the narrator herself observes (121). Through Linda’s experiences, Harper has managed to feel, albeit vicariously, what it is like to grow up a girl in the southern society. More crucially, though, the bond between the two characters stems from their shared discrepancy between what they feel and what is expected of them because of their physical appearance. From the moment that little Linda is introduced to Iris and “Baby” Harper, it is fairly easy to intuit that their fates will be joined. Iris’s “contractual” coldness in this first encounter signifies her disappointment with Linda, which is explicitly linked to Iris’s reaction to Harper: “As Iris had done with her own flesh and blood (a grown brother whom she still called Baby), she would see of me what she wanted, and she would ignore the rest. For Iris, ‘the rest’ included most things about me, especially who I was before I became a Hammerick” (166; emphasis added; cf. 178). Iris’s willful blindness to Linda’s difference finds a mirror in the paradoxical narrative taciturnity of “Confession.” Like Iris, much of the novel, including paratexts like the cover, wills itself not to see “the rest” of Linda. In this, we can literally judge the book by its cover, as we saw at the beginning of this section.

The absent-present body, even if dismissed by Linda herself and consciously ignored by the narrator, will be finally disclosed in the second part of the novel. As happens in other Asian American narratives, it is the protagonist’s racialized difference, “the physical appearance of [her] body that produces the demand to evoke [her] bloodlines” and inaugurates the “process of race making” (August 102). One scene in the first part of the novel anticipates just such a race-making process. When, after scandal has tainted Linda’s father’s death (and life), Iris defends her ruthless ways to get Linda into Yale, the issue of physical disparity takes center stage for the first time: “Her little brother may have been a lacy-undergarment enthusiast, her son-in-law a philanderer who died without his boxers on, and her granddaughter a physical letdown in a training bra, but we all belonged to her” (132; emphasis added). Apparently, then, it may have been merely aesthetic expectations that Linda has not lived up to.

The explanation that follows gives little factual information: “I believed that she was indifferent to me because I looked nothing like her” (133; emphasis added). The narrator consciously withholds the crucial fact that such a lack of physical resemblance is due to the fact that Linda is not Iris’s “blood” relation, and the girl is originally from Vietnam. The reader may be intrigued by such a scarcity of details, but at that point (s)he ignores Linda’s transracial adoption. However, the reflection that follows acts as a textual clue that will become highly significant only retroactively. Right after this reference to the physical disparity between Iris and her
granddaughter, the narrator confesses: “I now know that it is no coincidence that the word ‘favor’ is used to denote a physical resemblance. I favor you (your eyes, your chin). You favor me (with love and attention). Favor is a reciprocity based on a biological imperative, it is a primal vanity that has saved the lives of some babies and doomed others” (133; emphasis added).

The exemplum that Linda offers in order to illustrate her Darwinian hypothesis is the following: “The floodwater is rising. You have only your two hands. Which child in your brood do you grab on to? The one who is your mirror or the one who is unrecognizable?” (133; cf. 139). Iris clearly sees her granddaughter as an “aberration,” “a mirror that failed to produce an exact image” (133). We will soon realize that, if Linda’s body fails to live up to her grandmother’s expectations, it is because it is read as a double aberrant subversion. If adoption seems taboo to traditional Southerners like Iris, transracial adoption is doubly seditious, doubly aberrant. While racialized subjects such as Asian Americans constitute the Others in American society, being an adoptee adds a second stigma, for “Adoption is Other in a culture and kinship system organized by biological reproduction” (Melosh 218; cf. 221). If the fact of “adoption” seems to annoy Iris as much as its qualifier, “transracial,” it is the racialized difference that weighs the more, since it cannot be hidden from view.

If, rather than reflecting quantifiable data, racialization emerges from perceptions, is it self-perception or how the others view you that counts the most? As we have seen, race-making does not require the racialized subject’s willful participation. Linda disavows what her racialized body tells others about her, since she does not feel Asian American, at least not as customarily understood. If it is the others’ perceptions that count the most in the process of race-making, then Linda is certainly an Asian American woman despite her own indifference to such ethnoracial ascriptions. Much like Truong herself, Linda feels as if she had the word Vietnam “tattooed” on her forehead (Truong, “Real” 687; cf. Silverblatt; Homans, “Essentialism” 262). Linda’s fiancé, Leo, also fails to see Linda for what she wants to be and instead “equates” her girlfriend’s “body with what others have projected onto it” (173). Echoing the narrow script in most adoption narratives, these characters take for granted that there exists “a transparent and deterministic relationship between the child’s background or place of origin and what he or she should be” (Jerng, “Recognizing” 48). Although Linda is convinced that “looking” (Asian) is not “being” (Asian), the people around her fail to see the difference:
Since leaving Boiling Springs, I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South. You mean what was it like to grow up looking Asian in the South, I would say back to them . . .

I was still taken aback, startled, I suppose, that it was the outside of me that so readily defined me as not being from here (New Haven, New York, New World) nor there (the South). How could I explain to them that from the age of seven to eighteen, there was nothing Asian about me except my body, which I had willed away and few in Boiling Springs seemed to see anyway. (169-70; emphasis in original)

Although the white community of the Southern town had immediately seemed to make a “pact” in order to be “color-blind” towards Linda, what had happened instead, in the narrator’s words, was that she “became a blind spot in their otherwise 20-20 field of vision,” for “they learned never to see” her (170, 171). In contrast, the few black women she briefly met in de-facto segregated Boiling Springs actually “saw” her. What is more important is the fact that Linda found these black men and women uncomfortable to look at because they reminded her of her own difference: “I learned early on not to meet their eyes, dark and deep as a river. If I saw them, I would have to see myself. I didn’t want a mirror. I wanted a blank slate” (170; emphasis added). It is in the light of this selfish mechanism of self-defense that we understand the white people’s decision not to “see” her: theirs “was an act of selective blindness that was meant to protect me from them, or perhaps it was the other way around. They knew that if they saw my face they would fixate on my eyes, which some would claim were almond-shaped and others would describe as mere slits. If they saw my hair . . . If they saw my skin . . .” (171). Such negation is tinged with sexist and imperialist angst in the case of some of the men, who view Linda with both pleasure and guilt: “how many of the men would remember the young female bodies that they bought by the half hour while wearing their country’s uniform in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, or South Vietnam?” (171; cf. Eng, “Transnational”).

If the very “detachment from biology” that inheres in the concept or act of adoption provides Truong with the ideal instrument “to redefine the terms in which we understand identity, to make it more expansive and self-directed” (Callahan 19),

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13 Like Baby Harper and black children (171-72), these women understood her plight, but at the same time they did not understand “why one of my own hadn’t taken me in” (170).
the aforementioned reactions constitute a stark corrective to the optimistic prospect of self-fashioning, espoused by Linda and translated into the narrative strategies of “Confession.” Apparently, even if Linda does not believe in body as fate, in biology as destiny, those around her, including her self-centered boyfriend-psychiatrist, persist in telling her otherwise and acting on it.\(^\text{14}\) Although we might expect the aforementioned discrepancy between looking and feeling to effectively decouple the character’s “origins”—“betrayed” by the telling Asian features—from her lived experience as a girl growing up in the South, external racialization sets severe limits to Linda’s attempts at self-making.

The trope of adoption, then, allows Truong to explore not only racialization or “race-making,” but also the construction and constructedness of one of the most basic human institutions: the family. As a young woman, Linda sees family as “choice,” not as “fate” (cf. Jolly 1). Accordingly, she tries to forget the family that was imposed upon her, mostly DeAnne and Iris (182). After all, children can be viewed as “hostages of the families into which they are born” (Melosh 236): no child has ever been asked whether (s)he wants to be part of a certain family (Truong, Bitter 265). That is why the narrator bestows so much importance on her family of choice, those fellow “synesthetes” that she discovers in a PBS documentary, both the anonymous and the famous ones: Kandinsky, Nabokov, Messiaen, Scriabin . . . (217-30).\(^\text{15}\) Instead of succumbing to “the syndrome of genealogical bewilderment” that Melosh talks about (227), Linda decides to build her own virtual family of synesthetes. If every family is “an invention” (265), Linda decides to create “an alternative family tree” (228), whose branches do not include either her birth or her adopted parents. In this way, the narrator tries to debunk the mythology surrounding parenthood, usually idealized as the embodiment of love, generosity and altruism. Children, Truong reminds us, are usually the result of selfish motives, most commonly the need to perpetuate ourselves through other bodies/people (265). In contrast, synesthesia, imagined as something to be joyfully accepted, not stoically put up with (218), seems to generate a selfless bond between Linda and her fellow synesthetes. By “adopting” her synesthetic siblings, Linda apparently reinforces choice over fate. However, we cannot forget that Linda’s synesthesia is not chosen by her but rather a product of her brain-body, over which she has little control. The mythology of choice is belied by this realization, even if it is not voiced in the

\(^{14}\) Not only Linda’s physical features but her “double” and apparently incongruous names affect her destiny (30). And yet, names can be changed (42, 54) or ignored (171).

\(^{15}\) Linda actually “felt a distinct sense of embarrassment and loss that I had never heard of Scriabin, as if I had failed to meet a member of my own family . . .” (228).
narrative.

It may be argued, somehow counter-intuitively, that the narrative strategy chosen by Truong in withholding, if not erasing, the “racial traces” in the text, actually foregrounds the very issue of “race.” In “Southern Girl, Twice Over,” Truong explains to the interviewer that, with *Bitter in the Mouth*, she intended to explore the manner in which “our differences—internal and external—define how we see ourselves and how others see us” (Jolly 1). In other interviews, the writer has also voiced her belief that we are defined by much more than just our looks or our sexual orientation: “Our lives are not defined by [just] one thing;” otherwise, “we become one-dimensional” (Silverblatt; Ng 3). That is why she tries to make Linda’s identity revolve around something other than her racialized body: namely, her synesthetic condition. For Linda, Truong tells us, it is not her presumed Asianness that matters; what makes her really different is her synesthesia (Silverblatt). In fact, the writer herself explains how *Bitter in the Mouth* stemmed from her concern with synesthesia, as well as her wish to explore the American South (“History” 1). We may ponder the question as to whether Truong has been successful in her endeavor to highlight Linda’s synesthetic condition as the most determinant factor in making her who she is.

On the one hand, it can be argued that synesthesia seems more intimately connected to Linda’s identity than any other of her characteristics and circumstances; after all, it is the secret that she keeps hidden from all but Kelly. Her boyfriend Leo does not know (76-77, 221, 223), and her mother does not want to know (107, 246). When faced with the familiar situations associated with ethnic identification such as the history of, or latest news from, Vietnam she does not react. She fails to identify with those identical names and bodies; she does not find them helpful or “applicable”: “At the time, I had no body, which meant that I was impervious and had no use for such information” (216). In contrast, as an adult she does identify with a white man from Manchester, Mr. Roland, whom she first sees in a PBS documentary. In him, “I saw myself, or rather my doppelganger” (217).

On the other hand, as we have seen in the previous analysis of “racial traces” in the novel, Linda’s ethnicity is more relevant than is suggested by the initial narrative strategy in *Bitter in the Mouth*. It bears repeating that, by keeping the racialized body a secret for most of the novel, the very issue of “race” comes to the forefront once we learn of Linda’s transracial adoption. After all, as Truong herself

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16 The fact that she does not mention transracial adoption in these early interviews about *Bitter in the Mouth* may be related to her wish not to be a plot spoiler.
admits, “[w]hen we tell the stories of our lives, I think that what we leave out, what we leave till the end, and what we never say are as revealing as the words that we do utter” (“History” 2). In this case, not only do Linda’s body and her past persistently lurk in the narrative, but it is the revelation of the particulars of her transracial adoption that Truong chooses as a conclusion for the novel. This is significant in and of itself, and the way the announcement is phrased only confirms its importance. Just as DeAnne is about to tell her adopted daughter about her biological parents and how she came to her to be Linda Hammerick, we read that she intends to get “to the heart of the matter” (266).

The fact that the ending recounts Linh-Dao’s beginning complicates the way we interpret the novel as an adoption narrative. While other authors have chosen the trope of adoption “to highlight the elusiveness and constructedness of origins” (Homans, “Trauma” 19), Truong hesitates between an acceptance of our lack of knowledge and a resolute quest for answers. This final revelation both enacts and privileges a return to the origin: “We all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay” (282). Right after DeAnne breaks the secret she had kept in order to protect herself (256, 278)—and, according to Iris, protect her new daughter as well (5, 12)—Linda mentions Iris’s initial prophecy again, thus closing the circle: “The story of my birth parents’ final days in Chapel Hill was what my grandmother Iris, the secret bourbon drinker, had thought would break me in two” (279). The privileged position that both the secret and its revelation acquire in this peculiar Southern Gothic tale says much about the narrative hierarchy. Ultimately the novel, through the way this revelation is textually crafted, highlights the necessity of having such narratives of origin and belonging.

Taken at face value, those concluding words would indicate that Truong apparently embraces the “fixation on provenance” that Linda had faulted Leo for (169), as well as her racialized difference. Even if synesthesia is at one point said

17 Perhaps it is not so much the skin but the past that clings to us and determines who we are. This is what Iris believes and tries to instill in Linda: “The past was an affliction for which there was no cure” (10).

18 The contrived (and highly improbable) explanation of how Linda became an orphan and came to be adopted by the Hammericks is less relevant than is transracial adoption’s potential as a cultural metaphor.

19 Leo, coming as he does from spotless WASP stock (178), is described as “a man fixated on provenance” (169), and, much like his literary predecessor Kate Chopin’s Armand Aubigny in “Désirée’s Baby,” he dislikes “obscure” origins. However, in this case, it is the fact that Linda is adopted, and not her racialized body, that he disapproves of (168).
to overrule any other feature in defining Linda’s identity (and family), the narrative construction somehow belies such an open statement and once more accommodates what Jerng described as a “proleptic trajectory for the project of recognition” (“Recognizing” 48). Seen in this light, Linda’s reference to synesthesia as “the key to a mystery” (254), the mystery being herself, takes on another import. True enough, the phrase can be read literally: understanding her synesthetic condition has helped her (and readers) to understand her(self). Alternatively and more fruitfully, the phrase can be construed as follows: by finding out the meaning of her first word-taste association Linda will unravel her forgotten past. Thus, synesthesia becomes the “key” that will open that door and break through her childhood amnesia: the original fire scene (116-17), associated with a mysterious word (15, 116-17), constitutes her first blurred memory. If amnesia can naturally result from the traumatic event (fire, death, separation), then synesthesia can even be interpreted as Linda’s particular way of coping with that same traumatic experience, allowing the mind-body to forget and remember (through word-taste associations) at the same time.  

In a final narrative twist, however, Truong turns what seemed to be a wholehearted endorsement of the narrow script of “fixed origins” into something much more elusive. The fact that “[w]e all need a story of where we came from . . .” is attenuated by the preceding sentence: “I had thought . . . that she [DeAnne] could be making this all up. I decided that it didn’t matter. At least it was a story, I thought” (282). The narrator is prepared to live with the radical unknowability, even the impossibility of origins (Homans, “Trauma” 6), so central in adoption narratives. Like the mise-en-abyme micro-narrative of Virginia Dare, Bitter in the Mouth explores “the difficulty both of establishing origins and of doing without them” (Homans, “Trauma” 22). By adopting the literary trope of adoption, Truong feels “licensed” to fiddle with and unearth the familiar grounds on which we traditionally build identities, she feels free “to denaturalize origins, to expose their fictiveness” (Homans, “Trauma” 16). By privileging provisional storytelling over “fixed origins,” the novel proclaims that it is possible to find a compromise between the legitimate aspiration to look for one’s (lost, obscure) origins and the need to

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20 See Homans, “Trauma.” An interpretation of Truong’s novel from the viewpoint of trauma theory would certainly prove fruitful: nightmares plague the protagonist even as an adult, the original fire scene reappears transmuted into phantasmatic avatars (Truong 18, 126-27, 138), and the rhetoric of loss and void, so common in autobiographical narratives of adoption (Melosh 227), also appears in the novel (Truong 161, 165, 212).

21 Similarly, the mysterious word in Linda’s synesthetic epiphany is never known.
accept that, ultimately, origins may not be fully knowable in other than fictional (re)constructions.

**Phantom Asian America or the New Racial Shadow**

All families were an invention. Some families were machines. Some were gardens. . . . Others were Trojan horses.

—Monique Truong

*Bitter in the Mouth*

*Bitter in the Mouth*, despite its narrative game of secrets and revelations, ultimately subverts the fixation with provenance and origins that has come to be associated with transracial adoption narratives. That Truong’s novel remains critical of essentialist understandings of identity is confirmed by what is foregrounded in its concluding chapter: not so much the need to return to one’s “real roots” as the need for fictions in the ongoing construction and invention of one’s identity. Such an anti-essentialist argument can and, I argue, should be extrapolated to Asian American literature as a whole. If, according to the narrator of the novel, the “ghost” that haunts North Carolina was Virginia Dare (50), the ghost haunting Asian America is the transracial adoptee. If Linda is the Trojan horse in her family, she is also the Trojan horse in the larger Asian American “family.” As a person adopted across “racial” lines, Linda precipitates “a crisis in the meaning of kinship, especially in a culture that defines family in terms of shared ‘blood’” (Callahan 15). The Hammericks will never be the same after Linda; the Asian American “family” will not be the same after the irruption of transracial adoptees. If transracial adoption has long been a narrative ruse used to deal with “the experience of immigrants, their children and native-born Americans struggling to negotiate a sense of identity” (Callahan 148), in this particular novel Truong has used the privileged trope of adoption in order to question what we assume to be Asian America.

The deployment of synesthesia likewise contributes to this radical project. The dislocating effects of Linda’s transracial adoption are reinforced by her synesthetic condition. In linking taste and language, Linda’s synesthesia bonds together and reconciles two apparently divergent senses, much as her own transracial adoption willy-nilly reconciles two very different realities. Auditory-gustatory synesthesia involves “two halves,” “something bitter in the mouth” and “the word that triggered it” (15)—or, more specifically, the sounds making up that word, since homophones
trigger the same taste (111, 227-28). Similarly, being Asian American can be understood as another “two-halved mystery” that involves looks and feelings. Just as synesthesia intertwines two apparently disparate things, Linda’s peculiar ethnic identity derives from a similar incongruence: looking Asian American, but not being Asian American as traditionally understood. On the other hand, synesthesia is also described as experiencing “phantom tastes”—in contrast with “real flavors” (155)—which again makes it the perfect objective correlate for “phantom ethnicity.” Truong effectively translates the pervasive, haunting nature of synesthesia in Linda’s life by opting for a graphic strategy whereby “normal” speech patterns are constantly interrupted by gustatory echoes, taste labels juxtaposed with each of the words by which they are triggered. Similarly, the phantasmatic presence of Linda’s past and her racial body pervades the whole narrative.

In the ending is the beginning, but in the beginning is also the ending. The initial quotation that precedes the novel, once more from Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, constitutes an even more important paratextual element than the aforementioned book cover. Through Lee’s words, Truong not only emphasizes the lack of physical data (they didn’t know what he looked like), so central to this novel’s narrative strategy, but also points out the relevance of “seeing” someone for who she really is, not just for her body. Transracial adoption makes the strait-jacket of essentialism burst at the seams. We are more than our racialized, gendered bodies. At the same time, we are also our racialized, gendered bodies. But bodies also have “secret chambers and cells” (75), they contain the seeds of invisible synesthetically powers and sexual desires. Bodies change involuntarily, with age and disease. Bodies are also modified or supplemented at will. Linda experiments with both types of change: after cancer has left her with little hair of her own, she decides to wear a wig, a “mane of long black hair,” probably sold by an Asian woman who needs the money (248). Thus, it is her own choice (paradoxically, out of necessity), and, simultaneously, the lack of choice of another, similarly racialized person, that modifies Linda’s body. It is the (less visible) class factor that makes her share someone else’s body now. Class, gender, race and all manner of visible and invisible elements make us who we are; class, gender, race and all manner of visible and invisible elements make up Asian America.

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