

"I was Pearl and my last name was Harbor":

MONIQUE THUY-DUNG TRUONG'S

"KELLY" AND ETHNIC SOUTHERN MEMORY

by . Nahem Dousaf and Sharon Monteith

Monique Truong became a recognized author with the publication of her 2003 novel *The Book of Salt*, in which a Vietnamese cook in Paris in 1934 answers an advertisement placed by Alice B. Toklas specifying that she and Gertrude Stein wish to retain a chef. However, Truong began mapping the voices of displaced Vietnamese characters much earlier in stories and essays. Her reiteration of the experience of displacement reflects her own history as a Vietnamese American who began her "American" life in the South. One of the most powerful voices Truong employs to explore displacement is that of Thuy Mai, protagonist of the 1991 story "Kelly," published in *Amerasia Journal* under the author's full name of Monique Thuy-Dung Truong. The story is set in the small North Carolina town of Boiling Spring.*

"How to write about a place that is you but one that you have got to go back, call out and claim because no one there will ever claim you as their own." (Monique Thuy-Dung Truong, "Kelly")



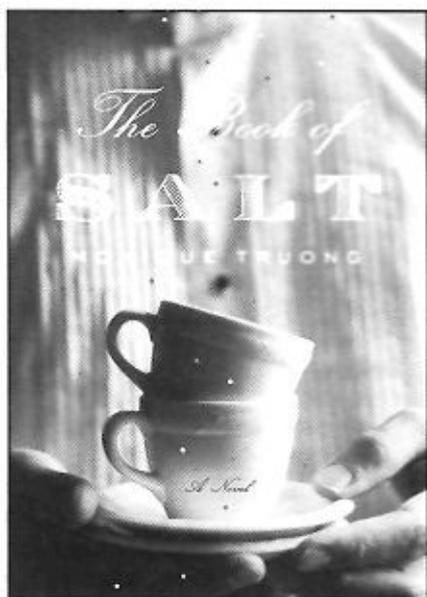
John R. Daver, Jr. Memorial Chapel on the campus of Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, NC

* There is an actual Boiling Springs (with an "s") in North Carolina; however, the town is spelled without the "s" in "Kelly."

*"Boiling Spring. North Carolina is a footnote that I wished to God my parents had read before setting forth to this place that had not changed since the Civil War."
(Truong, "Kelly")*

Truong's protagonist in "Kelly," Thuy Mai, is a subaltern who, in telling her own story, is generating a Vietnamese personality *sui generis* in Southern literature. With Thuy Mai, Truong begins the process of exploring the relationship between Vietnamese and Americans through fiction in which place is mediated through memory, and "unclaimed experience" (to borrow Cathy Caruth's term) becomes the focus of the narrative. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth describes trauma in terms of a deferred response to historical outrage or a psychological wound that was neither fully acknowledged nor healed. In Caruth's model, the wound reopens later and the history of the injury is reconstructed in a belated narrative. Read in context of this narrative model, Truong's "Kelly" reveals eight-year-old Thuy Mai's damaged sense of self as a result of the prejudice she experiences at school in 1975. In 1990, via her imagination, Thuy Mai returns to the scene to bear witness in the letters she writes to Kelly, the white childhood friend she met and made in Boiling Spring, who shares something of Thuy Mai's, experience because she was ostracized by her peers for being fat: "I'll tell you now that we are so far tno longer able to talk except through the stories of the past we once shared" (44). The girls have been thrown together at school – Kelly, the "fat girl" and Thuy Mai, the foreign "freak." Still, Thuy Mai is convinced that whiteness and relative affluence will have ensured her friend's successful investiture into Southern society, while she herself remains traumatized by feelings of estrangement even as an adult, stigmatized as the ethnic "other."

The story "Kelly" explores the ways in which twenty-one-year-old Thuy Mai's Southern experience is arrested at age eight. She returns to her painful memories of school and small-town life to renew them, as if picking at a scab that has grown too quickly over an old wound. At the same time, she continually



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conceptualizes herself as a Southerner. Throughout the short story, there are many archetypal "Southern" references to, for example, the Civil War, Southern Baptists, Southern speech patterns, and *de facto* segregation, as well as to Faulkner, Patsy Cline, and Hank Williams, associations that underscore Thuy Mai's fragile belief in herself as "Southern." Truong deliberately fuses her protagonist Thuy Mai with her own writerly self, endowing her protagonist with one of her own names (Thuy) and tracing in the "Notes" that are appended to the story some highly personalized ideas and memories that simmer beneath the fictional surface. In her commentary Truong performs a self-consciously critical assessment of her own empirical and Thuy Mai's fictional experience, guiding the reader through the process of remembering and reconstructing lived experience in fictional form.

"Kelly" is set following the fall of Saigon in April 1975. Thuy Mai and her family find an ambivalent sanctuary in Boiling Spring, a small North Carolina town. Truong's story is a reminder that ethnicity is often constructed along racial lines – putative black and white categories – especially in the South. The traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese girl that lie at the center of "Kelly" are complicated by the protagonist's falling between black and white in the town's racial hierarchy. When Thuy Mai arrives in the post-Civil Rights South, she becomes a new

*"When the central historical referent for southern identity is no longer the Civil War but Vietnam, radical change can be felt in the foundations of southern society and literature."
(Michael Kreyling)*

"Southern" subject whose provocative story anticipates Michael Kreyling's observation, in *Inventing Southern Literature*, that "[w]hen the central historical referent for southern identity is no longer the Civil War but Vietnam, radical change can be felt in the foundations of southern society and literature" (121). "Kelly" functions primarily as a meditation on feeling displaced in the South precisely because of the ways in which American emotions about Vietnam influence the reception of Thuy Mai's family in small-town North Carolina in the 1970s. As Gina Marchetti and others have pointed out, Hollywood's fascination with Southeast Asians involves "homogenizing" the casualties of Vietnam as American soldiers. Movies and fictions have overlaid the land – and the war – with a mystique of unknowability, and while the North Vietnamese are homogenized as Vietcong, the South Vietnamese have been projected through an Orientalist inscrutability. In *Tangled Memories*, Marita Sturken acknowledges that "remembrance of the battles fought by the veterans in Vietnam and at home [may] necessarily screen out any acknowledgment of the war's effect on the Vietnamese" (82). Following the war, the dearth of representations of Vietnamese refugees living "American" lives falls in to what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe as a form of textual repression in a historical continuum, whereby Vietnamese Americans have deferred telling the kinds of experiences that Truong reveals in her short story.

Truong's response to traumatic memory revolves around the arbitrariness of the girls' subject positions and a self-reflexive turn that is reflected in much literary discourse on memory. The search to confirm, complete, and even resolve memories has, of course, been explored by Sigmund Freud, who claimed that resolution might take place in the conscious working through of unconscious memories, and by Maurice Halbwachs, who has argued that completion can be a component of collective memory and therefore takes place in wider society, enlisting participant witnesses to reinforce what otherwise remains a personal process. The self-conscious process of addressing repressed personal and collective memories animates "Kelly." By locating "Kelly" as a Southern story, Truong revisits what she represents as a collective war wound. Halbwachs's theorizing of memory recognizes that there may be an original memory but that it is rehearsed and revised over time because remembering takes place in an ever-changing present. In Thuy Mai's case, childhood memories are ritualistically reconstructed with

regularity. She tends to return to her story each spring: "You don't know this part yet so read carefully cause I may not write it again the next time around" (45).

In 1975, Kelly and Thuy Mai are "library kids" waiting for their mothers to collect them after school one day when, looking at books their teacher has recommended, their eyes "meet" at a book about Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian-born Spanish navigator after whom the American continent was named. Maureen Ryan, discussing Vietnamese immigrants in the South, has argued that their primary adjustment is always to "America" as an imaginary or social construct, rather than to a region (241). While this is generally the case for the protagonist Thuy Mai and revealed here via the image of Vespucci, Truong further imbues Thuy Mai's ethnic memory with specifics of the American South that have far more resonance for her than "America" or that "Other" South that has receded – South Vietnam. The Vietnamese who arrived in the US in 1975 were refugees airlifted out of Saigon or escaping on boats, refugees who had little, if any, preparation for life in another country. Thuy Mai observes acidly that the US, "for those educated by the flicker of Hollywood is a very short book," and that no one in Saigon bothered to read the footnotes. Boiling Spring is the footnote she "wished to God my parents had read before setting forth to this place" (42). The implication is that the family ends up in North Carolina by accident rather than by design but that their presence as war refugees personalizes for this small town what is already a politically hot national debate about the war and its aftermath:

We, my family not you and me, were driven into town sometime in the deep summer of 1975. You don't know this but I keep telling you that the summer of 1975 was earth shattering. It wasn't the heat that had cracked and blistered the whole of the United States of which the South is a blood red caboose.

I am afraid it was me. (42)

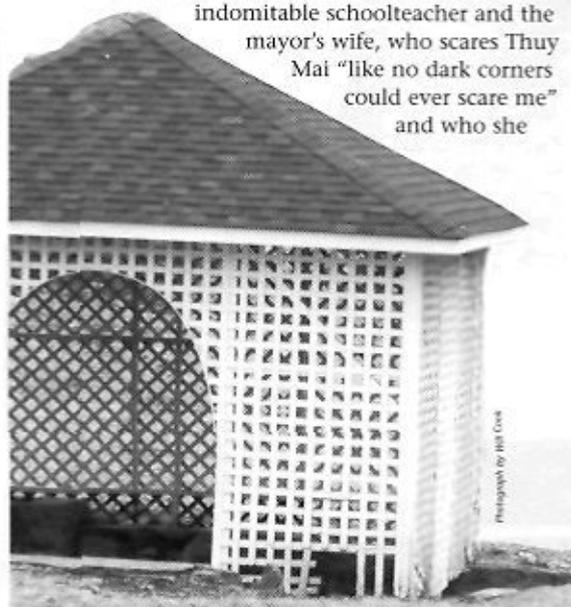
*"Boiling Spring was the first American town I ever called home. I have despised it, cursed it and hoped for its demise since leaving it the summer before fifth grade."
(Truong, "Notes to 'Dear Kelly'")*

The broader context in "Kelly," published in 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, is America's mythmaking around a war in which the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is the revenge for the Japanese attack. In the story, Thuy Mai's anguish begins in her homeroom when her teacher Mrs. Hammerick alludes to December 7, 1941, as the "Day of Infamy." Thuy Mai feels this label is a loaded reference to the way she – as an Asian child – should be perceived by her classmates:

You have to know that all the while she 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. They understood her like she was speaking French and their names were all Claude and Pierre. I felt it in the lower half of my stomach, and it throbbed and throbbed (42).

Much of what Thuy Mai remembers of Boiling Spring involves her sensitivity to Orientalist stereotyping and is derived from Mrs. Hammerick, the

indomitable schoolteacher and the mayor's wife, who scares Thuy Mai "like no dark corners could ever scare me" and who she



the gazebo/spring of Boiling Springs, NC, located on the Gardner-Webb University campus

fears has reduced her to a cipher of war and anti-American sentiment, like a spy for the enemy. In the space of only a few thousand words, Truong draws three different moments in American history into her protagonist's conceptualizing of Boiling Spring: the Civil War of 1861-1865, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the fall of Saigon in 1975. In Pierre Nora's theory of *lieux de memoire*, the "embodiment" of memory (in sites where "a sense of historical continuity" persists) encompasses texts that focus on place as well as geographical spaces (7). Thuy Mai's memory-site is neither the South Vietnam that she once called home nor the Vietnam that, in America, was synonymous with war in the 1970s. Instead, her memory-site is Boiling Spring where she first becomes aware of war as a key concept at the heart of American civic nationalism and of one of nationalism's by-products, the marginalization of Asian Americans. Thuy Mai's story explores the damage inherent in this attempted elision. The letter she writes to Kelly speaks to Thuy Mai's (and Truong's) failure to reconcile herself to her Southern "home"; as Truong says in the story's appended "Notes," "I know that there is an affiliation, an empathy on my part, if not theirs, that connects me with this region of the United States that did not want to see me then in 1975 nor now in 1990" (47).

While North Carolina may have begun as a footnote in Thuy Mai's family's impression of the US South, Thuy Mai's search for – and belated discovery of – her roots in the small-town South dominates the story. Boiling Spring is for Thuy Mai (as Boiling Springs was for Truong) "the first American town I ever called home" ("Notes" 47). The name of the town is the key metaphor for the resentment she feels at not finding a welcome there, and she cannot be consoled. She fails to allow disturbing memories to "slip underneath the leaves" of Boiling Spring's white oaks or let the past lie peacefully somewhere quiet like the gazebo in the center of Boiling Spring. Instead the town is "named for a hole in the ground," and Thuy Mai has, like her creator, "despised it, cursed it and hoped for its demise" since leaving there the summer before she entered fifth grade ("Notes" 47). But she cannot let the place recede, for it is "home" and the place to which she must return in order to (re)conceptualize her ethnically marginal-

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ized status. Michael Kowalewski worries that human beings do not find it easy to access a vocabulary with which to "ask engaging philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions about what it means to dwell in a place, whether actually or imaginatively" (174). Truong attempts to ask such questions and in doing so she "boils" to tell her story each "spring," re-establishing and refining her connection to this place in her past.

The tension the protagonist and her creator express between the will to escape the South and the need to return to the region for self-definition is hardly new in Southern literature, but its Asian American contextualization allows readers the opportunity to view a Southern literary trope through a different lens. When Truong herself states in the "Notes to 'Dear Kelly'" that small-town North Carolina "informs and forms me in ways that I have been unwilling to admit" (47), she recalls a litany of conflicted declarations from divided Southerners in life and literature, especially black Southerners from James Weldon Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, to Toni Morrison's *Milkman* Dead in *Song of Solomon*. And she inevitably recalls Faulkner's Quentin Compson ("I don't hate it! I don't!"), who is summoned by Rosa Coldfield when, at the end of her life, she needs to "tell about the South" by passing on her stories in a tragic exemplification of the Southern maxim that "maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished" (Faulkner 210). It is Faulkner – and specifically *Absalom, Absalom!* – that informs the ideological texture of Truong's story, but in ways that begin to open up late twentieth-century ethnic configurations since, as Michael Kreyling notes, "shifting gears from Civil War to Vietnam in effect mothballs Quentin." But while Kreyling believes the guilt and shame of Vietnam are "freely available to everyone in the population," he fails to consider the Vietnamese in the South, concentrating his attention on the challenges of white Southern women writers to "the Quentin thesis" (122). Truong provides a new and acerbic twist on a developing Southern story of Vietnam that white Southern women writers began to tell in 1984, with the publication of Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* and Jayne Ann Phillips's *Machine Dreams*.

While Truong's story would appear to refute many of the traditional motifs of Southern culture – including

politeness and hospitality and the reification of place – it operates simultaneously to speculate on their persistence as literary influences because one of the strategies writers employ to write themselves into the regional narrative is intertextuality. As a writer Truong identifies with Faulkner because "I understood his narrative climate better than Kingston's" ("Notes" 47). One telling reference in her "Notes" is to the topics Truong feels are imposed upon her as appropriate subject matter for her: "everyone else out there expects you to write about mothers and talk-story" (47); clearly, Truong is referring to paradigms established by the most visible practitioners of Asian American writing, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, who in their women-centered stories of cross-generational struggle – *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, respectively – emphasize women's quests for self-expression and intersubjectivity. "Here is a story my mother told me. . . . I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine" (Kingston 240). Kingston's narrator is initially overcome by debilitating silence in her American school where "silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (Kingston 193). Only at the Chinese school she attends after "regular" school is over does she slowly and tentatively speak with "splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one another" (Kingston 196). One wonders whether, when Truong began to write, she may have felt constrained by the success of an older generation of Asian American women writers for whom the "talk story" was synonymous with exploring heritage – drawing on the "old" stories from China, told by mothers and grandmothers, together with new Chinese American ones told by their daughters – and striving for their reconciliation. Kingston's Stockton, California, however, is an immigrant community, while Thuy Mai's family lives without an extended Vietnamese community in Boiling Spring and without a grounding in family stories that might mediate against the young girl's feelings of utter displacement. There are no descriptions of the Vietnam that the family left behind or references to the Vietnamese language,

other than Thuy Mai's sister's inability to speak it. Thuy Mai's parents are only described once, as specters on the campus of the Southern Baptist college where they work but where their presence is ignored: the father, "hovering and running around like he was playing dodge ball with the entire campus," and the mother, "so beautiful when she wasn't crying or worrying," who fails to turn heads on campus because "women were white or they weren't at all" (43).

The influences and expectations of Asian American writers do *not*, for the most part, inform "Kelly," and the story was published before younger writers such as Gish Jen broke onto the literary scene to write with comic brio of, for example, the bristling hybridity of feisty young teenage girls shaping American lives in Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*. A more intrinsically Southern definition of the "talk story," however, returns the reader again to Faulkner – to his continual reworking of the South as story – and to Richard Gray's emphasis on Southern writing as "literature of memory." Responding to Malcolm Cowley's review of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner wrote, "I am telling the same story over and over, which is myself and the world." In the same letter, Faulkner describes his writing process as an attempt to "say it all in one sentence. I'm still trying to put it all, if possible, on one pinhead . . . All I know to do is to keep trying in a new way" (qtd. in Cowley 14).

In "Kelly," the teleological gives way to obsessive reiteration of the child's liminality in Boiling Spring.

The idea of a multicultural South has been contingent upon its being granted currency in discussions of Southern literature and culture. In "Kelly," Truong emphasizes the postmodern, decentered subject in a very specific Southern place. "Multicultural postmodernism" is a loose and equivocal label that revolves around fictions in which post-1960s identity politics find place. But, as defined by Rafael Pérez-Torres, multicultural postmodernism involves the material history of the individual at the nexus of the local and the global in literature – a literature that emphasizes "the localism of context, the specificity of devalued knowledges and histories repressed by the hegemonic 'political unconscious.'" Pérez-Torres maintains that such literature (Chicano poetry in his context) offers "the potential for the local to achieve some significant and lasting social change" (168). The latter may seem a grand claim, especially for a literary genre like poetry with its traditionally limited readership, but, by extrapolating from the paradigms Pérez-Torres puts in place with regard to fiction and memoir and by re-examining "Kelly" through his lens, the reader can begin to see what Truong achieves in revealing the process of remembering a North Carolina town. In this story, local historical memory is projected through the devalued perspective of a child and a refugee, a new tentative and vulnerable "Southern" subject.

Memoir has often been described as the most Southern of literary genres, and Truong's autobiographical fiction purposely combines the stuff of memoir (the convincingly representational as tied to the realist project) with the self-consciously fictive (whereby the impossibility of attaining a recoverable reality from a single reliable perspective signifies the impossibility of rehabilitating an unmediated memory). The road back to Boiling Spring is blocked time and again as Truong collapses the key events into an aesthetic vortex in which they are successively rewritten and overwritten, embedded in a letter that, the reader comes to understand, is one of a series never mailed to its named recipient – Kelly.

Truong's aesthetic considerations – the letter form and the commentary that follows – reflect socio-political determinants outside the narrative itself, but they exhibit appreciation of "the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our own lives" (Culler 186). As a case in point, in 1995, Truong contributed a short autobiographical piece to a *Resource Handbook for Asian Women and Girls* in which she returns again to Boiling Spring: "I listened my way through four years of schooling in Boiling Spring, North Carolina, and almost as many in Centerville, Ohio, two little towns that no one even bothered to acknowledge as small black dots on a road map.*"



* Boiling Springs, NC, has made it onto state maps since Truong's residence there. It is located west of Gastonia, in Cleveland County, just north of the North/South Carolina border.

"... the summer of 1975 was earth shattering. It wasn't the heat that had cracked and blistered the whole of the United States of which the South is a blood red caress. I am afraid it was me." ("Kelly")

In classroom after classroom, I sat filled with half-formed words and no voice to say them with" ("Teacher" 56). Truong has not chosen to write of the ironically named Centerville. Rather, her return in fiction to Boiling Springs reflects the developing writer's return to the Southern literary tradition to explore a specific Southern place that influenced her early life.

Truong deploys strategies for creating a Southern sense of place – geographical, historical, political, autobiographical, and textual – in which to cite her ethnic memory. Ethnicity is a term that gained currency in the 1930s and that (since the 1960s and the struggle toward acknowledging cultural diversity that came out of the Civil Rights Movement) has become complicated by multiculturalism and the "culture wars." The term "ethnic group" is an identifier or marker often applied positively by its members in self-identification, but it also functions strategically as a way of distinguishing a group, setting it apart from national – or regional – characteristics and thereby excluding it. In *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture*, John Shelton Reed argues that Southern "ethnicity" – or self-identification as Southern – is heightened by "exposure to outsiders, actual or . . . vicarious" (18), but he spends no time tracing how the traditionally biracial yet monocultural South has been complicated by immigration. In *Natives and Newcomers*, George Brown Tindall distinguishes carefully between "Ethnic Southerners" and "Southern Ethnics." The term "ethnic" has been rooted in two socially contradictory designations: the collective regional and racial "we" and the social other or "foreigner"; it can be stretched to encompass North Carolina natives on the one hand and Haitian migrant workers in the Cape Fear region on the other.

Truong's Southern perspective on ethnicity explores how marginality in a small town contributes to the shaping of Thuy Mai's negative self-image, and in reclaiming the place as her own, she begins to locate herself in relation to others. The Vietnamese family lives in a trailer and Thuy Mai reminds Kelly, "You said only black people live in trailer homes. I said I wasn't black as if your mamma and poppa would have let me in their house if they thought I was" (44). Neither the black girls in Thuy Mai's racially integrated homeroom nor Michelle, with a sibling in each school year, attend a popular white girl's birthday party. Thuy Mai attends with Kelly, and with hindsight Truong reveals that not only is her

protagonist situated in the buffer zone between black and poor white (not black yet not quite "white") but also Kelly sometimes functions as Thuy Mai's "pass" to becoming (more or less) "white." In an effort to account for her own position in the racial hierarchy, Thuy Mai alludes to Michelle with her "brown hair, brown eyes, brown face . . . covered in a light layer of gravel, dirt and dust," whose racial background is tellingly ambiguous and whose family name is the same as the mayor and his wife; Michelle is "something the good people of Boiling Spring didn't want to see" (45). Whether mixed race or poor white, Michelle's marginalized position is historically entrenched. Thuy Mai impresses on Kelly that, in the 1970s, Boiling Spring, North Carolina, had not really changed since before the Civil War. As Truong purposefully flattens period distinctions in order to recall a color-coded caste system, she also reorients Mrs. Hammerick's return to Pearl Harbor as a potent signifier in a drama of American national weakness ("I would understand that Pearl Harbor was not just in 1941 but in 1975" [42]) recast as military ineffectiveness in Vietnam and bitterly resented by a schoolteacher who configures a little Vietnamese girl as a kind of insidious fifth columnist.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Hammerick is made representative of the "ideological maneuvers" that seal Thuy Mai into a self-diminishing sense of "crushing objecthood" and "thematization." The terms are Frantz Fanon's, whose theory of a psychology of the oppressed elucidates the space wherein Thuy Mai feels she is at once a metonym for a "bad war" and for an "enemy" Asian community. She feels herself systematically reduced by her teacher until her "corporeal schema" crumbles to be replaced by "a racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 112), according to the caste and class biases of the Southern town in which her white friend Kelly was brought up. Truong's counter-story, therefore, is personal history targeted against the politically toxic teacher but mediated through Kelly, and it is deliberately written in a Southern voice. She declares in the "Notes" that she has purposefully created this effect so that the reader "hears" that Thuy Mai's speaking voice is

Southern by default – just like her teacher's and just like Kelly's. A Southern accent is "a twang" Truong's mother has grafted on to an old language, but it is Thuy Mai's to claim, and although Truong says in the "Notes" that her own Northern education has diminished her Southern accent, it persists: "It is there, though, every time I say 'North Carolina.' It is a way of speaking that I understand but rarely have chosen or been given an opportunity to use, like my sister who understands my parent's [sic] Vietnamese but never speaks it herself" (47). Whether the reader "hears" Thuy Mai's Southern accent is a moot point; in fact, her Southern-ness remains ambiguous.

Truong's "Notes" are stiff with irony couched as a history lesson and containing the bitter gall of an interracial friendship forged and lost. The story is titled "Kelly" and signed "your friend Thuy Mai," but exegesis of this framed narrative reveals a protagonist who judges Kelly as though she has access to her deepest thoughts and prejudices and the facility

*"My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage,
my port of call." (Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides*)*

to preempt her every thought or response: "When people like you looked at me and my yellow skin, you didn't see color, you saw dirt" (43). Thuy Mai is not an entirely reliable narrator, not simply because the dialogue she creates through the letter is spurious but also because, while she situates her ethnic identity in contrastive relationship to her friends Kelly and Michelle, she withholds other complexities: black girls have "twisted hair" and "silent reserve," and "Mrs. Hammerick knew what to do with them, and they what to do with her" (43); and Michelle's family "disturbed an order that struck back by shunning and ignoring them into an oblivion not even you and I understood. Kelly, you think maybe the black girls knew?" (45). Consequently, Kelly, at liberty to lose her freakishness by losing her fat, is the sediment that Thuy Mai's narrative voice stirs up while Truong leaves much else in the story unaddressed in her commentary.

This North Carolina story with its two main characters, a "fat" girl and a "freak" – words Thuy Mai tosses about with disdain – taps into a form (the epistolary short story or novel) and style (ironic and barbed) that women writers have often utilized as a vehicle of critique: of race and racism, of middle-class white feminism, of anxieties over personhood and nationhood, for example. It is interesting to consider

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for a moment the various intertextual and thematic permutations that may be extrapolated from the story before returning to its central meaning within the context of the South. "Kelly" may be compared to Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif," in which Twyla and Roberta, two eight-year-old girls, black and white, are thrown together when their mothers leave them in an orphanage. A similar process of aversion, recognition, studied friendship, and estrangement takes place, but the remembering over the years that follow is a two-way process, even though Roberta's voice is contained within Twyla's first-person narrative. Thuy Mai, on the other hand, speaks to herself with Kelly as a foil, a symbolic presence in a story told in a letter that can receive no response because it is never sent.

The letter that is not a letter is a literary trope that signifies intrapersonal rather than interpersonal communication, as in the 1981 novella *Une Si Longue Lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), African writer Mariama Bâ's critique of neo-colonial Senegal (Yousaf 85). The protagonist Ramatoulaye writes to her friend from within the confines of the mirasse, a period of mourning for her dead husband, during which time she remains at home and contemplates their relationship as it reflects the failing health of a nation spiraling into corruption in the aftermath of French colonialism. Unlike Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* or Nettie in Alice

Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, "Kelly" is problematized by an addressee who is constructed as antagonistic. In this way, "Kelly" recalls another letter-story by the Southern writer Alice Walker, "A Letter of the Times," in which the narrator, a young African American woman called Susan Marie delivers an angry tirade to a white friend named Lucy. When invited to a fancy dress ball to celebrate feminist icons, Lucy chooses to dress as Scarlett O'Hara. It soon becomes clear that Susan Marie despairs that her white friend could ever understand the anger she feels at being continually "captured and enslaved" by stereotypes. She mourns her friend's rejection of the cross-racial feminist understanding she hoped they had forged together. Like Susan Marie's letter, Thuy Mai's epistle to Kelly is tinged with resentment for what she chooses to interpret as a young child's unconscious betrayal of her fragile subjecthood. Thuy Mai feels that like others around her, her friend Kelly spent too much time "watching my eyes to see if I could open them any wider than they were already" (46). Thuy Mai tries to wrest the metaphor back.

The opening sentences to Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*, "My wound is my geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call" (1), preface a novel in which a repressed childhood memory of abuse haunts a middle-aged man who has left the South. The repression causes his mental breakdown and

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the gazebo/spring of Boiling Springs, NC,
located on the Gardner-Webb University campus

eventually reconciliation, but in "Kelly" the pain that coalesces around Thuy Mai's childhood in Boiling Spring continues to smart. Barbed comments are sharpened rather than muted with time, as when Thuy Mai looks back satirically on "paying homage to the South and to its fine and hospitable families" (42). The author poses a question to herself that challenges Southern writing by new immigrants: "How to write about the Southern United States when you are not White or Black?" (47). She returns to the conceptual problem of the outcast that lies at the root of her own as well as Thuy Mai's ill-fitting "exotic" Southern-ness. In order to write her letter to Kelly, Thuy Mai puts on the "creaky armor" that Tran Van Dinh believes Vietnamese refugees have to wear in order to "joust with the world outside" (Dinh 87). But, in the dialectical relationship that Truong produces between trauma and revisionism and between the local and the transnational, there is scant protection for a young woman who is "always forgetting the joyous parts" of her experience (43) and who only returns "home" to the South in her imagination.

There is little sense of testimony working to heal Truong's protagonist. Instead, she is paralyzed by a haunting childhood memory and as she casts around for blame – to the teacher, the town, the former friend – she is returned only to her fragile sense of self. The literary enterprise that Vietnamese Americans have begun to engage in involves a deferred telling of stories that has only recently become recognized. Sourcebooks like Alpana Sharma Knippling's 1996 *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States* contain no reference to Vietnamese immigrants because they

privilege fiction over poetry, and the first novel by a Vietnamese American woman that is set in the South, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, was not published until 1997. However, Truong followed "Kelly" with an academic survey and critique of literature by and about Vietnamese Americans, "The Emergence of Voices" (1993), in which she uses the first-person narrative voice to situate her subject:

Life as a refuge seeker and a peace seeker has placed us in the United States battle zone of historical revisionism, racial tensions, and ideological maneuverings. Playing out a grotesque but unfortunately applicable metaphor, Vietnamese American lives and their textual reincarnations have provided the newest arsenals for the national infighting. (28)

Truong's examination of the coruscating impact of censoring the "previously undesirable" Vietnamese "other" ("Emergence" 47) equates the refugee with the silent subaltern and makes the conflicted yet resilient Thuy Mai all the more groundbreaking as a character. Truong maneuvers the reader into sympathetic consideration of how an historicized understanding of civic nationalism may elucidate Thuy Mai's geographical "wound" in the aftermath of the Vietnam War as a small town adjusts to the changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement. Her precarious "anchorage" in the South demonstrates that "[h]istory is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 24). Truong eschews polemics in favor of a partially realized and flawed protagonist-author whose precarious relationship to place reflects her anxieties about being excluded from national fantasies of a "post-Vietnam America" and the "New South."

Nahem Yousaf is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. His books include *Alex La Guma: Politics and Resistance* (Heinemann, 2001), *Apartheid Narratives* (Rodopi, 2001), *Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia* (Continuum, 2002), and *Chinua Achebe* (Northcote House, 2003).

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