

“THE VOID AND THE MISSING”:

HISTORY, MYSTERY, AND THROWAWAY BODIES
IN MONIQUE TRUONG’S *BITTER IN THE MOUTH*

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELE PANDURI METALLI



“Young Thomas told her that he was from the South. She told him that she was from the South too. He, unlike many Americans at the time, knew that her country had been partitioned into North and South just the year before,” writes Monique Truong in her 2010 novel *Bitter in the Mouth*.¹ These words, depicting a dialogue between white North Carolinian Thomas Hammerick and Vietnamese transplant Mai-Dao, speak not only to the rise of transnationalism in the twentieth century (and beyond), but also to the powerful confluence of two “Souths” defined just as much by history and ideology as by geography. Both South Vietnam and the Confederacy function, in the Western popular imagination, as areas marred by physical and ideological defeat, areas with deep and troubled histories. The American South, of course, still bears the stigma associated with the American Civil War and surrounding events. In her book *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, Leigh Anne Duck makes reference to “the disproportionate predominance of slavery and segregation in southern history,” an emphasis that persists even into the era of late capitalism. Even in the contemporary era, notes Duck, “formulations of U.S. southern exceptionalism have been only slightly less tenacious and have regularly served as foils to that of the nation.”² Thereby the South, while part of the United States, also becomes the “Other” for the country as a whole.

In her article “Meditations on the Partly Colored,” Leslie Bow connects this “othering” of the American South to the Asian experience: “The South is an idea, I know. But then, so is the Orient. They are not places, but sites of elaborate mythologies, of longing, of profound feelings of repulsion and desire. If they did not exist, they would have to be invented. . . . They serve as the self’s negative image, the projection of difference necessary for self-definition.”³ This connection is particularly telling when assessing the “elaborate mythology” behind South Vietnam, an area not only affected by its loss in the Vietnam War, but, much like the American South, an area whose actual genesis sprang from the politically charged issues that led to the war itself. Speaking of the American involvement in the Vietnam conflict, David L. Anderson writes in his introduction to *The*

¹ Monique Truong, *Bitter in the Mouth* (New York: Random House, 2010) 268; subsequently cited parenthetically.

² Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006) 2.

³ Leslie Bow, “Meditations of the ‘Partly Colored,’” *Southern Review* 43.1 (2007): 94.