



Monique Truong's Southern Heritage

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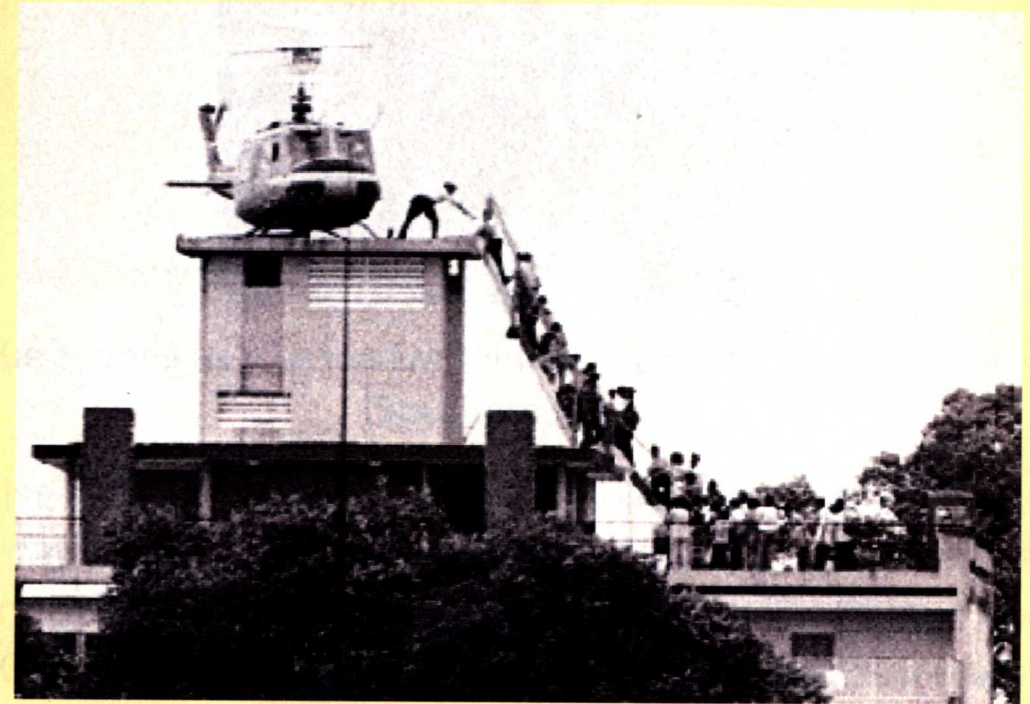
Monique Truong



Photograph of Monique Truong. (Monique-Truong.com)

Monique Truong is a Vietnamese-American writer born in Saigon, South Vietnam, and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975. She spent her early youth in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and now lives in Brooklyn, New York. She has written several novels, such as *The Book of Salt and Bitter in the Mouth*. Truong has also contributed several essays to several publications like *O Magazine*, *Real Simple*, *Marie Claire*, *Town & Country*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Allure*, *Saveur*, *Food & Wine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *T Magazine*, *The Times of London*, *Time Magazine*, and many other publications. She is also the editor of *Vom Lasterleben am Kai*, a collocation of reportage by Lafacadio Hearn, and co-editor of *Watermark: An Anthology of Vietnamese American Poetry & Prose*. Truong received the John Gardner Fiction Book Award and the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature. She Truong serves on the Board of Directors of the Authors Registry, the Creative Advisory Council for Hedgebrook, and the Advisory Council for the Authors Guild. (All information comes from Monique Truong's website).

The Fall of Saigon



South Vietnamese evacuees board a U.S. helicopter. (National Museum of Diplomacy)

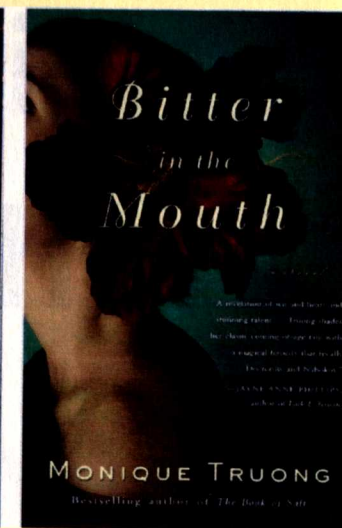
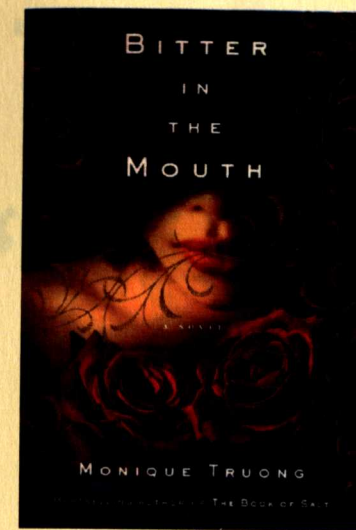
Monique Truong came to America as a refugee during the end of the Vietnam War. On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army, effectively ending the Vietnam War. In the days before, U.S. forces evacuated thousands of Americans and South Vietnamese. 10,000 South Vietnamese waited at the embassy gates, hoping to make it onto a helicopter. From April 29th to April 30th, helicopters landed at 10-minute intervals in the embassy, including landing on the embassy roof. With some pilots flying for 19 hours straight, over 7,000 people were evacuated, including 5,500 Vietnamese, in less than 24 hours. This evacuation resulted in a Vietnamese-American community located in the Southern region of America. (Information comes from the National Museum of Diplomacy).

“Southern, Reborn”

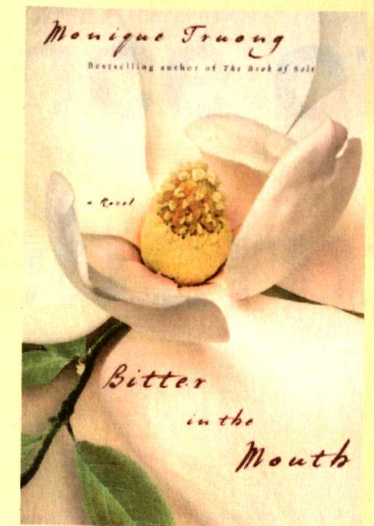


Monique Truong as a baton twirler in the 1977 Shelby Christmas Parade.
(Southern, Reborn)

“Southern, Reborn” is an article by Monique Truong that recounts two different moments in her life in North Carolina in the mid-1970s. She first describes her childhood in Boiling Springs as a baton twirler in the annual Christmas parade. This memory of her youth is used to set up the overarching thesis of the article, which is her conflict with being recognized as a Southerner due to her ethnicity as a Vietnamese-American. Truong begins by describing the metaphorical rebirth she and many other refugees and immigrants faced when they arrived in the United States. This rebirth is represented by her forgetting her native language for English and how her original name, Dung, pronounced with a Y, was changed to Monique, which is of Western origins. She has not abandoned her Vietnamese heritage, but her status as a refugee causes her to hold a closer attachment to her childhood in the U.S. South. Truong then writes about her recollection of a Christmas parade she participated in as a moment that helped connect her to the U.S. South. She describes her role as a baton twirler as “one of the quintessential rites of passage of Southern girlhood.” Truong then writes how she likes to believe that she might appear in photos of the residents and how the writer found solace in knowing she is “a part of their collective memory as much as they are a part of mine... that we belong to one another.” This moment helped her realize her connection with her hometown and its effect on her writing later in life.



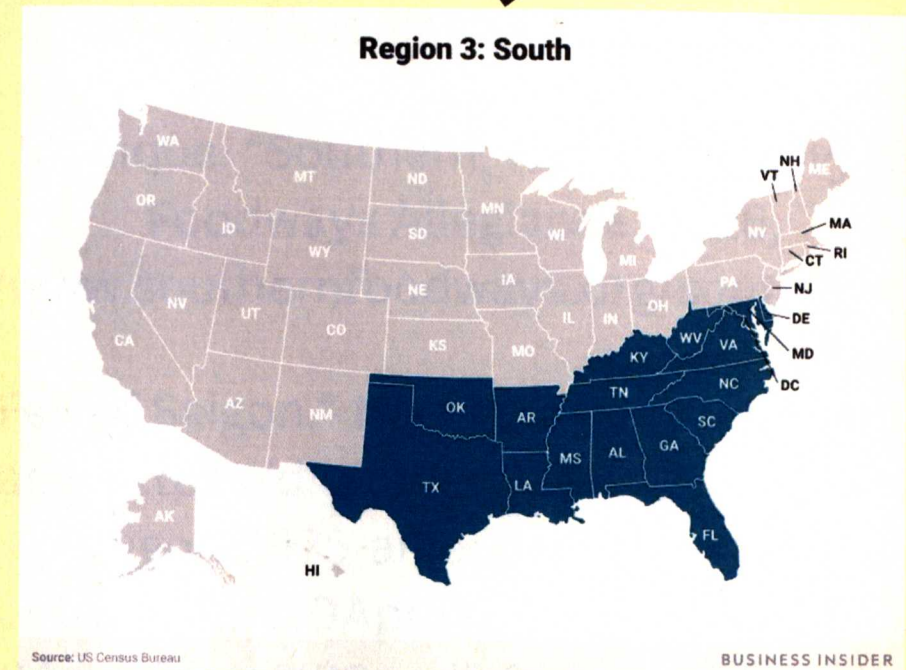
The publisher's initial covers. (Souther, Reborn)



Final Cover for the 1st edition. (Souther, Reborn)

However, Truong's second life event in the article shows that later in life, she came into conflict with her publisher over her Southern heritage, being a direct inspiration for her novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*. After being presented with two covers by her publisher, she felt they misrepresented what her book was setting out to be. She describes the covers as being downright false advertising, feeling these covers better represented a South American novel, and her publishers wanted to avoid marketing her book as Southern literature. In Truong's words, the publisher ignored her regionality because "as if its Southern milieu was roadkill or a pothole or an unexploded landmine." Her publisher was almost complex as to why Truong wished to be associated with the South as if it was beneath the publisher. Despite that, she was determined to have the cover present her novel as Southern to her audience. After constant pushback from Truong, they finally settled on the cover of a magnolia flower, even though the magnolia is the state flower of Mississippi. In contrast, the Dogwood, the state flower of North Carolina, would have been more relevant to the novel's setting. These two events in Truong's life show us that, even though she associates her youth, many refuse to see her work as a Southern piece of literature.

The Significance of “Southern, Reborn”



Regional map of the South. (The U.S Census Bureau)

I chose to write about this specific article by Monique Truong because this work perfectly shows how many individuals ignore the diverse stories that encompass Southern Literature. When you think of Southern Literature, you may think of writers like William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Harper Lee, and Richard Wright. While these writers are influential not only in the Southern literary canon but American literature as a whole, audiences unintentionally ignore the works of other communities due to not widely being recognized with the South. Monique Truong writes about how, even though the South shaped the woman she is today, she still has to fight against racist ideas of the South to be recognized as not only Southern but also American. I implore readers to become more aware of the diverse communities that the South is home to and to not only look at more Vietnamese-American works but also explore other undermined groups of the South, such as other Asian American groups.

Sources

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Further Reading

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