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Paper 3

May 12, 2017

Liminality as an Active Reimagination of a Global South

Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* and Linda Hogan's *Power* both employ familiar themes of Southern literature to situate their novels within the Southern pantheon. Some of these motifs include an emphasis on matriarchal wisdom and destruction, dominant white, male heterosexuality through sexual violence, and the struggle of coming of age. Because these themes are familiar, they literarily entrench these novels in the traditional Southern category; but they also do so in a way that opens the door for a new, broader definition of the literary South.

Bitter in the Mouth sees the "Civil War" narrative that typically defines the literary South and tries to expand this definition from the inside out. Truong advocates for a larger definition of the South through the inclusion of other races and identities outside the typical black, white, and heterosexual lens by juxtaposing the expectations of the readers of a "traditional" South and Linda's actual experience of the South as an Asian American. *Power* approaches this definition slightly differently, and doesn't even mention the typical black and white binary, and instead appeals to a broader, more universal definition of the South. Hogan constantly emphasizes Omishto's world as beginning with the sea, the wind, and limestone, as well as the differences between otherness and belonging that dictate her experience as a Native American living at the edge of both her traditional culture and the white world surrounding her. These natural boundaries are more encompassing than any political, social, or geographic boundaries of the South, and they challenge the South through omitting the familiar.

Although these novels approach the challenges of expanding the "Civil War South" differently, they both advocate for the creation of a more global interpretation of the South. Whether through inclusion or omission, both approaches advocate for a South that constantly – and actively – evolves. And through this evolution and fluidity, the definition of the South becomes less about the traditional South, and more about relatable human experiences that tie Southern literature together. This inclusion is represented through Truong and Hogan's use of familiar ideas and situations and then using those themes to expand the definition of the South, and are both enacted through the context of liminal identities and space. Liminal space refers to the state and place of change associated with rites of passage and coming of age; but it also implies uncertainty and struggle within its boundaries (Deloria 35). Both Truong's Asian American Linda or Hogan's Native American Omishto expand the familiar of the South to include a more global South because of their place within the uncertain, changing landscape of liminality.

An example of one common Southern theme – mainly championed by Faulkner and other traditional Southern authors – is the idea of maternal advice, destruction, and death. By examining the classic Southern themes that *Bitter in the Mouth* and *Power* adhere to, it is possible to see that these novels are connected to each other and to the larger body of Southern works, and to then evaluate how these stories expand the genre through their beginnings in these classic themes. Although they don't center around these removed matriarchal connections, Grandma Iris and Ama shape the stories because of their ability to dictate narrative plot. Although neither of these women are the closest relations to the two young girls, their choices and actions create conflict and questions that drive the novels forward. Grandmother Iris opens the story of *Bitter in the Mouth* by setting a mysterious tone and drive for the plot: "What I know

about you, little girl, would break you in two. Those were the last words that my grandmother ever said to me" (Truong 5). Although Linda does not seem fazed, the mystery of her grandmother's words constantly dogs both Linda and the reader until it is answered at the end of the novel. Ama dictates the narrative of *Power* by killing the Sisa, the Panther, which creates direct, glaring, cultural conflict that Omishto must learn to navigate. These events not only drive the plot, but also shape how these young women view both themselves individually and within the world. Linda may not realize that she is searching for the answer to this question, but once she receives an answer from her mother, she finally feels at peace about setting down roots. Omishto's trust and understanding – or lack thereof – of Ama's actions influence how she views the native world and the white world she tries to inhabit, and directly influence her decision to return to Kili Swamp to learn from the Taiga elders. Although Omishto obviously cares for Ama more than Linda cares for Iris, both girls are shaped by the honesty that these two matriarchs provide – even if that honesty influences their lives in dramatic and seemingly negative ways.

Both Linda and Omishto have strained relationships with their mothers, which not only puts the two novels in conversation with each other, but also with other Southern novels that employ maternal struggles and difficulties that range from unpleasant to the grotesque. These relationships first push the two young women away, which partly prompts them to reevaluate what they know and to seek a different way of life. Then, as their relationships progress, DeAnne and Mama teach Linda and Omishto valuable insights about their history, which then influences their understanding of their individual, cultural, and global Southern identities.

Due to the structure of *Bitter in the Mouth*, readers interpret DeAnne and Linda's strained relationship resulting from DeAnne's lack of maternal instinct, or her inability to protect Linda from Kelly's cousin Bobby, who rapes her when she is eleven. However, after Linda is revealed

to be a Vietnamese adoptee, another layer is added to the explanation of the tense interactions between the two. As Justin Mellette says in his article, *One of Us:*

> *Once readers become aware of Linda's racial identity, we see that Truong's narrative strategy of withholding this information is designed to make readers avoid over-emphasizing race in the early pages; it would be too simplistic to regard* Bitter in the Mouth *as simply about "an Asian girl living in the South" or even a "young woman living with synesthesia"* (Mellette, 125).

Truong avoids characterizing Linda and DeAnne's relationship through a solely racial lens, and instead appeals to a more global understanding of the dichotomy of parental relationships, both through revealing Linda's racial identity later in the book and through emphasizing their reconciliation. These failures – and struggles to amend them – transcend cultural lines and speak to most mother daughter relationships; not just relationships of the marginalized South.

Another failed aspect of Linda and DeAnne's relationship relates to their individual relationships to Danny, Kelly's cousin. Linda experiences him as a rapist, and she blames her mom for his close proximity to her. "That was when she became DeAnne to me. A mother would have known better… He was a monster. He was a menace" (Truong, 37). Although the reader is later introduced to Thomas' infidelity and DeAnne's loneliness and desire to belong, it is still impossible for the reader to completely forgive her or forget the negative impact of Bobby on Linda's childhood. However, by introducing DeAnne's story, Linda (and the reader) can better empathize and understand the more universal story of suffering that both these women must endure and accept. "DWH and I, finally, had begun the complicated process of doing something that most people, especially a mother and a daughter, could never seem to do. We were forgiving

each other for who we were, for how we came into this world, for how we changed or didn't change it for each other" (Truong 279).

After Baby Harper's death, DeAnne and Linda finally reconnect, and are able to do so in a more transparent way than ever before. DeAnne seemingly inherits Grandmother Iris's honesty which enables her to share more freely with Linda, and gives Linda an open space to reveal herself to her mother. This newfound openness – although not perfect – allows the two to finally revisit the circumstances of Linda's adoption, and to evaluate the undercurrent of DeAnne's struggles with loving Linda when she was younger: Linda's race ultimately reminded DeAnne of her husband's emotional infidelity. This honesty allows Linda to fully understand her past, and with that, to fully choose her future, and how to define herself. "I had thought, in between our sips of bourbon, that she could be making it all up. I decided that it didn't matter. At least it was a story, I thought. 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" (Truong, 282). This honesty allows Linda to finally join in her family's heritage – not a racial heritage of South Vietnam, or even the cultural heritage of the United States South – but the shared inheritance of the family that chose her.

In *Power*, Omishto and her mother are mostly at odds because of the cultural differences between them. Although like Linda and DeAnne, these cultural differences are most jarring because they are self-imposed by Omishto's mother; while Linda and DeAnne's differences are imposed by Linda's sudden appearance in DeAnne's life. "But I think my mother, who tries to pass for white, is really afraid I will love Ama more than I love her… She sees everything as a threat that will subtract love from her world" (Hogan 20). Omishto and her mother both exist in the undefined space between the Taiga and the white cultures they inhabit, but they disagree with

how to live out this liminal identity. Mama chooses to embrace 'white' culture, and Omishto runs towards Ama – who seems to successfully lives between the Native culture and the modern, white culture – to help her understand and navigate between these tensions. These differences strain Omishto and Mama personally, and also escalate tensions between Omishto and both communities after the Panther incident.

Omishto also struggles with sexual abuse allowed by her mother's proximity to a horrible man, just like Linda. Both young women are violated by the men that their mothers keep around to try and fulfill an emotional need vacated by their absent husbands. Mama feels that she needs Herman because he cares for her (in a very messed up way); but she also emotionally needs him for the security he offers as being 'white', and very different than her first husband who left her. Mama sees that her relationship with Herm is negatively affecting Omishto, and yet doesn't acknowledge it until the end of the novel. This follows the same pattern as Linda and DeAnne's experience, and although the reader can empathize with Mama's reasons for needing Herm, those empathies do not extend to fully excuse the sexual trauma that Omishto experiences. Mama's honesty also allows an opportunity for an increased understanding between Mama and Omishto, which then affects Omishto's worldview and understanding, which implies that these experiences are not only 'Southern,' but more personal and global at the same time.

One of the most defining moments of Omishto and Mama's relationship comes after Ama has been banished from the Taiga tribe, and Omishto is living at Ama's house by herself. Mama lets herself be known by Omishto for the first time, and tries to fully understand her daughter in the moment. "I study her face, surprised she knows anything about me, and I think how little of her that I know. She has never let me know her" (Hogan 221). Shortly after Mama emotionally opens up, Omishto settles more into her decision to reject the white world her mother inhabits.

Omishto firmly rejects what her mother is searching for to save the world, and looks to find a different way to achieve her desire to belong. "… I stand and watch her go and I think of salvation. The church is saving Mama, the old ways are saving the people at Kili. Ama is saving a world. But I am saving myself being here, and in all these savings, the path of things is changed forever" (Hogan 224).

Looking at sexual assault more closely, although both Linda and Omishto experience sexual assault at the hands of men that their mothers care for in these specific instances, these acts of violence are indicative of a larger racism and violence specifically attributed to Southern literature – even if sexual assault itself is not typically 'Southern'. Linda and Omishto are targeted because of their otherness; specifically, racial otherness. This is relayed through the omission of details in Omishto's story, and the retroactive revelation of Linda's identity. Although the reader doesn't learn about Omishto's sexual assaults in one telling and is only given scant information in different spaces, eventually the story is pieced together enough to question why Omishto alone is targeted by Herm; and the answer seems to be because she is actively different. She does not adhere to the strictly 'white' lifestyle like her mother or her sister Donna, and this seems to intrigue and infuriate Herman. He tries to dominate Omishto, and this escalates to the point where the only way to escape from Herm is to live at Kili Swamp with the elders. (Not that she chooses to live at Kili *because* of Herm, but as a minor, it's definitely an influencing factor). And as a white man pursuing a Native American minor, this even more strongly speaks to the racialized sexual violence and white dominance evinced in the traditional South. Linda's sexual assault is also about racial violence and domination. Both Linda and her childhood friend Kelly are assaulted, but Kelly is only forced to put her hand on Bobby's pants, while Linda is raped. Learning about Linda's racial identity singles out her otherness, and

propels Bobby's desire to dominate her because of this racial difference into the forefront of his decisions regarding these assaults.

The topic of otherness and being targeted because of differences leads to one of the final points of similarity that Linda and Omishto share: both of their narratives are coming of age stories. This similarity is important because coming of age stories typically challenge the individual to find themselves within their world, but these stories also use this structure to highlight the changing definitions of that world that both women must navigate and create as well. Both these young women are trying to find their own niche of belonging in a world that doesn't seem large enough to encompass them: Linda in Boiling Springs, and Omishto between the Taiga and the rest of the white world that is closing in on the small Native American community. These spaces seem too small to contain both women in their entirety, and their stories are about their navigation between their experiences and their eventual decisions regarding 'home'. Although Linda is seemingly undecided after talking with her mother, her journey begins tumultuously and ends with relative peace. She seems to be more open to accepting this South as her home; the South made of 'others' – her community of friends and her mother. Omishto returns to the traditional Taiga life at Kili swamp, and although her future is unwritten and she might return to Ama's house and fulfill the work of walking between the two worlds, she also feels peaceful choosing to fully embrace her Native American heritage for the time being. Both women seem to find peace in their choices – whether they are right or not – and seem willing to embrace the life in the new communities they have chosen.

Now that I've discussed the topics that bring these two books together within the larger 'Southern' literature, I want to discuss how these books use these familiar themes to advocate for a broader definition of the South and what their hope for the new definition includes. Although

both novels appeal for a greater inclusion of narratives within the Southern understanding, they approach the topic very differently. However, both still reach out from the same place of liminal advocacy for a more global South based on human experiences rather than traditional social and racial contexts.

Bitter in the Mouth directly addresses the traditional interpretation of the American South as a slavery issue, and appeals for a broader inclusion of peoples in that definition. One of the first ways that Truong combats this identity is by omitting Linda's race until the second half of the novel. This allows the reader to connect with Linda as a seemingly white character who pushes the boundaries if the stereotypical because of her synesthesia and then to retroactively understand that her otherness is also due to the strict lines of characterization typical in the cultural South (Mellette 129-130).

Linda's experience of growing up in Boiling Springs is not mentioned until the second half of the novel. "When we first met, I tried to tell Leo about my childhood in Boiling Springs. He said that these experiences meant that I did know what it was like *being* Asian in the south… No, Leo, I know what it was like *being* hated in the South" (Truong 173). Mentioning her experiences of racism highlight Denise Cruz's argument about global violence and racism specifically relating to U.S. violence and treatments of other countries (Cruz). This creates a stage of global interaction solely reliant on Linda's race and her treatment in Boiling Springs; but, it is important to note that this violence is built upon the U.S. Southern stage and then expands to a global arena. Although this seems to be an expansion of the traditional United States South, this actually limits the South to an expression of global violence and racism, even though the South is so much more. Much of the second half of Truong's novel addresses the racism she felt growing up, the aloneness she experienced as the only Asian American in her

town, and much of the lack of recognition that the struggles of other Asian Americans in the South received. By addressing the seeming invisibility of Asian Americans in the South, Truong argues for their inclusion in the cultural and literary South.

This is also addressed through Linda's interpretations of three historical characters: George Moses, Virginia Dare, and Wilbur Wright. Although Linda draws from the actual history of these three characters, she quickly shapes their stories into incredibly personal epitaphs that she herself can relate to. By including these misfits in her story, she not only creates a family of 'queers' for herself – as Michele Janette proposes – but also broadens the scope of the "South" through their narratives (Janette 208). Including these characters highlights the need for both individuality and belonging the Linda desires, but also shows non-traditional people that make up North Carolina's history, which speaks to a larger definition of the South.

Another important figure in Linda's life is Baby Harper, who perhaps fulfills the role of 'queer' as most literally and metaphorically as possible. According to Denise Cruz, Baby Harper not only fills the role of expanding the traditionally heterosexual South to include a queerer community, he also expands the South geographically by travelling to South America – quite literally – a more global South.

> *This rooting in small-town North Carolina is crucial, for* Bitter in the Mouth *carefully departs from valorizations of the urban cosmopolitan locale (in Rio de Janeiro or Manhattan) as a site of 'queer liberation.' Perhaps most striking is that Baby Harper comes out for the reader formally in the novel through the juxtaposition of the rural South with its links to a larger hemispheric South; these moments literally occur on facing pages* (Cruz).

Baby Harper is the most visible symbol of Truong's expanded vision for the South, and his presence not only comforts Linda personally, but comforts the town of Boiling Springs through his role as a funeral photographer. This comfort signals a cultural shift towards more outward inclusion of non-traditional communities that also find homes for themselves in the South.

Hogan's *Power* on the other hand, combats the "Civil War South" through an entirely different interpretation. Hogan does not mention the typical divisions of black and white, and even though she focuses on otherness and belonging quite a bit, she does not employ outrageous amounts of "us vs. them" rhetoric, which would be understandable because of the prominently violent history between Native Americans and white communities. One of the main qualities of Omishto is her ability to see and know everything what is going on around her. This trait becomes central to the novel as Omishto is the only one who truly understands what is happening surrounding Ama and the panther. Her ability to see and understand both sides – how both the Taiga and the white Floridians are right and wrong – place her in a uniquely understanding place and perspective. She doesn't fall into the familiar: siding with her family, or siding with the Panther tribe, simply because she belongs to one or the other. She knows that both have their weaknesses and cannot see the whole truth; for example, even though she goes to live with the elders, she knows that Ama's banishment – or death – from the Taiga, was wrong. "'I am thinking we threw her away.' Her eyes are sad. 'She was strong. She was important. We threw her away.' I sense in her a kind of helplessness. 'I know it,' I say back. Don't I just know it, though. I see Ama again, how she was sacrificed…" (Hogan 226); and although she chooses to leave the outside world, she understands her mother and family more at the end of the book than she has at any point leading up to it. She sees that inclusion of the two must happen, even if she cannot achieve it now. "Again, both sides are wrong, but both sides, also, are right" (Hogan 138).

Although the ending of the book seems to be more exclusionary than inclusive because of Omishto's return to her Native American traditions and community in Kili Swamp, Omishto herself hopes to learn more about the old ways from the elders to promote that global understanding that she sees. She mentions limestone, the sea, and the wind several times in her aloneness, and she seems to be saying that everyone is, and should be, included. "I walk on limestone that rose up from the bottom of the sea not so very long ago. The Spanish had floors of silver, but nothing, I think, I know, is more valuable than the floor of the sea" (Hogan 234). Not only the Taiga who strive to live in harmony with the natural world, but the white world as well. She criticizes everyone for the destruction of the earth, and her ideal seems to be to return to the natural order where humans (as a whole) do not dominate the natural world. Although this seems counterintuitive to a more inclusive canon of Southern understanding, Omishto is searching for a South that doesn't have any divisions at all – including between humans and animals – and this translates to not only her view of the world, but her hope for the future.

> *And I think of Ama, the amber-eyed woman, and how she believes that she has saved us, that animals are the pathway between humans and gods. They are one step closer to the truer than we are. She says skin was never a boundary to be kept or held to; there are no limits between one thing and another, one time and another* (Hogan 188).

Power also includes Ama as an incredibly important figure that promotes the peaceful inclusion of the Native American and white American cultures. Ama simultaneously walks between the two worlds and embraces them without being untrue to herself or to either world – a challenging feat in a cultural relationship defined mostly by violence and exclusion. And while this seems to be the most obvious form of a global South that this book has to offer, it is not as wide a vision of the world as Omishto's. Ama's un-selfish sacrifice of herself for the good of the

panther and her community starts Omishto on her journey to understanding what a truly global South – and then world – could look like and be. Although Omishto does not achieve a more unified South because of her choice to rejoin the Taiga elders in relative isolation, she has internalized her place in the larger story; this could lead to her potentially resuming Ama's role as peacekeeper, or to move past it and to create a world that embraces these differences in a larger Southern narrative.

This builds on Jesse Peters' argument about inclusion and connection. Although Omishto needs human connection in her life, she is ultimately seeking connection between the world and the other.

> Power *is an important statement of the need for all people to consider the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and to never simply accept definition. Finding the strength to question one's place within the world (even if questioning means redefining 'tradition' or defying colonial authority) and then to act accordingly is difficult, but it is where, in the end, true power lies* (Peters).

Although Peters sees Omishto's current rejection of the white community as a failure of a more universal approach, I think that Omishto's true strength is in her understanding of the two cultures and their place in the world. To emphasize connectedness, one first must accentuate the separation (Peters), so Omishto is first highlighting the brokenness of the current world she sees and then stresses the connection she hopes for in the future to expand the current dichotomy of the South and include her and her community's perspective in to the narrative.

This argument then leads to Barbara Ladd and Peter Deloria's arguments about inclusion and the global South. Deloria's full definition of liminality is worth quoting in full, first, because

it's beautiful, and secondly, because the whole definition truly encompasses Linda and Omishto's journeys and their importance to the South on both micro and macro scales.

> *In such rites of passage, participants are forced through a period of emptiness during which they are neither one thing nor another. Anthropologists have a word for such suspended time—liminal. Liminality is like the light at dawn or dusk, when one can speak of neither daylight nor darkness but only of something in between. Liminality implies change—the world will either get brighter or will sink into night—but if one were plopped down, without any context, at the exact moment of dusk or dawn, it would be hard to discern whether day or night was approaching. Liminality is a frozen moment of unpredictable potential in the midst of a process of change, and it is in that sense that it has been used to describe the inbetweenness found in rite of passage rituals. Evocative, creative, and often frightening, it is critical to an individual's (or a society's) final reemergence as something new* (Deloria, 35).

According to Deloria, both Linda and Omishto reside in a liminal space, both personally, culturally, and literarily. They exist in a place that is between who they were and who they will become, as well as being in the South that exists and the South that could be. All the features of the novels so far have operated within this space to point to the change that *could* happen regarding the South. Linda and Omishto live in this place that doesn't have a clear direction or purpose on an individual scale other than personal understanding, but on the macro scale points to the reinvention of the South into a more inclusive definition.

Similarly, this argument also exists in Barbara Ladd's article, *Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places – Past, Present, and Future*. Ladd does not advocate for a liminal space as far as it is a place without a clear direction; but, she argues for a space that turns a place into an agent

of change. Combined with Deloria's definition of the liminal space that allows people and cultures to mold and change before entering the period of 'becoming', these two books operate within this context to create a more global South. According to Ladd, there is a real difference between ideological maps and physical places and mindsets, but these differences are no longer helpful for purely identifying a person's social context.

> *Space and time were, in a sense, grounded if not bounded; and under such conditions, place is relatively unproblematic; under such conditions, to speak of a social location is to speak of a geographic location… The experience of place remains dynamic and vital. It is the theorizing of place that is problematic* (Ladd, 33-34).

These mindsets, since they have become ingrained in the American psyche, can create an obsolete and dangerous constraint that excludes important narratives from the regional and national story and experience. Ladd argues that to avoid this stagnation, places must be active reimagining's of themselves, or else we risk the failure to include important voices that belong in the Southern realm, not because of what they reference in terms of what the South 'was', but in terms of what they have in common with what the South 'is' (Ladd, 36). This constant reimagining works well with Deloria's liminal space as the place between dusk and dawn: if something is constantly changing, then it cannot be what it needs to change into unless it has stopped changing (Ladd 39-40). Hogan and Truong's novels seek to expand the South, not only to include the main races of their novels (Asian and Native American), but to constantly reimagine the possibilities of the South with the changing ideals of a global definition. Their arguments from within their liminal spaces advocate for the inclusion of not only the main objects of their novels, but also the network of 'others' that support their arguments from even deeper within the vail of difference and liminality.

Through familiar literary tactics that are commonly associated with Southern literature, and using those to expand the definition of the 'South', Truong and Hogan advocate for the expansion of the South not only through an enhanced definition of who belongs to the United State South, but including it in a global South that everyone can relate to on not only a geographic, but on a human level. This is stressed through their character's struggles with maternal relationships, sexual assault, and belonging and otherness involved with coming of age. No matter how familiar these stories are to the traditional Southern genre, they uniquely create a space within the familiar to advocate for a more universal South – a South that is constantly changing not only through shared geography, but through shared human experiences.

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