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

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Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies; 39卷2期 (2013 / 09 / 01), P7 - 32

DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2013.39.2.02

transracial adoption; synesthesia; race; Asian American literature; Monique Truong

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.

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Monique Truong’s “Bitter in the Mouth,” is a beautifully written, complex story of self-discovery. The narrator, Linda Hammerick, looks back from the vantage point of her 30s to her childhood in a small Southern town, a place where she never felt she belonged. It’s the premise of many coming-of-age stories, but Linda truly was an outsider, for reasons that emerge as her story progresses. Linda is extremely intelligent but hampered in school by a form of synesthesia that causes words to evoke tastes. Her first name, for example, tastes of mint, her last name tastes of Dr Pepper (Lindamint Hamm