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Finding Tender Roots: Affiliation, Disability, and Racial Melancholia in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*

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Abstract: Early on in *Bitter in the Mouth*, we learn that the protagonist, Linda Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick, has auditory-gustatory synesthesia—that is, nearly every word she hears evokes a specific taste. Hammerick, for example, tastes like Dr. Pepper and Linda tastes like mint. There are many articles that analyze Linda's synesthesia but few articles approach the text through the lens of disability studies. In this article, I employ feminist disability studies and diaspora studies to argue that Linda's identity as a disabled transracial adoptee allow her to seek out additional forms of affiliation and kinship. By constructing an alternative family tree based on affiliation with a disability, Linda begins to process the racial melancholia associated with the transracial adoptee experience.

Keywords: disability studies, racial melancholia, transracial adoption, affiliation, critical race studies

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Content Notification: This article contains a sustained close reading of sexual assault in *Bitter in the Mouth*.

Early on in Monique Truong's (2010) *Bitter in the Mouth*, we learn that the protagonist, Linda, has auditory-gustatory synesthesia—that is, nearly every word she hears evokes a specific taste in her brain. For example, her last name, Hammerick, tastes like Dr. Pepper and her first name tastes like mint. When Linda hears just one ordinary sentence, then, she can taste ten or so different foods. Her synesthesia proves distracting and overwhelming until she learns to manage these “incomings” through sensations that overpower the taste that words evoke for her; namely, she turns to cigarettes, alcohol, and sex to control the incomings she is constantly experiencing. Because Linda's synesthesia is such a crucial aspect of the novel, nearly every scholarly article on *Bitter in the Mouth* discusses Linda's synesthesia to some extent. For example, Jennifer Brandt (2016) discusses how Linda's synesthesia serves as a “metaphor for Otherness” that blurs the “boundaries between outside/inside, perception/emotion” (41, 43). Amanda Dykema (2014) also analyzes how Linda's synesthesia affects the way she views the world, noting that Linda's synesthesia “fundamentally structures her epistemological relation to the world” (108). While it is clear that Linda's synesthesia is a key component of Linda's identity, one that alters her relationship with language and food as well as her relationships with family and friends, in this article I explicitly define Linda's synesthesia as a disability in order to articulate a feminist disability studies methodology that accounts for the way that disability, race, gender, and diaspora are all inherently connected in Linda's attempt to forge a new definition of family and home for herself. In other words, by thinking through the concept of diaspora as an expansive and inclusive one that also includes identifications with disability, as well as race and ethnicity, I provide a framework for how Linda is finally able to—to paraphrase the final passage of the novel—put down tender roots and find community in unexpected places.

Indeed, as Denise Cruz (2014) notes in her article about the literary South and regional form in the novel, *Bitter in the Mouth* also presents rich potential for disability studies that has not been as critically explored. While much has been written about Linda's synesthesia, scholars have rarely classified synesthesia as a disability. Discussing the palimpsestic nature of Linda's synesthesia, Michele Janette (2014) argues that Truong characterizes synesthesia "not as a disease or disability but as a nondominant way of experiencing the world, one kept secret not because it impairs but because it is likely to be misunderstood" (158). I suggest that to Linda, there is little difference between impairment and the threat of being understood. Time and time again, Linda's inability to be understood by those around her seriously impair her ability to form meaningful relationships and result in unresolved traumas. I use "impair" here not to pathologize Linda's synesthesia but rather to emphasize how Linda's condition and the way she is forced to keep it secret, has excluded and subordinated Linda throughout her life. Defining Linda's synesthesia as a disability recognizes the injustices that Linda has suffered because of her neurodiverse¹ approach to the world. On the other hand, I also assert that defining synesthesia as a disability also changes Linda's condition from one suffered in isolation to a political identity that leads her to find community and affiliation with other synesthetes.

Though Linda does not explicitly refer to herself as disabled, I identify her synesthesia as a disability, drawing from Alison Kafer's (2013) definition of disability not as "a category inherent in certain minds and bodies but as what historian Joan W. Scott calls a 'collective affinity'" (11). Kafer, quoting Scott, describes collective affinities as "playing on identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them" (11). Throughout her life, Truong shows how Linda's synesthesia serves to alienate her. For example, although Linda's standardized test scores reveal an aptitude for both reading comprehension and math, her teachers repeatedly deride her for her "unwillingness to pay attention in class" and Linda remains an average student until she begins smoking cigarettes to dull her synesthetic incomings (Truong 2010, 21). This criticism of Linda as "inattentive" echoes common descriptions of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Again, I connect Linda's synesthesia to other neurodiverse individuals such as those with autism or those with ADHD to signal how neurodiverse students often experience educational stigma and challenges. Linda's synesthesia can be understood seen as a disability because she is constantly labeled by her teachers as an "inattentive" student simply because she lacks a productive learning environment for her neurodiverse bodymind. I use the term bodymind here drawing from the work of Margaret Price and Sami Schalk. As Sami Schalk (2018) notes in *Bodyminds Reimagined*, "bodymind is particularly useful in discussing the toll racism takes on people of color. As more research reveals the ways experiences and histories of oppression impact us mentally, physically, and even on a cellular level, the term *bodymind* can help highlight the relationship of nonphysical experiences of oppression—psychic stress—and overall wellbeing" (5-6). This understanding of "bodymind" and racialized ableism guides my later discussion of racial melancholia in the novel.

Furthermore, I characterize Linda's synesthesia as a disability because it becomes a secret burden that isolates her from her loved ones and thus, their misunderstandings of her condition do ultimately impair her. She is afraid to tell her fiancé, Leo, about her synesthesia because "he would have had me committed . . . even at the apex of his love for me, Leo would have put me away" (Truong 2010, 222). Similarly, when a young Linda tries to explain her synesthesia to her mother, her mother refuses to listen, telling her "I can handle a lot of things . . . But I won't handle crazy. I won't have it in my family" (107). This emphasis on family is particularly stinging, especially after we learn in the second half of the novel that Linda is a Vietnamese orphan adopted by the Hammericks at age seven.

However, I want to make clear that disability is not the only vector through which to analyze such a complex and rich novel. Indeed, Truong provides a deeply textured portrait of what it is like to grow up

and live in the South as an outsider. For example, as discussed by many scholars, Linda's relationship with her great-uncle Baby Harper, a gay man who finds joy and love in the conservative town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, is undoubtedly a vital and formative relationship. The novel is also deeply concerned with history, particularly the history of the South—excerpts from *North Carolina Parade*, a 1966 book on North Carolina history are interspersed with Linda's narration of her own personal and family history. For the purposes of this article, I do not focus on the significance of Southern history in Linda's formation but instead highlight how Linda's personal relationships with her own family are impacted by her discovery of another family—that of synesthetes who share a disability and a subjectivity with her.

To further define disability, it is important to acknowledge the term is always being continually redefined and it is important to be clear what definition I am working with for the scope of this article. In the entry for “Disability” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (2015) note the capaciousness of the term “disability”—“disability can be situational; it can also wax and wane within any particular body” (31). However, by looking at different definitions of disability laid out by sources such as the American with Disabilities Act and the universal design movement, Adams, Reiss, and Serlin do note that “recent developments all emphasize meanings of ‘disability’ that are external to the body, encompassing systems of social organization, institutional practices, and environmental structures” (37). The emphasis on external meanings of disability is important because it places the focus of impairment not on Linda and her body but rather on the environmental structures and institutional practices that exclude her because her mind processes language and taste differently than others. Additionally, the editors of *Keywords* note that an understanding of disability as a “subjective state, the condition not only of *identifying* as disabled but also of perceiving the world through a particular kind of lens” has come to the forefront in recent scholarship (38). As I noted when discussing scholarship on Linda's synesthesia, many critics view Linda's synesthesia as a condition that fundamentally affects her epistemological relation with those around her—in other words, synesthesia provides a way of perceiving the world through a particular lens.

Disability is thus not simply defined by a medical or social model but rather also through a cultural model, defined by Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell (2005) as a model that “allows us to theorize a political act of renaming that designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously suppressed” (10). This is key because I argue that Linda's own process of coming to terms with her own disability community—the knowledge of other synesthetes she gains from a PBS documentary—allows her to finally begin grappling with the racial melancholia she experiences because of her position in the Vietnamese diaspora.

Because of Linda's race and country of origin, it is important to consider and embrace a definition of disability that goes beyond Western contexts and which considers the intertwined relation between feminist disability studies and critical race studies. As Jina B. Kim (2014) notes in her article on spatial disability and the Bhopal disaster, “in order to theorize disability beyond the Western context, scholars must identify the limitations of the social model as currently conceived, and in so doing, begin to conceptualize disability as multiply articulated and contingent upon social, cultural, historical, and regional particularities.” This builds on the definitions of disability I have already discussed, and also demonstrates the need to consider the cultural implications of the term “disability.” Writing about the intersections of disability and race, Sami Schalk (2017) notes in “Critical Disability Studies as Methodology” that:

understanding critical disability studies as a methodology also means exploring issues of illness, health, and disease which often have important intersections with issues of race and class. Using (dis)ability as a term

for a system of power that shapes bodymind norms and expectations allows for the inclusion of illness and disease no matter what the current definitions of disability might be.

Therefore, using the theories of racial melancholia laid out by Eng and Han alongside disability studies provides important ways to link critical disability studies with critical race theory.

Given all of this, it is crucial to analyze Linda's positionality as a disabled transracial adoptee through the lens of the cultural model of disability as well as through the angle of racial melancholia within the Asian diaspora.² Here, I am drawing deeply from the work of David Eng—both his work on queer diasporas as well as his recent work on racial melancholia with Shinhee Han—to theorize the ways that Linda's position in the diaspora is characterized by racial melancholia and how she begins to resolve this melancholia through the different relationships she seeks out. My reading of the term “diaspora” involves an expansion of the term that takes into account the way identification with disability becomes a form of affiliation and Eng's theorization of queer diaspora is thus crucial to how I imagine a link between feminist disability studies methodology and critical race studies. Eng (2003) notes that “traumatic displacement from a lost heterosexual ‘origin’ questions of political membership, and the impossibilities of full social recognition dog the queer subject in a mainstream society impelled by the presumptions of compulsory heterosexuality” (32). While Eng is of course talking about queer subjects, I argue that these issues similarly impact people with disabilities. As shown in Linda's own personal history, there is often a traumatic displacement from an able-bodied “origin”—Deanne forces Linda into silence when Linda tries to disclose her synesthesia because Deanne does not want her family to appear as deviating from the norms of able-bodied society. Similarly, Linda is denied full social recognition; she hides her disability and self-medicates through cigarettes and alcohol because from previous interactions, she has learned that people only react negatively when she tries to share her synesthesia. Lastly, just as Eng notes that queer subjects often remain outsiders in a society ruled by “compulsory heterosexuality,” I argue that compulsory able-bodiedness also relegates people with disabilities, such as Linda, to the fringes of acceptable society.

Racial melancholia is a crucial framework through which to analyze the novel because it provides a language to analyze the trauma that Linda experiences as a disabled transracial adoptee. Building on the definitions of disability I spoke of above, I use the term disability here broadly, to refer to Linda's synesthesia but also to refer to the trauma she suffers after both her sexual assault and ovarian cancer. After the removal of her ovaries, Linda's doctor explains that this is a “trauma that the body could recover from, but afterward the body would continue to grieve for what had been taken from it” (Truong 2010, 212). This echoes Freud's definition of melancholia that Eng and Han present: “a mourning without end” (2019, 36). Yet, Linda's grieving, melancholic bodymind is given another dimension by her position as transracial adoptee; she only finds out about her ovarian cancer because Leo, “disturbed by the fact that [Linda] was adopted” and had no family medical history, requests she receive a full medical check-up before they get engaged (168). This demonstrates that an analysis of the novel must consider the various facets of Linda's identities and how they intersect, and racial melancholia offers a way to look at all these facets because the novel is ultimately concerned with the body and its grief. For example, as Jennifer Brandt (2014) notes when discussing Linda's rape, “the guilt and shame Linda experiences as an emotional response to the rape is described and housed in terms of her body” (51). Linda's body grieves not only for her ovaries, but for the various traumas and displacements that have been forced upon her throughout her life.

Linda's relationship to the Vietnamese diaspora is complicated by both her status as a transracial adoptee and her disabilities. In his work on queer diaspora, David Eng (2003) has noted that because diaspora is so often attached to genealogy, filiation and biology, it can “underwrite regnant ideologies of

nationalism, while upholding virulent notions of racial purity and its structuring heteronormative logics of gender and sexuality” (13). To this, I add that diaspora’s attachment to genealogy and biology also means that it can uphold the normative structuring logics of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar (2017) notes in “Disabled Diaspora, Rehabilitating State,” Zionism itself was a movement that “tried to change or rehabilitate the Jewish people from their seemingly disabled state in the Diaspora to a new healthy and ‘normal’ nation in Palestine” (102). This idea that existing in the diaspora is inherently disabled state suggests that only by reclaiming a national homeland can a group be made “whole” or “healthy” again. Yet, for people with fraught relationships to home and homeland such as Linda, a Vietnamese adoptee who does not remember her time in Vietnam and whose only “home” has been the United States, diaspora is a more complicated concept. By reading for the ways that Linda’s race, gender, and disability interact with her position in the diaspora, I provide a more expansive way of thinking through diaspora that is line with the way Eng theorizes queer diaspora.

Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are intertwined within the very definition of the word diaspora. Jarrod Hayes (2016) notes that diaspora comes from a combination of two Greek words: “through” and “to sow and to scatter.” Quoting Stefan Helmreich, Hayes then points out that “the original meaning of diaspora summons up the image of scattered seeds . . . the word “sperm” is etymologically connected to diaspora . . . Diaspora in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men” (16). To demonstrate the need to think through alternative implications of diaspora, then, I want to draw attention to the fact that diaspora in the traditional sense prioritizes not just those with a heterosexual desire to reproduce but also those who possess bodies who are *able* to reproduce. Following Robert McRuer’s (2006) argument that “compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa” (89), I propose that because Linda is physically unable to have children (and also lacks the desire to have biological children), she is directly excluded from the traditional definition of diaspora, thus demonstrating how compulsory able-bodiedness is contingent on compulsory heterosexuality.

Drawing on Schalk, Kim and Minich’s critical disability studies framework and crip of color critique, I highlight the ways that compulsory able-bodiedness/heterosexuality is also imbricated in systems of race. As a transracial adoptee, Linda is further excluded from this traditional sense of diaspora because she does not know what “seed” she has been scattered from and feels no connection to whiteness or Asianness. Thinking about the cultural model of disability alongside diaspora thus offers an alternative way of thinking about genealogy and allows Linda to subvert traditional narrative tropes associated with adoption, such as the search for a biological mother.

Race is deeply connected to the melancholia that Linda feels throughout the novel. Drawing from Eng and Han (2019), who state that they are “dissatisfied with racial discourses and clinical assessments that pathologize people of color as permanently damaged,” I want to state that by characterizing the ambivalence that Linda feels toward her race as melancholia, I am not attempting to pathologize her but rather to provide a reading as to why Linda does identify so deeply with a disabled community. Ultimately, I understand see Linda’s identification with disability and other synesthetes as part of the process that allows her to reconnect with her adopted family and begin to form a more coherent narrative around her identity, one that allows her to heal and to find community.

As I will discuss more at length, Linda’s seeming disinterest in a biological origin story demonstrates what Jarrod Hayes (2016) identifies as the turn from filiation to affiliation. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Hayes defines filiation as a “linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents” while affiliation is characterized by the “re-assembling [of] the world in new non-familial ways” (22). The distinction between affiliation and filiation is important because Linda’s position as a transracial adoptee means that she does not have a relationship to her biological parents.

However, through affiliation with a disabled identity, by the end of the novel, she is able to reconnect with her adopted mother and define family for herself. Hayes also notes that the “opposition between filiation and affiliation should thus be considered inseparable from Said’s other key distinction, the notion of *beginning* as opposed to *origin*, the latter divine, mythical and privileged, the former secular, humanly produced, and ceaselessly re-examined” (22). Following this distinction between beginning and origin, I read *Bitter in the Mouth* as a novel unconcerned with origin stories (such as the search for a biological mother) and rather, a novel more intimately concerned with the ability to begin again, as we see when Linda reunites with her mother after a long period apart.

Linda’s exclusion as a disabled person is compounded by her role as a transracial adoptee in a way that forces her to seek out modes of relationality that prioritize affiliation over filiation. Again, I return to the scene where Linda’s mother DeAnne rejects Linda’s attempt to disclose her disability: “I can handle a lot of things . . . But I won’t handle crazy. I won’t have it in my family” (Truong 2010, 222). As we learn at the end of the novel, DeAnne only agreed to adopt Linda after her husband promised never to discuss the story of Linda’s adoption. There is an implicit message behind DeAnne’s refusal to hear about Linda’s synesthesia; adopting a Vietnamese child in a predominantly white North Carolina town is something that DeAnne reluctantly “handles” but she refuses to accept that she has adopted a Vietnamese child who is also “crazy.” In other words, having a disabled, Asian American child is more than DeAnne is able or willing to handle. Because Linda’s race and disability constantly serve to exclude her, I think that it is most productive to read the work not simply through the lens of feminist disability studies or critical race studies but through an attentiveness to both methodologies that allows for an expansive reading of what it means to exist within a diaspora.

Through a discussion of the alternative family tree that Linda constructs, an investigation of the way that Linda is able to re-meet DeAnne, and the formal elements that Truong uses to portray Linda’s synesthesia, I show that attentiveness to disability and racial melancholia in the novel creates alternative models for affiliation and presents family and home not as a figure that can be stabilized but rather as an expansive and fluid concept.

Alternative Roots: Affiliation with Disability

Throughout the novel, Linda states she feels little connection to her Vietnamese heritage and describes her experience growing up in the South as *looking* Asian rather than *being* Asian. Linda’s attempt to reach out to other synesthetes represents her first attempt to construct a family tree—one that is not tied to her Vietnamese heritage but rather non-traditional family tree centering experiences of disability. I use the framework of the cultural model of disability to explain why Linda experiences such intense feelings of affiliation with other synesthetes. This alternative family tree ultimately expands the notion of diaspora by revealing the ways that one can craft affiliation and familial ties bound by intimacies rather than biological genealogy.

While watching television, Linda stumbles upon a PBS documentary. She is about to turn the TV off (because of her synesthesia, watching television can often be incredibly distracting and overwhelming) but she stops when she sees “[her]self, or rather [her] doppelganger. He was a British man in his late thirties with thinning blond hair” (Truong 2010, 217). With her immediate identification with the British man, Linda craps our idea of diaspora and identification. A doppelganger is traditionally used to describe a person who physically resembles another person, but there is no clear physical resemblance between a white blonde British man and a young Vietnamese-American woman. Rather, the resemblance and affinity comes from “this man’s speech pattern”—a pattern that Linda immediately identifies as that of a

man with synesthesia. It is significant that it is the man's speech pattern that allows Linda to recognize him; as I discuss further in a later section, Linda's distinct relationship to language allows her to navigate diaspora in an expansive and fluid way. After recognizing this man as her doppelganger, Linda continues to watch as the man, Mr. Roland, describes the different tastes that he experiences through different words. She describes the process of watching Mr. Roland's interview in the following manner:

What I was experiencing at that moment wasn't an out of body experience. It was an in-another body experience. Everything but this man and me faded into darkness. He and I were at the two ends of a brightly lit tunnel. We were point A and point B. The tunnel was the most direct, straight-line route between the two points. I had never experienced recognition in this pure, undiluted form. It was a mirroring. It was a fact. It was a cord pulled taut between us. Most of all, it was no longer a secret. (217)

The intense feeling of recognition between Mr. Roland and Linda is transformative for her because she realizes she is not the only one with this condition. I read the fact that Linda describes the recognition as "pure" and "undiluted" as a subversion of the concept of racial purity. As Eng (2003) notes, diaspora can often "uphold virulent notions of racial purity" and by using that particular phrasing here, Linda acknowledges the role that purity plays in discussions of race and alters the meaning so that it can describe the relationship between two people sharing the same disability. Also, I argue that the language here signifies beginnings, rather than origins; Linda states "we were point A and point B" but does not specify *who* Point A and B are. This shows that she is unconcerned with origin points and more concerned with how her identification with Mr. Roland *begins* a new form of consciousness within her. It is significant to note that for Linda, the most important part of learning about this man's synesthesia meant that hers was no longer a secret burden to be suffered in silence.

Many scholars have analyzed the importance of secrets in *Bitter in the Mouth* in order to situate the book in the context of the Southern Gothic tradition.³ While I agree that the novel's sense of mystery and use of familial secrecy aligns it with the Southern Gothic tradition and can reveal much about how the history of the American South intersects with that of the Global South, I want to draw attention to another relevant narrative trope that relies on mystery and the unveiling of secrets: the transnational adoptee search story.

Transnational and transracial adoption rates rapidly increased during and after the Cold War era. Following the Korean War, South Korea "with the help of Western religious and social service agencies, has expedited the adoption of over 200,000 South Korean children (150,000 of whom are now residing in the United States)" (Eng 2003, 10). Rates of transnational and transracial adoptions are particularly high in places where "the United States has had a notable military presence and/or strong political and economic interests"—during and after the Korean and Vietnam War, many children were adopted from these respective countries (10). As more transnational and transracial adoptees begin to come of age in America, more and more are returning to visit their birth countries. Eleana Kim (2012) notes that transnational and transracial South Korean adoptees first began "returning in significant numbers in the mid 1990s" and quickly became a media spectacle as journalists "began to actively help adoptees search for their Korean families" (300). Similarly, scholars of transracial adoption such as Mark Jerng (2010) have noted that many transracial adoption narratives feature a "search story"—that is, a young adult adoptee going back to their birth country in an attempt to find their biological parents.

Yet, what is striking about *Bitter in the Mouth* is the utter lack of such an adoptee search story. Linda never expresses any desire throughout the book to learn the story of her adoption. At the very end of the book, after Linda and her mother have reconciled, DeAnne, without prompting, reveals the identity of Linda's birth parents and how Linda came to be adopted by the Hammericks. DeAnne, perhaps

wracked by guilt for keeping this secret from Linda for so much of her adult life, unearths a series of letters between Linda's birth mother, Mai-Dao, and Linda's adopted father, Thomas. But Linda does not ever ask DeAnne for these details; nor does she ever attempt to return to Vietnam or to learn about Vietnamese culture or history, as so many other transracial adoptee narratives depict. In fact, right before the section where Linda watches the PBS documentary about synesthesia, she recalls the moment in ninth grade where she stumbles upon the name "Nguyen" in a history book. She had "never seen 'Nguyen' printed a book before. So while it belonged to me, I didn't recognize it" (Truong 2010, 216). Growing in a white family and in a town with few other Asian Americans, Linda experiences a distinct sense of ambivalence regarding her race that Eng and Han characterize as typical for transracial adoptees. Eng and Han (2019) note that "while transnational adoptees identify with their parents' whiteness, their parents do not necessarily identify with their children's Asianness. Such a failure of recognitions threatens to redouble racial melancholia's effects, severing the adoptee from the intimacy of the family unit, emotionally segregating her, and obliging her to negotiate her significant losses in isolation and silence" (79). Linda does experience this severing from the intimacy of the family unit because her race marks her as obviously different from her family and she does negotiate these losses in isolation. To Eng and Han's characterization of the psychic status of transracial adoptees, I would add that Linda is further isolated from her family because she carries the secret of her synesthesia for years. Thus, it is important to consider how the intersections of her adoptee status as well as her disability contribute to her racial melancholia.

Many traditional narratives about transnational adoptees emphasize the importance of origins; in his essay on transracial adoptees and adoption life stories, Jerng (2010) analyzes an anthology of writings by adoptees to demonstrate that "the social recognition of transracial adoptees becomes more and more dependent on fitting them within a narrative that makes their personal identities contingent on the construction of origins" (46). I argue that *Bitter in the Mouth* presents a different approach to origins, one that privileges identification within a disability community as a way of processing racial melancholia.

Linda later notes that "what I wanted to know about myself I never read in a book in high school, college, or law school. I saw it on television"—meaning the documentary (Truong 2010, 216). By adding disability to a narrative about a transracial adoptee, Truong complicates the idea that making contact with a birth parent will suddenly unlock a person's knowledge about their own identity; rather, she presents a difference between being Asian and looking Asian to signal that for Linda, disability rather than race is the key way that she navigates the world around her. The fact that Linda is not concerned with secrets about her biological parents and is more concerned about learning that there are other synesthetes living in the world shows how the novel pivots away from biological determinism and toward affiliation with disability.

The interview format of the PBS documentary on synesthesia reveals the way that those with disabilities are often interpellated by those around them. For example, when one of the synesthetes in the documentary is asked whether synesthesia has been disruptive to daily life, he responds by asking "Would you say that living with your sense of smell or your eyesight has been disruptive to your daily life?" (217). Similarly, Ms. Cordell, another synesthete, is asked why she has chosen a career as an instruction booklet writer and responds with this question: "You mean why am I not a poet or something more interesting?", a question that makes it seem "as if she had heard this objection to her chosen genre too many times before" (220). The format of these interactions echoes Linda's experience growing up as an Asian American in the South; she notes that "since leaving Boiling Springs, I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South. You mean what it was like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South, I would say back to them" (169). The similar structure of all three

interactions—answering a question with another question—draws attention to the ways that those who are viewed as racial or disabled anomalies are misrecognized by people around them.

This repeated sense of misrecognition is frustrating but also means that when Linda stumbles upon the *PBS* documentary, she instantly relates to the struggles of the synesthetes profiled in the program. By refusing to offer a coherent narrative of what it means to be Asian or to be a synesthete, Linda, Mr. Roland, and Ms. Cordell instead point out the ever-fluid and expansive ways that people can differently experience their disabled and racial experiences. Their responses to the questions also demonstrate their lack of interest in crafting answers that will be palatable to society at large and also draw attention to the fact that there is no one way that racialized or disabled people navigate the world. Linda, Mr. Roland, and Ms. Cordell refuse to perform their disabled and racial identity in a way that appeases those who are fascinated by synesthesia and those of a different race.

This constant need to define oneself against what is normal and to provide a logical narrative to explain one's presence has often been a characteristic of the refugee experience. Timothy August (2012) shows how refugees often recount similar experiences of living their life by a particular script in order to justify their existence. August points out that Vietnamese refugees "had to tell their life stories to newspaper reporters, individuals, and/or church sponsors over and over again in order to explain their presence" because "more than half of the American public did not support the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the United States in the early 1980s" (105). Thus, by refusing to provide a straightforward or palatable answer to the question, "What was it like growing up Asian in the South?" Linda resists the traditional urge to assimilate into white narratives of racialized identities. She does not view herself as *being* an Asian subject so her redirection of the question with another question is her refusal to answer a question she does not feel she can answer.

Similarly, the responses given by Mr. Roland and Ms. Cordell show that, because of their synesthesia, they have often been interpellated in specific ways. Ms. Cordell sees all her words in colors because she visualizes each letter of the alphabet as a different color. Her choice of career is constantly questioned because people assume that she must have an extraordinarily creative approach to language, an approach that is wasted on technical writing. But just as Linda refuses to answer what "growing up Asian in the South was like," Ms. Cordell refuses to change her profession simply because being a technical writer is perceived as too "boring" for someone with chromatolexic synesthesia. Although Ms. Cordell is a white woman from Tuscaloosa, her experiences of constantly being misinterpellated or misunderstood speak back to Linda's own experience growing up as someone who looked Asian in the South. In her predominantly white town of Boiling Springs, Linda had no one in which to confide or share her struggles of feeling misrecognized; thus, the discovery of Ms. Cordell and Mr. Roland fill a hole in Linda's life that she was aching to fill because of the ways that synesthesia impacts her life on a daily basis. The discovery of the name "Nguyen" in a history book does not fill such a hole because it was a void that Linda never felt the need to fill in the first place. Thus, an attentiveness to the different ways that people can be disabled by their environment allows us to understand why Linda, a transracial adoptee who feels ambivalent about her racial background and who has experienced rejection and misrecognition due to her disability her whole life, experiences such intense feelings of recognition when she comes across the *PBS* documentary.

After procuring the transcript of the documentary (reading the program, as opposed to rewatching it on TV, makes it easier for her to manage her incomings), Linda tries to construct "an alternative family tree" (Truong 2010, 228). She contacts the producers of the documentary and asks for the emails of those involved. Her email is passed along to the participants but she never hears from them. Disappointed, Linda then directs her energies into getting to know the famous synesthetes profiled in the program. She learns about Alexander Scriabin, composer with synesthesia and "felt a distinct sense of

embarrassment and loss that I had never heard of Scriabin, as if I had failed to meet a member of my own family, an uncle who lived just over the state line or a half-brother I should have recognized because we have the same eyes or nose” (228). Again, the language of family and recognition appears again, this time with an even stronger connection to biology and resemblance. As an adoptee, Linda bears no physical, biological resemblance to her family and as a transracial adoptee, her appearance marks her as distinctly other from the rest of her white family. Though Linda does not vocalize the sense of loss that comes from a lack of knowing about her biological family, she does articulate the sense of embarrassment and melancholia from never having heard of Scriabin. Thus, she expands the definition of what a family or even what a diaspora can look like—the sense of racial melancholia and loss pervades Linda’s description of Scriabin, the same sense of racial melancholia that haunts more “traditional” diasporas such as the Asian diaspora.

Because of their shared experiences as synesthetes, Linda can deeply identify with the actions of the people being interviewed. When Ms. Cordell is explaining to the interviewer that she never tires of a particular sentence because it shimmers with golden light, Linda notes that “the interviewer couldn’t see what Ms. Cordell meant.” Nor could Linda but “the difference was that [Linda] believed her. The interviewer didn’t” (Truong 2010, 221). Ms. Cordell then recounts when she first attempted to tell her mother about her synesthesia: “she was six years old and her mother slapped her so hard that she fell backward, hitting her head on the linoleum floor” (221). As Ellen Samuels (2017) notes, “disclosures do not take place in a vacuum” and “the fear of negative reception or misrecognition often stifl[es] the impulse to disclose” (17). The violence associated with Ms. Cordell’s first attempt to disclose is evidence of the negative reception that often accompanies disclosure and demonstrates that the mere act of *attempting* to disclose signals a level of trust and vulnerability. It is significant that both Ms. Cordell and Linda both attempt to disclose their disabilities to their mothers, figures who they believe will accept and love them unconditionally. Yet, Linda’s own disclosure is also marked by rejection and misrecognition.

While I have spent much of this section on the positives of affiliation with disability, the negative reaction that Linda receives from disclosing her disability to her mother demonstrates that there is also a great deal of shame regarding disability, especially those that cannot be “seen” by others. For Linda, this shame and continued psychic toll converges with her racial melancholia and drives her to keep her sexual assault secret for years. Thus, while reviewers have placed “disclosures about race, synesthesia, and rape alongside each other without exploring the connections among them,” I argue that it is important to analyze the scenes where Linda discloses her rape and synesthesia and to examine how they are connected (Janette 2014, 155).

When Linda first attempts to disclose her synesthesia to her mother, she is met with a hostile rejection. The day before “Bobby knocked on the door of the blue and gray ranch house and then pushed himself inside,” Linda is riding in the car with DeAnne. Feeling safe, Linda tries to disclose her synesthesia to DeAnne but DeAnne states that she won’t have it in her family—in other words “if you want to be one of us, Linda, you hush your mouth” (Truong 2010, 107-08). Because of the close proximity of Linda’s disclosure to her mother and Linda’s rape—as noted above, the two events literally happen one day apart—I read Linda’s disclosure of her synesthesia as intimately and inextricably linked with Linda’s decision not to disclose her sexual assault to anyone for several years. DeAnne very forcefully tells Linda that she will tolerate having an adopted Vietnamese daughter but her threshold for anything else outside the ordinary is severely limited; it seems reasonable to assume that had Linda told DeAnne of the rape, she would have been similarly berated and shut down. This instance also marks the last time that Linda remembers loving DeAnne (she notes that she loved her mother from ages seven to eleven, from when she was adopted to when she was raped). Linda’s relationship with her mother is bookmarked then by two

traumatic events—her displacement from her biological family and her rape at the hands of Kelly’s cousin, Bobby.

Linda only attempts to re-connect with DeAnne after she watches the *PBS* documentary, a move that I see as a potential link between Linda’s disability and her trauma. By learning about others with the same disability, Linda begins to feel the healing and therapeutic effects of community and thus feels compelled to try to find similar feelings of community with her mother. In fact, when Linda returns to her childhood home and tells DeAnne about her synesthesia, DeAnne wants to know “how much did it hurt me not to be believed” (246). This links the trauma of Linda’s rape with the stigma she suffers because of her disability. Although she was silenced years ago when she attempted to disclose both her synesthesia and her sexual assault, in this moment, her mother is finally acknowledging that Linda deserved to be believed on both counts and that her voice is important. This is the moment that finally allows Linda to begin to have an open relationship with her mother and to thus reshape her idea of what family and home mean to her.

“Natural” Women: The Role of Disability in Re-Meeting Family

While Linda’s disability allows her to first seek out an alternate family tree of synesthetes, I argue that her disability and cancer also allow her to re-define and re-assemble her relationships to the disabled women within her own adopted family. This demonstrates disability’s potential to open up new modes of affiliation, new ways of understanding family and belonging, and possibilities for reconciling with racial melancholia. I will begin this section with a reading of how Linda’s ovarian cancer and subsequent oophorectomy exclude her from a traditional notion of diaspora but allow her to position herself out of what a “natural” woman should be. Next, I will look at how food—a language in itself for Linda because of her auditory-gustatory synesthesia—serves as a method of connection between Linda and her mother as they begin to rekindle their relationship.

Linda initially discovers her cancer after Leo proposes to her because one of the stipulations of his proposal is that Linda get a full medical checkup before they officially announce their engagement. Leo insists on the checkup because he was “disturbed by the fact that [Linda] was adopted” (Truong 2010, 168). Because of her lack of family medical history, Leo considers Linda “a twenty-nine-year-old ticking time bomb with deactivation wires not clearly colored-coded” (168). After a pelvic examination, Linda’s doctor finds a mass on one of her ovaries and while she is in surgery, they find another mass on her other ovary. The doctors then remove both of her ovaries. Three weeks after she returns from the hospital, Leo breaks up with her. I detail this experience in order to show how Linda’s cancer and oophorectomy exclude her from the heteronormative, able-bodied diasporic experience. The fact that Leo decides to end their relationship as soon he learns about the mass shows again that his notion of family is closely tied to the need to have biological children with a “healthy” woman.

Linda’s cancer has both material and metaphorical ramifications. Materially, it means that she can no longer have biological children of her own, thus negating her ability to pass on her genes and to continue the reproduction of the diaspora. The cancer is also a metaphor for Linda’s lack of an origin story—Leo’s description of Linda as a “ticking time bomb” means that the mystery surrounding her birth and arrival in North Carolina renders her body incoherent and illegible to him. But Linda’s lack of an origin story also means that she turns to affiliation, rather than filiation, to reassemble her world in new ways, with new people that share her positionality.

Linda’s oophorectomy means that she will never pass her genes on to a biological child, but Linda also never explicitly expresses a desire to have children. This echoes the experience of her adopted

mother, DeAnne, who we learn never wanted to have a biological child of her own. When she is telling Linda the story of her adoption, DeAnne notes that she was initially reluctant to adopt Linda because DeAnne “had known from the time that she was in her early twenties that she didn’t want to have children” (280). DeAnne’s mother, Iris, “told her that no man would think that was natural,” leading DeAnne to think that, “she would be alone for the rest of her life” (280). Here, I want to draw attention to the word “natural” because disabled bodies have often been viewed as unnatural and as lacking wholeness. It is significant that DeAnne’s lack of desire to have children is described as unnatural because it links Linda’s inability to have children with DeAnne’s lack of interest in reproduction. I draw this connection not to suggest that DeAnne’s lack of interest in child rearing is a sign of disability but instead to show that both Linda and her mother are seen as atypical from society as a whole, and this deviation from norms is part of what allows Linda to connect with her mother in a new way. As noted earlier, it is also significant that Linda’s cancer and surgery is framed in terms of loss, as a “trauma that the body could recover from, but afterward the body would continue to grieve for what had been taken from it” (212). Because Linda travels to see her mother very soon after her surgery, I see a connection between Linda’s grieving body and Linda’s attempt to repair her relationship with her mother.

Similarly, Linda’s unique relationship to language and food helps signal to the reader a new relationship with DeAnne and a new desire and willingness to relate and understand to DeAnne. Linda’s synesthesia means that she processes and relates to the world in a distinct way; she often uses food as a way of relating to people because food and taste are connected to every word she and another person utter. Through a close reading of the meals shared with DeAnne, I argue that because of her disability, Linda sees food, taste, emotion as intricately connected and inseparable from one another. Food then represents not just hospitality and care for Linda but is the way that she forms ties of kinship and affiliation.

Because Linda has auditory-gustatory synesthesia, the topic of food has been well-studied in the novel. In her discussion of regionalism in the novel, Cruz (2014) notes that “the palate of *Bitter in the Mouth* portrays the South as a space of comparative and global racialization, one that extends beyond the more prominent black-white binary of race in the U.S. South” (723). Most of the discussion of food in the novel has revolved around Linda’s synesthesia and the tastes that are associated with certain words. I would like to go a step further and suggest that for Linda, food itself is a language through which she understands the world. Thus, food allows Linda to experience relationships with her adopted family in a fluid and expansive manner following her revelation about the discovery of other synesthetes.

Linda’s identification with her disability allows her to re-open a relationship with her estranged mother and try to heal from the trauma of not initially being believed by DeAnne—be it about her synesthesia or her sexual assault. When Linda returns to her house in Boiling Springs, she describes her reunion with her mother in the following manner: “I met DeAnne Whatley Hammerick for the first time when she was sixty-six years old” (Truong 2010, 244). The phrasing of this sentence exemplifies the difference between origins and beginnings, between filiation and affiliation, and demonstrates why the flexible model of affiliation allows Linda to begin to resolve her melancholia and reconnect with her mother. As noted earlier, Hayes presents affiliation as characterized by the re-assembling of the world and beginnings as involving ceaseless re-examinations. Here, we see Linda, who has recently undergone an oophorectomy and who has not returned to Boiling Springs for years, reassembling her world by reexamining her mother, a person she once thought she knew. By saying that she is meeting her mother for the first time, Linda is drawing attention to both how Linda and her mother’s bodies have changed over time and these changes allow for a stronger sense of affiliation.

The first thing that Linda does when she returns to her childhood home is to show her mother the *PBS* documentary about synesthesia. Her mother then promptly stays up all night, watching the

documentary. When Linda finds her in the morning, she makes her mother a cup of coffee and they talk at the kitchen table. Throughout her stay at home, this is how Linda and DeAnne begin their mornings together. Linda would wake first and make a pot of coffee and then DeAnne would join her in the kitchen and “make a breakfast that involved no cooking. Bowls of milk and cereal, tubs of yogurt, halves of a grapefruit. Then we would begin to talk” (246). This echoes the descriptions of food that followed after Linda’s father passed away: “the foodstuff of women living alone. Cans of tuna fish. Yogurt. Dried fruits. Salads splashed with bottled dressings” (124). While the descriptions of food are similar—the foods described are those that do not require cooking and easily prepared—the spirit of the meals now differ. When they were estranged, DeAnne and Linda ate alone. Now, with Linda’s disability disclosed and DeAnne’s body showing visible signs of aging and disability, the two women eat together at the kitchen table. Thus, Linda’s knowledge about synesthesia (signified by the *PBS* documentary she makes DeAnne watch) opens up new opportunities for affiliation for her and allows her to begin to reconnect with her mother.

It is significant that food marks the changed relationship between Linda and her mother because Linda’s disability makes her especially attuned to the connection between taste and language. As Brandt (2016) notes, the foods that Linda eats growing up (per Linda’s description, these foods are a rotating list of unappetizing casseroles), “represent the eradication of Linda’s heritage by her adoptive mother and the effects of DeAnne’s opinions regarding ‘diversity’ on Linda’s developing sense of self” (44). After Linda first tells her mother about her synesthesia, she “tried to assuage her concerns by sharing with her words with incomings that I adored and craved. I told her ‘mom’ tasted of chocolate milk” (Truong 2010, 247). By sharing this fact with her mother, Linda acknowledges the work that they are both doing to repair their relationship and to re-meet each other in light of the disclosure of Linda’s disability. Because comfort for Linda is often bound up in certain words and tastes, sharing food and sharing what foods are associated with particular words is an intimate expression of vulnerability that allows Linda to come to terms with the racial melancholia of transracial adoption.

The Language of Synesthesia

Linda’s unique engagement with language as a result of her synesthesia also manifests itself in her close attachments to the written word; from the start of the novel, she stresses that writing letters is a large part of her relationship with her best friend because reading letters does not trigger her incomings. In her discussion of language and synesthesia, Brandt (2016) notes that the novel comments on “the discursive power of language in respect to bodies, emotions, and their mutual dependency upon each other” (52). It is thus crucial to end this discussion of Linda’s synesthesia with an analysis of the discursive power of language throughout the novel.

Upon first reading, one of the most striking aspects of the novel is the way that Truong depicts Linda’s synesthesia throughout the text. As noted in an earlier section of this article, whenever Linda wants to demonstrate her synesthesia, the taste that is associated with a particular word will come after in italics. The following is an exchange between her and her teacher:

When my teacher asked, “Linda, where did the English first settle in North Carolina?” the question would come to me as “Lindamint, where did the Englishmaraschinocherry firstPepto-Bismol settlemustard in Northcheddarcheese Carolinacannedpeas?’ My response, when I could finally say it, I experienced as “Roanoke Islandbacon.” (21)

Scholars such as Cruz (2014) have noted how the formal characteristics of the novel often make the text “visually bewildering” and “muddle different sensory experiences with sentences that themselves are also difficult to parse” (726). This muddling and disrupting of the reading experience forces the reader to at least begin to empathize with Linda’s synesthesia, as Linda and Truong try to show the reader how, for someone with synesthesia, it can be extremely difficult to simply comprehend a teacher’s question, let alone be expected to answer it in a prompt manner. The experience of reading the passages with italics is, as Cruz notes, bewildering and also forces the reader to slow down in order to comprehend the meaning of each individual word. Thus, this stylistic choice can be read as Truong’s attempt to overwhelm the reader in the same way that Linda is often overwhelmed by her synesthesia.

The structure of the novel itself also asks the reader to slow down, to re-read, and to see every situation in a different light; the novel does not reveal that Linda is Vietnamese-American until roughly halfway through the book, on page 158. This revelation changes the way one can interpret key moments of the novel. After Linda is raped, she writes Kelly and asks why her cousin Bobby had done those things to her; by that, Linda meant “why had he treated me so differently. When Kelly was ten, Bobby had held her hand, forced it into the crotch of his pants. Why was that not enough for him when he found [Linda]?” (Truong 2010, 118). At this point in the novel, the reader does not know that Linda is Vietnamese-American and there are no definitive answers as to why Linda was treated differently. But re-reading this passage with the knowledge of Linda’s race presents a possible answer to the question. As Janette (2014) notes, “on first reading, Bobby’s behavior appears to be the escalation of sexual predation” but “Bobby’s violation of Linda demonstrates his expansion into violent claiming of both racial and sexual privilege by penetrating Linda’s bodily territory” (171). Similarly, at Linda’s father’s funeral, some of her family members “acknowledge his death by sending a small jade plant in a wicker basket to the funeral home.” Iris, Linda’s grandmother, “saw the small potted plant . . . and saw it for what it was: an insult, anchored to rich soil and meant to grow with each passing day” (Truong 2010, 126). She takes the plant to the yard and burns it. This scene, which also comes before the revelation, seems odd without the knowledge of Linda’s race and adoption. But rereading this with the knowledge that Iris always viewed Linda as other because she was adopted and did not look like the rest of the family, it is easy to understand why Iris is so insulted by this. Furthermore, we learn at the end of the novel that Linda’s parents died in a fire—Iris’s burning of the jade plant (a symbol from the extended family meant to insult both Iris and Linda) links Linda’s race, adoption status, and trauma associated with her displacement from her home. The revelation in the middle, as well as the novel’s non-linear structure, shows how *Bitter in the Mouth* resists any traditional sort of reading experience.

This non-linear structure, and the need to reread the novel to truly understand its complexities, is characteristic of the “crip time” that Kafer discusses in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Kafer (2013) notes that “crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies” (27). I do not mean to suggest reading in a non-linear structure is inherently a crip act; instead, I draw attention to the ways that the structure of the novel itself allows the reader to recognize our own expectations of how long things take and how race is portrayed. For example, because of the way Truong includes Linda’s tastes on the page, the reader can feel overwhelmed and the need to slow down when faced with so many different foods. Similarly, because of where the revelation is positioned in the novel, the reader must reconfigure expectations of how many readings it will take to grapple with the newfound revelation and to be attuned to clues of Linda’s race that were not initially evident.

The formal technique of including some of the tastes that Linda includes directly on the page also has the effect of making the reader appreciate the role that the *written* word—especially letters—has in

Linda's world. Reading letters does not trigger Linda's synesthesia, which is why she and her best friend Kelly primarily communicate through letters they send through the mail. Letter writing is at the center of Linda and Kelly's relationship, and they take the process so seriously that they number each of their letters chronologically. However, the first time we are introduced to Kelly, the emphasis on order is already disrupted. Linda first introduces Kelly by recalling the time that she first moved to New York City and "wrote to Kelly that I had made a mistake" (Truong 2010, 16). She then tells the story of the first letter that Kelly wrote her when they were both seven years old. From then on, the letters are referenced in a non-chronological way: letter #26 is referenced on page 21, but then a few pages later on page 25, Linda references letter #742. A few pages after that on page 29, Linda brings up letter #394. This demonstrates that for Linda, the origin of a story is not as important as *what* a story tells. This echoes Hayes' (2016) assertion that an alternative roots narrative "challenges the patrilineal lines of descent implied by roots by disrupting the linear storytelling that constitutes identity" (2). Indeed, the letters between Kelly and Linda challenge the idea that linearity means a clearly defined sense of identity or coherence, or that putting something in order or being able to map it onto a family tree makes something legitimate. Thus, these letters—coupled with the fact that they send them because letter writing is a way of managing Linda's disability—also demonstrate Kafer's theory of crip time.

At the end of the novel, DeAnne draws on a series of letters to recount the story of Linda's birth parents. She reveals that Linda's biological mother, Mai-Dao, communicated with Linda's adopted father, Thomas, while Mai-Dao was living in North Carolina with her husband. Specifically, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, Mai-Dao contacts Thomas to see if he can help find any of her missing family members. When Mai-Dao's husband finds these letters, he accuses his wife of adultery and forbids her from contacting Thomas again. At the very end of the novel, once Linda has heard the story about how her biological parents died in a fire, DeAnne tells her that the letters are waiting for her in the hallway. The book then ends with the following passage:

Of course, I had wondered how DeAnne Whatley Hammerick could have remembered in such plaintive details the contents of all those long-ago letters. I had thought, in between our sips of bourbon, that she could be making this 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. (282)

This passage acknowledges the artificiality of roots while also positing that however fictional the concept of "roots" may be, narrative can play an important role in creating a sense of coherency for those who have often been displaced and dislocated from traditional notions of home. Ultimately, by thinking through the relations between disability, diaspora, race, and gender in this novel, I hope to demonstrate that feminist disability studies and critical race studies provide key frameworks for thinking through home and belonging. While Linda's story is anything but conventional, her winding path back home to Boiling Springs demonstrates that roots and origin stories can be constructed in any multitude of ways, depending on different affiliations and identifications. Additionally, considering Linda's relationship with other synesthetes as diasporic draws attention to the ways that diaspora can be constructed in a more expansive and inclusive way. Linda reaches out to the other subjects of the PBS documentary, and listens as her mother recounts the story of Mai-Dao because she is still invested in knowing a story of where she came from, both in terms of her race and her disability, but she rejects the notion that biology is the only way to structure a story.

As someone whose position within the Asian diaspora is initially characterized by ambivalence and voids, Linda is able to begin to resolve her racial melancholia by connecting an alternate family tree,

one that relies more on affiliation rather than filiation, that acknowledges the fictionality of roots. She reaches out to the subjects of the PBS documentary and is disappointed when they do not respond, but this does not lessen the impact that this revelation has on her life. She learns about the death of her biological parents and how she came to live in Boiling Springs, but she acknowledges that these details could be fictional. This demonstrates that to Linda, it is not important whether a story is true or not; rather, it is more important for her to have a story, to know of a community in order to let herself grieve, to re-connect with her mother, and to finally put down tender roots and stay.

Notes

1. Neurodiversity is a term first coined by sociologist Judy Singer in 1999 to describe the experiences of people with autism. The term has gained traction within the disability studies and disability justice community as a word that celebrates difference and embraces the multitude of ways a particular “bodymind” can interact with the world. I use it here to describe Linda’s synesthesia to emphasize that there is nothing wrong with the way Linda processes words and senses; rather, it is the way that people misunderstand Linda and the stigma of difference that disadvantages Linda in educational settings.

2. When discussing Linda’s status, it is important to note that while she is a transracial adoptee (that is, her adopted family is a different race), she is not a transnational adoptee because she and her biological family were already residing in the United States before Linda was adopted.

3. Michele Janette’s (2014) article on the palimpsestic nature of Linda’s synesthesia is structured around three of the secrets that concern the novel that is, the secret of Linda’s synesthesia, the secret of her rape, and the secret of her race until halfway through the novel. Alaina Kaus (2017) notes that “as part of the Southern Gothic tradition, Truong’s novel demonstrates the continuing presence of the past, the lasting significance of place, and the weight of familial heritage . . . by convey[ing] a pervading sense of mystery” (84).

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