A Divided Family: Examining the Physical Displacement in Robert Olen Butler's A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

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Thesis Abstract

In Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, the collection focuses on the Vietnamese that emigrated to America because of the Vietnam War. Through these short stories, Butler illustrates the physical displacement of the characters, and their new role within their new home, America, as the Other.

Throughout examining the physical displacement and the characters’ status as the Other, this thesis focuses on the after effects of the Vietnam War. Each character attempts to cope with their displacement and Other-ness through a variety of methods including exploitation of their Other-ness for monetary gains, using their sexuality to achieve assimilation into their new society through a domestic role, focusing on other aspects of their life (i.e. business) in order to avoid their physical displacement, or trying to create a legacy with their son, or coming to terms with death. This thesis focuses on these characters’ attempts to achieve assimilation into their new culture through their various methods while they attempt to maintain their Vietnamese culture.

This thesis also uses critical works from Homi Bhabha and Edward Said to further explore the Post-Colonial aspect of the short story collection, as well as Derek Attridge’s definition of the Other (the three are Post-Colonial critics/scholars). In order to more fully understand the collection and its place in Vietnam Literature, an emerging sub-genre within the past two or three decades, critics like Owen Gilman Jr., Philip Beidler, and Steffen Hantke are used to describe the Vietnam Literature sub-genre, as well as where Robert Olen Butler’s place in the field stands and the impact and importance of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. 
A DIVIDED FAMILY:
EXAMINING THE PHYSICAL DISPLACEMENT IN ROBERT OLEN BUTLER’S A
GOOD SCENT FROM A STRANGE MOUNTAIN

A THESIS

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For the degree of Masters in Arts

by

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# Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................1

Physical Displacement in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*……6

Conclusion........................................................................................................50

Endnotes...........................................................................................................55

Work Cited and Bibliography........................................................................57
Introduction

In *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Robert Olen Butler writes about the Vietnamese as they become physically displaced from their homeland. He explores this situation by focusing on different characters throughout the short story collection, as they experience the after effects of the Vietnam War. By being physically displaced, Butler’s characters become the Other, which is defined by Derek Attridge, a critic who focuses on the Other and Post-Colonialism: “the other tends to stand for the colonized culture or people as viewed by the dominant power” (23). Attridge’s definition will be the main definition that this thesis uses, along with ideas from Homi Bhabi and Edward Said, two notable Post-Colonialist critics.

While discussing Butler’s collection, Steffen H. Hantke, a critic who focuses on American Literature about the Vietnam War, writes that it “describes the interpenetrations of U.S. and Vietnamese cultures in the aftermath of the war” (65). Hantke’s quote illustrates what is at the heart of this thesis: by examining the cultures’ interpenetrations which [that] stem from the characters’ physical displacement, a reader can more fully understand the effects caused by the Vietnam War. This thesis will examine how the Vietnamese that are physically displaced become the Other, and illustrates the “interpenetrations of U.S. and Vietnamese cultures” (65) through the characters maintaining their native culture while living in a new culture in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.

Hantke also claims that a discussion of the Vietnam War has two sides, and that “one of these camps argues that the Vietnam War is not really over because it has caused an as-of-yet unresolved trauma within the American psyche, which makes it impossible
to put the event behind us” (63). Butler’s stories, with their emphasis on the physical displacement caused by the war, demonstrates the unresolved nature of the war, as these characters continually deal with the after effects of the Vietnam War. Through examining this short story collection, a reader can understand the beliefs and culture of the people America fought for and against during the Vietnam War, and the wide-ranging effects of the war. In this thesis, I intend to examine how the physical displacement of the characters in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* causes them to become the Other, and how the characters’ attempt to alleviate their displacement through various methods like acceptance, attempting to create a legacy, avoidance, exploitation of their Other-ness, and withholding information.

In this thesis, I will focus on the stories “Open Arms,” “Fairy Tale,” “Crickets,” “Love,” “In the Clearing,” “The American Couple,” “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,” and “Missing.” Throughout these stories, I will illustrate how Butler’s theme of physical displacement is coped with by the characters. Although the other stories in the collection deal with physical displacement, the stories I have chosen best exemplify the displacement and Other-ness that the collection features. Stories like “The Trip Back” and “Relic” both illustrate the displacement of the characters, but use the same methods of alleviating their displacement as “The American Couple (i.e. the characters attempt to exploit their Other-ness for monetary gain in order to get acceptance into the community). “A Ghost Story” uses ghosts as a way to remind characters of the culture they are leaving behind, a theme which is better exemplified in the title story, “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.” Although the rest of the stories illustrate physical
displacement, they are driven more by plot than the theme (i.e. "Preparation" is about a friend preparing her woman for her funeral), which is why I chose not to focus on them.

Butler’s decision to create a short story collection rather than a novel about the Vietnam War itself raises issues. In a lecture, Butler\(^\text{iii}\) himself describes the difference between a short story and a novel, according to him:

The distinction between the vision that becomes a novel and the vision that becomes a short story is pretty much like this...the short story will have you say to the reader, “Look, I don’t have much time. So sit down, let me tell you about a moment in this character’s life when something took a turn, or something intensified in some significant way.” The short story will have, oftentimes, a brief sequence of casually linked events, but ultimately it turns on the moment. The novel is going to be saying to your reader, “Look, this is going to take some time. Let’s go for a long walk...but ultimately the focus of a novel is on that- I won’t call it a chain, because that argues for a certain kind of linear structure, but- that certain configuration of casually linked events. (Burroway, 33)

The quote is particularly interesting when related to Philip D. Beidler’s\(^\text{iv}\) statement about the structure of Vietnam literature in general. Beidler\(^\text{v}\) focuses his work on literature about the Vietnam War, and has studied many of the notable authors of Vietnam War literature like Tim O’Brien and Robert Olen Butler. Although he never directly addressed Butler’s collection, his description of the structure of Vietnam War literature is applicable to Butler, since the collection is gaining importance in the Vietnam War literature sub-genre. He states:
In these words, fashioned out of experience into imaginative art which in turn inscribes itself into the larger discourse of culture, we find a call, a challenge, and even, given the richly generative concept of the language they propose a medium of enactment for a new art that would be a kind of ultimate cultural revision. It is an art that, even as it acknowledges the painful memory of Vietnam, would make possible the imaginative projection of that memory into new dimensions of consciousness, private and public, individual and collective, often providing equally new insights into knowledge, meaning, and value. (xii)

Although Butler’s quote would indicate that his choice of creating a short story collection is a conscious decision that focuses on moments in a character’s life, Beidler’s illustrates the notion that Vietnam literature searches for a new way to express the effects of the Vietnam War. Butler’s use of a short story collection as the medium allows him to focus on important moments in his characters’ lives, which are their attempts to cope with the physical displacement caused by the Vietnam War. By doing this, Butler is illustrating the “ultimate cultural revision” (xii) in order to display how the after effects of the Vietnam War effected the Vietnamese people.

Inexplicably, only a small amount of critical attention has been devoted towards this collection considering the collection won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. For this thesis, I will be using the collection re-released in 2001, which includes two added stories, “Salem” and “Missing.” The exact reason that Butler released a second edition with the added stories is unknown, but the only significant changes are the addition of the two stories. Because of this, the critical responses featured in the thesis are applicable since
the addition of the two stories does not negate what the critics wrote about the collection when it was first released nor do the stories change the theme of physical displacement.

The stories featured in the collection appeared in several literary journals including *The Hudson Review* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Although the stories were published individually, Butler’s intention was to have a short story collection. He explains the process while discussing how he wrote “Crickets”:

Suddenly a voice came out of my unconscious, the voice of a Vietnamese father in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on a Sunday afternoon. Everything’s boring and dull and his son is bored and he tries to interest the kid in cricket fighting. So I sat down and wrote it in one six-and-a-half-hour stretch. It turned out well. I went to bed that night and the next morning when I woke up I had two dozen other voices in my unconscious, saying *me, me, me*. All the stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* presented themselves to me at once. (Burroway, 138-139)

The quote illustrates Butler’s desire to have the stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* presented together for a reader. Whether the stories came to him or not in a specific order remains to be seen, since the arrangement of the book has not been expressed by Butler or critics.

It is my hope that this thesis will bridge the gap of critical neglect that the collection has, as well as offer a reader a better understanding of the physical displacement caused to the Vietnamese people because of the Vietnam War. Also, if Hantke’s assertion about the Vietnam War not being over is correct, I hope this thesis will cause another effect of the Vietnam War to be discussed.
Physical Displacement in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

Butler begins his collection with “Open Arms,” which focuses on two men: Thap, a former Vietcong soldier who becomes disenchanted with the Vietcong after they murder his family, and the narrator, who becomes physically displaced at the end of the story by emigrating to America.

In the opening paragraph, the narrator explains how he worked as an interpreter for the Australians because he could “speak perfect English” (1); by working as an interpreter for the majority, he is exploiting his Other-ness, which is his ability to speak Vietnamese, the language of the minority in the story, in order for personal, monetary gains for financial security.

The narrator is telling the story after the war, when he is an influential and successful member of his community in Gretna, Louisiana. However, the financial security offered by the role he chose has its drawbacks, as the story exhibits. Because of the financial security he gained by working for the Australians during the war and emigrating to America after the war, he loses his wife to another man. More importantly, the narrator loses his country, stating that “in the end, my country was lost and I am no longer there” (1). The passage reveals the narrator’s continuing alliance with Vietnam, even though he lives in the United States of America. The narrator loses his Vietnamese cultural identity, since he does not view himself as an American and does not live in Vietnam.

When the two men meet, Thap is about to be interrogated by the narrator. The narrator describes Thap and his situation as:
A master, our other sources said, of explaining the communist vision of the world to the woodcutters and fishermen and rice farmers. And meanwhile, in Kontum, the tactics had changed, as they always do, and three months ago the VC made a lesson out of a little village that had a chief with a taste for American consumer goods and information to trade for them. This time the lesson was severe and the ones who did not run were all killed. Thap’s wife and two children expected to be safe because someone was supposed to know whose family they were. They stayed and they were murdered by the VC. (6)

The story exhibits an after effect of the Vietnam War— the murdering of Thap’s family causes him to become mentally displaced, meaning he can no longer fight for the ideology he believes in since it was the communists that murdered his family. Like the narrator’s relationship with Vietnam, Thap still feels connected to his former cause, but chooses a different side to fight with because of his displacement.

Because of the atrocities committed by the Vietcong, Thap becomes mentally displaced and forms a new allegiance in order to cope with his mental displacement caused by the Vietcong killing his family. He states that he’s still a believer, who believes “in the government caring for all the people, the poor before the rich. I believe in the state of personal purity that makes this possible. But I finally came to believe that the government these men from the north want to set up can’t be controlled by the very people it’s supposed to serve” (7). Although he still believes in the cause, he does not believe in the Vietcong; his mental displacement from the horrors they committed force him to abandon fighting for his beliefs.
However, his mental displacement does not last long. One night, the Australian soldiers screen a movie. When the soldiers show a pornographic movie, Thap realizes the mistake he made:

Thap was a true believer, and that night he felt that he had suddenly understood the democracies he was trying to believe in. He felt that the communists whom he had rightly broken with, who had killed his wife and shown him their own fatal flaw, nevertheless had been right about all the rest of us. The fact that the impurity of the West had touched Thap directly, had made him feel something strongly for his dead wife, had only made things worse. He’d had no choice. (14)

Thap’s mental displacement is short-lived, as he once again reverts back to fighting for communism and the Vietcong. His final act of attacking the Australian soldiers who forced him to watch the video illustrates how he copes with his mental displacement. While he joined the opposing cause for justifiable reasons, the mental displacement he experienced because of the horrible act the Vietcong committed against his family is gone once he re-aligns himself with his true beliefs: communism and the Vietcong.

The narrator understands what Thap went through; during the film, the narrator expresses how the two were united, stating that “Thap was my countryman in some deeper way. And it had nothing to do with his being Vietnamese, either” (13). Both Thap and the narrator experience displacement during the war, which unites them more than military allegiances could. As the pornographic film progressed, the narrator states he “knew what was happening inside him. He was desiring his wife, just as I was desiring mine” (13). Even though the two men experience different forms of displacement, they share a bond because of being displaced. While Thap’s wife is dead
and the narrator’s wife is physically apart from him, the two are both experiencing the loss of intimacy. Because of this, the narrator can understand Thap’s actions.

Later in the story, when Butler focuses on the narrator after the war, the physical displacement that the narrator tries to cope with because he sought financial security in America is displayed. In a lecture to a creative writing class, Butler emphasizes how important the words “my country” (Burroway, 137) are. Although the narrator’s life is good in America, it is still not his country; Vietnam, regardless of its political state, will always be his country. Butler adds “it’s not that it’s no longer his country, it is his country, but he’s no longer there” (Burroway, 137). By trying to exploit his Other-ness for monetary gains, the narrator lost his country. He makes a respectable life for himself in the United States, but he is physically displaced and does not know how to assimilate into the American culture. He still views himself as Vietnamese, even though he lives in the United States. Yet, the narrator does not attempt to cope with his physical displacement. Instead, he chooses to dwell on how America is not his home, and how his allegiance will always belong to Vietnam.

One of the last paragraphs in the story illustrates the narrator’s discontent with his life:

And as for myself, I live my life in the United States of America. I work in a bank. I have my own apartment with my own furniture and I have saved more money than I expect ever to need, if I can keep my job. And there’s no worry about that. It’s a big bank and they like me there. I can talk to the Vietnamese customers, and they think I’m a good worker beyond that. I read the newspapers. I subscribe to several magazines, and in one of them beautiful women smile at me
each month. I no longer think of my wife. I go to the movies. I own a VCR and at last I saw the movie “Mary Poppins.” The street I live on is one of four named after Mary Poppins in our neighborhood. (14-15)

Butler discusses how the passage undercuts what the narrator is trying to convey about happiness, stating:

I hope you understand the irony at the end, that little litany of I’m OK: I’ve got a VCR, I’ve got a good job, there’s no hatred in me, everything’s fine. Not so. He is utterly lost, for the same reason as that other man, Thap, who came to a movement in which he realized that he had no country whatsoever. That’s what our narrator is really responding to, because in spite of his avowals at the end of the story, deep down he feels he belongs nowhere. (Burroway, 137)

The narrator in “Open Arms” sets up the recurring theme in A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: the voice of the Other as they try to cope with the physical displacement they experience because of the Vietnam War. In this story, the narrator’s unhappiness stems from his decision to actively play the role of the Other. By serving as an interpreter in the war for the Australians and by working in a bank in the United States, where he deals with Vietnamese customers for the bank, he allows himself to be exploited as the Other. As a result, he loses his home, his wife, and his cultural identity. Ultimately, his failure at coping with his physical displacement is that he does not attempt to assimilate into the American culture. He maintains his old identity as a Vietnamese man, but he does not attempt to become a Vietnamese-American. As Homi Bhabha states, in the Other’s “displacement, the borders between home and world become confused” (323). Although he is inundated by his new culture, America, from living on a street named after Mary
Poppins, owning a VCR, and subscribing to several magazines, he only maintains life from his home, Vietnam.

Philip Beidler writes about the displacement that many felt during the Vietnam War and afterwards:

The outsider at once at home and abroad, the alien adrift in the country that remains the war, burdened with the ceaselessly recurring scenes of survivor memory; these are some of the central, repeated imaginings of the project of literature as cultural revision in the post-Vietnam fiction of Robert Olen Butler… Indeed, a great measure of his achievement lies precisely in his rendering of the memories of the war and their burdens for Americans and Vietnamese alike through specific issues of consciousness and language. For he is often thus able to speak, as an American writer (like the poet John Balaban, Butler is himself a student of Vietnamese), from precisely within the horrendously tangled dialectic of cultures themselves that became, as Frances Fitzgerald and others have shown us, the source of some of the truest tragedy of the war. (52,55)

Butler’s knowledge of the Vietnamese language equips him to be able to capture the Other’s voice in A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain. After the war, not only did many Vietnamese soldiers become physically displaced, but they also felt mentally displaced as well. The story “Open Arms” illustrates both forms of displacement, and demonstrates the ongoing examination of physical displacement in the collection, which acts as a constant reminder of the after effects of the Vietnam War.

The story “Fairy Tale” focuses on a civilian trying to acclimate herself to a new culture. “Fairy Tale” follows Miss Noi, a Vietnamese woman who tries to assimilate to
the American culture. Even though she resorts to exploiting her Other-ness for monetary
gains like the narrator of “Open Arms,” Miss Noi uses her sexuality as a way to cope
with her physical displacement.

Miss Noi is a Vietnamese “bargirl” who wants to become an American
housewife. While in Saigon, she would strip for American soldiers. By using her
sexuality, she hopes to become an American housewife in order to cope with her
physical displacement. By attempting to fulfill her dream of becoming an American
housewife, she attempts assimilation into America through a role in the domestic sphere.

Finally she finds an American suitor who takes her to America where she can
begin to fulfill her role as a housewife. However, the two fail to communicate. Miss Noi
relates how her American husband tried to say “may Vietnam live for ten thousand years”
(46), but instead told a group of Vietnamese businessmen and politicians that “the
sunburnt duck is lying down” (46). Miss Noi considers her husband to be a sweet man;
but she finds out that he is not what he appeared to be. She makes one last attempt to be
in love with him. “I ask him in the dark night to tell me about the sunburnt duck, what is
that story. He thinks I am one crazy Vietnam girl and he says things that can burn Miss
Noi more than the sun. So boom, I am gone from that man” (47). Miss Noi’s physical
displacement causes her emotional duress because of her inability to effectively
communicate with an American. Miss Noi cannot fully comprehend the meaning of what
is happening; she cannot understand her American husband’s true meaning because she is
not an accepted member of his country. Once again she becomes physically displaced,
forced into her version of the Other because she is single (and not part of the majority by
being a Vietnamese-American housewife).
In some ways, the miscommunication represents a failed attempt to cope with physical displacement. Miss Noi’s misunderstanding of what her husband meant to say is an example of her efforts to maintain her cultural identity. Because he attempts to speak in her language, Miss Noi can marry him with the knowledge that her cultural identity can be maintained. However, his misrepresentation of the language illustrates the failure of language to uphold Miss Noi’s cultural identity. Richard Barbieri points out “Butler’s fidelity to Vietnamese orthography: his Vietnamese names and words are adorned with detailed accent marks above, below, and even in mid-letter-dots, slashes, hats and curves of many types- dressing the western alphabet in fluttering silks and hinting at pronunciations of complex lyricism….One character tells us she fell in love with an American because of his tonal errors” (7). Because the husband mistook the tonality of the language, he communicates something else. The language becomes an ineffective way to cope with physical displacement in this story because of the failure of Miss Noi’s significant other to fully understand it. This, in turn, illustrates his misunderstanding of her cultural identity.

Miss Noi goes to America and becomes a stripper in New Orleans, and returns to cope with her physical displacement through her sexuality, still hoping someday to become an American housewife. Miss Noi realizes the only way to become assimilated is to become one of the majority; if she can become an American housewife, she can acclimate because of what Bhabha calls “the world-in-the-home” (324). He writes “the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and inviduating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-the-political; the world-in-the-home” (324).
By becoming an American housewife, Miss Noi can become part of the majority, creating the “world-in-the-home” (324).

Even though she works with American “bargirls,” there is still a cultural difference between her and her co-workers. Miss Noi states that “if you want to know how dumb some Vietnam bargirl can be, I can give you one example. A man brought me to America in 1974. He says he loves me and I say I love that man” (46). Miss Noi implies that the difference is purely cultural- an American bargirl would not make the same mistake that the Vietnam bargirl would. Although both cultures feature women using their sexuality for their own means, only the Other makes the mistake of developing feelings for a “client.” Later, Miss Noi describes how “many girls on Bourbon Street tell stories and laugh very hard about the men who say they want to marry them” (50), which further enhances her physical displacement. If she were one of the majority, she would be able to joke about the situation, instead of stating “how dumb some Vietnam bargirl can be” (46).

Upon her return to work, she states “I am twenty-five years old and my titties are small, especially in America, but I am still number-one girl. I can shake it baby, and soon I am a dancer in a bar on Bourbon Street and everybody likes me to stay a Vietnam girl. Maybe some men have nice memories of Vietnam girls” (47). Miss Noi’s claim about the smallness of her breasts compared to the other bargirl’s in America illustrates another way she is the Other: her exoticism is exploited as a selling point within the bar. However, she copes with being exploited as the Other by continually pursuing her dream of being an American housewife. Even though she is the most popular girl at the bar, she is forced to use her sexuality as a means for monetary gain, not the acclimation she
wants. Unlike the narrator in "Open Arms," she does want to assimilate into her new culture.

During the war, Miss Noi worked in Saigon. She describes her encounters with American soldiers: "only when they love me very much I ask them to get me something. In the place where the GI eats, they have something I cannot get in Saigon. This thing is an apple. I only ask for apples. I buy mangoes and papayas and pineapples and other sweet things to eat in the market, but in South Vietnam, an apple is a special thing" (49). The apples become symbolic of her dream of acclimation in America, as it represents her acclimation as a Vietnamese-American housewife. The apple represents the domestic role, Bhabha's "world-in-the-home" (324) as a Vietnamese-American housewife that she dreams of having.

Once she is in America, the apple loses its luster to her; "in New Orleans, there are apples in the stores and I buy them and I eat too many. The taste is still good but it is not special anymore" (50). The American life that she wants has not turned out as she planned- she is divorced, had to leave her son with her mother, and instead of being the housewife she expected to become, she is once again a bargirl. Without an American husband, she is unable to assimilate fully into America.

Miss Noi describes the difference she faces in her profession, claiming that "I am not a blossom in New Orleans. I am a voodoo girl" (50). Once again, Miss Noi is exploited as the Other. The bar's announcer makes it explicit when Miss Noi states he "makes a big deal about Miss Noi being Vietnam girl," (51) and that "this night he sees some men in the audience with jackets on that says they were in Vietnam, so he says I am from Saigon and I am ready to please" (51). Beidler quotes Scott Spencerviii, that Butler
"returns ‘to what might be his great obsession, the American misadventure in Vietnam,’ with the sexual collision between G.I.’s and prostitutes serving as a symbol of that war,’ he now also uses that voice as the central means whereby he ‘immerses us in the cultural dislocation of our time’ (10)” (59). Although the quote is in reference to one of Butler’s previous works, it is still applicable to this story: Butler’s use of Miss Noi as a representation of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese immigrants extends to the notion of how these immigrants try to cope with their physical displacement while in America (and during the Vietnam War when they were viewed as the minorities in the eyes of the American soldiers). The two cultures became intertwined through sex, as the coupling of these solicitations often produced offspring. The offspring becomes one of the after-effects of the Vietnam War, and prevent the war from further gaining closure, as the offspring attempts to find their cultural identity.

Miss Noi meets an American Vietnam veteran, Mr. Fontenot, at the bar, and she is not quite sure if she understands what his intentions are. She thinks in the broader sense that she does not understand men, claiming “I take men to my bed and I save my money and there have been very many men, I guess. It’s like eating too many apples. You take a bite now and you can make yourself remember that apples are sweet, but it is like the apple in your mouth is not even there. You eat too many apples and all you can do is remember them” (53). Once again, Miss Noi relates her experience in America to the apple. She is disenchanted with her life in America, and her physical displacement is still apparent. She is not able to adjust to life in America, which she intends to achieve by becoming a housewife, so she can become a Vietnamese-American.
After bringing him home one night, Miss Noi does not see Mr. Fontenot at the bar for a while. One night she leaves the bar, and he is waiting for her on the sidewalk. “He is wearing a suit with a tie and his neck reaches up high out of his white shirt and I can bet his hands are clean and he moves to me and one of his hands comes out from behind his back and he gives me an apple and says he wants to marry Miss Noi” (57). Miss Noi embraces her new culture by adopting its form of communication: she embraces the fairy tale genre and relates her story as one, which is indicative of her achieving her acclimation, since she considers fairy tales as a part of American culture.

The fairy tale continues as Miss Noi describes herself and Mr. Fontenot: “then he takes her with him to live in Thibodaux, Louisiana, where he fixes cars and she has a nice little house and she is a housewife with a toaster machine and they go fishing together in his little boat and she never eats an apple unless he thinks to give it to her” (57). Miss Noi’s sexuality has given her a domestic role as a way to cope with her physical displacement. Her role as an American housewife allows her to achieve the following: she is married to a man, they mutually understand each other’s respective culture (he used to love walking the streets of Saigon), and she is a Vietnamese-American housewife. Miss Noi successfully achieves a life where she can maintain her Vietnamese culture, while embracing her life in America because Mr. Fontenot was a soldier in Vietnam and understands the Vietnamese culture. The apples that her husband now gives her become ritualistic, representative of her old life in Vietnam where American soldiers would give her apples. The embracing of the fairy tale illustrates how she is now a part of the American culture, where she will be a housewife in Louisiana. As Bhabha argues, she has created her “world-in-the-home” (324).
In the story “Crickets,” the physical displacement of the Vietnamese-Americans is presented in an interesting fashion by having Bill, the son of Mr. Thieu, completely assimilated while Mr. Thieu struggles to adapt to his new environment. By having a father and son in different stages of assimilation/displacement, the story illustrates how the succeeding generations of immigrants identify themselves.

The narrator, Mr. Thieu, begins by stating “they call me Ted where I work and they’ve called me that for over a decade now and it still bothers me, though I’m not very happy about my real name being the same as the former President of the former Republic of Vietnam” (59). Even though his name has a negative connotation in his homeland because it is the same as the former president, Thieu prefers his real name to an American name like Ted. By assigning him the name Ted, Thieu loses the cultural identity that is ascribed to his real name; instead, he becomes another Vietnamese-American, someone who is less representative of the Other. He discusses where his name came from, stating: “Thieu is not an uncommon name in my homeland and my mother had nothing more in mind than a long-dead uncle when she gave it to me. But in Lake Charles, Louisiana, I am Ted” (59). Even though his name is not uncommon in his homeland, in America he is forced to adopt a common American name in order to more fully be accepted in his workplace.

Thieu notes the connection between the American South and Vietnam, stating “we ended up here in the flat bayou land of Louisiana, where there are rice paddies and where the water and the land are in the most delicate balance with each other, very much like the Mekong Delta, where I grew up” (60). Richard Gray* writes:
More than a million Vietnamese and native-born Americans of Vietnamese descent now live in the US, the vast majority having come over either just after the fall of Saigon in 1975 or as so-called “boat people” in the second wave of emigration in 1978. About 300,000 of these have gathered in the Southern region of the country. The attraction of the South, and especially Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, for Vietnamese refugees is not hard to fathom...there is the obsession with family and ancestry, the compulsion to look backward to a past that seems to have been consumed, over and over again, by war. (142)

Gray’s quote illustrates one of the connections between Vietnam and the South: the two share similar climates and landscapes, allowing the Vietnamese immigrants to feel at home in their new country. Because of this, the American South becomes a surrogate Vietnam, which is one of the ways Thieu copes with his physical displacement.

While discussing his place within the community, Thieu states:

These people who work around me are good people and maybe they call me Ted because they want to think of me as one of them, though sometimes it bothers me that these men are so much bigger than me. I am the size of a woman in this country and these American men are all massive and they speak so slowly, even to one another, even though English is their native language. I’ve heard New Yorkers on television and I speak as fast as they do. (60)

The quote is important because it illustrates how the community does not actively try to oppress Thieu and make him the Other. The community attempts to accept him into their culture, but he cannot join them completely because he is physically different. Because
he is shorter than the men around him and he speaks quicker than the rest of his colleagues, he is constantly reminded of his differences.

On the other hand, his son identifies himself more as an American than a Vietnamese-American. Thieu states:

My son is beginning to speak like the others here in Louisiana...He is proud to have been born in America, and when he leaves us in the morning to walk to the Catholic school, he says, “Have a good day, y’all.” Sometimes I say good-bye to him in Vietnamese and he wrinkles his nose at me and says, “Aw, Pop,” like I’d just cracked a corny joke. He doesn’t speak Vietnamese at all and my wife says not to worry about that. He’s an American. (60)

Thieu’s son does not need to worry about assimilation because he does not identify himself as a Vietnamese-American; his son strictly views himself as an American, and does not attempt to maintain any cultural connection to Vietnam. Thieu actively contributed to his son’s identity as an American: “I agreed with my wife and gave my son an American name. Bill” (60). His son’s name is not forced upon him by the community in order to be accepted by American society; rather, he is given an American name from birth, which makes him a member of the community from the start. Thieu’s physical displacement because of the Vietnam War causes his son to only know a life in America, making Bill identify with the only culture he’s ever known.

When Thieu finds Bill bored one day, he decides to show his son a game from his own childhood. The idea for the game came to him because “this place is rich in crickets, which always make me think of my own childhood in Vietnam” (61). The game is Thieu’s attempt to cope with his physical displacement by creating a Vietnamese legacy
with his son. Since the game is a part of Thieu’s cultural identity, he hopes that teaching the game to Bill will make him embrace his Vietnamese culture like he has embraced the American culture.

In order for Bill to learn the game, Thieu demonstrates it for him:

I told him how, when I was a boy, my friends and I would prowl the undergrowth and capture crickets and keep them in matchboxes. We would feed them leaves and bits of watermelon and bean sprouts, and we’d train them to fight by keeping them in a constant state of agitation by blowing on them and gently flicking the ends of their antennas with a sliver of wood. (62)

Thieu hopes to pass on his childhood ritual to his son in order to cope with his own physical displacement. If his son takes an interest in the ritual, Thieu can pass his cultural identity onto his son, which will turn Bill into a Vietnamese-American instead of someone who identifies only with his American homeland.

After describing the game in more detail, Thieu and Bill begin to search for crickets: “it was one of the rocks that gave us our first crickets, and my son saw them and cried in my ear, ‘There, there,’ but he waited for me to grab them. I cupped first one and then the other and dropped them into the shoe box and I felt a vague disappointment, not so much because it was clear that my boy did not want to touch the insects, but that they were both the big black ones, the charcoal crickets” (63). Although Thieu is playing “Cricketmen,” the game is not the same as it was in Vietnam; in America, he can only find the “big black ones,” and not the “fire crickets” that he could find in Vietnam. This is indicative of his physical displacement in his new homeland- even though the South acts like a surrogate Vietnam, it will never be exactly like the homeland he was raised in.
There will always be elements of America that are different than Vietnam, and the lack of "fire crickets" is illustrative of that.

Unfortunately Thieu realizes that his son will never adapt a cultural identity that includes Vietnam. Thieu states "'Oh, no,' my son said with real force, and for a second I thought he had read my mind and shared my feeling, but I looked at him and he was pointing at the toes of his white sneakers. 'My Reeboks are ruined!' he cried, and on the toe of each sneaker was a smudge of grass" (63-64). Thieu’s physical displacement is not eased by his attempt to maintain his cultural identity through his son because his son does not care about collecting crickets; Bill only cares about his Reebok sneakers, a product of the American culture.

Yet, Thieu continues to try to cope with his displacement by continuing the game:

I got back on my hands and knees and I circled the entire house and then I turned over every stone in the yard and dug around all the trees. I found probably two dozen more crickets, but they were all the same. In Louisiana there are rice paddies and some of the bayous look like the Delta, but many of the birds are different, and why shouldn’t the insects be different, too? This is another country, after all. (64)

Thieu realizes that his physical displacement cannot be coped with through forcing a Vietnamese cultural identity onto his son. After all, he realizes he is in another country, America, and it will never be his homeland, Vietnam. He cannot combat his physical displacement by creating a legacy with his son, and may ultimately be forced to identify himself as Ted instead of Thieu.
When his son leaves the next morning, Thieu states “then he was out the door and I called after him, ‘See you later, Bill’” (64). The quote illustrates Thieu’s final realization that his son will only identify himself with his American culture, instead of identifying himself with both his American and Vietnamese cultures. Thieu will never join fully into the community because he always tries to maintain his Vietnamese cultural identity. However, with his son’s complete immersion into the American culture, his cultural legacy cannot be passed on.

Like “Open Arms,” “Love” also focuses on a person who served in the Vietnam War. In “Love,” the protagonist was a former spy, or “an agent handler” (75), for the American camps near his hometown. As an “agent handler,” the narrator would give the American camps valuable information in order for them to successfully bomb targets.

Similar to “Open Arms,” the narrator uses his position as the Other to empower himself through the military, as he uses his job in order to scare his wife’s potential suitors away through military persuasion. He states: “I was once able to bring fire from heaven” (73). The narrator used the “fire from heaven” (73) to persuade his wife’s potential suitors to stay away from her. He states that “it was the Vietnamese who I feared. They loved my wife, all these men, and it was only to be expected that some of them would try to have her” (74). In this story, the protagonist wages war against his countrymen. Even though he is Vietnamese, he still tries to combat his wife’s wandering eye by using American resources. In Vietnam, he acts like a Vietnamese-American, as he is acclimated into the Vietnamese culture and has the resources of the American military.
When the narrator comes to America, he realizes he cannot bring the “fire from heaven” (73). He states “but that was in Vietnam, and when the need arose once more, here in America, I had to find a new way” (73). In Vietnam, he was already a member of his community; now, he has to find a way to assimilate into his new home, America, without the aid of the American military in order to cope with his physical displacement, which causes him to lack any military firepower to combat his wife’s wandering eye.

While in America, the protagonist discovers a different kind of fire to combat his enemies: voodoo. While discussing the history of New Orleans, he comments about its origins:

This city was the causal possession of a small man who commanded fire of his own. But the city had a long history even before Napoleon held it. For a hundred years it had been a city with French and Spanish people but with many from the Caribbean, too, the West Indies and elsewhere, black people with fire of a different kind. You can’t live around New Orleans without hearing about voodoo. (80)

In the story, New Orleans offers the narrator a new form of “fire from heaven” (73)-voodoo. Like in the story “Crickets,” the American South becomes a surrogate Vietnam for the narrator because of his ability to warn off his wife’s potential suitors with American resources like in Vietnam.

Owen W. Gilman, Jr. illustrates another connection that the American south and Vietnam have, as he describes how American troops used the South as a surrogate Vietnam, similar to Thieu in “Crickets,” in order to try to acclimate themselves to what life would be like in Southeast Asia. He writes:
Many of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were not of Southern origin, yet by virtue of military training conducted at Southern installations, their orientation toward Vietnam reflected at least a portion of the conditioning that continues to make the South unique. Training in the South for Vietnam made sense, for in that region, soldiers could be given the most practical introduction possible to the feel of heat, humidity, and other discomforts that would be encountered in most of the combat regions of Southeast Asia. (46)

Since the South is so similar to Vietnam, the narrator can retain an aspect of his Vietnamese life through the climate and landscape, while trying to find a way to combat his wife’s wandering eye, which is his relation to the American culture.

Still, there is another connection that the American South and Vietnam share: a reverence for the past. Vietnamese honor their deceased ancestors on a regular basis. Gray argues that the South contains “the obsession with family and ancestry, the compulsion to look backward to a past that seems to have been consumed, over and over again, by war” (142). The narrator’s obsession to maintain his family through his continual search for a new method of firepower, which is his “compulsion to look backward” on his days as an agent handler during the Vietnam War, allows him to more easily become connected within his new home. He is still physically displaced and trying to cope with it by combating his wife’s wandering eye, but that is the only part of his acclimation into his new home, America, that he is struggling with.

However, the most important connection that Vietnam and the South share in the story is African-Americans. The connection is two-fold: as allies in combat and in displacement. The narrator describes his search for a voodoo doctor:
I went up to the next corner and turned down a side street, then took another turn and another until I was in a cobbled street of narrow little houses with spindlework porches and I walked along and I smiled at the black people on their stoops and I stopped at several of the stoops and asked if there was a voodoo man in the neighborhood. I have learned the lessons of history and I felt a kinship with these people and I was comfortable asking them for help. (81)

The narrator asking an African-American man for help is an example of the narrator and a Southern African-American being allies in combat. Owen Gilman describes Project 100,000, a military project that America employed to recruit more troops for the Vietnam War, which “eventually brought more than 240,000 men into the armed services. Many Southern African-Americans joined the army through this project” (28). Although the exact number of Southern African-Americans is not listed, the connection is that the Southern African-Americans would have been the protagonist’s allies in the war. The narrator is trying to cope with his physical displacement by gaining new firepower to combat his wife’s wandering eye. Because the African-Americans can guide him towards voodoo weaponry, he can hope to regain his wife’s fidelity and become a Vietnamese-American again (this time living in America).

Secondly, Gray writes that “a Vietnamese character in A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain may feel ‘a strange kinship’ with African Americans...The connection between two dispossessed peoples, and the wars and memories associated with them” (144). Gray argues that the connection fails because African-Americans were brought over here instead of willingly coming like the Vietnamese. Regardless, the two ethnicities are still physically displaced from their home land and the narrator attempts to
cope with his physical displacement by getting the help from another group that has been considered the Other in America much longer than the Vietnamese.

In order to once again combat his wife’s infidelity, the protagonist visits a voodoo doctor, in the hopes that a potion can cure her:

In my lap was a small brown paper parcel and Doctor Joseph said, “Inside is a hog bladder. You will also find a vial of blood. You must fill the bladder with the shit of a he-goat and then pour in the blood, tie up the bladder with a lock of your wife’s hair, and then at the stroke of noon throw the bladder over your rival’s house.” (84)

The voodoo weapon becomes the means by which the protagonist can assimilate into his new home to become a Vietnamese-American; if he can use this weapon to stop his wife’s wandering eye, he can once again become a Vietnamese-American, now living in America. The narrator’s continued search to combat his wife’s wandering eye like he did during the Vietnam War also prevents closure from the war like Steffen Hantke argues. For the narrator, his version of the Vietnam War, combating his wife’s wandering eye, has not ended, and he continues to use his allies (this time, Southern African-Americans) and their weaponry as a way to fight the enemy (the Vietnamese).

At the end of the story, the protagonist drops the bladder onto the man whom his wife is sleeping with. Whether the cause is the voodoo or the sheer act of trying to win her back, the protagonist’s wife regains her affection towards her husband. While he is in the hospital healing from falling out of a tree, he states: “every day I have been in this hospital, my wife has come and sat with me and held my right hand with her face bowed. Then this evening she brought her sewing and pulled her chair close to me, and before
she began to sew, she asked what thoughts I had about the ways the Vietnamese in America were becoming part of American society” (93). The protagonist’s battle to once again assimilate into two cultures is over- he is once again living as a Vietnamese-American, with the ability to combat his wife’s wandering eye, which is his connection to the American culture. For the narrator, the Vietnam War has finally ended, unlike Hantke’s claim that the Vietnam War remains ongoing in the American psyche.

“In the Clearing” focuses on a group of young, Vietnamese soldiers, fighting against the Vietcong, who are out on patrol and “sitting in a row against a dead trunk, our legs stuck out flat or tucked up to our chests. We were all young and none of us knew what he was doing” (105). The protagonist, who is telling the story to his son, adds how he wanted to speak to Lieutenant Binh “because I was feeling the fear pretty bad, like it was a river catfish with the sharp gills and it was just now pulled out of the water and into the boat, thrashing, with the hook still in its mouth, and my chest was the bottom of the boat” (105). The protagonist is thrown into the jungle to fight for his life without the necessary strength to do it. He is mentally displaced over the prospect of combat, and the possibility of dying like the catfish.

The protagonist “sat trying to think what to say to Lieutenant Binh, but there was only a little nattering in my head, no real words at all. Then another private sitting next to me spoke. I do not remember his name. I can’t shape his face in my mind anymore. Not even a single feature” (105). The protagonist uses avoidance in order to make the scene feel less real to him. By avoiding the other private’s features, he can try to avoid becoming mentally displaced over the horrors that he witnesses during the battle.
When the protagonist discusses the dragon coming South to the other private, Lieutenant Binh retorts “you’re dead meat if you keep thinking like that” (106). Even though Lieutenant Binh acts stern, he is also mentally displaced over being in battle. In order to combat his mental displacement, he chooses to focus on the story, as he asks “what was that about the dragon?” (106). The two continue to converse on the subject:

“He married a fairy princess,” I said.

“Who married them?” the lieutenant said.

I couldn’t answer the question. It was a simple question and it was, I see now, an unimportant question, but sitting in that clearing in the middle of a forest full of men who would kill me, having already fired my rifle at their shapes on several occasions and felt the rush of their bullets past my face and seen already two men die, though I turned my face from that, but having seen two men splashed with their own blood and me sitting now in a forest with the fear clawing at my chest, I faced that simple little question and I realized how foolish I was, how much a child. (107)

The men are mentally displaced and are avoiding the situation they are in by discussing the linguistics of a Vietnamese myth. The men cannot face the situation that they are in, so they focus on something else.

The moment comes when they actually are facing combat, as the protagonist “looked across the clearing at the tree line and I knew that someone out there was coming near and I knew that dragons and fairies do not have children and the lieutenant’s voice was very close to me and it said, ‘Save your life’” (108). Both men realize the gravity of
the situation and realize that, while it may combat their mental displacement, using avoidance during their current circumstances could get them killed.

However, the protagonist still is feeling “shell-shock”:

I don’t know if some time passed with me sitting there feeling as crumbly and dry as the tree trunk I leaned against. Maybe only a few seconds, maybe no seconds at all. But very soon, from the tree line before me, there was a flash of light and another and I could only barely shift my eyes to the private sitting next to me and his head was a blur of red and gray and I was as quick as my rifle and over the trunk and beside my lieutenant and we were very quiet together, firing, and all of the rest is very distant from me now. (108)

Both the narrator and the lieutenant are under heavy mental duress, and the protagonist’s actions are made without thinking. The non-specific depiction of the event illustrates the inability to fully relate the traumatic experience that the battle causes the narrator.

At the end of the story, the narrator is brought to a new country by Lieutenant Binh. He states “he was taking me and the others into the South China Sea and when I realized I was leaving my country and my wife and my unborn son, I was only about to turn my face to him, for I knew there was no going back” (109). He becomes physically displaced in order to avoid combat again, which would cause more mental displacement.

Bhabha writes “increasingly, ‘national’ cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (320). In other words, in order to fully depict the Vietnamese culture, one must examine the lives of those who are attempting to assimilate into another culture. The narrator only realizes how the Vietnamese creation myth is a part of his Vietnamese culture after he is physically displaced from his home.
As the narrator is attempting to assimilate into another country and culture, he is relating the creation myth of Vietnam to his son. He says:

Thousands of years ago a gentle and kindly dragon grew lonely in the harsh wide plains of China and he wandered south. He found a land full of beautiful mountains and green valleys and fresh, clear rivers that ran so fast in their banks that they made a singing sound. But even though the land was beautiful, he was still lonely. He traveled through this new country of his and at last he met a beautiful fairy princess. She, too, was lonely and the two of them fell in love and they decided to live together as man and wife and to love each other forever...the dragon had to make a difficult decision. He realized that the family was too large for them all to live together in one place\textsuperscript{xiv}. So he called his family to him and told them that even though he loved them all very much, he would have to divide the family into two parts...the princess took fifty of the children and went far away to the east, where she became the Queen of the Ocean. And the dragon took fifty children far away to the south, where he became the King of the Land. The dragon and the princess remained with the children until they were adults, wise and strong and able to take care of themselves. Then the dragon and the princess vanished and were reunited in the spirit world, where they lived happily together for the rest of eternity. The children married and prospered and they created Vietnam from the far north to the southern tip and they are the ancestors of all of us. (109,110)

The creation myth illustrates the divided nature of Vietnam. When the country of Vietnam was first founded, the Vietnamese from the north overtook the Chinese.
Although the country was unified in the mid 1970's, the country was still divided: this time not by Vietnam, but by the fact that some Vietnamese people had emigrated to other countries because of the war. The creation story illustrates that the physical displacement of the Vietnamese is only temporary, like what happened with the dragon and the fairy princess; eventually, the Vietnamese will reunite and prosper. In the story, the narrator telling his son the creation myth is an example of one of the many families divided because of the Vietnam War. The narrator becomes physically displaced, leaving Vietnam and his family behind with the hope that one day they will be united.

The narrator ends the story by writing “for a time in my life, the part of me that could believe in this story was dead. I often think, here in my new home, that it is dead still. But now, at least, I do not wish it to be dead and it does not make me feel foolish, so perhaps my belief is still part of me” (110). The narrator’s physical displacement allows him to reflect on what makes him Vietnamese; by hoping that he could reignite his belief in the creation myth, he is hoping that he can find out what it is that makes him Vietnamese in order for him to maintain it while he is in his new country. Also, the desire to believe in the creation myth illustrates his desire to be reunited with his home country, Vietnam, and his son, which allows him to cope with his physical displacement.

While examining national identity and imperialism, Edward Said states “at its core is the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is principally and irredicably a member of some race or category, and that race or category cannot ever be assimilated to or accepted by others- except as itself” (374). In other words, Said argues that an ethnic group cannot become a part of another culture unless they attempt to assimilate as their culture and not a mixture of other cultures. The narrator, disenfranchised over having to
leave his home country, attempts to maintain what makes him Vietnamese. As Said
states, and similar to the narrator in “Open Arms,” he does not assimilate or become
accepted by his new home country; rather, he attempts to re-assimilate to Vietnam by
reaffirming his Vietnamese beliefs, even though he is in another country.

In “The American Couple,” Butler gives a portrait of two veterans, both on
to vacation in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico that were won by their wives on a game show: an
American and a Vietnamese. The two are polar opposites, with the American, Frank,
being outgoing while the Vietnamese soldier, Vinh, is very restrained. Not only that, but
the two have had very different stories since the war has ended, with Vinh becoming a
successful businessman and Frank not being able to move on from the war. Although
Vinh has seemingly been acclimated into America through his success in the business
world, he is not fully acclimated because he does not appreciate American culture. He
only focuses on the business aspect of everything he sees. He represses his mental
displacement over the war by focusing on business, which ironically causes him to be
physically displaced.

Vinh’s wife, Gabrielle, does appreciate American culture (with its game shows,
soap operas, etc). She talks about one of the actresses on a soap opera, then broadly
about America: “this is what’s good about America. There is always some
improvisation, something new, and when things get strained, you don’t fall back on
tradition but you make up something new” (158). The new thing that she is trying to
create is an identity in America. Although he is successful in business, she states “he has
no use for the things I like about America” (160). Gabrielle wants to acclimate herself
into American culture, but her husband resists. Vinh copes with his sense of physical
displacement not by maintaining Vietnamese rituals, but by only concerning himself with business.

Butler illustrates a former soldier who cannot re-acclimate himself to his former life in Frank, the American Vietnam War veteran. Frank cannot succeed in business because he is mentally displaced, as Gabrielle relates ‘‘my wife…’ But he paused, again measuring his words. I expected him to tell us that his wife didn’t like him talking too much about all of that, but apparently even this was something he’d agreed not to say, for he finished the sentence: ‘…she’s the winner in the family” (177). This line is loaded with double-meaning, as the narrator, Gabrielle, points out. She writes “this was a reference to her game-show victory, but when Frank heard himself say this, you could see his face flinch as he unexpectedly interpreted his own words in another way. He could not resist: ‘I wish I’d been a part of a winner for you folks’” (177). Both Frank and Vinh fought in the war, and on the same side, but from different countries (America and Vietnam, respectively). Frank’s reaction in the scene is indicative of Steffen Hantke’s argument about the Vietnam War being unresolved because of the American psyche’s inability to gain closure on the event: Frank cannot look past the loss of the Vietnam War, which becomes a debilitating memory for him. He cannot succeed in business because he does not live in the present. His mind only focuses on what happened during the Vietnam War, which makes the event have an unresolved nature in his mind, preventing him from moving on.

Frank and Vinh start to squabble, each trying to offer the other a courteous gesture while riding in the taxi:
"Hey there, Major, you outrank this soldier by quite a lot. You should take the favored place."

"I always rode in the backseat as a major," Vinh said, and there was just a little sharpness in it. But then he added, "Besides, you’ve got the longer legs by quite a lot." (195)

Frank and Vinh are trying to cope with their displacement by reliving their war days. Since neither of them can cope with the physical and/or mental displacement the Vietnam War caused them, the men try to recapture the experience, keeping the Vietnam War an unresolved conflict like Hantke argues.

While Frank and Vinh illustrate their return to their days as soldiers by faux-charging down a hill, Gabrielle watches from a distance. The two argue about the safest route to the objective, the building, which leads to a war game to end the debate. The war game causes the men, who were allies during the war, to become opposing factions. Gabrielle thinks that Frank is "like those Marines coming ashore in Da Nang or something" (224), while Vinh "was the other side- would he actually play the part of the Vietcong, who he hated? Perhaps. Perhaps if this American had given him no choice, he would play the Vietnamese no matter what the politics. I didn’t know. And I guess it’s important to realize that I didn’t know what Vinh would do in this situation. The man in the woods was hidden from me, too" (224). The quote illustrates the desperation the two men have in order to continue their reversion back to their days as soldiers. Even though Vinh did not fight for the Vietcong during the Vietnam War, he would agree to fight for them in the war game because it allows him to become a soldier once more. His inability to cope with his physical displacement because of the Vietnam War through focusing
only on business does not allow him to resolve the Vietnam War. Instead, both Vinh and Frank have to relive the conflict in order to get closure from the war, with Vinh even portraying the people he fought against, the Vietcong, in order to do that.

After Vinh hit Frank with a rock in their war game, Frank refuses to admit defeat. “Frank rubbed his shoulder and then he darted away, behind a tree, and then to another, and then he ran to the near side of the building and pulled up and pressed himself against the wall. Vinh was clearly agitated. He thought he had already won. He flapped his arms in exasperation and I could see Frank was ready for more war” (227-228). Even though the two recreate the Vietnam War in a war game to gain closure, Frank cannot accept any sort of loss. Like Hantke argues, his American psyche does not allow him to put the event behind him, even though the war game is supposed to be over. Frank cannot move past the Vietnam War, even when given the opportunity at definitive closure, because he cannot accept the result of a loss, real or fictional.

Finally, when the war game ends, it proves more cathartic for Vinh than it is for Frank. Vinh achieves not only his ability to face his memories, but the ability to acclimate into the American culture by participating in a tourist activity (Gabrielle had done it earlier in the day), parasailing.

While parasailing, she writes:

He was holding the ropes and at first I wondered if he was being an airborne soldier again. But it was very much different from that. I had failed to understand his face when he was standing before me, but this much I could tell now as he glided past me strapped to a parachute. He was looking down with the
calmest of pleasures...He was high above Puerto Vallarta and the sea and he was happy now. (234)

By participating in the tourist activity, he acclimates himself into the American society in which his wife was already an active participant. Instead of focusing on the business aspect of the activity, he allows himself to enjoy it. Unlike Frank who cannot move past the unresolved nature of the Vietnam War, Vinh is able to gain closure on the Vietnam War because of the war game. Although the game was fictional, Vinh illustrates that he no longer has to focus only on business in order to cope with the physical displacement caused by the Vietnam War. He can start to accept the American culture, which he does by participating in the tourist activity.

In the titular story of the collection, Butler uses the ghost trope as a way to illustrate the narrator’s displacement. Gray writes that Vietnam literature often uses “tropes of ghostliness and haunting,” (144) and “shadows and memory are often deployed” (144). According to Kathleen Brogan xvii, “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain” uses the gothic tradition in order to illustrate a new representation: cultural haunting (150).

The story opens with Dao, the narrator, who emigrated to America and is close to death, admitting that “Ho Chi Minh xviii came to me again last night, his hands covered with confectioner’s sugar. This was something of a surprise to me, the first time I saw him beside my bed, in the dim light from the open shade” (235). As Brogan claims, “ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature function...to recreate ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present” (151). Brogan’s description illustrates Ho Chi Minh’s
function in the story: he is a reminder of the cultural past that Dao had in Vietnam and is used in the story to try and unite the divided family of Vietnam through helping physically displaced Vietnamese cope.

When Ho Chi Minh appears in Dao’s bedroom, he says “‘Dao, my old friend, I have heard it is time to visit you’” (235). Ho Chi Minh knows it is time to visit Dao. This follows the Gothic trope, as Brogan writes “the familiar trappings of the Gothic— the haunted house, the family secrets, endangered inheritances, imprisonment and escape, the encounter with the unspeakable, and indeed, ghosts themselves” (149). Minh’s visit illustrates the Gothic trope of using ghosts as a mean to move the plot along; the reason that Minh needs to come in the story is because Dao is not only physically displaced, but he is close to dying.

Dao understands his life is close to the end, as he explains that “it is time now for me to see my family, and the friends I have made who are still alive. This is our custom from Vietnam. When you are very old, you put aside a week or two to receive the people of your life so that you can tell one another your feelings, or try at last to understand one another, or simply say good-bye” (236). In order to formally say good-bye, the Vietnamese ritualistically invite the friends and relatives of the person who is close to dying in order to provide closure.

However, even this ritual is altered because of the physical displacement of Dao and his family. He says how “a Vietnamese family is extended as far as the bloodline strings us together, like so many paper lanterns around a village square. And we all give off light together. That’s the way it has always been in our culture. But these people who came to visit me have been in America for a long time and there are very strange
 Dao and his family’s physical displacement causes the family ritual to change, as the divided Vietnam family acclimate more and more to their new country, America. Through their acclimation into America, Dao and his family have changed how they view the world.

The event that has changed the people that visit Dao is the killing of a newspaper man, Mr. Nguyen Bich Le, for writing that a communist government in Vietnam is a reality that needs to be accepted. Dao states “you should understand that Mr. Nguyen Bich Le had been shot dead in our community here in New Orleans just last week. There are many of us Vietnamese living in New Orleans and one man, Mr. Le, published a little newspaper for all of us” (238). The quote illustrates Mr. Le’s attempt to cope with his physical displacement; in order to acclimate into his new country, he maintains a newspaper to keep his Vietnamese heritage. However, Mr. Le’s way to cope with his physical displacement is also what leads to his demise, as members of Dao’s family, his daughter’s husband and their son, take offense to what Mr. Le wrote and murdered him.

Le’s death becomes a thread throughout the whole story, but Dao notices the irony of the location of his death: “he was shot as he sat behind the wheel of his Chevrolet pickup truck. I find a detail like that especially moving, that this man was killed in his Chevrolet, which I understand is a strongly American thing. We knew this in Saigon. In Saigon it was very American to own a Chevrolet, just as it was French to own a Citroen” (238-239). Not only does the passage display how cars are culturally linked to the Vietnamese, but also how Mr. Le has been assimilated into the community. He maintains his cultural identity through his newspaper, he owns a Chevrolet pickup truck, and has become a Southern Vietnamese-American. Even Dao notices this connection, as
he states “he had bought not only a Chevrolet but a Chevrolet pickup truck, which made him not only American but also a man of Louisiana, where there are many pickup trucks” (239). Mr. Le was an assimilated Vietnamese-American before he was killed.

When he hears his son-in-law and his grandson discuss the murder, Dao pretends to fall asleep. He states “I am a Hoa Hao Buddhist and I believe in harmony among all living things, especially the members of a Vietnamese family” (239). Dao is upset over his family’s involvement in the murder, and this also adds to his physical displacement. As Vietnamese-Americans, the way his family behaves has changed; Dao is no longer considered a factor in decisions within his home, as he believes that Mr. Le was right for what he said, but no one asked him. Instead, his son-in-law and grandson take it upon themselves to act against a man who, as Dao notes, “had made the fatal error- though it should not be that in America- of writing that it was time to accept the reality of the communist government in Vietnam and begin to talk with them” (238). Even though Mr. Le is supposed to have freedom of speech, Dao’s family did not agree. Although the family is in a new country, Dao’s relations still act with the interest of their idea of Vietnam in mind and not for uniting the divided Vietnam family.

When Minh visits Dao again, he asks whether Dao “still follow(s) the path you chose in Paris?” (240). The quote illustrates what Brogan describes as cultural haunting. She writes about cultural haunting:

Centrally concerned with the issues of communal memory, cultural transmission, and group inheritance, stories of cultural haunting share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another. (152)
The quote is important because it explains Ho Chi Minh’s role in the story: he serves as an interloper between places. Just like the characters in the collection, Ho Chi Minh is in-between two places (America and Vietnam for the former, life and death for the latter, who’s continued appearances illustrates his unfinished business- uniting Vietnam). Jean Lacouture writes Ho Chi Minh was “president from 1945 to 1969 of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). As the leader of the Vietnamese nationalist movement for nearly three decades, Ho was one of the prime movers of the post-World War II anticolonial movement in Asia and one of the most influential communist leaders of the 20th century” (1). While Ho Chi Minh was the president, he tried to unite Vietnam as a country instead of maintaining the divide between the north and south. Jean Lacouture adds that Ho Chi Minh’s “public personality….is best symbolized by his popular name, Uncle Ho. He stood for the essential unity of the divided Vietnamese family” (4). Butler’s use of Ho Chi Minh illustrates the divide that Dao has to overcome to cope with his physical displacement: he is a divided man because he emigrated from his home country, Vietnam, and does not consider America to be his home. Ho Chi Minh is once again trying to unite his “divided Vietnamese family” (4) by helping Dao cope with his physical displacement. In the story, Ho Chi Minh’s attempt to unite the Vietnamese people is another example of Steffen Hantke’s argument about the lack of closure the Vietnam War has because of the after effect of displacement because of the war.

The fact that Ho Chi Minh is depicted as the 1917 version of himself is significant because both men were still discovering themselves during this time period. Dao is still trying to find his place in the world, as he is physically displaced from his
home country, and Ho Chi Minh is trying to find his place in the afterlife. As Brogan states, albeit about “A Ghost Story,” that “the ghost of a Vietnamese woman...becomes, by the end of the tale, the consuming spirit of acculturation that feeds upon war refugees resettled in the States. Characters run the danger of being swallowed up by the very past they attempt to recover (or to deny)” (155). Although she is referring to a different story, Butler is using the same device in “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.” Dao runs the risk of losing his Vietnamese identity if he fully assimilates into American society, and Ho Chi Minh never lived to see the family of Vietnam united.

Minh notices the table that Dao has in order to practice his religion. Dao states:

There was only a red cloth upon it and four Chinese characters: Bao So’n Ky Hu’o’tng. This is the saying of the Hoa Hao. We follow the teachings of a monk who broke away from the fancy rituals of the other Buddhists. We do not need elaborate pagodas or rituals. The Hoa Hao believes that the maintenance of our spirits is very simple, and the mystery of joy is simple, too. The four characters mean “A good scent from a strange mountain.” (241-242).

The quote illustrates Dao’s opinion that coping with physical displacement does not require elaborate actions. Dao does not need to use drastic rituals to maintain his cultural identity; rather, all he needs to do is keep things simple. In Dao’s case, his way to keep things simple and cope with his physical displacement is to accept his death.

Dao is starting to gain the acceptance needed to combat his physical displacement, as he states about his dead wife and the other people he knows that have died: “I want to be with her in that square and with the rest of those we’d buried, the tiny limbs and the sullen eyes and the gray faces of the puzzled children and the surprised
adults and the weary old people who have gone before us, who know the secrets now” (243). His desire to see the loved ones and friends that he has lost illustrates he is beginning to gain the acceptance of his death, which will allow him to cope with his physical displacement. The square he is referring to is Ba Dinh Square, which had a large crowd of people gather there on September 2, 1945. Jean Lacouture writes that here is where “Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent, using words ironically reminiscent of the U.S. Declaration of Independence” (3). The people that Dao refers to are the Vietnamese people, who were not granted independence from France; Lacouture writes: “on October 6 the French general Jacques Leclerc had landed in Saigon, followed a few days later by a strong armoured division. Within three months, he had control of South Vietnam” (3). French military force kept Minh’s family divided, as France regained control of South Vietnam. Dao’s acceptance of death can allow him to reunite with divided members of his Vietnamese family.

However, Dao is not fully ready to come to terms with his death, as Ho Chi Minh cannot assure him of some of the questions he has about death:

I asked, “Have you seen my wife?”

Ho had wandered to the far side of the room, but he turned and crossed back to me at this. “I’m sorry, my friend, I never knew her.”

I must have shown some disappointment in my face, for Ho sat down and brought his own face near mine. “I’m sorry,’ he said. “There are many other people that I must find here.”

“Are you very disappointed in me?” I asked. “For not having traveled the road with you?”
“It’s very complicated,” Ho said softly. “You felt that you’d take action. I am no longer in a position to question another soul’s choice.”

“Are you at peace, where you are?” I asked this knowing of his worry over the recipe for the glaze, but I hoped that this was only a minor difficulty in the afterlife, like the natural anticipation of the good cook expecting guests when everything always turns out fine in the end.

But Ho said, “I am not at peace.”

“Is Monsieur Escoffier over there?”

“I have not seen him. This has nothing to do with him, directly.”

“What is it about?”

“I don’t know.”

“You won the country. You know that, don’t you?”

Ho shrugged. “There are no countries here.” (245)

Dao not is not re-assured about death; Minh cannot tell Dao that he has seen Dao’s wife in the afterlife, cannot or will not form any judgment over whether Dao made the right choice with his religion, or explain whether death brings peace. Minh cannot be at peace until Dao is ready to accept his fate because Dao’s acceptance will help Minh achieve his goal of uniting the divided family of Vietnam. Even when Dao tries to comfort his friend, Minh admits that “there are no countries here” (245). Although Ho Chi Minh no longer is trying to unite Vietnam, he is still trying to unite the family of Vietnam by uniting the people. Until Dao can accept his fate, Ho Chi Minh cannot unite the people, and Dao cannot cope with his physical displacement. Minh’s statement illustrates Said’s idea of national identity: “at its core is the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is
principally and irreducibly a member of some race or category, and that race or category cannot ever be assimilated to or accepted by others- except as itself” (374). National or cultural identity is a man-made construct; Said’s quote and Minh’s statement illustrate how cultural identity cannot be won or lost by acts or rituals. Although a cultural identity may be placed upon an ethnic group by a group in the majority, the cultural identity placed upon a group does not need to be combated. In other words, if Americans attribute Vietnamese cultural values, the Vietnamese do not have to combat this cultural identity. Cultural identity lies in how a person identifies his or her own self.

At the end, Dao is able to accept death. Although he attempts one more question to ease his worries, Minh does not answer it. Rather, Dao states “I felt Ho Chi Minh very close to me, though I could not see him. He was very close and the smell was strong and sweet and it was filling my lungs as if from the inside, as if Ho was passing through my very body, and I heard the door open behind me and then close softly shut” (249). When Minh enters his lungs, it is indicative of Dao’s acceptance of death; Ho Chi Minh no longer has to worry, as he has helped his friend face his fear of death in order to unite him with the family of Vietnam. Dao admits that “perhaps I will be as restless as Ho when I join him. But that will be all right. He and I will be together again and perhaps we can help each other” (249). Dao is finally able to cope with his feeling, loss, and the physical displacement by accepting death. Because, once Dao dies, there will be no more countries. Dao does not have to worry about maintaining his cultural identity anymore, as he can look forward to the afterlife he has been dreaming of. Ho Chi Minh is finally succeeding at uniting the “divided Vietnamese family” (4).
Butler ends his collection with the story “Missing”. The story is once again about the Other acclimating to a new world; in this case the Other is an American trying to assimilate into the Vietnamese culture. The narrator is an American soldier who deserted, or as he states, “walked away. I just walked away. And there were a thousand of them like me” (262). The narrator remains nameless, to represent the thousands like him that deserted and stayed in Vietnam.

When the narrator finds a picture of himself in a newspaper, he is angry about the way he is portrayed, claiming “because you can’t see the cigarette, my hand coming down from my face looks like some puny little wave, like I’m saying come help me. And that’s the last goddam thing I want” (262). What the photo illustrates is an example of the Other not having his voice heard. Instead of depicting the narrator smoking, the photograph is made to seem like he is asking for help.

Attridge claims the Other “is brought into being by an act of writing, whether this otherness is embodied in an argument, a particular sequence of words, or an imagined series of events, is not just a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding and could not have been predicted by means of them” (22). The “old modes” of understanding in this case are the citizens of his former country, America. By assuming that he is in need of help because the photograph does not clearly demonstrate the actual event, the American people are not allowing the “new existent” that is the former soldier’s life in Vietnam to be understood. Instead of stating that the narrator is smoking in the picture, misery is attributed to him. In this case, the media is the majority and attributes an identity to the soldier that is not true (the narrator being miserable and asking for help).
The narrator no longer considers America his home, or his past life in America his real life. He relates the experience of the photo to his wife, a member of the village in Vietnam, stating “I do not wish to open the past either, my wife. But this is my village and I was seen across a field by millions and the eyes of that other country turn this way” (266). The narrator copes with his physical displacement by withholding his past; he does not tell the village about that other life he had (he had no wife), which allows him to be more easily accepted into their culture. America is no longer his homeland, but that other country. The story illustrates the physical displacement caused by the Vietnam War with the use of an American psyche, which Steffen Hantke argues prevents closure on the war. Even though he believes he is fully acclimated into his new culture, Vietnam, he cannot be until he is ready to bring closure to the Vietnam War by explaining to his wife his past life in America.

He even describes how his skin has become like the Vietnamese:

I looked at my hands darkened by the sun, not as dark as my wife’s skin or Binh’s or any of the others in the circle I’d broken but as dark as the skin of a Vietnamese child, that dark. This could be the skin of a Vietnamese child. Except for the blonde hairs on my knuckles, and I looked at my arms and there was a forest of blond hair on this dark arm. (267)

The narrator begins to resemble the people he now considers his brethren. Although the passage may be facetious, his physical resemblance represents how he has assimilated into the Vietnamese culture.

However, the narrator eventually has to tell his wife about his past life; he tells his wife that “there was no woman in that life” (269). Although he no longer can use
withholding information as a means to cope with his physical displacement, he still hopes to gain assimilation into his new culture by divulging his past to his wife in hopes that she will still accept him.

His revelation is well received by his wife; she is comforted by the information about his past. “My wife sighed softly and her breathing grew as smooth as her body when I first touched her and I closed my eyes” (269). The two embrace, allowing his two separate lives and cultures, American and Vietnamese, to become one. He is no longer physically displaced.

Pat C. Hoy IIxxii reviewed *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, writing “looking in on these stories from the outside, we see a touch of lunacy: ludicrous plots, bizarre games; far-fetched men and women their Southern neighbors might consider a bit touched. But inside the stories, inside the lives Butler creates, we experience loss and need. We learn about the suffering that comes from desire, and just for an instant we look into things so deep we can’t deny them” (3). Butler’s collection depicts the Vietnamese as they are physically displaced by the War. The “ludicrous plots” occur because the collection examines the lives of the Other, a voice that is normally oppressed. The “strangeness” featured in the plots is not indicative of the Vietnamese, but indicative of the limited knowledge a reader may have of the Other, more specifically the Vietnamese-Americans.

In their attempt to become assimilated into American society, the characters in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* have varying degrees of success in coping with their physical displacement. Butler’s collection offers a reader the opportunity to see one
of the after effects of the Vietnam War, physical displacement, examining both soldiers and civilians.
Conclusion

Through studying the physical displacement of the characters in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, a reader can see the effect that the Vietnam War had on a portion of the Vietnamese population that emigrated into America. In order to assimilate into their new culture and to battle against their new role as the Other, these characters are forced to find a way to cope with the physical displacement by maintaining vestiges of their Vietnamese heritage. Their various methods like exploiting their Other-ness for monetary gains, attempting to use their sexuality and Other-ness in the hopes of finding marital bliss, passing a childhood game to a son, etc., are the means by which these characters attempt to cope with their physical displacement while also trying to maintain aspects of their Vietnamese culture through their language and rituals.

For some, this topic may not seem to be of monumental importance. However, I believe this topic falls in line with Steffen Hantke’s argument about the Vietnam War; Hantke, a critic who studies the Vietnam War and its literature, writes “what is it about the Vietnam War that it seems to be haunting America more than any other localized event in its recent history? Why is there, whenever we talk about the Vietnam War, a tacit assumption that in some way it is still present and always will be?” (63). Although his essay was published in 2001, the opinion shared is still prevalent today: the Vietnam War will always be a relevant historical event to the American people, even to the point where it haunts us.

Hantke’s argument about the Vietnam War’s presence in today’s society is exactly why I believe that Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* perpetuates Hantke’s view. Butler’s collection focuses on the lives that were affected by the Vietnam
War; their continued (fictional) presence in America is a reminder of how the Vietnam War constantly maintains its place within American memory. His characters are examples of the physically displaced, and they serve as a continual reminder of what the outcome of the war created: the lives of many Americans and Vietnamese and the physical displacement of many Vietnamese from their homeland.

Ivan Wolfers\textsuperscript{xxiv}, a critic who focuses on the short story genre, claims that Butler’s “writes stories about the Vietnamese Americans in the United States at this moment to give meaning to the Vietnamese American conflict in the past. He tries to harmonize the United States and Vietnam with each other” (115). Wolfers’ argues that Butler’s stories keep the Vietnam War in the forefront of American society. By focusing on the effects of the war, Butler brings the past back into the present. Butler attempts harmony between the United States and Vietnam through his characters’ displacement; by having his Vietnamese characters attempt to cope with their displacement and their new culture, Butler attempts to find harmony for the Vietnamese-Americans in their new home while maintaining their old culture.

Although a continuing conversation about the Vietnam War means that closure on the subject will not occur suddenly, Hantke argues that Vietnam literature provides a kind of closure. He writes “by devoting its creative and ideological energies to the problem of closure, Vietnam Literature clearly means to answer to these complaints. Its answers will come across either as an immediate response, dictated by specific circumstances. Or they will appear as pre-emptive strikes, which are written into the discourse from the very beginning in order to provide it with a sense of stable identity” (80). With this in mind, Butler’s are “dictated by specific circumstances” (80), the plight of the Vietnamese-
Americans and their new communities in America. Through illustrating his characters coping with their physical displacement and Other-ness in the collection, Butler offers Vietnamese-Americans a strategy to maintain their culture that is in peril of being forgotten because of their displacement and the need to assimilate into their new culture.

Also, by illustrating the physical displacement of his characters and the ways they adapt to being the Other in American society, I hope to give a chance to readers to examine themselves through the Other. Bhabha writes that “the study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees- these border and frontier conditions- may be the terrains of world literature” (325). If the Vietnam War remains present in discussion in American society, then the recognition of the Other is also still alive. Through the projection of their Other-ness, Butler’s Vietnamese-American characters attempt to retain what it is that makes them Vietnamese. By coping with their physical displacement, the characters illustrate what exactly the Vietnamese culture values through their efforts to retain their cultural identity.

Even though Butler’s characters are fictional, Hantke writes, while discussing Vietnam Literature: “in the words of the Russian formalists, fiction bares its devices. The fantastic, in heightening the ontological self-awareness of both the text and its readers, drives this point home even more dramatically” (79). Hantke’s quote, which illustrates the value of fiction, describes how fiction can be a more important telling of a historical event than a historical account because fiction uses whatever means are dictated
by the event in order to bring emotional truth to it. Also, the quote illustrates the importance of a work of fiction in studying the treatment of the Other that Bhabha argues. Through studying Butler’s short story collection, a reader sees fictional tales that emphasize dramatically the physical displacement of the Vietnamese people; a reader can see the treatment of the Other by the United States through these fictional tales, and what is valued by the Vietnamese about their own culture.

If Hantke’s argument about the continued existence of the Vietnam War in America is true because of lack of closure, then the same basic argument can be applied to Vietnam: the Vietnam War has not ended because it has not brought about closure to the Vietnamese people. The war was fought to unite the divided family, a task that Ho Chi Minh attempted to achieve (but did not live to see accomplished). In the mid 1970’s, Vietnam became a united, communist country, but the family was not united; the Vietnam War caused many Vietnamese people to become physically displaced. Their physical displacement from their homeland prevents the Vietnam War to end because the family is still divided. Butler’s collection is also a reminder of the divided family members physically displaced from Vietnam, and how their unification will bring closure to the Vietnam War for the Vietnamese.

Finally, the examination of this short story collection offers very valuable insight for a reader. Said writes about World Literature that “it is only through the scrutiny of these works as literature, as style, as pleasure and illumination, that they can be brought in, so to speak, and kept in. Otherwise they will be regarded only as informative ethnographic specimens, suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists” (378). Said’s quote is important for Butler’s short story collection- although the
collection received critical acclaim and accolades, this does not guarantee that the collection will warrant continued examination. By focusing my thesis on the physical displacement of the characters throughout *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, I aim, as Said states, on bringing the collection “in” (378) with the hopes that it will be viewed as more than “informative ethnographic specimens” (378). My goal is that the book enters the continuing conversation about the Vietnam War that Hantke argues is still prevalent in America today.
End Notes

1. From his essay “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other.” In the essay, he defines what the Other is, as well as giving readers ways in which they can begin to relate to the Other through literature. The essay helps a reader understand the different ways the Other is or is not represented through different mediums.

2. From his essay “The Use of the Fantastic and the Deferment of Closure in American Literature on the Vietnam War.” Along with discussing A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, Hantke analyzes other Vietnam narratives like Larry Heinemann’s Paco’s Story.

3. The quote is taken from Janet Burroway’s “From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction.” Burroway was a student of Butler’s, and she recorded a series of lectures in order to illustrate his technique. Butler writes using the “dreamscape,” which he describes as writing that comes from his sub-conscious.

4. From his introduction to Re-writing America: Vietnam Authors in their Generations. The book focuses on several authors like Bobbie Ann Mason and Robert Olen Butler. Butler’s novels The Deuce and Countrymen of Bones, his first novel about Vietnam, are the main emphasis of Beidler’s analysis.

5. Beidler also wrote a previous book about Vietnam Literature called American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam. The book illustrates some of the conventions that authors to that point had established within the genre.

6. Robert Olen Butler is able to relate to the Other (mostly Vietnamese-Americans) because of his experience in Vietnam, where he served as a Vietnamese linguist for the American Army. Butler’s said experience in Vietnam helped him shape his work: “as a military intelligence agent, I had gone to an interrogation center run by the South Vietnamese- and there was a cell where they kept the Viet Cong prisoners while they tortured them- horribly, as the South Vietnamese often did” (Burroway, 34). While there, he noticed one of the prisoners wrote the phrase “Hygiene is healthful” in his cell, leading him to write Countrymen of Bones, his first novel about the Vietnam War.

7. From his essay “Border Lives: The Art of the Present.” Bhabha discusses what it is to be the Other in literature, presenting the term in a different way by describing it as being in the “beyond,” which he defines as “being in the ‘beyond,’ then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historical commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’, becomes a space of intervention in the here and now” (321).

8. Scott Spencer’s excerpt is from the essay “Times Square by Way of Saigon.” Scott Spencer is also a novelist.

9. From his essay “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis.” The essay discusses literature that represents the Vietnam War; Gray argues that the literature is a key tool to understand the Vietnam conflict more fully. While focusing on literature that illustrates the Vietnamese immigrants and their relationship with the American South, Gray uses A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain along with Boat People by Mary Gardner (1995), and Monkey Bridge by Lan Cao (1997), amongst others.

10. From his book Vietnam and the Southern Imagination. The book relates some of the Southern tropes featured in war literature like The Warrior South (the phenomenon that large portions of the military have Southern roots). He also focuses on several narratives like James Webb’s Fields of Fire.

11. The narrator is referring to the history of the African-American people. More specifically, he is referring to the days when they were used as slaves in Europe and North America.

12. Regarding the folk lore about the dragon, Asiarecipe.com writes: “in respect of animal-worshiping beliefs, unlike nomadic culture that worships fierce wild animals, Vietnamese tend to worship gentle species of animals like stag, deer, frog, especially those which are easy to come by in the riverside regions like water-birds, snakes, and crocodiles. The Vietnamese proclaimed themselves as belonging to the Hong
Bang family line and the Tien Rong breed (Hong Bang was the name of a huge species of water-bird, Tien, or Fairy, was deification of an egg-laying species of bird, Rong, or Dragon, was an abstract image of snake and crocodile). The ascending dragon that was born in the water is meaningful and special symbol of the Vietnamese nation.

This refers to the history of Vietnam. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica: “A distinct Vietnamese group began to emerge c. 200 be in the independent kingdom of Nam Viet, which was later annexed to China in the 1st century bc. The Vietnamese were under continuous Chinese control until the 10th century. The southern region was gradually overrun by Vietnamese from the north in the late 15th century. The area was divided into northern and southern dynasties in the early 17th century, and in 1802 these two parts were unified under a single dynasty.”


From his essay “The Politics of Knowledge.” In his essay, he discusses imperialism and the creation of the Other, noting the importance of viewing works written by the Other in an effort to gain a complete view of culture.

From her essay “American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers.” In the essay, she discusses the Gothic trope of ghostly figures and the uncanny as a means to move the plot forward (149). Later, she attributes this tradition to modern day African-American fiction (i.e. Toni Morrison’s Beloved).

Jean Lacouture writes in Encyclopaedia Britannica that Ho Chi Minh was “(born May 19, 1890, Hoang Tru, Vietnam, French Indochina-died Sept. 2, 1969, Hanoi, Vietnam) founder of the Indochina Communist Party (1930) and its successor, the Viet-Minh (1941), and president from 1945 to 1969 of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).” As the leader of the Vietnamese national movement for nearly three decades, Ho was one of the prime movers of the post-World War II anticolonial movement in Asia and one of the most influential communist leaders of the 20th century” (1).

Brogan writes about the Gothic trope: “A specific kind of ghost story- a story of what I would call cultural haunting- that, while it has nineteenth-century antecedents, has emerged in large numbers only in the last quarter of this century...These modern ghost stories recast supernaturalism as the hallucinatory projections of the self. In doing so, they show a family resemblance to Macbeth’s specters, but are marked by a Freudian-era understanding of psychology. The idea of the internally haunted self.” (151-152)

Lacouture writes “after living in London from 1915 to 1917, he moved to France, where he worked, in turn, as a gardener, sweeper, waiter, photo retoucher, and oven stoker. During the six years that he spent in France (1917-1923), he became an active socialist” (1).

Encyclopaedia Britannica states that he was a “French culinary artist known as ‘the king of chefs and the chef of kings,’ who earned a worldwide reputation as director of the kitchens at the Savoy Hotel (1890–99) and afterward at the Carlton Hotel, both in London.”

Lacouture writes “in July 1959, at a meeting of the central committee of Ho Chi Minh’s Lao Dong (Worker’s Part), it was decided that the establishment of socialism in the North was linked with the unification of the South” (4). Ho Chi Minh was an advocate of the unification of Vietnam, but he did not live to see it happen.

From her review of A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, which is titled “Suffering and Desire.” She discusses many of the implications of the book by focusing on how the reader can learn about the Vietnamese that were effected because of the Vietnam War.

His book is called Writers on Writing: the Art of the Short Story. Within the book, Wolfers examines the art of the short story collection, giving it legitimacy, whereas critics in the past would critique short story collections with a flippant sentence or two. He examines authors like Joseph Conrad, as well as discussing some of Butler’s other work besides A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.
Work Cited


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