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Carving Out a Vietnamese Identity in the New South

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For Asians in the South and everywhere, there is still narrative scarcity.

This is Finding Little Saigon (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://catapult.co/editorial/topics/finding-little-saigon/stories>), a column by Kim O'Connell on Vietnamese identity and culture in America.

On a sunny afternoon in August 2017, my husband, children, and I left our home in the Washington, DC, suburb of Arlington, Virginia, and headed south towards Tennessee, where we had rented a cabin near the Great Smoky Mountains and hoped to see the total solar eclipse. About two hours into our trip, the landscape opened up as we approached the Appalachians, looking far different from our urban neighborhood back home. Under a wide blue sky, the mountains stacked up ahead of us in successive waves, with barns dotting the rolling hillsides like peppercorns.

This was my Virginia, I thought, the Virginia I've grown to love.

We stopped at a rest area near Charlottesville for a bathroom break and some snacks. As we pulled into the crowded parking lot, I noticed an SUV with four men inside, eating some takeout. I didn't think much of them until I saw the trunk of their car—filled with robes, hoods, flags, and signs. Hateful signs. I knew instantly what I was seeing: members of the modern Ku Klux

Klan. We'd hoped to avoid the Unite the Right rally that happened earlier that day in Charlottesville, and instead we'd run right into it—or at least, part of the aftermath. Only later would we learn that the rally had resulted in the violent death of protester Heather Heyer.

I looked at my children in the backseat, oblivious to what we were seeing, and marveled at their innocence. I wondered about the inevitable moment when that would change for them—the thing that would draw back the curtain and reveal the world's ugliness and hate.

This, too, was my Virginia. This, too, was the South. The South with an often ugly history. The South that is evolving, but sometimes so slowly it feels like time is ticking backwards. The South that contains multitudes—that I, the daughter of an Asian immigrant, have struggled to understand.

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After my father graduated from law school at Cornell University in New York, he moved my mother and me, then a preschooler, to the Washington, DC, suburb of College Park, Maryland, so he could begin a long career with the federal government. My mother, a Vietnamese immigrant who'd met and married my soldier father during the Vietnam War, did her best to fit into our neighborhood of mostly white blue-collar families, where I never saw another multiracial family. She learned to make traditional American food, which she would share with neighbors and bring to parties. She spoke only English with us and with others.

One day when I was about five, a neighbor boy rode his dirt bike by my house as I sat in the yard, probably making a potpourri of dandelion, clovers, and grass, as I liked to do. My mother was just inside the house, keeping an eye on me through the window. His tires spun in the gravel of our poorly paved driveway. "Hey, VC!" he called out to me, laughing.

I didn't understand the term and asked my mother what he meant, and she told me it stood for Viet Cong. "He's an ignorant boy," my mother said. "Forget about him." But I couldn't. For a while, he called out "VC" every time he saw me, until my family's newness wore off and he no longer saw me at all. I thought about how casual it was, his racism, tossed at my mother and me like birdseed.

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In elementary school, I learned that because Maryland was tucked below the Mason-Dixon Line, we were supposedly in the South. It didn't feel much like the South to me, though, probably because everyone around me spoke with a mid-Atlantic accent that was far more clipped than the Southern twangs and drawls I'd heard on TV shows. The real South, I thought, lay across the Potomac River in Virginia and beyond—a place where, in my mind, the flowers were always blooming and life flowed slowly, like a lazy river.

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The real South, of course, was far more complex.

When I actually visited Virginia for the first time when I was around six or seven years old, to my surprise, I saw Vietnamese faces, like my mother's. This was the first time I'd seen so many Asians in one place. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States developed enclaves where they could meet other Vietnamese, eat traditional food, and speak their native language. One such community developed in downtown Arlington, with Vietnamese entrepreneurs opening restaurants and stores.

Hearing about it through friends, my mother and I regularly made the forty-five-minute drive to Virginia to shop in this “Little Saigon.” I sometimes would sit on an overturned crate in the corner of one of my mother’s favorite Asian grocers, working through a color-by-numbers book while she pored over ingredients, filled her basket, and made conversation with other shoppers. It was the first time I heard my mother’s language spoken at length. I knew they were sharing stories, and I fervently wished that I could understand.

“Just a little longer,” she’d say to me, when she’d occasionally remember that I was there. It was usually *a lot* longer, but I didn’t mind. For me, as a mixed-race child who resembled her white father, I loved being steeped in my mother’s culture, smelling the spices and sauces, and looking at the accented words on product labels, even though I didn’t understand them.

Being here with my mother made me feel like I truly belonged to her, that I was valued enough to be brought into her world.

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In 1996, I moved to Arlington at the age of twenty-six, attracted to the diverse community and the vibrant bar and restaurant scene, which still included a few Vietnamese establishments left over from the Little Saigon of my youth. By that time, most of Arlington’s Little Saigon establishments had moved a few miles west to the <https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://catapult.co/stories/finding-eden-and-myself-in-a-vietnamese-shopping-center-eden-center-identity-diaspora-virginia-kim-o-connell>) Eden Center <https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://catapult.co/stories/finding-eden-and-myself-in-a-vietnamese-shopping-center-eden-center-identity-diaspora-virginia-kim-o-connell>), a Vietnamese commercial center in nearby Falls Church. If this was Virginia, I thought, I was happy to become a Virginian.

Yet contemplating the loss of the original Little Saigon, I thought about how that place had held such importance for my mother. This made me want to write about it, as a way to capture both my memories and community memories, too.

The majority culture, according to Vietnamese author Viet Thanh Nguyen, enjoys “narrative plenitude”—meaning their stories are widespread and dominant. For Asians in the South and everywhere, there is still narrative scarcity. For the Vietnamese in particular, the stories told about them are so often about the war, a narrative of losing and loss. But there is so much more to say.

Ever since their arrival here after the war, Vietnamese people, along with other immigrant groups, have been transforming Virginia and the rest of this region into what is now commonly known as “the new South.” This is a region where traditional southern cuisine—itsself a conglomeration of African, European, and Native American foods—is now regularly infused with Asian and other cultural flavors at dining tables <https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.tastingtable.com/dine/national/South-by-Southeast-Asia-Hot-Joy-MoPho-Heirloom-Market-and-Kin-Comfort-Create-Southern-Asian-Fusion>) throughout the South <https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.tastingtable.com/dine/national/South-by-Southeast-Asia-Hot-Joy-MoPho-Heirloom-Market-and-Kin-Comfort-Create-Southern-Asian-Fusion>). You can now get a steaming bowl of pho, a North Vietnamese dish that migrated first to South Vietnam and then all over the world, in Durham, North Carolina; in Sumter, South Carolina; in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; and even in the mountain town of Galax, Virginia, population 6,400.

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Currently, according to the (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.socialexplorer.com/product-data>)Social Explorer (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.socialexplorer.com/product-data>) database, more than 545,000 Virginians are of Asian descent, representing over 6 percent of the state's population; of these, ten percent are Vietnamese. University of Virginia researchers have found that not only are Asians the wealthiest ethnicity in the United States, they are (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/http://statchatva.org/2018/10/24/virginia-the-state-for-crazy-rich-asians/>)the wealthiest in Virginia (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/http://statchatva.org/2018/10/24/virginia-the-state-for-crazy-rich-asians/>) as well (although Asians are the (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>)most economically divided (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>) group).

But without stories that reflect the complexity of Asian experiences, thinking of Asians only as wealth earners is reductive. Asians are still often marginalized and mythologized as “model minorities”—effectively erased. “Even in assertions of the ‘New South’ as a modern, industrial, and cosmopolitan space, there is little mention of Asian migration,” write editors Khyati Joshi and Jig Na Desai in their book *Asian Americans in Dixie* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20231001050231/https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/68cdr6dh9780252037832.html>).

The “New South” as a concept, if not a myth, is often simply aspirational. Traveling through the Virginia countryside, I often see Confederate flags. In every election, northern Virginia and other urban areas vote bright blue, while the state's vast rural areas vote red, areas that a John McCain advisor once called “the real Virginia.” Although some fraction of the Unite the Right rally-goers were certainly from out of state, Virginia is still a place where Klansmen felt they could stage a threatening and violent protest and feel they were among brothers. It's a legacy that I must cop to if I'm going to continue living here, a necessary first step towards a future that makes amends.

One way to do this is to understand and elevate people's lived experiences. I find myself seeking out stories, writing both for the Vietnamese community and as a member of this community. I do it because I think it's important to balance the narrative ledger in favor of immigrants whose lives have long been undervalued. Maybe it's a bit of atonement, too, for the bias and blind spots that come with my white skin. Back in Little Saigon, I didn't understand the language my mother and others were speaking. I still don't understand the language, but I am working harder to understand the stories.

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On a mild spring evening, I'm looking for a Thai restaurant in a suburban strip mall outside of Richmond, Virginia, and I'm running late. Although it's only 100 miles south of Washington, DC, Richmond has sometimes seemed, to me, like a whole other world. With its Confederate statues, its sweet tea and biscuits, and its slower pace, on the surface it seems like the South as I imagined it, years ago. Yet here, as elsewhere, Richmond has been transformed by its newcomers. I've come here specifically because, after I'd met one of the organizers, board members of the Asian American Society of Central Virginia have generously invited me to dinner.

Finally, I find the restaurant, and as I walk in, I am stunned to see more than twenty women sitting around a long table. They all turn their heads in my direction at once, and my contact, Zeistina Khan, jumps up to welcome me. I've barely put down my purse when Zeistina asks me to introduce myself and talk about my Asian heritage. There, before a table full of strangers, I tell them my story, which is not just my story but also my mother's.

I tell them about how my parents met during the war and how my mother emigrated from Vietnam to here. I tell them how lonely she often felt, how hard she tried to be both American and Vietnamese. I tell them about how many times I've tried to feel more connected to my mother's culture, and to feel more connected to her. I tell them all this until my voice catches, and I can't tell any more.

Then, for the next three hours, we go around the table as each woman, originally from Vietnam and China and Indonesia and Cambodia and Laos and Pakistan and many other places, tells their own stories of leaving their homelands and establishing new lives in Virginia. There, over plates of noodles and sweet Thai tea and bowls of sticky rice that remind me of home, I think, this is the traditional Southern dinner, redefined. And no one can tell us **that** we don't belong.



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Based in Arlington, Virginia, Kim O'Connell writes about history, nature, culture, design, and food, and especially enjoys when those things intersect. Bylines have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Huffington Post, Ladies Home Journal, Atlas Obscura, and other national and regional publications. www.kimaoconnell.com

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