In observing some of the developments in late twentieth- and early twenty-first century United States American fiction, the reader notes increased attention paid to certain twentieth-century conflicts that were a direct result of the Cold War (Gray 141). Any study of the history of the Cold War demonstrates that the political situation in Europe was contained by the strategies of the American and Soviet superpowers and so we have to look elsewhere for evidence of a military conflict as an extension of their policies. This can be found on the Asian battlefield of the Cold War starting with the Korean War and culminating in the even more infamous Vietnam War. This article will argue that it is thanks to the revisionary attitude that some Asian American authors have adopted in their writings as regards certain episodes of the historical position of the United States during the Cold War, and especially contemporary representations of the Korean War—which, as Daniel Kim argues, has “traditionally received short shrift in American literary and cultural studies” (550),—that parts of the United States Cold War involvement can be rewritten. I will be concentrating on two recent novels by Asian American authors: Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student (1998) and Chang-rae Lee’s The Surrendered (2010). Both authors, not surprisingly, are of Korean descent.

A perspective which emerges as part of what Jodi Kim (237) calls “an Asian American critique—itself an offshoot of a new Americanist theoretical agenda”—resolutely addresses one of the key issues in contemporary American
cultural studies; namely the imbalance between the presentation of historical events and the reality of those events as retained in the collective, cultural memory. This imbalance will be dealt with in the present paper by investigating contemporary Asian American literature especially in relation to its representations of Cold War conflicts and the Asian wars. An eye-opening study by Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire* (2010), provides a cultural history of the Cold War as it was played out on Asian battlefields. She traces the roots of United States of America engagement in Asia to as far back as the late nineteenth century when United States imperial designs expanded beyond American borders and reached all the way to the Philippines (1899-1902). In its ambition and scope it was an unprecedented United States expansionist enterprise which was to epitomize all subsequent United States Asian ventures.

Now let us move fast forward to another episode in the Asian wars which, according to Jodi Kim, are subsumed and consequently occluded by the Cold War paradigm—the Korean War being a case in point. Several facts will corroborate this contention. Given the fact that the Korean War, fought from 1950-53 but never officially terminated, unfortunately followed hard on the heels of the undisputed allied victory in the World War II while anticipating the subsequent stage of United States involvement in South East Asia, it has slipped into a historical recess, so to speak, from where it only occasionally re-emerges. As Kim notes, its standard presentation in United States historiography is one that is almost dismissive, being referred to as “the small-scale” conflict and “the forgotten war” (J. Kim 143; D. Kim 550); this appellation is unwarranted on many counts. In the first place, although the number of United States casualties, estimated at around 34,000, comes nowhere near the death toll in Vietnam, neither is it a number to be lightly dismissed; secondly, the number of Chinese casualties which was 147,000, is as nothing compared to the number of the Korean victims (estimated conservatively at 2.5 million [Robinson 114]). Additionally, in the assessment of the war’s impact we have to take into account the involvement of several major actors, the United States on the one hand, and the USSR and Red China, on the other. So it would seem that in this war the scene was all but set for the beginning of yet another global conflict. Nonetheless, until a fairly recent show of interest on the part of first- and second-generation Asian Americans—specifically Korean American authors, the war figured only sporadically in United States literary and cultural accounts (I concede that an exception could be made in the case of the hugely popular United States TV series *M*A*S*H* [1972-1983], based on the 1968 feature film *MASH*—based, in turn, on the eponymous novel by Richard Hooker which recounts in a lighthearted vein the work of American army surgeons in South Korea during the Korean War). I would argue, however, that the television series was, in fact, inspired by a reading of the Vietnam War, for which the Korean War is used as a backdrop.

With these broadly stated facts in mind, in the remainder of the paper I will focus on Choi’s and Lee’s significant and creatively ambitious attempts to re-
retrieve the significance of the Korean War for American mainstream literature and culture and to trans-nationalize it in the process by involving in the texts themselves and, more specifically, in the publication and circulation of the texts both United States American and “other” (Asian, Korean) subjects who rarely get a chance to tell their own story. The two Asian American writers featured in my analysis have both gained national stature notwithstanding their “ethnic” themes, as testified by their status and the critical acclaim which their novels have been accorded. Both Choi and Lee endeavor to insert the devastating war in Korea into the United States cultural and historical memory since by so doing, not only do they revive a national historical record but they also retrieve the role that the Asian scene, broadly speaking, had had to play in it (Nguyen 144).

The Korean Civil War: Containment of Communism and the Missionary Complex

As Jodi Kim provocatively claims, what generates the cultural production of Asian Americans during the Cold War is a process of triangulation, with the United States as the colonizer (imperialist), racially distinct minorities as “internal colonies” and (Asian) populations abroad as neo-colonies (16). Arguably, both Chang-rae Lee’s and Susan Choi’s novels wish to revive this triangulated scene as a condition of their emergence, since they dwell on segments of Asian history, consider the implications of the United States’ imperialistic involvement in it, and they do so by presenting for the most part Asian/Korean American characters. It is precisely such an orientation which ensures that their novels figure as another instance of United States multicultural, ethnic fiction while opening up a transnational, triangulated perspective (D. Kim 551). Since both Lee’s Surrendered and Choi’s The Foreign Student dramatize the conditions of emergence for Koreans in America, we must concur with Jodi Kim’s observation that the Asian American subject or modality doesn’t arise solely from national conditions but is “an imperialist transnational project” (16). For both Choi and Lee, the task is to outline the implications entailed in such a project spawned by the Korean War and its aftermath.

One aspect of the transnational aspect is the temporal duality that pervades Choi’s novel, as well as her characters, insofar as the plot is divided spatially between the past represented by the war in Korea and the present in the United States, where the protagonist (Chang Ahn/Chuck) is safely ensconced as a student on a college campus in the Southern states. On the temporal plane, there is not just the already mentioned duality between the war in the past which persists in the protagonist’s traumatic present and the current narrative,—but there is also a constant blurring of temporal boundaries due to the exigencies of trauma that disrupt the neat time lines. The Korean War is not just summed up in narrative form in the large sections of the novel that relate Chang Ahn’s experiences of war and war-related suffering, but it continues to pervade the sections
that relate to his American existence. The strategy of doubling is not confined to matters of time but is also reflected in the way Chang experiences the Tennessee landscape, which resembles that of Korea (Choi 53).

In this brief examination of the novel, I would like to point to another feature that goes some way toward explaining the somewhat enigmatic attitude to the war in the United States cultural imagination. American military engagement in Korea is, at first, not seen as a war, nor is it understood in all its complexity, least of all by Americans: this is evident from the erratic American military tactics (Choi 63-65). Their initially superficial, but subsequently fatal misreading of the situation on the ground only stokes the fires of the civil war that was tearing the country apart and that was not confined only to the fateful thirty-eighth parallel, the provisional line of demarcation between North and South Korea. This misreading continues on a slightly different level in the reception that the Korean scholarship student Chang, now renamed Chuck, receives as he tours United States Southern Episcopal churches and recounts the story that the congregation expects from him. His country, Korea, seems “dim, impoverished, and unredeemable” (Choi 39) to these concerned United States citizens, whose peacetime interests and politics would, in the wake of the war, subject the south of the divided country and its people to a massive missionary, educational and rebuilding program. For Crystal Parikh, there are clear parallels to be inferred between the domestic (United States) South and its international counterpart in the south of Korea after the civil war (53).

Susan Choi’s take on the war, before Chang is finally able to leave Korea, is unusual in the face of Chang’s morally problematic stance—that of the American side-kick and collaborator who refuses to take sides even when his ambivalence is ultimately punished when he nearly succumbs to brutal treatment in one of the southern, anti-communist detention camps. This is ironic in view of Chang’s strategic deployment of his cultural and linguistic credentials in the service of the American military administration imposed on Southern Korea. It is part of Susan Choi’s narrative strategy to complicate the historical account of the war as part of the containment plot professed by Truman’s administration (Truman), by casting it in a more tortuous shape. The war that we see emerging in Chuck’s disturbing flashbacks is a civil war obliterating strictly military and geographic boundaries, rendering ideological goals suspect and ordinary rules of engagement obsolete (D. Kim 551). Within this context, Choi clearly refuses to demonize only the communist side.

Once in the States on a student visa, Chang/Chuck is arguably disingenuous in his decision to exploit the so-called “missionary stance” toward Korea by, firstly, securing the scholarship that will get him out of the country and secondly, by playing up to his audiences’ expectations of his own and his country’s “orientalism” (Choi 41, 44). It is interesting that such a remodeling happens against the backdrop of the American South (specifically Tennessee, the main setting of the American section of the action) doubling for Korea but being used by Chuck, as
suggested by Daniel Kim (551, 552), in a process of translation that is simultaneously an exercise in a decolonizing project. According to Crystal Parikh (53) in her subtle analysis, it is precisely the pre-Civil Rights American South that provides such an opportunity to the psychologically-overtaxed protagonist by placing his new identity image between the two racial positions present in the South at the time, white and black. His progressive, if subtle, racial assimilation develops against the backdrop of the white, upper-class, all-male student body on the one hand and a group of African American menials on the other. Choi first places Chang on the axis of the black/white model, but is obliged later on in the story to add an Asian American, pan-ethnic modality, as we follow Chang traveling north to Chicago and finding temporary refuge in the city’s Little Tokyo. This, however, proves to be a short lived and tenuous form of identification since he soon finds himself back in the South, where he undergoes another powerful lesson taught by American national pedagogy, that of the successful closure of the interracial romance that flowers between Chang and Katherine (D. Kim 562; Parikh 48). The two make an interesting couple in the sense that they are atypical—he as a traumatized outsider, an unwilling hero, a halting speaker of English, an Asian (once almost fatally mistaken for a Chinese, hence communist spy [Choi 278]) in a South that recognizes only black and white; she—a wayward Southern belle who, nevertheless, continues to be a member of the Southern upper class. Only as an individual, and moreover, only by internalizing the ideas of emotional transcendence received from an American woman, albeit a socially rebellious one, is Chang able, as a foreign student, to escape the ravages of the conflict and to subvert the workings of American orientalism. It is interesting that while early on in the story the narrative was invested with the task of presenting the major historical, social and political perspectives of the conflict, it progressively veers toward a more personalized take on the Korean War, as Chang’s actual present in the States is repeatedly fractured by intrusive memories of the past.

Korea, Origins of the Global Conflict, and the Specter of Hiroshima

If we recall Jodi Kim’s pertinent sketch of the way the United States Cold War neo-imperialist designs generated the Asian American diaspora, then we could argue that Asia, from America’s perspective, and acted upon by America in a series of military interventions on a larger or smaller scale, becomes a stage where the forgotten, even repressed origin of at least one global conflict (that of World War II) has occurred. This brings into existence an entirely new post-war dispensation which we can see at work in Chang-rae Lee’s *The Surrendered*. Lee’s novel is, on one level at least, a story of the devastating impact of World War II, where he subtly brings together the pre-history of that war—which he unequivocally places as having its origins in Asia (specifically by way of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria)—and its progress toward the ensuing Korean War in a single
The metaphor of concatenation might best approximate what went on in Asia during the era of the Cold War, ushered in by President Truman’s National Security Act of 1947 (J. Kim 17), and, more significantly, if somewhat earlier, by the catastrophic outcome of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan. In short, while in Europe the Cold War was waged mostly by way of deterrence—occasionally interrupted by short-lived revolutions in Eastern Europe (most notably the uprising in East Berlin in 1953, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and of Poland in 1981), —in Asia this global conflict has from its bloody start in the Korean War taken on a much more sinister aspect. It is entirely justified, in line with this “buried” history of twentieth-century conflicts in Asia, that Lee’s novel features China in the thirties as one of the breeding grounds for the imminent World War II, the Korean War in the fifties as its continuation, and the violent civil unrest in the United States and terrorist activity in Europe (more specifically Italy) in the seventies as their traumatic reflections.

Going through the reviews of Lee’s novel, one is struck by the almost total disregard on the part of both American and British critics in the mainstream press and literary magazines (Churchwell; Rafferty; Wood) of the background provided by the two world wars in the novel. The critics’ insistence—in my view misguided—on the narrative’s finer points which might be welcome in another context, reflects a general obliviousness to the causes and the course of the Korean War, a war that took both Soviets and Americans almost by surprise while allowing China to assert its newly gained leverage. I would also argue that Lee himself was—intentionally or not—somewhat ambivalent when, while discussing in an interview the main interests of his novel, he failed to highlight the unresolved traumatic kernel of his narrative; in other words the Korean War both as the conclusion of the previous global reshuffling and the starting point of a new, post-World War II layout (Chacón). Even if he refrained from writing a thesis novel, one could argue that the thesis that seems to be proposed by the novel, the re-inscription of the Korean War as a template for the United States global interventionism during the Cold War, was well worth the risk.

Still, something of a similar nature was obviously on Lee’s mind since he shows how episodes from the World War II in Asia overlap with those from the Cold War creating a continuum. (Thus it is clear that for Lee the complications
in Korea were just an extension of a great upheaval that it is impossible to break
down into single, compact units: everything is linked to everything else.) This
connectivity is appropriately reflected in the novel’s palimpsest structure, which
takes us from Manchuria in the thirties when it fell under Japanese military rule,
to the post-war United States, Korea in the war years, (including a typical Korean
orphanage after the war), then to the States in the eighties, and finally to the char-
acters’ final destination of modern day Solferino, Italy. These war-scarred places
relate principally to the three main characters: the Korean American June Singer,
who was adopted into an American family as a war orphan; Hector Brennan, an
erstwhile American GI in Korea, and Sylvie Tanner, a missionary’s wife in war-
wrecked Korea, who worked in the very orphanage that June is placed in while
awaiting adoption. The novel effectively traces the entanglements of their life
stories as they were dictated by the inexorability of the Korean War, but it also
highlights how they are unwittingly embroiled in issues that go far beyond Ko-
rea. Hiroshima and Solferino play an important, if subordinate, part in decipher-
ning certain historical tendencies that are dealt with after a considerable lapse
of time, as is demonstrated in Kim’s study, which takes a clear-sighted view of
the human, economic, political, and social toll exacted by of the containment of
Communism in Asia as practiced by a series of American administrations in the
twentieth century. Let me briefly expatiate on my main contentions. As far as the
characters in the novel go, one of Hector’s principal motivations for joining the
army was the atomic destruction wrought on Hiroshima (and later Nagasaki.)
To this extent Hector’s role in the narrative is almost predetermined by that his-
torical tragedy. For another of the novel’s protagonists, Sylvie Tanner, Solferino
is a traumatic knot that ties her tragic and blighted life to the gruesome end her
parents had met with in Manchuria at the hands of the Japanese. She thus feels
the urge, transposed onto the other two protagonists, June and Hector, to under-
stand the meaning of Solferino, that in the novel stands for the carnage of war
and so prefigures every other incident of a similar nature. Following the novel’s
logic, Solferino is not only a place of historical singularity but also a horrible tem-
plate to be repeated, unfortunately and with astonishing frequency world wide
ever since. As if requiring a ritual (or, rather, traumatic) re-enactment, it was Solf-
erino and what it stood for that impelled Sylvie’s parents to come to China where
they are ultimately destroyed and their daughter ravaged and scarred for life. The
only other event that exceeds the historical and traumatic enormity of the Battle
of Solferino in the novel is, as I have already mentioned, Hiroshima. But then,
for anything else to match, let alone exceed Hiroshima, that would indeed be the
end of everything. In the meantime, Lee’s novel reminds us of what the char-
acters’ are forced to recall during their final visit to Solferino’s chapel of skulls.
The realization of the unusual doubling of Solferino and Korea, is unequivocal in
Sylvie’s words: “...I forget what’s happened all around us here. The enormity of it.
The cause of all this” (Lee 143). She makes it clear that in order to understand the
present, we have to remember the past. The same screening strategy, the similar
process of occlusion is at work with the specter of Hiroshima, as we have seen. Lee’s novel is a very singular contribution to recent Asian American literary production and reminds its American and global readers of the things and causes we should be remembering for the sake of our future.

The emergence of Asian American authors—whose family immigration trajectory bare traces of Cold War exigencies and demonstrate how the Asian diaspora to the States is a direct result of United States Cold War pressures—means that a new rewriting of United States Cold War history in Asia has become possible. Writers like Choi and Lee recuperate for their United States and global audiences scenes and episodes from “forgotten wars,” engaging, in the process, in the production of a trans-nationalized text (D. Kim 551), creating palimpsest structures, and prompting a serious reconsideration of United States Cold War history.
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