

## **Bridging the gaps: inescapable history in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*;**

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Renny Christopher identifies the "bicultural" stance of Vietnamese American writing as its most unique and universal characteristic. Christopher observes that "Vietnamese exile authors, while becoming 'American' insist on remaining Vietnamese at the same time.... The struggle to remain bicultural ... is a theme that runs through most Vietnamese literature" (30). While the theme of cultural adaptation may be a pervasive one, it is nevertheless difficult to negotiate because "bicultural identity and cultural fusion are not easily or painlessly achieved" (30). The Vietnamese refugees in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* are forced to endure a series of divisions--from their homeland, their families, and their own pasts--which becomes problematic in a country where the refugees act as "reminders of America's most troubled war" (154).

*Monkey Bridge* conveys the complexity of the Vietnamese refugee experience through the narrative of a mother and daughter attempting to create a new life in the United States. The novel tells the story of Mai, a teenage Vietnamese immigrant, who fled Vietnam a few months before the end of the war. Mai's escape from Vietnam was initially made possible by her father's friendship with an American colonel, Michael McMahon, with whom Mai subsequently lives in the U.S. Eventually, Mai's mother, Thanh, manages to join her, and the majority of the novel focuses on the cultural negotiations Mai and Thanh must undertake in order to make a future in America. One consequence of the move to America is that Thanh attempts a containment of the Vietnamese past, denying Mai access to her family history. While Thanh's secrecy might be understood as an attempt to make her daughter's transition easier, her silence is motivated by the shameful circumstances of her own illegitimate birth. Unable to maintain his rental payments, Baba Quan, the man Thanh believed to be her father, prostituted his wife to his landlord, an act that secured his land and resulted in Thanh's conception. Baba Quan ultimately exacts revenge on the landlord by murdering him, an act that is obscured by Baba Quan's communist sympathies. Once the war begins, Baba Quan becomes a member of the Viet Cong; as a consequence, his village is declared a free-fire zone, and his family is moved away from their ancestral land to a nearby strategic hamlet. However, when Thanh's mother dies, her body must be returned to her home in accordance with Vietnamese ritual, and so Thanh returns to the village, where she is the victim of a napalm attack. In the confusion, Thanh is severely injured and left with permanent scars; more importantly, she loses her mother's body, and her failure to perform the proper burial rites prevents her from mourning her mother's death. The complexity of Thanh's problematic family history and the unresolved nature of her past have a significant

impact on her move to the United States and clearly affects her relationship with her daughter. Unable to envision a more promising future for herself and in an effort to distance her child from the disturbing Vietnamese past, Thanh ultimately commits suicide.

Through the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of *Monkey Bridge*, Cao also examines the implications of the divisive nature of war on the Vietnamese family. The central tension clearly arises from the conflict between Mai, who wishes to gain access to her own Vietnamese past, and Thanh, whose aim is to protect her daughter from her family's shameful history. Cao establishes a particularly intricate web of associations between the loss of ancestral land, the maternal body, and memory in order to illustrate the difficulty of reconciling the Vietnamese past and culture with life as a refugee in America. Cao utilizes specific Vietnamese myths and beliefs in order to explore Mai's familial and cultural heritage, demonstrating how myth is used to obscure historical realities. However, to the extent that Thanh is unable to escape her shameful past, history, is expressed through trauma, and despite Thanh's efforts to mythologize Baba Quan, Mai's troubling family history returns through her mother's symptoms and silences.

There exists a clear imperative to alter past facts in order to adapt to a new country and culture, yet attempts to erase history are never wholly successful or without complication. In *Monkey Bridge*, relocation to the U.S. gives the refugees the opportunity to reinvent themselves in the present, but it also allows them to rewrite history. Mrs. Bay, a prominent member of the refugee community, encourages the inhabitants of Little Saigon to alter the facts of their pasts in order to give themselves every advantage in the future. For example, she suggests that one refugee "tell [the American authorities] your son was in the eighth grade, even if he was really in the tenth. That way, when he surpasses his eighth-grade classmates with his tenth-grade skills, they will think he is especially gifted" (41). In a further rewriting of personal histories, shameful pasts are replaced with narratives of conservative lives that conform more closely to traditional Vietnamese values, so that "a bar girl who once worked at Saigon's Queen Bee ... acquired a past as a virtuous Confucian teacher from a small village" (40). Within the refugee community, secrecy and lies are thus characterized as survival tactics that create more palatable histories. However, despite such attempts to rewrite history, the erasure is not wholly successful. While the ultimate aim of amendment is to obscure the past, the explicit discussion and promotion of the practice among the Vietnamese refugees actually serve to partially expose the fabrications. Mai's explanations suggest the histories that the refugees attempt to sever from their lives in America, and she concedes that "even without papers and identifications, all of us in Little Saigon had left too long a trail of history to erase" (42). Yet, while the refugees can alter certain details in their official documentation, some remnants of their "inescapable history" remain (42).

While history might indeed be inescapable, the Vietnamese refugees demonstrate that the past may be delivered in a variety of ways. Legend provides one way of making history more palatable, and myth is employed by several of Cao's characters in order to negotiate the troubling reality of Thanh's family history. In an effort to find acceptable ways to present troubling pasts

and disturbing histories, the refugees resort to fabrication, evasion, and mythologization. In a country where the Vietnamese immigrants necessarily recall America's embarrassing military defeat, the inhabitants of Little Saigon must find ways of reconciling a disturbing history with a new life in the United States.

Mai's position as an "outsider with inside information" (212) affords her some critical distance from both American representations of the Vietnamese and the traditions and habits of Little Saigon. Generational division and cultural distance offer Thanh some comfort that her family karma may finally be escaped, but despite her mother's protective silence, Mai acts as a repository for traumatic memories. Her position in the Saigon hospital as the transcriber of "battlefield memories and dying declarations" prefigures her translation of the family's history from Thanh's journal (12). The translation from Vietnamese into English is a central theme in the novel, as Thanh envisions an American future for her daughter that is free of the burdens of the Vietnamese past. Language is also important because it is the vehicle of introjection--the means by which the void is filled and the loss made communal. However, Thanh reminds Mai that "the verbs in our language are not conjugated, because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible and knows no end" (252). Vietnamese thus functions as a linguistic form of karma that offers no potential for real closure since loss cannot be consigned to the past.

There is, then, a clear imperative to abandon Vietnamese in favor of English, in which a shameful history perhaps might be contained in the past tense. Mai senses the potential of language to liberate her from her family history as she realizes that English allows her access to "an inheritance my parents never gave me" (36). No longer limited to her family's version of the past, Mai finds an opportunity to reinvent herself at a distance from her family and mother. According to Esther Rashkin, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's emphasis on dual unity as the founding principle of identity formation means that they "conceive of the individual as an 'individual,' as an un-divided entity gradually defined by a constant process of differentiation or 'division' from a more primary union: the mother. The crucial moment in this process is the child's discovery of the word" (Rashkin 34). Mai's differentiating discovery comes in her mastery of the English language, through which she begins the process of separating from her mother. Her command of English inverts her relationship with her mother, shifting the burden of responsibility and protection from mother to daughter. Reveling in her new linguistic power, Mai assumes a position of "unadulterated authority" (37) within the Vietnamese community, which allows her to rename the world both for herself and her mother.

Her swift adoption of the English language and American culture should make Mai an ideal translator, but "the ease with which [she] could fabricate wholly new plot lines from T.V. made the temptation to invent especially difficult to resist" (38). Her reluctance to simply translate may be based partly on the assumption that the translation is, by its very nature, derivative and secondary. In *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi explain that "students of translation almost all start out with the assumption that

something will be lost in translation, that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior" (4). Mai invests her translations with new meaning and relevance, so when Thanh demands a translation of an episode of *The Bionic Woman*, Mai retells the story, introducing elements of a plot that never existed in the original. The new story is, as Michele Janette points out, more relevant to Mai's life in America. The translation of the T.V. show mirrors the trajectory of the novel and incorporates Mai's desire for unconditional maternal support. Janette explains that Mai's "revision endorses a strong, independently acting and heroic young woman being praised for these very traits by an older woman--a plot that can be read as offering her mother a parable for their relationship" (71). Mai's creative impulse ultimately makes her a bad translator.

More than simply suggesting that Thanh ought to recognize and endorse her daughter's struggle for independence, the story demonstrates Mai's impatience with prewritten narratives that bear little relevance to her own experience or situation. Consequently, Mai does not lose anything in translation; rather, her desire to make the narratives relate to her relationship with her mother adds a personalized and recognizable moral.

Mai's translations testify to her expertise in negotiating the culture gap in a way that her mother refuses even to attempt. When she is instructed to translate her mother's demands to an American apartment complex manager, Thanh reassures Mai that the man will know that she is "just translating" (21). However, Mai realizes the need to cross cultural as well as linguistic boundaries and consequently transforms her mother's ancestral curse into an appeal to the manager's vanity, telling him "she's sure you can help us, because you're the manager" (23). Just as Thanh is able to "look at a monkey bridge and see an uncomplicated surface" (179), Mai is able to use her knowledge of American culture to effortlessly bridge the distance between Thanh and the manager without alerting either of them to her manipulations.

For Mai, translating becomes her own version of the monkey bridge as she recognizes that "translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (Bassnett and Trivedi 2). Thanh assumes that Mai will remain faithful to the original, that the translation will attempt to render, as closely as possible, her exact meaning. However, Mai apparently subscribes to more recent theories of translating that recognize the difficulty in surmounting cultural as well as linguistic disparities. Andre Lefevere explains that "the rules to be observed during the process of decoding and reformulation depend on the actual situation, on the function of the translation, and on who wants it made and for whom" (75). Mai's more pragmatic approach to translating ensures her success because she demonstrates an awareness that "problems in translating are caused at least as much by discrepancies in conceptual and textual grids as by discrepancies in languages" (Lefevere 76).

Cultural inconsistencies in understanding account for Mai's radical alteration of her mother's warning to the manager. Thanh's words undergo both a linguistic and conceptual change until

they can easily be assimilated into the manager's frame of reference. However, the disparity among certain conceptual frameworks may not simply be a result of cultural differences. According to Lefevere, "Western cultures 'translated' (and 'translate') non-Western cultures into Western categories to be able to come to an understanding of them, and therefore, to come to terms with them" (77).

However, Mai observes that it is not just the residents of Little Saigon who are viewed as dangerous and unpredictable outsiders. Bill, the G.I. who shops at the Mekong Grocery, successfully plays the stereotypical traumatized Vietnam veteran in order to intimidate a motorist who tries to cut in front of him at the gas station. Mai comments that "the American public indeed seemed quite willing to believe that men who returned from the original sin and primordial evil of Vietnam had a natural predisposition toward madness" (209). Bill is effectively aligned with Mai in that they both translate in order to conform to Western categories, both play their parts self-consciously, and both are nevertheless rewarded with the success of their schemes. It seems, then, that while cultural differences offer significant obstacles to effective translation, there is something inherently problematic about Mai's "own untranslatable world" (98). She and Bill both recognize the potential for careful and deliberate misrepresentation in order to gain significant advantages.

However, as Mai's explanations of the histories reveal, certain inescapable aspects of the past can never be entirely effaced, and it is, ironically, through silence and secrecy that Mai ultimately gains some limited access to the family history that Thanh attempts to conceal. Aware of her existence in a "vehemently anti-Vietcong refugee community," Thanh understandably keeps Baba Quan's political affiliation secret, even from her daughter (40). However, even when she does finally reveal her complex and traumatic family history to Mai, Thanh communicates a mythic narrative that places Baba Quan in a long tradition of devout Vietnamese patriots. Although Thanh admits that "Baba Quan, the man I call father, is a Vietcong from whom I am still trying to escape" (227), she continues to attempt some limited vindication of his actions. Like the bar-girl whose past is rewritten as conservative and pious, Baba Quan is recast as a "traditional man" (5). He is the prototypical Confucian peasant farmer who, through his recognition of the importance of the land, is virtually an extension of the soil itself. Mai also senses in Baba Quan an almost mystical connection with the land, which allows her to experience the ancestral soil she has never visited: "he brought the fertile blackness of the earth with him. When I looked at his face I could almost see the rice fields I had never seen" (6). Mai's idealization, which transforms her grandfather into a pastoral figure, thus reinforces Thanh's conception of him as a symbol of traditional Vietnam, erasing both the political significance and historical specificity inherent in his defending his land. (4)

Baba Quan himself explains the Vietnamese connection to the land through the betel-nut legend, a story that also serves to explain and justify his own decision to exchange his wife's body for his land. His fierce protection of his land is understood as both a personal and patriotic gesture that

reinforces the importance of the soil to both a familial and national sense of identity. According to the betel-nut legend, the loss of the land has grave consequences:

The betel-nut story begins with two men in love with the same woman. When the woman marries the older brother, younger brother is heartbroken. He leaves home, unaware that his spirit, which has to watch over his ancestors' graves and can only live in the village land, cannot make the trip with him. (84)

The betel-nut legend therefore works to provide some limited vindication for Baba Quan's actions since the loss of the land prompts a loss of the soul and must therefore be resisted at all costs. However, the myth also potentially obscures a more cynical underlying economic agenda since it is presumably an effective way to control the population and is designed to encourage the cohesion of families and limit migration. In a peasant culture where subsistence farming is prevalent, there would be an obvious advantage in convincing offspring to remain in close vicinity of the family land to provide free labor. The legend therefore warns of the consequences of migration, but it also narrates the trauma of being evicted from the ancestral land, land which plays a vital role in providing for and uniting the family through the generations. The betel-nut legend is thus grounded in the economic realities of the rural Vietnamese existence, and yet the continuation of that traditional way of life is secured through a more palatable, mythologized connection to the land.

Just as subsistence farming is perpetuated through the legend, Baba Quan is mythologized through his connection to the land, which assumes central importance in a Confucian peasant-farming society. In *Mythologies* (1993) Roland Barthes suggests that myth "transforms history into nature" (129), which in effect is what Thanh aims to do by locating Baba Quan in a conventional "Vietnamese" role (Barthes 129). Her version of the story suggests that the war merely provided him with a larger political framework within which to carry out the murder of his landlord and Thanh's real father, Uncle Khan. Thanh depoliticizes Baba Quan's actions, and suggests that his political affiliations are a natural consequence of his traditional religious beliefs, rather than grounded in any real belief in communism itself. As the murder of Thanh's biological father, Khan, takes place, Baba Quan's accomplice exclaims, "Land to the Landless" (249), obscuring the individual act of revenge with communist ideology. However, the ultimately personal nature of Baba Quan's war was what allowed him, according to Thanh, "to risk his own life to save Michael from the riddles of a minefield he himself had designed" (251). Thanh uses Baba Quan's potentially suicidal protection of the American soldier as final proof that he was not fundamentally a Vietcong soldier but acted in accordance with greater and older values.

While Baba Quan uses the myth to justify his single-minded determination to protect his land, he actually overlooks the true meaning of the betel-nut legend, which insists that families remain intact. Baba Quan interprets the moral of the tale to mean that "there is no death.... There's your father, right here among us" (85), emphasizing the "luminous motion" between the living and the

dead through the land. However, the legend also suggests, in the relationship between the limestone, the areca tree, and the betel vine, that family survival and longevity depend on maintaining the integrity of family connections. The younger brother, devoid of his soul and without love for a wife, "becomes cold, and ... turns into dry limestone" (84). In contrast, the older brother's "heart is filled with love for his wife," which turns him into a "roof-rimming areca tree that bears thick clusters of green betel nuts" (84). When the loving brother and wife are reunited at the water's edge they create a resilient symbiosis, able to survive "prolonged periods of infertility and drought" (84).

Baba Quan's inability to read beyond the surface of the myth means that his efforts to save his family and land fail dramatically. The parallel between the legend and Baba Quan's choices is clear. Once he decides to trade his wife for his land, he is, like the younger brother, robbed of his soul. Without love for his wife he becomes cold, taking refuge from his guilt and anger in alcohol. Unlike the devoted husband and wife in the legend, Baba Quan's fractured family is unable to survive the loss of fertility in their village soil. While he recognizes the danger of crossing literal boundaries as a result of eviction and forced migration, Baba Quan transgresses social, religious, and moral limits through his complicity in prostitution and murder. His disregard for the strictly enforced difference between distinct categories is at odds with Vietnam's "history of defending, not crossing boundaries" (29) and results in the violation of wife and family.

#### SECRECY AND TRAUMA: TRANSMISSION OF "INESCAPABLE" HISTORY

The prostitution of wife in exchange for land allows for a displacement of anxieties about transgression onto the female body, and the concern with metaphorical as well as literal transgressing of boundaries is manifested in the wedding-night ritual described by Thanh. The ritual is designed to publicly display the bride's virginity in order to reassure onlookers of the continued adherence to a strict moral code. The female body thus provides comfort and reasserts the maintenance of barriers and cleanliness. However, the illegitimacy of Thanh's birth designates her mother as a site of defilement despite the proof of purity provided on her wedding night. Thanh's explanation of the wedding-night ritual exposes the anxieties surrounding defilement of the female body and, more specifically, the maternal body. Fortunately, Thanh's mother is able to produce the "red wedding-night stains [that] had declared triumphantly the modest fact of her purity" (51), but her later sexual encounter with Khan negates her original cleanliness, triggering the familial trauma that threatens to affect all subsequent generations. The purity of the female body is essential because it is designated as the site for the transference of what Thanh conceptualizes as "karma."

Thanh's apparently psychologically prompted miscarriages testify to her belief that her maternal body holds the potential to transmit "a fate that would surely be [the embryos'] if they' were to

become my children" (237). The body of the mother is thus the inevitable location for the settlement and transfer of ancestral trauma and shame.

Contamination has clear consequences for fertility, both for the land and for the women. Thanh believes that she caused her body to reject her children for fear that they would inevitably inherit her tainted family history. Similarly, the American soldiers poison the land that Baba Quan aimed to protect. Thanh explains that once the village was identified as a Vietcong stronghold, "the elephants rolled out drum after drum painted with orange stripes and sprayed our crops overnight with a special kind of poison" (244). The ancestral land, so essential to the maintenance and continuity of the family, is transformed by Agent Orange into "a suppurated mass of poison that was beyond resuscitation" (245). The dual poisoning that Baba Quan's actions effect negates the traditional function of the ancestral soil of encouraging continuity through the generations. Unable to farm the land, the villagers are forced into a strategic hamlet, and Thanh's miscarriages threaten to end the family line.

Anxieties surrounding defilement and the land converge in the key section where Thanh witnesses the murder of her biological father by the man who raised her. Thanh describes the killing as "the act that continue[s] to haunt me to this day" (249), yet it is not this one act per se but the multitude of poisonings and contaminations that the murder recalls that makes it such a powerful event. Khan is simultaneously punished for his tyrannical eviction of his tenants and for his complicity in the defilement of Thanh's mother, Tuyet. The battle between Baba Quan and Khan thus recalls not only the shameful illegitimacy of Thanh's birth but also the loss of the land for which she was payment. Baba Quan's actions ensured that the village and the family history were contaminated beyond salvation, and it is this potential to pollute that Thanh desperately attempts to contain through secrecy and myth.

Cao expresses the potential for anxieties surrounding the ancestral land to be encoded on the female body through the physical symptoms of Thanh's traumatization. Thanh's "S-shaped spine twisted like a crooked coastline" (205), testifying to the link between herself and the land. The "sea-horse curve" (161) of both Thanh's body and the Vietnamese peninsula recalls the fact that she was conceived as payment for the farm, and the land thus becomes an integral part of Thanh's identity and a central symptom of the shame of her birth. Similarly, Thanh's scars and other physical symptoms are symbolic of further traumas associated with the loss of her ancestral home. In light of the series of transgressions and desecrations that proliferate through Thanh's history, her multiple divisions seem to be an almost hysterical reassertion of boundaries. She divides herself to contain her mother's death, the shame of her illegitimacy, Baba Quan's Vietcong sympathies, and the murder of her landlord father. Thanh is also firmly convinced of her ability to contaminate her daughter's future with her own shameful history, and she both draws attention to the inherited nature of family fate and attempts to interrupt the karmic process by containing her family history within the limits of her own body. Thanh's exceptionally long ears are the original physical sign of her power to halt the effects of karma: she is designated as a

redemptive figure whose remarkable ears "compensate for the stumps of pig ears that had been inflicted generationally on the girls of our village" (52), a physical feature used to publicly declare that a new bride was not able to provide evidence of premarital virginity. Thanh thus has "the power ... to repair generation after generation of past wrongs by healing the faces of karma itself" (52), impeding the transmission of the effects of past female impurity.

Her long ears signify Thanh's capacity and responsibility to defeat karma, and she subsequently takes other physical signs as proof of her power to contain ancestral trauma within the boundaries of her own body. Thanh has an investment in resisting all attempts to heal, as healing would remove the markers from her body and undermine her capability to radically sever the past from the future. Mai is disturbed by her mother's refusal of the creams she prepares to soothe the facial scar; Thanh simply ignores them until "they soured and thickened and had to be discarded" (3). The existence of the scar not only acts as a physical reminder of the shame and failure Thanh feels at having lost her mother's body, it also provides comforting reassurance of Thanh's continued ability to physically block the transmission of her family's negative karma. The apparent manifestations of trauma Thanh displays are thus complicated by her sense that her suffering denotes containment and hinders the transference of a shameful past to her daughter.

Although it is revealed that Baba Quan is not Thanh's real father, she nevertheless inherits his belief in the value of the familial soil and is willing to transgress boundaries in order to adhere to legend. Thanh's dedication to the traditional myths espoused by Baba Quan prompts her return to the village land of her ancestors in order to return her mother's body to its rightful burial place in "the sacred land where my mother's placenta and umbilical cord had been buried and where her body would have to be buried as well" (248). However, since the discovery of Vietcong activity, the village has been declared a free-fire zone and, when her movements are detected, the funeral is interrupted by a napalm strike that prevents completion of the burial rites. Thanh's failure to perform the relevant funeral rites inhibits her ability to mourn her mother's loss, and she consequently demonstrates symptoms of what Abraham and Torok term "incorporation." In *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), Abraham and Torok explain the importance of appropriate funeral rites to healthy mourning, which demands the "introjection" of loss. Nicholas Rand defines "introjection" in his introduction to Abraham and Torok's work as "the basic principle of mental organization" (7) through which loss is experienced, processed, and assimilated into the continued psychological development of the individual. Abraham and Torok define incorporation as "[the introduction of] all or part of a love object or thing into one's own body" (126). Faced with the impossibility of linguistic expression, the subject is forced to seek alternative ways of filling the void, and the empty mouth consequently "reverts to being the food-craving mouth it was prior to the acquisition of speech" (128). Rather than filling the mouth with speech, incorporation enacts the fantasy of filling the void with the lost object itself, of swallowing the loss and everything associated with it. Incorporation thus acts as a substitute for

introjection and, as such, it circumvents the need for language and effectively denies that there ever was a loss to communicate.

Incorporation thus "has the ... illusory effect of eradicating the idea of a void to be filled with words" (Abraham and Torok 129). In contrast to introjection, which allows the gradual acceptance of loss and expansion of the ego, incorporation "merely simulates profound psychic transformation through magic.... In order not to have to 'swallow' a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost" (126). In order to enact the refusal of the loss, the survivor constructs what Abraham and Torok term an "intrapsychic tomb," which functions to preserve the loved one (and thus deny his or her death) within the survivor's own divided psyche. A metaphorical crypt is erected, through which the survivor internalizes everything associated with the unacknowledged loss. Unable to fill the grave in the land, the logical place for Thanh to bury her mother is in the sea-horse curve of her own body.

After the napalm attack, Thanh awakens from a six-month coma to discover that her mother's unburied body was never recovered, and she is consequently left feeling that "a part of me died forever by that river's edge" (250). The aborted funeral, empty grave, and Thanh's shame at what she views as her abandoning her mother act as barriers to proper mourning. As a consequence, Thanh continues to feel as if a part of her still exists with her mother; despite the move to America, Thanh's inability to relinquish responsibility for her mother's spirit is clear. Thanh's job at the Mekong Grocery, providing food for the refugee community, clearly echoes her anxiety that her mother's soul is "forever hungry and forever wandering by the waters of the Mekong where I had abandoned her" (251). Thanh's napalm scar, her double-lifeline, and the partial paralysis resulting from a recent stroke are all linked to Thanh's failed attempt to return her mother's body to its proper resting place. The intrapsychic tomb acts to divide identity, allowing the survivor the fantasy of housing a whole other person within his or her own mental topography. As Jacques Derrida explains in his foreword to *The Wolf man's Magic Word* (1994), the crypt is "a kind of 'false unconscious,' an 'artificial' unconscious lodged like a prothesis [sic], a graft in the heart of an organ, within the divided self" (xiii). The stroke divides Thanh's body, placing her left side beyond her control like the part of her she feels died by the Mekong and that she has "never been able to touch ... since" (251). Unable to introject the death, Thanh incorporates her mother into an isolated part of her psyche. Thanh's body becomes, like Vietnam with "its hidden minefields and burial grounds" (64), a repository for her unspeakable losses and unburied dead.

Thanh combines an attempt at physical containment with a refusal to verbalize the losses and traumas she has endured. However, rather than preventing transmission, secrecy can actually aid the transference of knowledge through the generations. Thanh explains that "genetics and karma [are] as intertwined as two strands of thread from the same tapestry," (169-70), and the inherited nature of karma is confirmed by Thanh's suggestion that in order to reveal the source of the family trauma she must "go back to the time when it all began, at the moment when I was

conceived, when your grandparents passed their sin down to me through their blood and bone, tissue and flesh" (230). However, Thanh's notion of the transgenerational effects of karma can also be traced back to the psychological consequences of shameful secrets.

Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom provides an alternative explanation of what Thanh tends to conceptualize as "karma": "the concept of the phantom brings the idea and importance of family history, in particular the secret history of families, to the forefront of psychoanalysis" (Rand 168). Esther Rashkin explains in greater detail that the child initially has "no unconscious of its own other than the mother's" (34) and that he or she gradually emerges as an individual through a series of repressions and differentiations. The phantom arises when "the child's normal repression of the parent's unconscious is hindered by the presence of a gap or lacuna within the parent's psyche" (Rashkin 40).

Thanh's decision to contain the past in silence is initially conceived of as a protective gesture designed to restrict the flow of karma. However, Thanh's strategy of secrecy means that, rather than being protected from the family inheritance, Mai is inevitably implicated in it. Thanh's silent incorporations constitute gaps in her own psyche that are transmitted to Mai in the form of a transgenerational phantom.

A shared dedication to maintaining secrecy makes the phantom particularly difficult to exorcise. In order to cure the subject, the analyst must overcome the "patient's horror at violating a parent's or family's guarded secret" (Abraham and Torok 174). The fact that the haunted descendant has some investment in keeping the secret would account for Mai's apparent desire to believe myths about Baba Quan that she does not find wholly convincing. When Mai is told how Baba Quan's almost mystical connection with the land allowed him to lead Michael's unit to safety through a minefield, Mai tellingly suggests that the explanation is "like a storybook story. You know, like it's almost too good to be true" (114). The rationalization of Baba Quan's ability to negotiate a Vietcong minefield bears a striking resemblance to Thanh's belief that "his intimate knowledge of the dips and bends that define the earth's curves could easily be explained by the fact that he was a native of the soil" (242).

According to Abraham and Torok's theories of mourning, Thanh's inability to mourn the death of her mother necessarily makes that history of loss inescapable for Mai. Thanh employs myth, secrecy, and physical containment in an attempt to prevent the transmission of the harsh reality of her shameful family past to her daughter. However, the symptoms of Thanh's trauma actually serve, to some extent, to reveal history. Consequently, Thanh is ultimately unable to contain her family history within her own body and, despite her efforts to subvert the course of family karma and contain her polluting potential, there is evidence of her compromised past emerging in her daughter. Thanh's dual fathers are replicated in Mai's adoption by "Uncle" Michael MacMahon, whose name and function-specifically, his ability to offer Mai amore privileged life and education-echo Uncle Khan's. Without ostensibly being aware that the Vietcong play a part in

her mother's scandalous history, Thanh believes that Mai "looks at her mother's black tropical cottons and sees Vietcong pyjamas" (53). Perhaps most interesting is Mai's inability to cross the Canadian border in order to overcome the U.S. embargo of Vietnam and contact Baba Quan. At the crossing she is confronted with signs declaring "Border Petroleum" and "Frontier Bar," and despite Bobbie's reassurances that Mai is "legal," she is unable to cross the clearly labeled boundary (16). Mai's reluctance to transgress the border is accompanied by a realization that to do so would require a confrontation with "an eerie topography of misshapen memories" (16).

Eventually, Thanh realizes that silence has failed as a protective strategy, and she decides to expose in a suicide note "the history that has melted into the very walls of our veins" (227). Janette interestingly concludes that Thanh's post-mortem revelation is a final lie designed to sever Mai from her Vietnamese past once and for all:

Almost every character in this novel uses narrative tactically rather than transparently. To take Thanh's letter at face value would be to disregard the novel's own lessons in narrative manipulation.... Looked at this way, the final confession becomes another tactic which will achieve the same goal Thanh had in writing the diary: to break the karmic chain. (56-57)

What remains unclear in Janette's reading is what, if we read the final confession as a strategic lie designed to discourage Mai's efforts to connect with her Vietnamese past, is what Thanh fears will karmically return to contaminate Mai's future. Accepting the letter as generally true seems to follow a certain internal logic because it accounts for the specific symptoms of Thanh's trauma and her extreme connection to the Vietnamese land. However, the letter does retain some of the mythic gloss intended to set Baba Quan's actions in a wider, virtually anachronistic context. Thanh's use of myth complicates Janette's strict opposition of truth and falsehood because "myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" (Barthes 129). Thanh's version of Baba Quan makes his actions more understandable, and it is finally neither a completely true nor totally false account, but just one way of speaking about the past.

Thanh's secrecy regarding her past teaches Mai "the importance of maintaining a silence" (41) and the need to guard against defilement, a double lesson embodied in the Buddha charm that Mai wears around her neck. Mai's ambiguous suspension between existence within the refugee community and her desire to escape it means that she is seen as "someone whose tongue had to be perpetually checked and contained." Consequently, Mai's ability to speak is hindered by the charm, which was a present from her mother. The Buddha is supposed to be a protective talisman infused with a spell placed on it by a monk, but the mystical power of the necklace can only be maintained by carefully guarding it against pollution. Mai explains that she was instructed to "hide it in my mouth, under my tongue, every time I came into contact with something filthy" (61). The charm is another clear indication of Thanh's anxiety that Mai could be contaminated, and it may serve some practical purpose in making her less prone to infection by forcing her to

keep her mouth closed in unhygienic surroundings. Regardless of any practical application, though, the charm more importantly forces Mai to hold her tongue, effectively controlling her speech and enforcing silence. The superstition surrounding the charm thus reaffirms Thanh's belief that articulation can aid in contamination and warns of the potential dangers of language.

In the sense that myth is "a system of communication ..., a message" (Barthes 109), Thanh transmits a particular, distorted version of Baba Quan's past to her daughter. Despite the fictional feel of Michael's explanation, Mai is as keen as her mother to accept a characterization that is consistent with her own conception of Baba Quan as a farmer with a special connection to his native soil. Although Mai desires access to the truth, she also demonstrates a conflicting willingness to perpetuate the mythologization of her grandfather and support her mother's dedication to secrecy. Mai participates in telling a particular version of her family history, one that is grounded in the unspoken shame passed "like the special kind of DNA which is inherited exclusively from the mother and transmitted only to the female child" (259).

The silent presence of Thanh's unresolved family tension goes some way to explaining Mai's inclination to repeat, in slightly altered form, her mother's beliefs. The interrupted transmission of the past necessarily results in incomplete understanding, a situation that leads to the problematic nature of knowledge in *Monkey Bridge*. According to Janette, in Cao's novel, "knowledge is not empirically verifiable truth" (56). Cao repeatedly undermines Mai's assertions of understanding until it seems that she "has redefined the phrase 'I knew' from signifying certainty to signifying on the impossibility of knowing" (Janette 55). I would suggest, however, that the apparent contradiction between Mai's believed certainty that she does know and her perpetual misunderstanding results from the silenced family history passed from mother to daughter. Mai's determination to uncover the events that led to her grandfather's remaining behind in Vietnam suggests that somehow she is aware of her mother's concealment, reinforcing Abraham and Torok's notion of a secret "knowledge" that resides in the haunted subject's unconscious. The gap revealed between Mai's apparent certainty and her actual confusion suggests that while Mai does know the facts of her mother's history it is a knowledge that she has great difficulty accessing consciously.

According to Janette, Thanh's final letter succeeds where the diary failed: "teaching that the grandfather was the antithesis of the hero Mai sought, the letter severs Mai's desire to recover the past" (57). However, Janette goes on to note the similarity between mother's and daughter's dreams of more fulfilling and satisfying futures (58-59). Thanh "walked into that beautiful dream" (Cao 182) of a supposedly modern marriage, just as Mai plans to "walk right into" (260) the ideal of modern American female education symbolized by Mount Holyoke. Janette consequently concludes that, "the novel ends, not by affirming Mai's closure of adolescence and preparation for her new life, but with the ironic return of her own history" (Janette 59). In the final scenes, Mai once more echoes both the pattern of her mother's life and her language, emphasizing the ultimate success of karmic transfer through the phantom. Mai's choice of phrase

is especially telling since "[the phantom] works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography" (Abraham and Torok 173). The linguistic and structural repetitions insist that, despite Thanh's suicide and confession, the letter reveals the source of the phantom without finally exorcising it. It would seem, ultimately, that Thanh's attempts to contain the past are inevitably destined to fail. The novel's final image is, perhaps, an even clearer indication that history has escaped Thanh's efforts at containment. Mai senses a "starlight of reassurance" in the acceptance letter from Mount Holyoke (260), yet the novel closes on an image of "the moon [that] dangled like a sea horse from the sky" (260). More than simply suggesting that Thanh is still exerting an influence over Mai, the final image of the past is a specifically national one, reflecting the shape of the Vietnamese peninsula. The closing lines recall the lost mother/land and reaffirm the connections between family and national history through Thanh's inextricable links with the land.

Thanh's desire to protect Mai from the past means that she quietly resists the "sly but seductive pull" (37) of the American Dream. Mai, on the other hand, quickly succumbs and wonders how "those numerous Chinatowns and Little Italys sustain the will to maintain a distance" (37). Thanh derives satisfaction from Mai's increasing Americanization and her mild derision of the Little Saigon community, but the division that Thanh senses emerging between mother and child is never finally complete. Esther Rashkin explains that although the child does undergo a process of division from the parent, the primary mother-child union is never totally transcended: while "individuality" is achieved, "the child will still carry with it, however, a reminder of the prior union from which it issued" (34). Mai acknowledges her mother's continued presence when she admits "a part of her would always pass itself through me" (Cao 259). Despite, or perhaps as a result of, Thanh's silences and evasions, separations and divisions, there are certain elements of Mai's Vietnamese past that inevitably remain inescapable.

Although Thanh conceives of negative karma very much in terms of family wrongs and generational inheritance, it is clearly rooted in the transgression of social boundaries that are encoded in specific national myths and superstitions. The unconscious knowledge transmitted through the generations is, in this sense, also the memory of a certain national history that Mai never directly experienced. Thanh attempts to hinder the transmission of ancestral judgement and wisdom in order to protect Mai's future from the negative karma that her family has incurred, but her efforts are subverted by the methods she employs. The several traumas that Thanh has suffered are linked not only to her own family but to a wider sense of cultural loss that constitutes an unavoidable part of Vietnamese memory and Mai's inheritance. Thanh's mythic distortions, erasures, and unspeakable silences testify to the difficulties of narrating both a personal and national history that has serious negative implications for the present and the future, but the symptoms of her evasions also serve to restore the history she attempts to erase. The phantom functions as a signal of concealment, but it paradoxically provides the tenuous link

between the past and the future that testifies to the inescapability of the Vietnamese past in the formation of refugee identity.

#### NOTES

(1) Thanh's first-person narrative intrusions appear in italics in the novel, a convention preserved throughout this essay. Unless otherwise stated, all italics are in the original.

(2) Renny Christopher detects a similar impulse to obscure involvement with the Vietcong through an emphasis on traditional peasant values in Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. According to Christopher, Hayslip "simultaneously insist[s] on the dignity, worth, and rootedness in tradition of the peasants and downplay[s] her sympathies for the Viet Cong" (1995: 71).

(3) Introjection is dependent upon language for its success since "language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by giving figurative shape to presence" (128). Initially experienced as the absence of the mother's breast, the lost object is replaced with words which fill the vacated oral void. However, when for whatever reason the loss is incommunicable, words no longer function to fill the void, and the mourner strives to deny loss through the implementation of "incorporation."

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