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## **Conspiracy of Silence and New Subjectivity in *Monkey Bridge* and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For***

**Quan Manh Ha**  
*University of Montana*

### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the memories of traumatic experiences held by major characters in two contemporary Vietnamese American novels: Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Because the parents who experienced trauma during the Vietnam War refuse to share their haunting pasts with the coming-of-age narrators who are maturing in the United States, both narrators feel suffocated by a very palpable conspiracy of silence, and eventually they must find release from their parents' traumatic and haunting pasts in order to create a new subjectivity for themselves in a new homeland—a subjectivity that characterizes the “1.5 generation” Vietnamese American consciousness. Both narrators possess memories and experiences of childhood, very early in Vietnam and then later in the United States. This combination of influences significantly informs their self-perception and their on-going construction of personal identity. This personal identity must be forged out of a sense of uncertainty, disorientation, confusion, and alienation felt during childhood and adolescence spent with parents who themselves were making the painful transition from a heartbreaking war to its trying aftermath. The narrators' new identity, achieved at the end of both novels, suggests optimism for the development of both personal, or individual, and collective, or community, identity, which is taking shape at the cultural crossroads between Vietnam and America and the historical crossroads between war and postwar eras.

**KEY WORDS:** Traumatic memories, Vietnam War, Vietnamese American, refugee experience, parent-daughter relationship, familial secrecy

Lan Cao and Le Thi Diem Thuy are two Vietnamese American authors whose voices are emerging in contemporary literature, and their novels have enjoyed substantial attention from literary critics. Cao's (1997) *Monkey Bridge* and Le's (2003) *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (*The Gangster* hereafter) share many commonalities in thematic treatments and narrative



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style, and their female protagonists reflect in some autobiographical ways the authors' own backgrounds and familial situations. Each novel captures the traumatic memories and initial settlement experiences of postwar Vietnamese American families who confront loss, separation, bewilderment, and identity crises in the United States. To many Vietnamese Americans, memories of traditional life in Vietnam, the Vietnam War, communist reeducation camps, the "boat people" experience, and family members left behind keep returning and haunting their lives, even decades after the war ended. It is such memories as these that weave through the fragmented impressions and flashbacks recorded in the plots of these novels, creating linguistic mosaic compositions out of a gamut of human traumatic experiences and emotional conflicts, all located somewhere between the recollections of a painful past and a present desire to be freed from the processes of history that apparently have determined the course of their lives.

Sudden intrusions of distant memories upon immediate experience amplify the events in the plots of these novels, as multiple layers of traumatic experiences define the personalities of most of the characters. Marian M. MacCurdy (2007) has observed that "the emotional intensity of *trauma* produces fragmented, imagistic memories that are difficult to pull together into a coherent narrative" (p. 33; emphasis added), and this insight certainly holds true in the novels by these two authors: the novels' main characters must contend with fragmented or dual identities as they experience the type of personal and cultural liminality to which MacCurdy refers. This article argues that, because the parents' traumatic pasts impose continuous disruptions upon the developing postwar experiences of their families, the traumas and conflicts of refugees are transferred to the next generation, and possibly even to subsequent generations. The narrator-protagonists in both novels, members of a generation of Vietnamese Americans who came of age in the United States, eventually must create a new subjectivity for themselves that is neither Vietnamese nor refugee Vietnamese, but rather Vietnamese American.

### **Traumatic Past and Collective Memory**

In *The Mind's Eye*, MacCurdy (2007) defines *trauma* as "any assault to the body or psyche that is so overwhelming that it cannot be integrated into consciousness" (p. 16). E. R. Kandel (2006) extends this concept by noting that consciousness allows us not only to perceive pleasure and pain but also "to attend to and reflect upon those [pleasurable and painful] experiences, and to do so in the context of our immediate lives and our life history" (p. 376). The childhood events in which the traumatic experiences of the narrators are concentrated are similar for the main characters in the two novels because both Mai in *Monkey Bridge* and the unnamed narrator in *The Gangster* had to leave their homeland and endure separation from their mothers at a very early age. The personal experiences and political backgrounds in which the traumas of their parents are grounded, however, differ from each other. For example, the traumatic memories of Thanh (Mai's mother), in *Monkey Bridge*, result primarily from her knowledge of the tragedies occurring through many years in her family in Vietnam, whereas the traumatic memories of Ba (the narrator's father), in *The Gangster*, are caused most specifically by his experiences in communist reeducation camps and as a "boat person." Although Le does not describe Ba's excruciating experiences in detail, a formalist reading of the text reveals the causes of his traumatic memories, which often are concealed beneath the surface events that unfold in her subtle narrative.

To draw an example from the traumas of an earlier war, a male victim of the Jewish Holocaust who had remained silent for thirty-five years, refusing to talk about what he had witnessed during World War II, later observed:

The thing that troubles me right now is the following: if we don't deal with our feelings, if we don't understand our experience, what are we doing to our children? [...] We are what we are [...] we can change some, but we will never be able to eradicate [...] what happened. [...] The biggest question is: Are we transferring our anxieties, our fear, our problems, to the generations to come? And this is why I feel that we are talking here not only of *the lost generation*—like the term they coined after World War I—this time we are dealing with *lost generations*. It's not only us. It's the generations to come. And I think this is the biggest tragedy of those who survived. (as quoted in Felman, 1995, pp. 48-49)

Throughout *Monkey Bridge* and *The Gangster*, the narrators witness incidents that happen within and around their families: they observe their parents' behavior, their internal and interpersonal conflicts, and their attitudes toward life, but without understanding the causes. Thus, both novels treat an apparent "conspiracy of silence" that is maintained by members of the preceding generation, which, as the Holocaust survivor indicates in the observation quoted above, transfers the unresolved issues to their children. The narrators' parents live constantly with the past, and they fail to explain its significance in the present moment because they either avoid articulating it to their children or attempt to conceal it even from themselves. Mai, the daughter in Cao's novel, registers personal confusion from her mother's seemingly erratic patterns of behavior; she admits, "I was merely a child trying to understand and save her mother" (Cao, 1997, p. 168), and "I was still not accustomed to the peculiar way she revealed her world to me" (p. 201). Her mother, Thanh, gradually reconstructs her past experience for herself, and she relives it in her postwar life, while her daughter, Mai, can only maintain a quiet hope of understanding that past so that she can integrate it into her own present and future life. Thanh is a victim of her traumatic past; she lives as an exile from Vietnam in the United States, refusing to become acculturated in America because her past exists as so powerful a force in her psyche that it persistently draws her back from the present moment. Mai knows that her mother "continued to live in a geography of thoughts defined by the map of a country that no longer existed in terms I could understand" (p. 66). Thanh, psychologically, maintains so strong an identification with her homeland and its history that she can view herself only as an alien sojourner in her new land: "She had no claim to American space, no desire to stake her future in this land" (p. 91). Memory, therefore, is a dominant presence in the novel that disrupts interaction in the family and precipitates the psychological distress experienced by Cao's main characters.

Thanh's deeper feelings and guarded knowledge of her family in Vietnam are recorded in diaries that she keeps hidden in her darkened bedroom. She cannot free herself from the images of her abandoned father, Baba Quan, of his having killed a landlord, and of her mother's funeral. Writing down one's memories, according to MacCurdy (2007) and according to Gayle Greene (1991), especially for women, can help to quell human traumatic experience because the act of writing allows people to unlock their depressed feelings and transform unarticulated confusion into understanding. Greene argues that "writing can join the cognitive and the emotional, resulting in a sense of control over that which we cannot control: the past. Writing produces a sense of agency that the trauma has threatened" (p. 2), which readers see expressed as the

otherwise unshared evidence of disruption and separation from the moment in which the writer lives. Thanh writes down, ostensibly for herself, memories of concealed realities that preoccupy her mind with the past events and that paralyze her present actions.

Thanh's life in the United States is like that of a phantom, confined to a self-imposed, darkened mausoleum, and Cao uses words associated with the dead to describe Thanh's life as a traumatized victim of a personal history that cannot be forgotten. Thanh exists in the United States almost as a ghost, as her ghostly memories of the past and of the war appear and reappear constantly, and as her untold stories give rise to questions that haunt her daughter, Mai. When they first move to an apartment in Northern Virginia, for instance, Mai notices that, on moonlit nights, she can see "ghosts of different wars" lingering just beyond the windowpanes of the apartment that she shares with her mother (Cao, 1997, p. 31), and that the world in which they live "could no longer offer comfort or sanctuary" (p. 32). Mai describes her mother's bedroom as a "catacomb of recess in which secrets could be hidden and later found," and when Mai enters the room, she feels the "presence of an enormous ghost" that co-exists there with her mother (p. 46). After Thanh is released from a rehabilitation center, she lies in her bed "with a blanket securely draped over her, like a corpse wrapped from head to toe" (p. 134). Mai is unable to explain her mother's "hallucinations and nightmares," (p. 11) and Thanh's "nighttime life" remains inaccessible, mysterious, apparent but unexpressed (p. 46). As foreseen by the aforementioned male victim of the Holocaust, Thanh's inability to discuss her traumatic past and her present sorrow has a negative impact upon her daughter, who "grows up in the void of the unspeakable" because Thanh refuses to talk about her past honestly, although her "wounds" inflict pain and concern upon her daughter (Pelaud, 2011, p.86). Mai can feel "the seemingly infinite silence, the expanse of sadness that was peculiarly hers [Thanh's], dissolve into [her] body" (p. 45), and she admits that she sometimes is afraid of her mother.

In Le's *The Gangster*, a communicative disruption exists between the narrator and her father, Ba, also because of his silence. She perceives Ba's voice as "water moving through a reed pipe in the middle of a sad tune. And the voice is always asking and answering itself" (10). Ba, a quiet man, never shares his past experiences with his daughter, who is awakened by his nightmares after they arrive in San Diego, and who is aware that he "cries in the garden every night" (Le, 2003, p. 27). Elizabeth A. Waites (1997) observes that some dreamers who experience frequently recurring nightmares of particularly horrible content had spent time in concentration camps (p. 118). Ba's nightmares probably are occasioned by his experiences as a detainee in postwar Vietnamese communist reeducation camps, which constantly replay in his thoughts and dreams. Ba's traumatic memories bring continued suffering upon his life, and his silence on the traumas in his past causes a pain of incomprehension in his family. This is a common phenomenon; Ba fears being overwhelmed by his past, but his inability to transcend that past holds it as an ever-present obsession.

Ba's response to emotional trauma is not unusual: as Robert D. Stolorow (2007) observes, "Experiences of trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned"; he concludes that "it is [the] trauma, not the unconscious, that is timeless" (p. 20). In this context, it is noteworthy that Ba discusses his past neither with his wife nor with his daughter, but only with a Vietnamese man of his generation who later becomes his best friend:

"[They] would sit on the front steps in the evenings, and talk about the past. They agreed that the past was when they were young and in Vietnam. [...] Sipping bottles of beer, they

talked about the war and how it was their youth and how when it ended it was like waking from a long dream or a long nightmare. And now the war was in the past.” (Le, 2003, pp. 113-14).

When Ba thinks about his former life in Vietnam, on the surface he seems calm and accepting of life as it is, but deep in his heart, he struggles with his traumatic past, screaming in his sleep and crying alone at night. Unlike Ba, his wife, Ma, is emotional and sentimental as she confronts the fact that she cannot enjoy her present life in the United States while her parents are neglected in Vietnam: she screams to her husband, “Take me back! [...] I can’t go with you. I’ve forgotten my mother and father. I can’t believe [...] we’ve left them to die. Take me back” (pp. 97-98). As Ma remembers her parents, it is her sense of filial duty that gives rise to a deep sense of guilt for having left them in her homeland so that she could join her husband and daughter in the United States. Although Ma is not so fully developed a character as her husband, Ba, the trauma she has experienced in her not-too-distant past and the lasting imprint of that trauma are vividly revealed in her immediate response to a sudden and almost total recall of the imprinted events.

*The Gangster* does not address specific war-related issues, as does *Monkey Bridge*. Nevertheless, its treatment of past incidents is subtle and more skillfully integrated into the narrative. For example, following the novel’s dedication, Le explains that the Vietnamese composite word *đất nước* can be rendered as *nation*, *country*, or *homeland* in English. As individual lexemes, *đất* means *land*, and *nước* means *water*. The non-traditional development of the novel’s plot, which is characterized by vignettes, sketches, and moments of remembrance, is “threaded by water,” as Sarah Anne Johnson (2004) has pointed out (p. 24). In the novel, *water* carries various meanings, and sometimes they are contradictory: it symbolizes conditions both of separation through geography and connection through memory with the past. Water is the source of life; it nurtures human beings and maintains life on the planet. Because Vietnam is an agrarian country in which agricultural hydraulics has been essential for more than four thousand years, water is respected as a defining feature of the land. Therefore, as the nation’s culture always has been based on rice production, the word for *country* in Vietnamese almost necessarily contains the word for *water*.

Subsequent to the communist takeover on April 30, 1975, those who had supported the Saigon government in the South have referred to that date as *ngày mất nước*, or “the date we lost our country” (to the communists from the North). The narrator’s father, Ba, left Vietnam because he had served in the South Vietnamese Army, and afterwards had been detained in communist reeducation camps for several years. In order to escape the political oppression and discrimination exercised by the Hanoi government, more than one million Vietnamese people fled the country in small fishing boats, risking their lives and fortunes to pirates, starvation, rape, death, and acts of God at sea. Fearful events upon the waters of the Pacific Ocean prompted recurrent nightmares for many Vietnamese refugees who survived and arrived in the United States. For example, the unnamed narrator says, “Years later, even after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices [utterances by other panicked Vietnamese boat-people calling for help] as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief” (Le, 2003, p. 105). As shown by MacCurdy (2007), when victims of trauma verbalize their imprinted experiences, they often are vocalizing images and sounds that “remain encoded permanently in their minds” (p. 36). In the scene alluded to above, the water of the ocean is associated with death and loss, which seem to be common in the

dreams of many Vietnamese refugees. Thus, water also is an all-too-often dangerous and hungry natural force that swallows countless boats and escapees seeking freedom to enjoy better lives in another country. Le (2003) captures this loss of homeland and ocean transit and their imprint with poetic beauty: “War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song” (p. 87).

When the novel opens, the narrator states that it is water, not blood, that unites her, Ba, and four Vietnamese men who “had stepped into the China Sea together” to leave Vietnam (Le, 2003, p. 3). Ma did not come to the United States with them, and the image of Ma left standing alone on a beach in Vietnam, either to say goodbye to her husband and daughter or simply to witness their departure, is etched in the narrator’s mind until they eventually can be reunited. Thus, the beach, the ocean, and a separation by water dominate the child’s memories of her mother, Ma; the six-year-old narrator does not quite understand why Ma is left behind or why she herself had to leave Vietnam. She also is connected to her past by memories that the ocean evokes. After the narrator is first introduced to her American classmates at school, the teacher locates Vietnam on the globe and “point[s] with her finger at an S-shaped curve near a body of water” (p. 19). This incident occasions the first moment in the novel when the narrator’s dead brother is mentioned: “I missed my older brother” (p.19). The brother is not alluded again until the second half of the book, in which his death is described in greater detail: “Twenty years ago, my brother’s body was pulled from the South China Sea and left lying on the beach to dry” (p. 126). The novel opens with the image of the beach, and it closes with the same image, uniting the themes of death, separation, and loss caused by water, as well as the images of two lands, both separated in geography and joined in memory by a vastness of water. Although the narrator Mai in *Monkey Bridge* did not clandestinely and perilously leave Vietnam as a “boat person,” her departure from Vietnam and separation from her mother are characterized by fear and death: “The fear of separation I suddenly understood that day to be a fear as primordial as the fear of death,” and this fear remains “trapped” in her chest (Cao, 1997, p. 97). Unlike the interactive battles that the Vietnamese fought during the war, the battles that many Vietnamese refugees have had to fight in the postwar period are within themselves—the battles between a traumatic past and a haunted present, which have “no beginning and no end,” in which the enemy is as illusive and ineffable as water. In Maureen Ryan’s words (2008), “Years after the end of the Vietnam War, American veterans may still wear their dogtags, but the Vietnamese bear the war quietly inside—in their souls” (p. 270).

Le’s young narrator seems to live in semi-darkness after she arrives in the United States. She does not quite understand what she has experienced, and she keeps asking herself questions about events in her life, but her questions remain unanswered. For example, very early in her childhood in Vietnam, she experienced the death of her brother, but all she knows of that event is that he had drowned at sea. Beyond the fact of his death, she remembers only how people prepared his funeral, but she neither cried nor grieved, because she did not understand the profound significance of separation and loss at such a young age. Nevertheless, her brother’s death imprints a powerful constellation of circumstances that later returns through memory from an ocean away to haunt her subsequent life: “The only thing I couldn’t drive away was the memory of my brother, whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a distant shore” (Le, 2003, p. 118). This reference to the brother’s body configured as the Vietnamese shore-line explains why the narrator remembered her brother when she saw the shape of her homeland on the globe. When alone, she often imagines that he still lives and follows her, and she can sense “the familiar feeling of warmth, of his body beside my body” (p. 74).

According to Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan (1996) “memory, like other constructions of culture, stands in a complex, reciprocal relationship with its bearers. Not only do we create and maintain the memories we need to survive and prevail, but [also] those collective memories in turn both shape and constrain us” (p. 8). The narrator’s traumatic memory is of the loss of her brother and of the consequent loneliness that recurrently enters her consciousness. Otherwise, she seems to have been too young to have been traumatized by the more abstract pains and losses precipitated by the war. As noted previously, *The Gangster* begins and concludes with images of the ocean’s shore. The ending certainly evokes the images of darkness, loss, and death, all of which have been continuously associated in the narrator’s mind with the sea: “Out from the darkness of the sea, wave after wave of small, luminous bodies washed to shores” (Le, 2003, p. 158). The concluding sentence—“As my parents stood on the beach [in the United States] leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights” (p. 158)—implies that the narrator finally is able to gain a level of liberation from a past imposed her by the silence of those closest to her. Her memory of running toward the lights suggests her entrance into a future in which the “good” of the present might mitigate the “bad” of the past, which otherwise could destroy her, as it had left so many others desolate and seemingly without hope.

### **Identity Consciousness: Neither Here Nor There**

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Gangster* are written by female authors of the generation of Vietnamese Americans who arrived in the United States very early in their lives and grew up in their parents’ new country. Like them, the protagonists in their novels experience their childhood and early adolescent years in the United States, but without the guidance of their mothers, because they left Vietnam prior to the departure of their mothers. As Cao and Le have indicated in published interviews, the novels are quasi-autobiographical, and in significant ways elements of the memoir and diary genres are discernible in these coming-of-age novels. Both Cao and Le create non-chronological plots, merging flashbacks of the past with events in the present, employing voices from various earlier times in order to define the consciousness of the characters and their feelings of displacement, dislocation, and nostalgia. In her study on Arab American literature, Lisa Suhair Majaj (1996) asserts, “Memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups; family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for ‘roots’ is often articulated as ‘remembering who you are’” (p. 266). In the novels by Cao and Le, the narrators live between two geographical worlds, always looking backward to the past and forward to the future, never completely enjoying a consciousness well centered in the present. They are continually seeking to discover and remember who they are. However, they are denied the family stories that Majaj indicates as important in linking their ethnic pasts with their American future. These untold stories are elements in the conspiracy of secrets that the Holocaust survivor quoted above sees as detrimental to members of subsequent generations.

Changing the focus slightly, in his book *Trailing Clouds*, David Cowart (2006) argues that *Monkey Bridge*, for example, should *not* be understood exclusively through paradigms developed and used in postcolonial theory. He takes a broader perspective: Cao’s novel concentrates on the “complexity of personal and national history among those immigrating from a place fought over for two thousand years before the advent of the American imperium” (p. 158). Cowart’s view applies equally well to *The Gangster*, which focuses on the complexity of the conflicts, deriving from events in personal and national history, that hold parents, and

consequently the narrator, between states of psychic arrest and psychic development, as they are unable to escape a haunting past fraught with grief and sorrow in Vietnam and a new, potentially rewarding life in the United States. The characters in the novels are trapped by cultural and historical circumstances that hold them in a consciousness that is “neither-here-nor-there.” In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai states, “My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither,” and she maintains, for this reason, two contradictory perceptions about herself, simultaneously (Cao, 1997, p. 88). She is in “a place apart” that critics of the Borders School define as “[a] part yet apart, home and not-home, neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’” (Singh and Schmidt, 2000, p. 7). When *Monkey Bridge* opens, Mai has not yet become naturalized; she is, however, a green-card holder, a permanent resident in the United States, but not a citizen. After she once had visited Canada on a brief trip with her friend Bobbie, Mai says, “I felt a tightening in my chest. The Americans, rumors had it, could forbid us to return if we stuck so much as half a foot outside the perimeters of *their* country” (p. 14; emphasis added). The word *their* signals Mai’s consciousness of herself as the “other,” who does not share the rights enjoyed by American citizens. She remained aware of her status as a refugee, as were many other Indochinese people residing in Virginia, particularly those who arrived just after the Vietnam War ended in 1975: “We were, after all, a ragtag accumulation of [the] unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget” (p. 15).

In Cao’s novel, Mai likes the Bionic Woman, a character in a TV show who becomes a source of information about American popular culture for Mai, because the character reminds her of heroic Vietnamese warriors and heroines who possessed such traditionally male characteristics as determination, courage, and power. Pauline T. Newton (2005) discerns that the Bionic Woman, for Mai, is a “reminder of Vietnamese culture but [also] a product of U.S. American television [that] literally and figuratively represents a cross-hatched figure in this text” (p. 138). In Mai’s construction of her own American identity, the Bionic Woman exemplifies the model of a dynamic woman whom Mai might emulate. She assumes different identities as the novel’s plot unfolds. Early in the work, she identifies herself with one of the Trung sisters, “the greatest warrior[s] of all Vietnamese warriors, fearlessly defying danger and death to lead a charging army against a brigade of Chinese invaders” (Cao, 1997, p. 29). She is proud of the Trung sisters’ heroic deeds and victory in Vietnamese history. In a subsequent development of this theme, Aunt Mary, Mai’s American adopted aunt, advises her to “be yourself” (p. 124) during her college admissions interview—that is, to act in the expected American way—but Mai does not follow this advice. She employs, rather, “[t]he Trung-sister strategy, the strategy of fluidity and softness, [which] is to master the art of evasion and distraction, to use momentum, not brute force, as leverage,” when the interviewer asks Mai about her memory of Vietnam (p. 129). On the one hand, Mai wants to maintain the Confucian tenets of obedience and filial piety, which were inculcated into her mind during her early childhood in Vietnam. On the other hand, she knows that she must attempt to defy the Buddhist karmic law and Vietnamese folkloric wisdom practiced by her mother and other Vietnamese refugees. However, she ultimately realizes that she needs to manifest her identity as a dynamic, self-confident Vietnamese American.

The relationship between Mai and her mother, Thanh, represents in a mild form the cultural and generational gap found in many ethnic-minority American narratives. Mai feels remote and detached from her mother’s traditional Vietnamese patterns of behavior and beliefs, and Mai articulates an American perspective—the perspective of one who has internalized from an early age the language and concepts that structure American culture. For instance, Mai does



not believe in “the infinite, untouchable forces that [make] up the hidden universe—hexes and curses, destiny and karma”—as her mother does (Cao, 1997, p. 24). Mai accepts the logical reasoning and scientific method taught at her American school. When speaking to her building manager about her mother’s desire to move to another apartment, rather than explaining to him about the “menacing shadow across our window” that her mother believes to be a “deadly sword that threatened to slash our fortune and health in two” (pp. 20-21), Mai is able to use English properly and courteously. This skill in making a request to change apartments demonstrates Mai’s Americanized attitude toward how things can be negotiated in the United States. Furthermore, when Mrs. Bay, a good friend of Thanh’s, and other Vietnamese neighbors are preparing to welcome a fortune teller at Mai’s home, the scene interests Mai, not superstitiously or spiritually, but scientifically: “On certain occasions, I could adopt the anthropologist’s eyes and develop an academic interest in the familiar” (p. 146). However, out of this experience, she discovers that she feels “detached” from her Vietnamese American community and does not understand their behavior: “I could see this community as a riot of adolescents, obstreperous, awkward, out of sync with the subscribed norms of American life, and beyond the reach of my authority” (p. 146). Obviously, this insight reflects the American perspective that she has developed toward Vietnamese folkloric tradition and spiritual culture. In this scene, Mai becomes an American who observes more-or-less objectively the behavior of her conservative Vietnamese American neighbors, and she has difficulty appreciating why they maintain their Vietnamese folk culture, which is considered quaint and irrational in the larger American culture. Thanh and her Vietnamese friends, from their perspective, maintain their native culture, hoping that in a few years the Vietnamese communist regime will collapse and that they will repatriate triumphantly. Their aspirations signal their sense of displacement and their resistance to assimilation. They do not accept the United States as their permanent home; it is but a temporary asylum where they await the advent of a new, democratic political system that may arise in Vietnam.

Like Mai and Thanh in *Monkey Bridge*, the narrator and her parents in *The Gangster* also live between two worlds, and they constantly struggle with their shifting identities. In an interview with Le conducted by Sarah Anne Johnson (2004), Le states that her inspiration for this novel stemmed from her observations of Vietnamese American refugees’ struggles with the fact of their cultural displacement and the fear of cultural assimilation, which are common features of the refugee experience. Le adds that these features affect a “huge human landscape. So many people are being moved through that landscape right now” (Johnson, p. 24). Thus, she wrote the novel to engage readers with the emotions and trepidations of these refugees. The two geographical settings of the novel again are Vietnam and the United States, and the psychological setting is the characters’ consciousness of loss and of alienation. They can neither forget Vietnam nor merge themselves completely into American culture. They sense that they belong “neither there nor here,” and they constantly attempt to bridge the gap between the two mental and emotional locations.

Elizabeth E. Waites (1997), in her study *Memory Quest*, writes that if one experiences sudden changes in life without any “intermediate stages to ease the transition,” the abrupt changes, which often are associated with traumatic events, can cause both physical and psychological damage (p. 12). In *The Gangster*, the narrator’s clandestine departure from Vietnam as a “boat person” marks such an abrupt change in her formative years, when she also is forced into separation from her mother and homeland. When *The Gangster* opens, the six-year-old narrator and her father, Ba, arrive in San Diego without her mother, Ma. Although Ba takes

good care of his daughter, she cannot stop thinking about Ma, who remains behind in Vietnam. On her way from the airport to Mel's house (the home of their American sponsor), she notices a poster of a couple lying on the beach, and scene in the poster reminds her of Ma, left standing alone on a beach, after her boat had departed and left her mother on the shore in Vietnam: "My mother was out there somewhere. My father had said so" (Le, 2003, p. 6). The image of Ma is etched in the narrator's mind because she desperately needs Ma to give her guidance, motherly affection, and comfort. Betty Jean Lifton (1996) argues that adopted children tend to luxuriate in their fantasies; they might look calm and quiet, but actually they are "imagining scenarios that might have been or still might be" (p. 22). She concludes that the absence of a mother disrupts the comfort zone that mothers alone seem to provide for a child. Although Le's narrator is not adopted by a surrogate mother, the little girl's psyche develops in ways that seem to mirror those of an orphaned child. The theme of loss is established when the narrator and her father must separate themselves from Ma. Mrs. Russell, Mel's widowed mother, empathizes with the narrator's and her father's situation, and she treats them kindly because "perhaps she sensed that we'd once had a woman in our lives" (Le, 2003, p. 12). The theme of alienation and the consequential indulgence in fantasies develops to the point of crisis while the narrator and her father live in Mel's home.

In a conversation with David Schulman (2009) for *Weekend America* on Public Radio, Le said that, every day in the United States, everybody encounters many people whose backgrounds he or she does not know. She gives as an example her own family's actual experience:

[...] as refugees of the war in Vietnam, we wouldn't have come here if that war hadn't happened. And one of the things that I've put a lot of thought into[,] since my father moved back to Vietnam in 2003, is how he never became an American in the way that, perhaps, he had hoped, but that the hope was that his children would become Americans, and feel at home here. (para. 4)

Linda Trinh Vo (2003) observes that the term "gangsters" has been used occasionally to refer to Vietnamese Americans who cannot assimilate themselves into American society (p. x). Perhaps, this possibility explains the title of Le's novel, which casts Ba, the fictional father, as a gangster. He is confused in his identity, which is signaled by his faltering attempts to spell his name in English. Le (2003) compares him to a "blind man circling a small room" as he is repeating each letter of his name, and "even when he was able to spell out his whole name, he couldn't quite trust that this was he himself. Were these the letters? Was this his name?" (pp. 114-15). The theme of displacement is emphasized in Schulman's interview when Le says to him, "Most immigrants and refugees don't leave their native countries by choice." It is obvious that the author's biographical and familial background informs the way in which the narrator and Ba in *The Gangster* live in the United States, while never feeling that they belong here. Le is now an American citizen and speaks English—a language she was "forced to pick up very quickly" in order to translate for her father (Schulman, 2009, para. 6, emphasis added). The word *forced*, which she uses in the statement above, conveys the nature of the process through which she has become accustomed to the English language and to American culture.

In Le's novel, one object that symbolizes very powerfully in the young narrator's imagination, her feelings of loneliness and alienation is a butterfly encased in a glass disk, which serves as a paperweight on Mel's desk. The narrator becomes attracted to the butterfly and identifies herself with it; she converses with the trapped butterfly as if it were a human being, or

her alter-ego. While everything around her is white—the house walls that her father and uncles have to paint for Mel, the snow in the winter, the ceiling of her classroom, and Mrs. Russell's light face—the butterfly is “golden brown [...] trapped in a pool of yellow jelly” (Le, 2003, pp. 24-25). The narrator is attached to it because “I heard the sound of my own breathing” when she held the glass disk up, and in her imagination, the butterfly sang to her a “whispered song” with a soft, pleasant rustling sound: “It was the butterfly's way of speaking, and I thought I understood it” (p. 25). Here, for the first time in the United States, the young narrator forms a personal connection with a voice (although an imagined one) that she believes she hears, and from another being with whose situation she can identify in an existential way. Before her encounter with the trapped butterfly, due to language barriers, she had enjoyed little interpersonal communication; she had only partially understood what Mel and his mother were talking about—for example, even “the tone of their voices troubled us” (p. 6). Johnson (2004) points out, “The child absorbs so much, but she doesn't understand what lies at the center of the events she witnesses” (p. 22). The young narrator imagines that the butterfly must still be alive and that “it wants to get out,” and she believes she hears it “cry for help” (Le, 2003, p. 27). The insect represents the narrator herself, who feels claustrophobically constrained in her life as a refugee, surrounded only by her father and four Vietnamese uncles and alienated from American society and students at her school. In order to free the butterfly, she breaks the glass disk in which it is sealed, and her rash action symbolizes her personal and desperate desire to liberate herself and attain freedom. Also, it is through the glass disk that she believes she sees her mother “standing on a faraway beach” (p. 32). The narrator feels lonely and painfully distanced from Ma and the motherly love that she has not enjoyed since her departure from Vietnam. Thus, shattering the disk also symbolizes for her a desire to break through the barriers that separate her from her loss of childhood security in Vietnam. Her physical action, shattering the disk, poignantly manifests the mental distress that she experiences. The imprisoned butterfly is a simple and straightforward symbol, and Le uses it skillfully, although perhaps too transparently, to represent various aspects of the narrator's developing consciousness of the loss, alienation, and displacement that her process of becoming a Vietnamese American encompasses.

In an article entitled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall (1997) rightly maintains that individuals gradually internalize the values and customs held by the society in which they live and develop as people. An individual's acculturation is, therefore, an unending process, but one that becomes more selective as a person matures (p. 112). Mai in *Monkey Bridge* and the unnamed narrator in *The Gangster* are confronted by conflicting narratives, or more seriously by narratives with segments that conspicuously are missing or concealed. The search through these narratives by both narrators in order to establish a firmer identity forms much of the plots of these novels. Each narrator is forced by circumstances to face the difficult realization that one's acquisition of a narrative of self-identity is relative to the milieu or cultural environment in which one lives and grows up. Self-identity is never “a given”; in Hall's words, it does not transcend the “place, time, and history and culture” in which one's personal narrative is constructed (p.112). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000) similarly maintain that the concept of “human nature” is misleading, because it implies “being,” whereas “the concept of the *production* of the human subject through ideology, discourse, or language” is more accurate and, therefore, less misleading (p. 220). However, in the case of Cao's narrator, the subjective, personal narrative cannot be completed until the missing elements can be supplied by her mother. These significant lacunae eventually are filled in, however, almost through a classical *deus ex machina*, when Mai discovers her mother's secret diaries. In the case of Le's narrator,

the subjective, personal narrative cannot be completed until the cultural disruption caused by forced departure from Vietnam and separation from a mother can be adjusted through later developments in the novel. In each work, the use of a first-person narrator is important because the construction of the personal narrative and the development of a new subjectivity actually are the primary focus for both authors. As stated earlier, the traumas experienced by a parental generation are visited upon a younger generation, and they can be assimilated by that later generation only with effort. It is the perceptive artistry of Cao and Le that allows them to delineate in their novels this particular coming-of-age difficulty that has been experienced by many Vietnamese American children and adolescents.

### Conclusion

Most Vietnamese Americans who arrived in the United States within ten years after the end of the Vietnam War are refugees, but they are different from the immigrant models presented among first-generation ethnic Americans who arrived under very different circumstances: “Vietnamese Americans of the military and political elites of the former South Vietnam are concerned with loss, exile, displacement, and homeland nostalgia—in short, they tend to look backward much more than they look forward” (Nguyen, 2001, p. 73). Thanh in *Monkey Bridge* and the narrator’s parents in *The Gangster* reflect the spirit of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s statement quoted above, that one’s identity is largely defined by one’s memory because past experiences help to develop one’s sense of self and to construct a personal identity. In both novels, the narrators must first discern and then transcend the conspiracy of secrets held so guardedly by their parents and their parents’ generation. They must come to term with losses and memories that the vastness of the Pacific Ocean occasions.

Thus, Cao’s and Le’s novels can be considered transition fiction—each presents not only the voices of the first-generation immigrants, but also the voices of the generation of Vietnamese Americans growing up in the United States who attempt to understand their parents’ pasts and memories of the past, and who desire to be free from the ghosts that haunt the earlier generation, in order to assimilate themselves successfully into an American future. Both Mai in Cao’s novel and the unnamed narrator in Le’s novel live with parents whose pasts cannot be “unlearned,” which therefore affects the two narrators’ perceptions of the present and their prospects for a future. However, both narrators, in the end, unburden themselves from their parents’ pasts and traumatic memories because they must, of necessity, “look forward.”

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### About the Author



Quan Manh Ha, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Montana. His research interests primarily focus on 20th-century and contemporary American literature, Vietnam War literature, ethnic studies, and literary translation. His publications have appeared in various journals and books, such as *Short Story*, *Ethnic Studies Review*, *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, etc. Currently, he is writing a book on the Vietnamese American short story and its writer.



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