

Contemporary women's roles through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American Eyes; Critical essay, Long, Lisa A. , *Frontiers -A Journal of Women's Studies*, January 1, 2008, 2008 University of Nebraska Press, Pg. 1(36) Vol. 29 No. 1 ISSN: 0160-9009

For many Americans, Southeast Asia and its inhabitants--particularly the Vietnamese and transnational ethnic groups such as the Hmong--become visible only through the lens of the Vietnam War. At the same time, contemporary Vietnamese tend to see that war as only one of the many imperialist conflicts in which they have been engaged for the past millennium. (1) And the Hmong, with traditional roots in agriculture and no national ties to speak of, hold an even longer view, seeing this war and subsequent migrations as part of an ancient four-thousand-year-old history of conflict and flight through the highlands of modern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand--and now to the United States. Not surprisingly, gender roles in Southeast Asia and the United States have been profoundly shaped in both cultures by these traditions of invasion, resistance, and, often, flight.

A complex, diasporic confluence of political history, militarism, immigration, and feminism emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. To tease out these delicate global intersections, which continue to shape contemporary women's lives, in this paper I explore representations of Viet and Hmong women in Vietnamese publications and public spaces and compare them to representations of women in the writings of Vietnamese American and Hmong American women. To this end, I pair images of Viet women culled from two Vietnamese publications, *Images of the Vietnamese Woman in the New Millennium* (2002) and *Female Labour Migration: Rural-Urban* (2001), and from the Vietnamese Women's Museum housed in Hanoi with Lan Cao's negotiations of Vietnamese American womanhood in her novel, *Monkey Bridge* (1997). As well, I examine representations of Hmong women at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi, specifically a book of photographic essays by Hmong girls titled *Through H'Mong Eyes* (2003), and compare them to selections by Hmong American women writers and story-tellers from the anthologies *Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (2002) and *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (1994). This essay questions the ethical and practical ends of Western, Vietnamese, and Hmong considerations of Southeast Asian women's gender roles, especially when viewed through the sometimes totalizing grip of the Vietnam War--or the American War of Aggression, as it is called in the War Remnants Museum in Saigon.

To pursue such a comparative analysis, it is necessary to place American publications alongside Vietnamese texts that are often multiauthored--sometimes with no clear sense of individual attribution. While the communal nature of these latter texts might reflect cultural traditions, the powerful state's role in shaping them also presents a challenge in reading Vietnamese publications as sources of contemporary reality. In contrast, American texts of the sort I analyze here, produced in the relatively freer West, can be read as authentic, individual *cris de coeur*. Yet it is important to keep in mind that both types of publications are crafted in response to audience

expectations and the unique demands of their respective publishing enterprises. The American texts are shaped by cultural traditions, gendered expectations, and economics. And even though the Vietnamese texts are products of the state, I read for moments that not only submit to but also strain against state orthodoxy.

It might also seem impolitic to pair the Vietnamese and the Hmong in this essay, for they came to the United States under very different circumstances: the former, almost immediately after US troop withdrawal from Vietnam as officially acknowledged compatriots at war; the latter, somewhat later as unacknowledged fighters in covert Laotian operations. Many southern Vietnamese immigrants come from educated, urban backgrounds, while many Hmong emerge from a rural and oral culture. And yet the Vietnamese and the Hmong sometimes struggle to convey their distinct cultures and histories to Americans who do not distinguish between them and may see members of both groups as painful reminders of failed American military might--as Lan Cao puts it, "invisible and at the same time awfully conspicuous." (2) Nevertheless, both the Hmong and the Vietnamese came to the United States as a direct result of this conflict and are associated in cultural representations of modern Vietnam in the United States. (3) Surprisingly, their ethnic and class differences are rigidly maintained in contemporary Vietnamese public spaces, where America is predictably represented as the failed imperialist, Vietnam as the resistant victor. This war clearly has different ideological meanings within Southeast Asia than it does in the United States, meanings that profoundly affect gender roles.

Western feminists have also had to resist different but equally significant imperialist impulses. They have often and rightly been accused of cultural blindness as they have sought to analyze the plights of non-Western women in non-Western and Western countries by applying Western models. Amrita Basu summarizes this practice: "The vast literature on women's movements is characterized by three broad tendencies: it ignores women's movements in the postcolonial world, considers women's movements products of modernization or development, and assumes a sameness in the forms of women's oppression and women's movements cross-nationally." (4) These are all tendencies that have contributed to the insistence of some scholars and activists that women's progress in Southeast Asia was antithetical to the colonialist wars that ravaged the region during the twentieth century and remains impossible under socialist or emerging capitalist regimes. Ultimately, such reading practices promote the idea that Southeast Asian refugee women become more "liberated," more feminist, as they become more American. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan add that some women "live in the 'West' without being 'Western,'" fostering interstitial identities that are not "unitary"; however, the "postmodern celebration of hybridity often retains the 'us' and 'them' paradigm that stems from modernist modes of description and representation. (5) Grewal and Kaplan's work implicitly encourages us to probe further the specific contours of the relationship between the United States and Southeast Asia--and, subsequently, the relationship between the women who immigrated and those who stayed behind--because of the "losing" war waged in Southeast Asia. (6)

To decenter the West, I compare the gender roles represented in texts by Vietnamese American and Hmong American women to those of Southeast Asian contemporaries, rather than measuring them directly against multicultural, Western ("American") traditions of womanhood. (7) What do we do with the gender consciousness of women who have been exiled from the so-called third world to the first? Of Vietnamese women whose former nation is proud of the third world's defeat of the first? How do these women's adaptations of Western and Eastern gender roles help to clarify a global understanding of women's roles and resistance to patriarchy? The oral narrative of one Hmong woman immigrant illustrates the particularities of such complicated subject positions. In "Ka Xiong's Life Story," as told to her son, Xiong writes to her children of their escape to Thailand from newly Communist Laos.

"You were all still so small then. You were like little mice and piglets running alongside their mom. I loved you children so much then, and I love all of you so much now. You children meant and still mean everything to me. Sometimes, these days, when I see poor little children of other countries on television, it reminds me of how my own children were dressed in rags and were so very skinny due to the shortage of food and the difficulties we encountered along our way." (8)

This remark dramatizes the psychic mobility of women who reside between the so-called first and third worlds, whose children were once the "mice and piglets" struggling for survival, but who now see the rag-dressed, starving children of other mothers through the distance of television and time and relative plenty. Those children are now of "other countries." (9) I seek to map this space between nations that Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American women inhabit together. For Hmong women, who have long eschewed national identities, this reconstructed, in-between space is especially crucial.

Thus it is necessary to understand Vietnamese and Hmong women in Southeast Asia and America in a specific historical and diasporic context. The women represented in the texts I consider here are not just non-Western or ethnic American women--they are non-Western and ethnic American women at war and after--hostile enemies and fervent compatriots, heroic mothers and vulnerable daughters. However, while militaristic understandings of womanhood continue to occupy Vietnamese and Hmong writers in Southeast Asia, the present-day realities of *doi moi*, or the post-1986 crumbling of the Soviet Bloc and subsequent integration of Vietnam into the global free market economy, preys on their minds just as keenly. The economic vacillations of post-war Vietnam and subsequent privatization of many social services, coupled with the maintenance of socialist control in many arenas of life, have had far-reaching effects on women's gender roles, simultaneously encouraging individual self-sufficiency while requiring national fealty.

Yet another part of this specific context is the recent historical trajectory of American feminism. Those who have come to the United States as first-or first-and-a-half-generation (those who moved as children) immigrants have arrived here in the midst of or in the wake of the second

wave of feminism and the cultural changes that have resulted. Thus while immigrants to the United States have always had to reconcile gender roles and expectations from their home countries with those of the United States, it seems we have witnessed and are witnessing a particular and interesting phenomenon in the texts of Southeast Asian American women. Vietnamese American and Hmong American memoirs and fictions that treat gender roles and women's experiences in the United States typically highlight the more oppressive aspects of native gender relationships. Indeed, the emergence of the personalized forms of Southeast Asian American writing treated here, as opposed to the more formalized, state-sponsored works that depict the status of women in Southeast Asia, reinforces the notion that the "personal is political." Vietnamese and Hmong American literatures portray what Westerners would call "domestic abuse" and other cultural constraints that do not allow women to reach their full potentials. One might argue that these new Americans' exposure to Western feminism and a so-called freer way of life has led them to see with new eyes the gendered worlds they have left behind--despite the immigrant communities' desire to maintain cultural traditions. But in saying this I might be accused of falling prey to precisely the sort of arrogance and cultural myopia that I encourage us to question and that informs many Americans' understandings of other non-Western cultures--particularly nations with which we are at war.

Vietnamese and Hmong texts situate what they assert as women's "separate but equal" status within a broader military, national, and ethnic context and explain women's current troubles in terms of the difficult yet lucrative transition into a market-based economy, rather than as the failure of traditional gender systems or the long-term fallout of imperialist wars. The war in Southeast Asia and its chaotic aftermath are understood as the triumphant proving ground of traditional values and women's importance to their national and ethnic communities. In this context, the deployment of "traditional" women's roles may be interpreted as the progressive retrieval of a repressed woman's culture, rather than as a sign of a retrograde society.

Finally, it is important to remember that much Vietnamese American and Hmong American literature is written by first- and first-and-a-half-generation immigrants and tells of the women's experiences migrating to the United States--a narrative with a starting point inevitably situated in war. Thus stories by and about these women are more properly called refugee literature than immigrant literature, and this changes the relationship of these particular groups of recently arrived Americans to the national narrative and to American gender roles. While those who remained in Southeast Asia contextualize the war with the United States in a larger narrative that includes any number of wars and experiences of exile, the stories of those who immigrated begin with the war with America--indeed, in many cases insist that we not forget their war service, for it is their loyalty to the United States forces that, in part, entitles them to Americanness.

Still, much is lost in the move from East to West. Dwight Conquergood reminds us that "The Hmong word for refugee is *neeg tawg rog*, 'war-broken people,'" that "refugee" and "war" are integrally bound in the language, and that only war can drive the Hmong from their

communities, threatening Hmong identity. (10) Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III contend that Vietnamese American narratives proceed from a similarly mobile and militaristic identity politics: "The difficulties suffered in Vietnam and in the move from Vietnam to America have given adult Vietnamese a strong sense of their own identity," they suggest, confirming that the traumas of war and exile are seminal and defining experiences. (11) Indeed, given the ubiquitous realities of our postcolonial world rooted, as Constance S. Richards argues, in "contemporary global configurations" of "displacement, exile, and alien domination," one must keep in mind that we are all constituted through these modern phenomena in ways that require more precision of our reading strategies. (12)

THROUGH VIETNAMESE EYES

The high position of women in Southeast Asian culture is shown to be distinctive by the authors of *Images of the Vietnamese Woman in the New Millennium*, published by the Center for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development in Hanoi. Basu has argued that "One way that women's movements have sought to challenge the notion that feminism derives from bourgeois or Western inspiration is by finding symbols of women's power within the precolonial context." (13) While such formulations still suggest that indigenous feminist icons have been reclaimed to meet Western expectations, nevertheless warrior women and powerful mothers attain prominent roles in national narratives to this day. Contemporary writers are careful to point out that women's high status is not founded on modern Western feminist principles of freedom and choice; rather, they show how traditional strengths are refined by the numerous, increasing, and modern responsibilities assigned to women. For example, like many contemporary thinkers, the authors of *Images of the Vietnamese Woman* begin by both critiquing and recouping traditional Confucianism, initially decrying the fact that "it denied the women's intelligence (14) Instead, they recast the four traditional virtues of "industry, appearance, speech, and behavior" to focus on the woman's role in a modern, industrialized world: women should, first, work hard; second, they should appear gracious, courteous, and intelligent to be a "female leader to solve successfully all affairs"; they should speak sweetly and patiently to "increase their powers of persuasion and the effectiveness of work"; and, finally, they should behave in a stereotypically feminine fashion to work for "the welfare of other people." (15)

The "women warriors" who dominate contemporary renderings of Vietnamese women's history are depicted as sacrificing not just for the good of the individual or the family, but, more important, for the benefit of the culture. In the beginning of *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly Hayslip explains that her father taught her "to sacrifice one's self for freedom ... in the manner of our women warriors, including Miss Trung Nhi and Trung Trac, who drowned herself rather than give in to foreign conquerors" when she and her sister triumphed over Chinese invaders in 40 A.D. (16) For many Vietnamese, "liberation" and "freedom" are terms that do not connote personal or sex-specific advancements, but rather national progress, although Western feminists, as Kathleen Barry phrases it, look still for the formation of an "independent women's

movement" as a sign of progress. Alexander Soucy sees public images of warrior women, such as the dominant sculpture of Au Co, mother of the Vietnamese race, displayed at the Women's Museum, as promoting a "feminism in Vietnam, [that,] rather than challenging the hegemonic masculine structure, tends to become only a vehicle for carrying broader policy issues; it has become a Trojan horse of nationalism." (17)

Yet his critique, too, measures the women's movement within Vietnam against an idealized notion of an autonomous feminism distinct from cultural and political constraint. Hayslip reminds us that the fundamental form of oppression in Vietnam is perceived as Western imperialism: "Vietnam was con rong chau tien--a sovereign nation which had been held in thrall by Western imperialists for over a century." (18) Contemporary scholar Bui Thi Kim Quy does not argue for the primacy of women's or national liberation but, rather, for their interdependence: "liberating women is tantamount to liberating society as a whole." (19) Thus Vietnamese publications reanimate traditional views of women within modern paradigms, or try to argue that those who have assumed that ancient Vietnamese culture was inherently oppressive for women have been wrong all along as they have been unable to see the ways that women's liberation is bound to the struggle for national autonomy.

In recent years, scholars have sought to reclaim the heroism of Vietnamese women during the war with the United States---a common tactic of liberal Western feminism as "lost" women are found and added to stories traditionally thought to be the sole domain of men. As well, war service is often proffered as a means for oppressed groups to earn fuller citizenship rights. Karen Gottschang Turner asserts that the reclamation of women's voices is meant to "empower them"--in other words, "help" them to see the value of their work. (20) However, this work, too, has been recast within traditional Vietnamese paradigms; Sandra Taylor argues that the more contemporary "long-haired warriors" who fought during the war with the United States, though still subject to traditional notions of Confucian womanhood and filial piety, saw liberation fighting as a family tradition and a national one that went back to the triumph of the Trung sisters. Though becoming more visible now through new scholarly work, the long-haired warriors were during the conflict the "invisible army" of "peasants by day, soldiers by night" who would booby-trap villages, hide Communist fighters, and communicate with guerillas in the jungle in the evenings while tending to children, the elderly, the home, and the economic needs of the family during the day. (21)

The supposedly private "productive labor" of the Mother (i.e., childbirth and childrearing) and the publicly meaningful "social labor" of the worker and nationalist warrior are mingled explicitly in the Vietnamese Women's Museum, where the first priority is to "portray the significance of the 'Mother' image in the Vietnamese frame of mind." Secondly, the exhibits represent the characteristics of Vietnamese women in the "course of national defense and construction as well as women's activities in the international arena. (22) One of the largest and most compelling exhibits in the museum is a tableau showing a Vietnamese woman in a hut

speaking with hulking American soldiers while members of the "revolutionary cadre" nestle in a shelter below her home. While it might seem as if the woman is merely trying to defend her home, hide the revolutionaries, and get the Americans to leave, Tuyet et al. suggest that she may be working on the offensive, as well: "many enemy servicemen asked mothers to show them the way to side with the revolution or to assist them with returning home. One of the commanders of US-puppet troops admits: 'Mothers constitute a very effective weapon of attack in a political struggle. Their attack on the troops was the most dangerous.'" (23)

Again and again, the museum materials and displays insist upon women's vital role in national construction and defense. However, just as the home is military theatre, domestic and military roles are naturally allied; as Tuyet et al. write, "the Mother myth is first of all the one of fighting foreign aggressors," Indeed, the "birth of the nation is closely connected with the mother's myth," thus intimately linking national identity, militaristic narratives, and reproductive capabilities. (24) Western associations of peace with femininity and war-mongering with masculinity do not correspond with these gender roles. While these stories of war-era heroism surely highlight the significance of women's work during wartime, they also focus the triumphs and plight of contemporary women through the all-encompassing lenses of war and essentialized gender roles.

Though motherhood is almost fetishized in Vietnamese texts, becoming a "stay-at-home mom" as Americans understand the term in the context of modern capitalism is not an option for Vietnamese women, who are exhorted again and again to contribute to the national cause outside of the home. Even though Vietnam increasingly operates under free-market capitalism, the specific notion of distinct public and private realms does not seem to be a part of the Vietnamese tradition, though Western scholars continue to describe Vietnamese spaces in these terms. For example, Barry writes, "With economic development, women are able to move into the public economy and labor force, breaking their traditional confinement to the private sphere." (25) At the same time, Vietnamese writers chart their awareness of this paradigmatic slippage. Tuyet et al. state, according to the conception of almost all countries in the world, men are responsible for bringing about income to the family, while women are economically dependent on the male sex, stay at home to do house-work to look after children and at the same time, try to get additional income for the family. In Vietnam, it is the tradition that women are also economically responsible and this remains unchanged. (26)

Indeed, as the Vietnamese incorporate the free market with socialist impulses, Tuyet et al. suggest not only that individual women should be economically productive, but also that the family structure itself should be exploited for capitalist ends: "it is the positive aspect of the market economy to turn the family, which was in the past essentially considered a 'sentimental unit,' into an 'economic unit.'" (27) Families have become even more important to the national economy since the emergence of *doi moi*. Vietnam is still largely an agrarian society, where 80 percent of the population live and labor in rural settings; many urban families run small businesses or, increasingly, take on entrepreneurial ventures. Thus women's labor "outside" and

next to the home has always been integral to the economy. (28) Indeed, the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Articles No. 55 and 68, "define that working is a right and obligation of every citizen." (29) Thus the model woman in Tuyet et al.'s text runs an entrepreneurial household, but she works not just for the good of the family but, rather, for the whole community, using her profits to support charitable activities in her village. (30) Barry also notes that the recognition of domestic chores as public domain activities "may actually contribute to the transformation, rather than the reinforcement, of gender identities." (31) The private realm that some in the United States understand as an isolated, limiting space, does not correspond to the Vietnamese division of space and labor in the post-war era, where "the woman worker is the image of the new woman." (32)

In *Female Labour Migration: Rural-Urban*, Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc outline the contours of "work/home" expectations for contemporary Vietnamese women who migrate from farming areas to urban centers. Tien and Ngoc emphasize again and again that the economic well-being of the entire family rests on women's shoulders; agricultural activities only take up the energies of the family for five to six months per year. (33) Indeed, Tien and Ngoc argue explicitly that women are more suited to the task of working outside and away from their rural homes than men.

As they write, "despite of the fact that the wage of women was often fewer than men, they sent back to family as much as men did, because they saved better and recognized their obligation and responsibility for family much more." (34)

One young porter interviewed by these authors asserts that she, rather than her husband, works in the city because "I am a woman. I can drink pipe water if I am thirsty and eat rice with salt even I can stand with hungry, hardship, but man can not." (35) Elsewhere, the authors assert that men spend their money on cigarettes, coffee, alcohol, and gambling. (36) Thus men are as likely to stay at home, taking care of the children and minding the farm work as women are in contemporary Vietnam, especially if it is perceived that women will be able to bring home more money--it is an economic decision as much as a gendered one. Le Thi argues that women do "everything," taking care of the labor at home and outside, while the husband "is the one to play the role of decision-maker and of manager of production and family activities." (37) Thus, one could infer that gender roles as Westerners understand them, to some extent, are reversed. Women are the hardcore laborers, while men "manage" the household. Men are unable to manage their bodily desires, while women are eminently in control. The money these women earn sustains whole communities as it is used to take care of relatives, support their children's schooling, build houses, invest in new ventures, and pay debts. (38) And yet they endure toxic work sites, sexual harassment, inadequate living conditions, and extortion from local mafia; the familiar and self-destructive rhetoric of female self-sacrifice resonates through these descriptions, as well. (39)

The authors of Vietnamese texts about women insist that women produce on what they call "an equal footing with men." Indeed, "the idea of equality, participation in the electorate, and an independence movement on terms of shared sacrifice" initially drew women to support Ho Chi Minh and the communist movement as early as the 1930s in Vietnam. (40) Literacy, equal pay for equal work, maternity leaves, and spousal choice were also integral elements of this ideology--familiar demands, not surprisingly, since Ho Chi Minh had been educated in the West. However, though some changes have occurred (e.g., polygamy has been outlawed), the promises made by the communists have not all been fulfilled, in part, because, while the government maintains control in many areas of private life, it has not created an economic safety net to provide for the basic needs of all citizens. Given the multiple demands made on Vietnamese women during war and after, it should come as no surprise that women's contemporary complaints arise around what Western feminists would call "second shift" issues, or as they are framed in Vietnam, the "'double burden' of work in society and work at home." (41) The woman must "work in the rice fields, in society, in the office and factory. She takes care of the children and holds the secondary job." (42) Most scholars recognize, as Tuyet et al. write, that "in the process of economic restructuring women are much more affected than men," though they maintain that women are able to quickly adapt themselves to new circumstances." (43) The female migrants and other urban dwellers increasingly take on jobs in the "unofficial economic sector" that provide no social, health, or long-term economic benefits.

The definition of "gender equality" deployed in Vietnam, then, entails the "gender-based labour division," creating a separate but equal logic that can be at odds with itself. (44) Tuyet et al. argue that traditional relations between wives and husbands have changed; according to a 1994 study 96.5 percent of wives devote themselves to sick husbands, while 78.7 percent of husbands will wholeheartedly care for sick wives, proving "today men and women have equal rights: mutual respect, concern and care for each other." (45) Yet the authors find no contradiction in the numerical discrepancy cited here, nor in going on to describe the distinct roles of men and women within the family structure, for example, the disproportionate amount of housework taken on by women (46) In Vietnamese state-produced publications such as *Images of Vietnamese Women*, *Female Migrant Labour*, or the *Vietnamese Women's Museum Brochure*, both differences in rights, which are supposedly ameliorated politically, and those of biology, which are immutable though celebrated, are acknowledged, and the dilemma for contemporary women is how to be all things at once. Though these representations clearly have their limitations, a more attentive reading of their imagery suggests the ways that a Vietnamese history of war and imperialism, as well as a present state oscillating between socialism and capitalism, both encourage and sabotage women's ambitions in contemporary Vietnam.

THROUGH VIETNAMESE AMERICAN EYES

Rather than producing state-sanctioned, historical documents of the sort found in Vietnam, first- and first-and-a-half-generation Vietnamese American women have developed a new series of

autobiographical novels to tell their stories. Yet both genres seek to articulate a distinct ideology of womanhood rooted in historical tradition and present-day exigencies. Recent United States publications include Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) and Dao Strom's *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* (2003), among others. For the purposes of this essay I will focus on Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. (47) While there are many important differences among these autobiographical novels, for all, the protagonists' childhood memories of their young lives in their native country are interwoven with the tall tales of adults, which together constitute the women's connections to Vietnam and their negotiations of contemporary gender roles in the United States. As Cao reveals in an interview, her shifting between past and present, Vietnam and the United States, her mother and daughter protagonists, and, I would add, Vietnamese and Vietnamese American notions of womanhood in *Monkey Bridge* is "natural" because "as an immigrant what happens is that when you look at an event or an object even in the present world, very often you view it the way you view it now as well as the way you view it in a different cultural context ... through two different cultural lenses almost simultaneously without even necessarily noticing it." Cao points out that this simultaneity is now signified by an ampersand rather than a hyphen---Vietnamese & American versus Vietnamese -American--not only representing a dual rather than a melded ethnic-national identity, but also gesturing toward the particular "double burdens" of gender and ethnicity, cultural responsibility and individual desire, war and refuge, that occupy many women refugees. (48)

In *Monkey Bridge*, a Vietnamese American teenager, Mai, attempts to unravel the mysteries of her family's history in Vietnam, which are most obviously embodied in her inscrutable mother, Thanh, who has also fled to the United States. As Mai notes repeatedly, Thanh's napalm scarred and stroke-ravaged "body had become a battlefield, she a war wound." (49) Thus when Mai feels "the tug of my mother through my body," she means not only her biological mother, but also her war-torn motherland and its notions of motherhood, heroism, and sacrifice. (50) However, the seminal and traumatic war experience is also embedded in Mai, who wants desperately to escape memories of war-torn Vietnam. In the opening scene of the novel, Mai is visiting her mother in an American hospital after her stroke. There Mai endures flashbacks of her work in a Saigon hospital during the war, focusing on the explosion in an operating room that killed and injured many staff members: "Who could have known before the man was cut up that an unexploded grenade, fired from a launcher--not a dead bullet--had lodged in the hollowness of his stomach?" This man and his dangerous load can be read metaphorically as representing how war becomes literally entwined into the beings of survivors like Mai, a "subverted interior" an "implant in [her] brain" as she calls it, that leads her to see and know things in multiple ways. (51)

Mai and her mother embrace television's *The Bionic Woman* as a transnational symbol of heroic womanhood, "a little bit of Shaolin kung fu mixed with American hardware, American know-how." (52) *The Bionic Woman*'s "bionic ears" are compared explicitly to Thanh's ears, the length of which were believed to provide her with longevity and good luck. Indeed, Thanh claims in her

diary that her ears heroically hear and then reanimate the lives of generations of young women whose inability to produce virginal blood on their wedding nights was announced by an earless roasted pig paraded through their villages--a ritual that led to their and their family's ruins and even deaths: "Inside my ears were the rage and revenge of every girl from every generation before whose return with a shameful and earless pig had destroyed her family's lives--lives my mother had now gloriously resurrected," the mother reveals in her secret diary (53) Cao has spoken of the Vietnamese martial arts novels that inspire Vietnamese girls today and influence such scenes. While American fairytales with their evil stepmothers and Prince Charmings promote a "kind of envy and competition among girls and women" these Vietnamese novels often feature handsome, skilled male protagonists, but "the main female is always his equal or better and always self-sufficient and knows how to do martial arts just as well as her male counterpart." (54) Thus Mai's desire to leave home and study at Mount Holyoke is, as she explains to her mother, the "equivalent of a martial artist leaving her village to study kung fu at the Shaolin Temple." (55) While in her interview Cao concedes that Vietnamese culture is traditional, restraining women in many ways, she also reminds us that women "are not seen as needing male rescue ...the idea of one's identity deriving completely from the husband or the father, I do not see it." This comment indicates, as Michele Janette also argues, that Cao is keenly aware of the Orientalist ways Western feminists might view Vietnamese gender roles, as well as the woman warrior tradition still dominant in Vietnam. (56)

The woman warrior tradition is an integral part of Mai's story as well, particularly that of the "sword-wielding Trung sister, the greatest of all Vietnamese warriors." The fact that Mai imaginatively inhabits the life of this Trung sister three times in the novel indicates that despite her seemingly successful integration to America, she continues to see her life in battle terms. However, she clarifies that the Vietnamese traditions she invokes are not those developed by an "empire-building country" but derive rather from "a history of defending, not crossing boundaries"--not the United States, but Vietnam. (57) Thus, when she shows up at Mount Holyoke for the "dreaded college interview," she draws strength from the "brilliant battlefield maneuvers" of the Trungs," (58) The art of war the sisters develop is one where the woman warrior does not "oppose an adversary head-on" but rather steps aside, pulling the enemy (in the folktale, a tiger) "forward, deeper in the direction of its own motion." (59) While some scholars read this "all-out guerilla warfare, the poor person's weapon," as uneasily representing Vietcong tactics within the context of the novel, one might read it at the same time as a gendered strategy. The ability to "turn even an armed force one hundred times our strength into a terrorized one" is the strategy of the physically weak but strategically superior force--the strategy of women who might deliberately make the enemy "see a weak front" but who have "strengths--columns of reserves" from which to draw upon. (60) Again, given the cultural context in which Mai operates, one could argue that she is manipulating American stereotypes about meek Asian women, ironically, by drawing upon traditional Vietnamese women's roles.

This warrior strategy is not deployed literally in the novel; rather Mai, her mother, and the other women in the refugee community transform the ancient tactics of martial arts into rhetorical and even economic strategies meant to help them not only survive, but thrive, in a culture which would underestimate them because of racist and gendered stereotypes and situate them in disturbing militaristic narratives. At her college interview Mai chooses not to confront head-on the "preconceived notions" of the interviewer about Vietnam but rather to rhetorically weave "drunken-monkey style" and master the "art of evasion and distraction." Janette labels this strategy a "guerilla irony" that makes Vietnamese experience "indigestible" to American readers.(61) Thus when the interviewer asks curiously what it was like in Vietnam, Mai describes the weather--clearly not the sort of sensational or tragic detail the interviewer was soliciting. As Mai claims later, "stereotypes aren't my enemy, as long as we tinker with them in a way that strikes an American chord," suggesting that she turns the rhetorical weight and heft of stereotypes to her advantage. (62)

And just as the Trung sisters trained an army of women to fight together, to lie in wait, and to stalk, the older women immigrants who dominate the refugee community work together to set up a "hui, a community pot of money designed to give those who would otherwise be unqualified for bank loans immediate access to a lump sum of cash." (63) This strategy is in keeping with Vietnamese notions of female economic ambition coupled with communal tendencies. Later on, Thanh writes that her daughter is "under an illusion of freedom. Unless you create your own circumstances, make your own luck, determine your own fate, forge your own path through uncharted territory, you're not free in her eyes." (64) Despite the fact that the hui members discover "their favorite English word was 'entrepreneur'," notions of American individualism and capitalism do not suffice; Thanh believes in the pull of the past and the power of the community. (65) Indeed, her entrepreneurial venture is directly derived from her Vietnamese past (she will produce "authentic" Vietnamese pickles for local restaurants) and from the pain encoded therein: "anyone with the right know-how and patience could massage the bitter sweetness of nostalgia into hard cash. (66) Just as contemporary Vietnamese pragmatically market war culture through venues such the nightclub "Apocalypse Now," the embalmed giant tortoise supposedly gunned down by United States forces in Hanoi, the Hanoi Hilton, the Museum of the War of American Aggression, and the Cu Chi tunnels, replete with wax figure soldiers, Mai's mother is willing to traffic in sensual memories of Vietnam--which are attached to war for Americans and Vietnamese refugees alike.

As the novel unfolds further, Cao comments on traditional Vietnamese "gender equality" and the Mother myth from a distance. As Mai is about to leave home for college, she begins to understand her mother's life in Vietnam. Thanh leaves a diary account of her marriage that draws on the language of battle and exile to make sense of women's gendered positions. (67) As she prepares to move to her new husband's family's home at the age of fifteen, she claims that her marriage has been a love match; however, Thanh didn't realize at the time that she had lost a

silent yet decisive battle: "there had been no singular calamity that conspired to vanquish me, no remarkable catastrophe that would warrant a battlefield badge or a medal." Like other Vietnamese women, she lives in a sort of perpetual exile, even in her own country, as she is driven from her parents' home and into the home of her new in-laws. "This, of course, was the beginning of my emigration, years before my second one, to the United States," Thanh writes, explaining that she is a "special kind of exile ... in [her] own country." (68) Married Vietnamese women are already immigrants, a diasporic population within the home country. The traditional expectations of her husband "may not be much different from wars and other acts more stark and obvious in their capacity for violence," she realizes. (69) Cao focuses not on physical violence within this relationship but rather on an intellectual and emotional distancing and abuse that causes a psychological disaffection similar to that suffered by some refugees and colonized peoples.

And it is through the tropes of war and exile that Thanh can connect her gendered experience as a Vietnamese woman to the immigrant experience of her increasingly Americanized daughter: she writes of her in-laws' properties, "a house, even another's house, a kitchen, a country store, each of these things could be made to have its own hidden beauty. That, I suppose must be what my daughter has learned to see in this new country we have suddenly found ourselves in, a beauty that she finds palpable but which seems to be beyond my reach. (70) The mother's exile is situated geographically in the domestic realm (a house, a kitchen), while the daughter is located in the vast expanse of a "new country." However, they are both forced to identify the "beauty" of their adopted surroundings and to fit themselves to its contours.

Thanh's body becomes a living symbol of the fragmentation of war and exile; her stroke makes her appear to her daughter "altogether undone like bits of glass reglued." However, later we learn that the old burn scars that mark her face are not the result of a domestic cooking fire, as Mai had always been told but rather are "seared by a fire dropped into the free-fire zone from a plane." (71) Thus the wounds supposedly suffered in the name of domesticity are both superseded by and politicized as the wounds of war. Cao eventually makes this connection between war and Motherhood explicit. In the end of the novel, Thanh commits suicide, and in doing so reclaims the role of the traditional Mother, but here for individualistic ends, to save her daughter from bad family karma. As Cao states in an interview, "the epitome of female virtue would be a woman who, even though she is very strong and could be alone and does not need male protection, nonetheless decides to sacrifice herself completely for her husband and the children." (72) Thanh is, then, a self-sacrificing hero within the domestic realm, protecting her family line. However, the passage describing Thanh's suicide is followed immediately by a description of the Buddhist monks who immolated themselves to protest the war, an act of "supreme devotion"; (73) this juxtaposition gives the Mother's suicide political and social significance beyond the family. Thus Cao negotiates an Americanized, a traditional Vietnamese, and even a socialized view of the Mother in her text. Indeed, motherhood--and subsequently war--become transnational categories,

"the same in every language," according to Cao. "The true division in this world, I believe, is not the division founded on tribe, nationality, or religion, but the division between those of us who are mothers and those who aren't," Thanh concludes, denying the male/female dualism integral to Western feminist paradigms and instead announcing an alternative duality--mothers versus nonmothers. (74)

Cao replaces one dualism--"tribe, nationality, or religion" versus outsiders--with another that is even more central to some feminisms in its essentialism--mother versus nonmother. Ultimately her novel does not eschew the Mother power of Vietnamese tradition but rather transforms and extends it, in this case, to the first-and-a-half generation of refugees who become not literal but figurative mothers to their parents, creating a "transmaternalism" of sorts. Largely because of Thanh's lack of facility with English, Mai becomes her translator and protector in the new country, using her English skills and her growing knowledge of American culture to do her mother's bidding. This often requires deception on Mai's part, in keeping with the strategies of the Trung sisters, and elicits her embarrassment. But she recognizes that she has no other choice as she "scoop [s her] mother out of harm's way and give[s] her sanctuary." (75) And though she is ultimately unable to "save" her mother, Mai can use her defensive techniques to try and provide her with the safe space the perpetual exile has never had.

THROUGH HMONG EYES

While Vietnamese women claim the label of perpetual exile, the Hmong as a whole are a deeply diasporic culture, for they have never truly had a "homeland." Ines M. Miyares demonstrates in her study of Hmong immigrants that the strong cultural identity of the Hmong developed precisely because of their existence as a migratory people who have during the last four thousand years "dispersed throughout southern China, northern Vietnam, northern Thailand, northern Myanmar, northern Laos, and since the fall of the Royal Lao government in 1975, in Australia, France, Canada, Argentina, and the United states." (76) To maintain their traditional ways, despite lacking a common geographic space or national identity, the Hmong tended to live in relatively isolated mountain communities in Southeast Asia, where they organized themselves in patriarchal clans and farmed rice, corn, and poppies. Most scholars believe that they had no written language until the 1950s and relied on oral narratives, material artifacts, and animist beliefs to convey cultural traditions.

Some scholars assert that the word "Hmong" translates roughly as "free." (77) Given the ideological importance of "freedom" to Americans generally, and feminists in particular, it is not surprising that this translation of "Hmong" has remained attractive for many in the United States. Regardless of its direct meaning, the search for--or maintenance of, depending on one's point of view--cultural autonomy is clearly as significant for the Hmong as it is for the Vietnamese.

Indeed, it is this passion for freedom that led the Hmong to work with the Americans during the Vietnam War, joining forces with the American CIA to wage a covert war against the North Vietnamese, who the Hmong feared would take over the Southeast Asian peninsula and once again disrupt their lives. Despite widespread belief among the Hmong that the CIA promised them an "autonomous kingdom" if they should suffer defeat, in 1969 the US government concluded that the United States was under no obligation to help the Hmong. (78) Subsequently, when Laos fell to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese after American troop withdrawal, "100,000 Hmong perished and an equal number fled across the Mekong." (79) Since the Pathet Lao murdered or marginalized the Hmong who remained in Laos, making their traditional mountain lives impossible, contemporary representations of Hmong women in Southeast Asia often derive from groups residing in Vietnam or Thailand, either in the traditional rural communities that have survived or in the refugee camps set up for the persecuted Hmong after the Communist takeover. Given this context of war, flight, and contact with Western culture, contemporary representations of Hmong women in Southeast Asia draw upon traditional Hmong notions of female subservience and domesticity and new notions of freedom claimed for the lives of modern women. For example, while ethnic Viet women are represented in the Women's Museum in Hanoi as engaging in the public world of national defense and politics, ethnic Hmong women appear only on the floor that features the traditional handicraft products of various tribal cultures. In this way, they are made marginal to national narratives and ahistorical, as their handicrafts are shown to be unchanging and irrelevant to contemporary concerns. However, when one understands the history and subsequent recorded culture of the Hmong, as well as the contemporary roles of Hmong women in the capitalist economy, these handicrafts come to have significant meanings. (80) Discussions of women's needlework in the postwar era in particular draw on the past and the future roles of Hmong women, as well as their exploitation of militaristic narratives. For example, Jane Hamilton-Merritt claims that the ancient Hmong did have a written language despite claims to the contrary, but that it was outlawed by the Chinese under penalty of death. It was women, she asserts, who cleverly kept their alphabet alive by including its letters in intricate, hieroglyphic-like patterns passed on generation after generation from mother to daughter to adorn tribal dress. During the years of fleeing and disruption, however, the Hmong lost the ability to use their written language. Many twentieth-century Hmong women who still painstakingly embroider or batik ancient symbols and ideographs of historical events, are not able to read or write the language which their needles preserved. (81)

This claim gives additional historical resonance to the handicrafts still done by Hmong girls and women. Not only marginalized in Southeast Asia, but often trivialized in the United States, despite recent efforts to garner appreciation for such women's work (e.g., quilting), the handiwork of Hmong women has been instrumental in maintaining cultural traditions and, in an oral culture, likely transmitting traces of a repressed written language--usually thought to be the purview of the patriarchy.

Indeed, as Dwight Conquergood continues, there was "no tradition of graphic representational art" in Hmong textiles before war in Southeast Asia. Influenced by life in Thai refugee camps and contact with the West, Hmong women have devised new modes of signification--altering traditional forms for Western tastes and developing embroidered story cloths that illustrate traditional Hmong tales and more recent war and exodus stories. (82) Indeed, story cloths that detail escapes on foot out of Laos and across the Mekong river to Thailand are the most prized by Western collectors and the museums that have begun to display Hmong handicrafts in the United States. (83) This needlework is produced primarily out of financial necessity, demonstrating the ways that Hmong women have managed to accommodate traditional work to the needs of their families in the new economies they negotiate. (84) American buyers symbolically "consume" conventional narratives of the "tragic" war in Southeast Asia, notions of the Hmong as ahistorical and unchanging craft workers, and Hmong women in particular as bound to tradition.

In the recent book *Through H'Mong Eyes*, published by the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, the Hmong girls who narrate the photographic text also situate Hmong women in a contemporary, economic context. Provided with cameras by a program called Photovoice, Hmong girls who live near the tourist destination of Sa Pa, Vietnam, documented their lives in word and image for the book. In this way, we see girls and young women who are engaged in the traditional domestic work of childrearing, cloth dying, and embroidery. Yet we also glimpse a new economy where girls are integral to the financial well-being of their families, much as other nationalistic Vietnamese texts extol the importance of Viet women to the national economy. One girl writes of the traditional gender roles in Hmong families that "each daughter-in-law in a family owns a barrel of indigo, because daughters-in-law have to dye and make clothes for their husbands' parents and brothers ... No boys know how to make indigo and hemp. That is the job of mothers and daughters." (85) Thus the cloth-making work is neatly relegated to women in conventional ways and women provide domestic labor for their husband's families upon marriage.

The meanings and value of this traditional work have also been transformed. Another twelve-year-old claims important and lucrative public work for women as well: "first I came to town with my mother, and she taught me how to sell [Hmong handicrafts]," she writes. "I like selling. If I stayed at home, we wouldn't have any money and food to eat. Now I am the only one who goes selling in the family and I give my parents all the money I make." (86) Thus working with the tourists in the village excuses girls from domestic chores and gives them a powerful place in the family structure. Another girl writes that she would like to go to school so that she "will be able to go working in a hotel" and thus make a bigger financial contribution to her family. (87) Yet another ten-year-old proclaims she would like to have three girls and two boys when she has children; "I like having girls more," she explains, "because girls can work and earn money to help parents. Boys are very shy, they only stay at home." (88) Here she inverts traditional eastern

and Hmong stereotypes of boys' assumed worth and earning potential versus girls' home-bound status.

Though these Hmong girls live within the national borders of Vietnam, they do, of course, have a vexed relationship to Vietnamese national identity and ideology. And so the more individualistic and even rebellious claims made in this book could be seen as part of a distinctive ethnic tradition as well as evidence of an emerging national economy. A sixteen-year-old married girl writes that even though her husband's family is well-off, she still wants to "work to save some money, so that [she] can buy whatever [she] wants." (89) This audacious claim also resonates with notions of Western individualism. However, this project was endowed by the Toyota Foundation and supported by the ethnology museum, which is funded by the French government. One could argue that this artifact of tourism is designed to appeal to Westerners eager for depictions of outspoken and independent girls. Indeed, there is an interesting confluence between the representations of Hmong women's work in the Vietnam Women's Museum, the book on young Hmong women, and understandings of Hmong women's work in the United States, for all focus on traditional handiworks, women's increasingly enterprising roles in Hmong culture, and the economics of ethnic arts. As Conquergood insightfully observes, "Perhaps more than any other feature of Hmong culture, the textile artworks have been accessible and attractive" to Westerners and Americans in particular; (90) apparently, they showcase both women's "private" domestic work and their entrepreneurial spirits.

THROUGH HMONG AMERICAN EYES

Because cultural identity is the defining feature of Hmongness, rather than geographic or national association, and because "kinship ties define culture and priorities," (91) traditional women's gender roles in the Hmong American community are freighted with extraordinary importance. For women (and men) to resist Hmong kinship roles and the "oppressions" they entail is for this migratory Hmong culture to disappear. However, one might also argue that the emergence of Hmong American womanhood is not only the result of Western feminism's unmooring of traditional Hmong womanhood but also is a new and innovative extension of adaptive and yet persistent Hmong traditions. As Naly Yang writes in her poem, "Spirit Trails," "My plig will always wander, / though many may try to tie it down. / ... / And the shaman's cloth, / made to bind, / falls not upon my legacy." (92) Yang rewrites traditional belief systems that argue for the bound nature of the female soul, much as Cao rewrites the Trung sisters into modern warriors.

NancyDonnelly agrees that Hmong culture may not be as aggressively gender-divided as traditional readings would suggest, writing that "the seeds of gender equality are present in Hmong folk tales and in the concept that both men and women need each other to achieve maturity"--a version of the "separate but equal" philosophy evident in Vietnamese texts. (93)

Recent Hmong immigrants to the United States are not as sanguine about life in Southeast Asia as the girls in *Through H'Mong Eyes*, nor as optimistic about the plight of Hmong American women. Many of the women whose stories Sucheng Chan transcribes in her collection of oral narratives, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, are empowered, the book suggests, by age and distance to tell much darker stories of Hmong life on both continents. The unique features of new Hmong American written narratives also shape their content. As Mai Neng Moua, editor of *Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, the first landmark anthology of Hmong American writing in the United States, contends, Hmong texts are "emerging" forms that bridge the oral and material traditions of Hmong culture and the imperatives of Western literacy. Moua explains that in traditional Hmong culture there "was no separation between what was art and what was culture," so that daily activities such as storytelling, cloth-making, metal-working, and even the construction of traditional homes all communicated emotions in ways that extended beyond "plain language." (94) Thus transcriptions of oral narratives and the material cultures they seek to convey are central to this new Hmong American literature.

In *Bamboo among the Oaks*, we find a number of Hmong American women writers who are quite critical of gender relations in the ethnic community, both in Southeast Asia and in America. In "A Good Hmong Woman," True Hang transcribes the abuses suffered by her mother in Southeast Asia at the hands of her sadistic in-laws. Indeed, according to Hmong custom, "marrying is called 'becoming a daughter-in-law' (ua nyab)," and young Hmong brides entered the homes of their husband's family with few rights. (95) Like Cao's mother, Thanh, Hang's mother recounts feeling like an exile in her new home. Hang's mother-in-law berates her, refuses to eat the food she prepares, ignores her, and even encourages the son and husband to beat and kill his young wife. Hang thinks "I am their daughter-in-law. They married me, and I came to live with them. Why don't they know how to use my strength?" (96) Notice the use of pronouns here: the girl has not married just her husband but his whole family, "they," connoting a communal subjectivity opposed to notions of individualism. As well, she understands that her "strength" is of most value to the family, though in this case they see it as a threat rather than a valuable commodity and it elicits their abuse.

These abusive practices are carried to America. For example, in the poem "broken," by Pa Xiong, the author depicts crippling domestic abuse:

I watched him hurt her verbalizing and emotionalizing scars into her childhood and her womanhood ... I watched her receive three years of his fists three years of blue and purple around her neck and in her heart. I watched. (97) Xiong's reference to the "purple heart" could also be a subtle nod to militaristic modes of understanding domestic life; it is the women who deserve recognition for their sacrificial service in family battles. However, what Westerners call domestic abuse is a recurrent theme in writing by Hmong American women, as well is in interview transcripts--the dominant mode of communication for illiterate first-generation women. Indeed,

in the introduction to her collection of interviews with Hmong women, Chan speaks to the difficulty of accounting openly for Hmong women's experiences in the United States. Her cadre of Hmong students assigned to carry out interview projects with family members found they could get more candid responses when they left women tape recorders, because the men who attended the interviews would often interrupt the women, and the women felt inhibited from speaking freely about painful topics. (98) Donnelly posits that domestic violence and divorce rates escalated in Hmong American households after settlement in the United States because men felt they were losing their basis of command in the household--thus spousal domestic abuse was exacerbated rather than ameliorated by immigration to this "freer" society. A popular joke among both men and women claims, "When we get on the plane to go back to Laos, the first thing we will do is beat up the women!" Donnelly explains that this joke registers Hmong men's frustrating unemployment, "the sudden economic value placed on women's work and the men's fear of losing power in their families. The state could circumscribe the authority of a man even within his own household, for instance by forbidding him to beat his wife." (99) Physical violence against women often accompanies extreme cultural transformations.

A Western feminist might be tempted to read this confessional literature as the product of a more open society and Western feminism's influence on Hmong worldviews. As Chan observes, echoing the views of many other scholars, "Given the greater freedom as well as greater protection that women in the United States enjoy, it is not surprising that several available studies indicate Hmong women are adjusting more eagerly than Hmong men to life in America." (100) One cannot deny that such claims are true in many respects. Young Hmong women of the first-and-a-half or "Rising Sun" generation are beginning to postpone marriage and childbearing beyond their teen years, to attain higher education, and even to live outside the family home. And protecting women from physical assault is clearly a priority. But this focus on "liberation" in the United States, the assertions that women like it better here than at home, is a bit troubling, for it does not acknowledge what has been lost in the transition, nor the fact that life has been chaotic in war-torn Southeast Asia for years before immigration to the United States, making the immigration route and cultural transition more complicated and even violent than it might have been otherwise. For example, in "Vue Vang's Life Story as told to her daughter," Maijue Xiong, transcribed in Chan's edition, 48-year-old Vang says: I feel that there are good and bad things about America. The good part is we don't have to sweat over a piece of land to produce food for every meal. The bad part is, even though I am told that the United States is a land of freedom, I feel no freedom at all. Freedom, to me, is being able to farm our own land, raise our cattle, and own our own homes without obligation to anyone.(101)

Vang does not accept capitalistic notions of "freedom," though she does long for communal ownership of land--or more properly, proprietorship--and a sense of self-sufficiency that resonates with American notions of rugged individualism. But not any land will do; she misses her family in Laos desperately and expresses a corporeal connection to the homeland: "Day after

day, I long to return to my country. My heart is not here in America" she claims. (102) Mayli Vang, in her poem entitled "We Women of the Hmong Culture," writes We women of the Hmong culture may now clean the plates of what the men have left ... They call this a privilege, to be seated at the table of those who were seated before Yet some she-witched women "possessed by this newfound knowledge of excessive freedom" are weary of participating in such patriarchal rituals of the old motherland. (103) While Hmong girls in Vietnam write confidently of new gendered economic roles, Hmong American girls are witness to Old World oppressions. However, notice in this passage that freedom is "excessive"--not a word with positive connotations; the fact that the women are "she-witched" and "possessed" by the new knowledge suggests that there is something magical and perhaps even evil to some about women who now resist their native culture almost against their own wills. While the mealtime rituals are "patriarchal," the native land is the "mother," connoting a tension between Southeast Asian maternalism and Western feminism that Hmong American women must negotiate.

Interestingly, "motherhood" does not seem to be fetishized in Hmong culture to the same extent that it is in Vietnamese lore or Western cultures. Miyares claims that while "the family is elastic in character," "clan membership is permanent," and the clan's structures and hierarchies supersede those of the nuclear family. (104) Thus while Hmong women's value in the traditional economy was based on their fecundity and their labor potential, the extended family is much more important than the nuclear family in organizing domestic relations, in some sense decentering mothers from familial dramas. Neither is home "home" in the American sense, again thwarting efforts to frame women's work within conventional private/public dichotomies. "Home or tsev to the Hmong is not locational, but relational." (105) Most scholars see women's work in Southeast Asia and here in the United States as traditionally divided with Hmong men attending to public affairs and work while Hmong women remain in the home raising children and teaching traditions; and it does seem to be true that they participate in a deeply patriarchal culture where women are subject to the men in their lives through adolescent marriages, polygamy, so-called "catch-hand" marriages, and the like. (106) However, many Hmong American women's descriptions of their lives in Southeast Asia emphasize their multiple responsibilities within the family and their incredible endurance for physical labor. The worst label that a Hmong girl can get is that she is "lazy," because then "no man would want her"; Hmong wives, too, fear the rumors that they are not hardworking, which are "spread when villagers do not like a woman." (107) Not surprisingly, given these gendered expectations, a constant refrain runs through the narratives of women who came to adulthood in Southeast Asia: the enormous amount of work they had to take on there and the way that their work lives in the United States have been altered. (108) Ka Xiong tells of a childhood filled with work and the surrogate mothering of siblings and orphaned relatives. "I worked so hard that I used up two bamboo buckets every year ... My body ached constantly and my palms and fingers were covered with calluses. My clothes would be soaked with sweat by noon" (109) Mai Moua explains that rather than working in the fields, her husband stayed at home, entertained guests, and ate up the

food as fast as she made it. "Since my husband had his personal business, my children and I had to do all the clearing and planting of the fields." She explains further "ever since I have been in America, I have not done anything strenuous except to babysit my grandchildren. I am happy to be alive today, seeing my family so well and happy." (110) However, she's not happy because she is "liberated" from her husband in the United States but, rather, simply because she doesn't have to work so hard. Ironically, Xiong goes on to say "now that I no longer have to work all day, I do not feel important anymore. When I worked to make money, I used my intelligence as best I could. But now I am useless. I have to wait for you children to help me with everything." (111) Ironically, this woman measured her cultural worth by her public work.

Thus it is fascinating that these refugee women do not see themselves as having been "working women" in Southeast Asia, despite the fact that they were not only managing their homes, but also running the family businesses--"entrepreneurial enterprises," as Donnelly describes them. (112) Indeed, one younger Hmong girl comments on how her family is unable to see how she will both attend college/have a career and raise children. Yet all of the women who single-handedly raised young families and ran family farms in Laos would, by Western standards, clearly be working "outside" the home. And some women continue laboring in this country, one described in Mai Meng Noua's poem "My Mother is a Coffee Table":

She is on all fours /One for her three young children/Two for the unpaid bills /Three for her broken English/ Four for ... help!" (113).

One might argue, then, that ambitious young Hmong women of the "Rising Sun" generation are merely following in the footsteps of their mothers in hoping to negotiate family and work roles. Indeed, they hope to step out of their mothers' footsteps to the extent that English skills, education, and smaller families can raise them up from laboring "on all fours." While physical work of the sort performed in Southeast Asia may no longer serve as the sole measure of a woman's worth, her intellectual labor in school and in the modern workplace takes its place.

Similarly, puritanical and yet liberated Western notions of female sexuality may complicate understandings of young women's romantic lives and gender roles. Maijue Xiong writes a story of a girl whose parents, to assure her good reputation, forbid her from going out with boys alone; however, "having adopted the American belief that an individual should be free to choose his or her friends, many times I have gone out behind my parents' back," she tells us. (114) Thus, she is seemingly freer to interact with potential romantic partners--even if she has to sneak out of the house to do so. In this sense, she is conforming to Western feminism's ideas that it is sexual freedom and modernization that signal women's "progress." But Donnelly reminds us that "easy premarital sex" was a fact of Hmong village life as boys and girls played "sexual games" together. An illegitimate pregnancy did not, apparently, confer any moral disapprobation upon the girl and might even enhance her status, because it proved her fertility. (115) And yet M.S.Vang, in "943," describes her father beating her ferociously and then forcing her to marry

when he discovered she was sneaking out on dates with a young Hmong man the in the United States. The father claims that it is not his violent behavior that would force the household to lose face in the eyes of the "world," but, rather, "this whore who would rather be a dog." However, the story suggests that it is the protagonist's stubborn willingness to speak in a "disrespectful tone" and to refuse to "dress cleanly" that infuriates the father as much as his imaginings of her sexual peccadilloes. (116) We also learn that the father cannot support the family financially and that the protagonist is the offspring of his second wife, circumstances which also suggest his fury is attached to the disintegration of his power in the United States and not necessarily to the daughter's sexual behavior. Her defiance and her father's violence are as much the product of Hmong traditions of resistance, intractability, insularity, and bravery as of Western feminism's influence.(117)

The invisibility of Hmong culture and history is highlighted in the foundational narratives of war that thread through almost all Hmong American texts. In the poem "D.C.," for example, Mai Neng Moua stands by the Vietnam War Memorial and claims "It's not enough that I am here. I want the imprints of their names. Some American proof that they were known. Their courage recognized. The sacrifices of their lives acknowledged." (118)

The park ranger in the poem tells the narrator that to connect to the emotion of the monument, she had to know someone who died in the Vietnam War; the narrator's visceral reaction and silent cataloguing of the family members who died in the conflict writes the Hmong into an American genealogy from which they have been formally excised.

CONCLUSIONS

There are profound differences among the texts I have examined in this essay: those produced in Southeast Asia are published by state-sponsored or colonialist entities; the American texts are often explicitly fictionalized. And yet American publishing is not free from ideological forces; nor do the nonfiction texts produced in Southeast Asia present a whole and complete picture of life there. Too, there are significant differences between Hmong and Vietnamese histories and cultures in Asia, as well as in the experiences of immigration to the United States, which I know I have only just begun to suggest here. At the same time, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Cheng Lok Chua remind us that Southeast Asians share "multicultural histories" and speak from "shared experiences, as refugees, as first-generation immigrants moving from a colonial history to a postcolonial present, with common social, political, and cultural concerns and traditions" that are "peculiarly resonant with contemporary social and cultural phenomena" in recent American history.(119)

Consequently, there is something to be gained from a transcultural, transnational analysis of the sort I have begun here--one that not only explores the insights of Western feminism in a global context but also demonstrates the potential global influence on American gender formations in

particular. I am not calling for complete moral relativism or arguing that women are "better off" in Southeast Asia than in the United States--or, necessarily, the opposite; however, a colonizing view of Southeast Asian women nurtured in the name of military action can blind one to the strengths of individual women and of a women's history operating within political and cultural frameworks deemed less progressive. As becomes apparent in retrospect, though socialist states are far from ideal, they have also turned out not to be the disaster for many women imagined by the West. A socialist ethos and emerging capitalist ethos have each been sited in ancient women's cultures in Southeast Asia, recasting the public/private gender divide in ways still unimaginable in the West. Yet at the same time, modern women's work and private lives have been co-opted and exploited by Eastern militarism and current economic needs far more viscerally than they have been by Western cultural arrogance. Finally, when Southeast Asian women write as Americans, they highlight the gains of Western feminism and the weaknesses of their native cultures, while also grappling with the weaknesses of the former and the strengths of the latter. Looking through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American eyes, we can embrace this ambiguity and temper the lasting effects of myopic and militaristic understandings of Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American women's gender roles. Like traversing Cao's thin, unsteady, and unaccommodating monkey bridges, such intricate yet laborious analysis is, perhaps, the only way to "propel [our] selves forward and across" perceived geographical and cultural divides. (120)

NOTES

I want to thank my colleagues, Jack Shindler and Kimberly Larsson, for procuring the Freeman Foundation Grant that partially funded my travels in Southeast Asia in December 2003 and for their gracious and able guidance while abroad. I also want to acknowledge associate editor Catherine Kaplan and the anonymous readers at *Frontiers* for their meticulous and insightful suggestions.

(1.) Alexander Soucy agrees that "a perusal of university library stacks will ... produce a crushing number of books about [the Vietnam War] and the events that surrounded it, and little on the culture of the Vietnamese people." "Vietnamese Warriors, Vietnamese Mothers: State Imperatives in the Portrayal of Women," *Canadian Women's Studies/Les Cahiers de al Femme* 19, no. 4 (2000): 121. Monique T.D. Truong succinctly describes what the word "Vietnam" connotes to Americans: "Vietnam = war/conflict; Vietnam veteran = United States soldier; Vietnam era = a time period of United States military involvement and therefore heightened consciousness about Vietnam; Vietnam film = films dealing with the United States involvement in Vietnam; Vietnam literature = texts about this United States involvement ... The unstated, understood agency of possession belongs to the United States; the United States' Vietnam War." "Vietnamese American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 242.

(2.) Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 42.

(3.) For example, Kate Gadow's novel, *Pushed to Shore: A Novel* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2001), winner of the 2001 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction, is about a high school ESL teacher and her relationship with both her Vietnamese and Hmong refugee students. Yet as Sucheng Chan writes, "Thousands of Hmong spent years in Thai refugee camps. Unlike the one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese who were evacuated in late April 1975 by the Americans and allowed into the US under the 'parole' power of the US Attorney General, the Hmong and other ethnic groups from Laos did not win that privilege until December 1975, when Congress admitted 3,466 Hmong under parole ... eventually some 50,000 Hmong had been resettled by the early 1980s." *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 49. According to the 2000 United States census, 1,110,207 Vietnamese Americans and 170,049 Hmong Americans reside in the United States (4.) Amrita Basu, "Introduction," in her *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 1.

(5.) Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity," in their *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 7.

(6.) Militaristic understandings of Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American experiences that situate gender roles within war merely emphasize that "the discourse of 'international' or 'global' feminism relies on political and economic as well as cultural concepts of discrete nations who can be placed into comparative or relational status, always maintaining the west as the center." Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, and Mino Moallem, "Introduction: Between Woman and Nation," in their *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 12.

(7.) Constance S. Richards contends that United States Third World feminism "fails to recognize the relationship of United States Third World feminists to their 'motherland' communities (the diasporic consciousness of Asian, African, and Latina women) and how these relationships constitute the international exchange of culture and politics." *On the Winds and Waves of Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature* (New York: Garland, 2000), 30.

(8.) Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 149.

(9.) As Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem observe, "Women are both of and not of the nation. Between woman and nation is, perhaps, the space or zone where we can deconstruct these monoliths ..." "Introduction: Between Woman and Nation," 12.

(10.) Dwight Conquergood, "Fabricating Culture: The Textile Art of Hmong Refugee Women," in *Performance, Culture and Identity*, eds. Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1992), 234.

(11.) Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage, 1998), 39.

(12.) Richards, *On the Winds*, 1.

(13.) Basu, "Introduction," 7. Karen Gottschang Turner adds that "indigenous, pure Vietnamese culture" is represented as allotting "high status to women" while "foreign influences"--which we can see ranging from Chinese Confucianism to modern Western feminism--are seen as muting these "progressive forces." Turner with Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998),

27. Ashley Pettus also argues that modern media images of women in Vietnam cast "the state's newest vision of modernity (of party-controlled capitalism) as a triumph of primordial national culture." *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 81.

(14.) Le Thi Nham Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman in the New Millennium* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2002), 58. I have maintained the misspellings and grammatical errors found in the texts published in Vietnam throughout this section, feeling that they do not interfere with an understanding of the concepts conveyed.

(15.) *Ibid*, 5.

(16.) Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's journey from War to Peace* (1998; New York: Penguin, 2003), ix.

(17.) Kathleen Barry, "Introduction," in her *Vietnam's Women in Transition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 2. Soucy, "Vietnamese Warriors," 123.

(18.) Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth*, x.

(19.) Bui Thi Kim Quy, "The Vietnamese Women in Vietnam's Process of Change," in *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, ed. Barry, 164-65.

(20.) Turner, *Even the Women*, 14.

(21.) Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 12, 6. Taylor elaborates on the specific tasks assigned to the long-haired warriors on 71-72.

- (22.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Women*, 264, and "Vietnamese Women's Museum," Brochure (Hanoi, Vietnam, 2003).
- (23.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman*, 17.
- (24.) *Ibid*, 10, 11-12.
- (25.) Barry, "Introduction," 9. Turner and Pettus agree, Pettus arguing that contemporary women's movements within Vietnam focus largely on "Vietnamese wom[e]n's entitlement to a better family life" in the private realm rather than "emphasizing women's rights to greater 'public' authority." *Between Sacrifice*, 85.
- (26.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman*, 168-69.
- (27.) *Ibid*, 314.
- (28.) See Linda J. Yarr, "Gender and the Allocation of Time: Impact on the Household Economy," in *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, ed. Barry, 110-22.
- (29.) Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, *Female Labour Migration: Rural Urban* (Hanoi: Women's Publishing House, 2001), 201.
- (30.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman*, 45.
- (31.) Barry, "Introduction," 8.
- (32.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman*, 130.
- (33.) Tien and Ngoc, *Female Labour Migration*, 188-89.
- (34.) *Ibid*, 145.
- (35.) *Ibid*, 142.
- (36.) *Ibid*, 94-95.
- (37.) Li Thi, "Women, Marriage, Family, and Gender Equality," in *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, ed. Barry, 71.
- (38.) Tien and Ngoc, *Female Labour Migration*, 165.
- (39.) Many authors comment on the younger generation's inability to appreciate or emulate the heroic sacrifice of earlier generations. Nguyen Bich Thuom and Mandy Thomas assert that young Vietnamese women strive for "an image of modernity, beauty and desire" an articulation with the global economy--"while also upholding a nationalist moral femininity." "Young and Emergent Post Colonial Sensibilities in Contemporary Vietnam," *Asian Studies Review* 28, no. 2

(2004): 134. Also see Tamara Jack, "Introduction to 'Engendering Postsocialism in Vietnam and China,'" *Asian Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2004): 111--14.

(40.) Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 14. In 1961 the Communist Party outlined women's roles in the "new order": "Women are not only equal to men in society, they are also equal to their husbands. We will abolish inequality between husbands and wives ... as we will abolish polygamy Family property is common property Women are equal to men in standing for elections Women must be free to choose their own professions Since they carry out the same work as men, women are to receive the same pay as men In brief, we plan to liberate all women to be totally free and equal in society and in their families." Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 54-55.

(41.) Yarr, "Gender and the Allocation," 113. Arlie Russell Hochschild with Anne Machung popularized the phrase "the second shift" in the book of that title, where they detail how women who work full-time for pay outside of the home have a second, unpaid full-time job—the second shift—for which they complete all of the domestic work of the family. *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon Books, 1989).

(42.) Tuyet, chief ed., *Images of the Vietnamese Woman*, 71.

(43.) *Ibid*, 36.

(44.) *Ibid*, 35.

(45.) *Ibid*, 141.

(46.) This feminism, emerging by way of socialist ideology, has crucial differences from that nurtured through capitalism. In her consideration of the transition from (socialism to capitalism in Eastern Europe, Ingrid Sandole-Staroste argues that "although notable gains were made, gender equality was not achieved under state socialism, in part, because a complex and contrary belief system, rooted in the patriarchal organization of socialism, prevailed. Given equal rights and opportunities, women and men were not different, but given their biological distinctions, women and men were essentially different. Whereas the former view was officially articulated and dominant, the latter remained unspoken and unchallenged" *Women in Transition: Between Socialism and Capitalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 6-7.

(47.) Le Thi Diem Thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Dao Strom's protagonist, like Cao's, has a mother who has been burned by a cook fire in Vietnam (though as it turns out, Cao's mother has really been burned by napalm). *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003). I have chosen to focus on *Monkey Bridge*, in part, because it is a seminal work in this emerging tradition. And while all of these texts are rooted in the war in Southeast Asia and are concerned with the demands of Eastern and

Western gender roles, *Monkey Bridge*, as the title implies, most succinctly and directly represents the tenuous connections between East and West past and present, and war and peace that I focus on. As Cao describes it the monkey bridge is a "thin, unsteady shimmer of bamboo," an "unaccommodating structure, lacking completely in width and strength," that took the uninitiated by surprise when they realized "they were expected to place their entire body weight on it. And, more than that, propel themselves forward and across." *Monkey Bridge*, 179.

(48.) Pauline Newton, "'Different Cultural Lenses': An Interview with Lan Cao," *Nimrod International Journal* 47, no. 2 (2004): 105,107.

(49.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 7.

(50.) *Ibid*, 15. Claire Stocks explores further how Mai's mother embodies the war-torn landscape, the sexual contamination of women's bodies, the bifurcation of exile, and the persistence of history and bad karma. "Bridging the Gaps: Inescapable History in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37, no. 1 (2004): 83-100.

(51.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 2, 91. Many critics of Vietnamese American writing have remarked upon the way this literature finds its genesis in war. However, Truong warns that it would be erroneous to see these refugees as a "people defined exclusively by the military conflict that forced their resettlement" and chides the many anthology editors who have framed Vietnamese experiences in the United States primarily as Asian "success" stories or situated their experiences in an "overdetermined and mythically constructed past." *Vietnamese American Literature*, 220, 223, 224.

(52.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 9.

(53.) *Ibid*, 52.

(54.) Newton, "Different Cultural Lenses," 50

(55.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 31.

(56.) Newton, "Different Cultural Lenses," 112. Michele Janette, "Guerilla Irony in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*," *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 1 (2001): 50.

(57.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 29.

(58.) *Ibid*, 118.

(59.) *Ibid*, 119-20.

(60.) *Ibid*, 121.

(61.) *Ibid*, 129. Janette, "Guerilla Irony," 51.

(62.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 147.

(63.) *Ibid*, 141.

(64.) *Ibid*, 169.

(65.) *Ibid*, 211.

(66.) *Ibid*, 224.

(67.) Qui-Phiet Tran writes about the connection between home and exile in literature produced in Vietnamese by women refugees to the United States asserting that "an imprisonment in obsolete, rigid ethical principles" can alienate women from "home and self." "Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home," *American Journal* 19, no. 3 (1993): 77. Renny Christopher also focuses on novels where Vietnamese culture becomes more portable in "Blue Dragon, White Tiger: The Bicultural Stance of Vietnamese American Literature," in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, eds. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992) 259-70. Nhi T. Lieu illustrates how this dynamic works in real-life Ao Dai contests where the "authentic past" that has been lost--and perhaps never existed--is sought and balanced with American values. "Remembering 'The Nation' Through Pageantry: Femininity and the Politics of Vietnamese Womanhood in the Hoa Hau Ao Dai Contest," *Frontiers* 21, no. 1 (2000): 127-51.

(68.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 185.

(69.) *Ibid*, 186.

(70.) *Ibid*, 191.

(71.) *Ibid*, 134, 250.

(72.) Newton, "Different Cultural Lenses," 113.

(73.) Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, 253.

(74.) *Ibid*, 252-53.

(75.) *Ibid*, 35.

(76.) Ines M. Miyares, *The Hmong Refugee Experience in the United States: Crossing the River* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 4.

(77.) Chan has titled her book *Hmong Means Free*. Jane Hamilton-Merritt writes that "For many the word 'Hmong' has the connotation of 'free people' or 'those who must have their freedom and independence.'" *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos*,

1942-1992 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3. Many Hmong dispute this claim. (78.) Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 30. Chan continues that nearly 20,000 irregulars in Northern Laos, mainly ethnic tribal people, flew reconnaissance missions for the United States, watched roads, and reported traffic, etc. According to estimates, 25 percent of the Hmong who enlisted were killed, and thousands of civilians perished during the war. One clan leader recalled that "if the Hmong should suffer defeat, then the Americans would 'find a new place' where they could help the Hmong."

(79.) In the transcripts of secret hearings held in 1969 by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, the former United States Ambassador to Laos "claimed that there was no 'formal obligation upon the United States,' no moral commitment to support the Hmong." Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 226, 410.

(80.) As Sally Peterson writes, "items of material culture embody shared philosophies, plans of action, and fundamental knowledge about the ways of the world." "'They Know the Rule for What Will Make it Pretty': Hmong Material Traditions in Translation," in *Craft & Community: Traditional Arts in Contemporary Society*, ed. Shalom D. Staub (Philadelphia, PA: The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies and the Pennsylvania Heritage Affairs Commission, 1988), 107.

(81.) Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 6.

(82.) Conquergood, "Fabricating Culture," 209.

(83.) Mai Neng Moua, editor of *Bamboo among the Oaks*, includes among the pieces in her anthology "Along the Way to the Mekong," fragments of particular memories of the exodus from Laos from "some of the first-generation Hmong students who attended St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, between 1991 and 1995." *Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 57. This composite piece serves much the same function as the story cloths, offering decontextualized yet conventionalized descriptions of the war and subsequent chaos in Southeast Asia as the genesis of Hmong American artistic expression.

(84.) Indeed, Hmong textiles, or paj ntaub, were once primarily worn by women. Thus the inscriptions once attached to female bodies have been transformed and sold to maintain the family.

(85.) Duong Bich Hanh, ed., *Through H'Mong Eyes* (Hanoi: The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, 2003), 79.

(86.) *Ibid*, 75.

(87.) *Ibid*, 89.

- (88.) Ibid, 22.
- (89.) Ibid, 67.
- (90.) Conquergood, "Fabricating Culture," 236.
- (91.) Miyares, *The Hmong Refugee*, 6.
- (92.) Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks*, 188.
- (93.) Nancy D. Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 191.
- (94.) Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks*, 11, 5.
- (95.) Donnelly, *Changing Lives*, 32.
- (96.) Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks*, 36.
- (97.) Ibid, 180.
- (98.) Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, xi.
- (99.) Donnelly, *Changing Lives*, 75.
- (100.) Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 54.
- (101.) Ibid, 116-17.
- (102.) Ibid, 116-17.
- (103.) Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks*, 154.
- (104.) Miyares, *The Hmong Refugee*, 91.
- (105.) Ibid, 50.
- (106.) Ibid, 56-57.
- (107.) Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 124, 144.
- (108.) Donnelly also notes "a rhetorical component in these stories: describing a current problem was how women asked for advice or reached out for sympathy; describing the terrible past helped create empathy and friendship. Their many complaints seemed a form of social glue, contributing to the reestablishment of community cohesion, so fractured in migration." *Changing Lives*, 72.

(109.) Chan, Hmong Means Free, 144.

(110.) Ibid, 133, 135.

(111.) Ibid, 146.

(112.) Donnelly, Changing Lives, 27.

(113.) Moua, Bamboo among the Oaks, 65.

(114.) Chan, Hmong Means Free, 124.

(115.) Donnelly, Changing Lives, 120-21.

(116.) Moua, Bamboo among the Oaks, 141-42.

(117.) Hmong history, from centuries fighting assimilation in ancient China to more recent clashes with the French in Southeast Asia and, ultimately, with the communists, is one of persecution and flight which Ann Fadiman argues has led to a people that "do not like to take orders ... do not like to lose ... would rather flee, fight, or die than surrender ... are not intimidated by being outnumbered ... are rarely persuaded that the customs of other cultures, even those more powerful than their own, are superior; and ... are capable of getting very angry." *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 17.

(118.) Moua, Bamboo among the Oaks, 61.

(119.) Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Cheng Lok Chua, "Introduction," in *Their Tilting the Continent: Southeast Asian American Writing* (Minneapolis, MN: New Rivers Press, 2000), xii-xiii.

(120.) Cao, Monkey Bridge, 179.

