

How memory haunts: the impact of trauma on Vietnamese immigrant identity in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

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The growing interest that surrounds representations of trauma and traumatic memory in literature appears to be fueled, in part, by the critical stance that traumatic experience precludes knowledge and language. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is defined by a literal reenactment of an event as well as by a temporal gap that makes the actual experience of trauma unknowable and unrepresentable. Yet literary representations of trauma, beginning with ancient poetry and continuing to the contemporary era, consistently refute Caruth's theory. Rather than turn to the vast literature and entrenched debate within psychology research regarding the causes and effects of traumatic experience and memory (a debate, incidentally, that ultimately reveals no therapist or theorist has a definitive answer to what trauma is or does), I let literature itself flesh out the alternative meanings ascribed to trauma. Fictional texts, such as Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), provide a theory of trauma that challenge the currently popular trend in literary criticism that celebrates the "unspeakable" quality of trauma by showing through innovative narrative strategies the varied ways trauma is represented in language and explores how traumatic events are experienced, remembered, retold, and rewritten. Trauma in Cao's novel alters how the female protagonists remember or forget the past which forces a rearticulation of identity, and, importantly, demonstrates the ways immigration and assimilation inform trauma's impact on memory, identity, and relation to place.

Comparing the ways Cao's female protagonists experience traumatic events enhances current understandings of trauma and its relation to immigration and social assimilation theories by showing that trauma is not experienced in universally similar ways, but tied to specific historical periods and places. Thanh's journal writing that her daughter labels "gorgeous fictional remembering" further solidifies the novel's claim that trauma can be represented in language and that the remembering and reinvention of the past through a fictional narrative administers a type of healing that can be found nowhere else. Rather than glorifying the gap of dissociation or potential disintegration of meaning that may be produced by traumatic events, Cao's novel reveals the specific meaning that is newly created from trauma that emerges to reformulate subjectivity and perception of reality. One significant meaning that arises is a newly formed knowledge of self and society; rather than claiming that trauma shatters identity, the novel argues that trauma disrupts and causes a reformulation of previous conceptions of self and relations to the world. Moreover, the novel provides non-Western views of coping with trauma, such as

found in the protagonist's belief in Karma or the national Betel Nut mythology, that enrich current Western psychological theories about trauma. (1)

Monkey Bridge is narrated by Thanh and her daughter Mai who describe pre-war and wartime Viet Nam, as well as life in the United States. Mai narrates her life as a teenager in urban Saigon, which includes her work at a hospital during the war, immigration to the United States in 1975 (the year of the actual exodus of Vietnamese assisted by U.S. airlifts), and her current preparation for college in Virginia where she lives with her mother. Thanh departs after Mai but does not bring her father, Baba Quan. The yearning to find out what happened to Baba Quan is the mystery that Mai intends to solve when the novel begins. When Thanh joins Mai in Virginia they relocate to a Vietnamese immigrant community called "Little Saigon." Baba Quan never arrives in Virginia, nor does Mai or her mother return to Viet Nam find him.

Mai eventually learns about Thanh's departure from Viet Nam and the real reason Baba Quan never met Thanh to fly to American, which is revealed in Thanh's suicide letter at the end of the novel.

Mai's accounts of Saigon and Virginia are paired with Thanh's nostalgic recollections written in her diary that Mai finds and reads. Thanh's entries record her childhood in Ba Xuyen, a small village in the Mekong Delta, her marriage, and her father, Baba Quan. Baba Quan is a "flamboyant" farmer in the rural village of Ba Xuyen, a "rice-growing province in the Mekong Delta" (5). Baba Quan rents his land from Uncle Khan, the benevolent landlord who aids Thanh's education. Importantly, Baba Quan represents qualities of the national Betel Nut myth that defines ethnic identity in relation to family, land, and ancestors. The Betel Nut myth is a central source of conflict for Thanh who cannot follow its directives. The myth asserts that ethnic identity is tied to native lands; therefore, one must reside next to ancestors' graves in order to guard their spirits. The human spirit, according to the myth, "can only live in the village land" and the Vietnamese must inhabit the land of their ancestors so that the ancestors' souls achieve eternal life and regeneration (84). The myth describes two brothers and a woman who leave the village only to all die next to a river where their souls turn into a limestone boulder, areca tree, and betel nut vine. The tree and vine wrap around the boulder and survive periods of "infertility and drought" when other vegetation dies (84). Baba Quan explains that the king learns of the story and proclaims, "There is luminous motion that binds family together for eternity" (85). The betel nut becomes a symbol of "eternal regeneration and devotion" and when people chew it they think of their family and "the inextricable connections that keep them tied forever" to their souls (85). For this reason, Baba Quan declares, "There is no death" (85). (2)

Thanh's identity in these journal entries are tied to her relations with her family and native lands. These written memories establish the importance of the rice fields of the rural Mekong Delta landscape to the protagonist's understanding of self and remembrance of the past. However, she creates a past that hides the truth of Thanh's last months of life in Ba Xuyen which are marked by

war and the betrayal of her father, Baba Quan. As the U.S. intervention in Viet Nam's civil war escalates, Thanh returns to her village to take care of her parents. They are forced to live in a military compound, or "strategic hamlet," built by the U.S. Thanh returns to her village, traveling across the "free-fire zone" to bury her mother in traditional burial grounds according to traditional customs. Before she can bury the body, she witnesses her father murder their landlord, Uncle Khan, and discovers his Viet Cong affiliation that contradicts his professed alliance. The murder disrupts the burial ritual and she is forced to flee from the site of the crime across the fields near the river to the compound. While running to safety, Thanh is shot down next to the river by military jets in the "free-fire zone." She flees to America soon after this incident. Thanh cannot maintain loyalty to her ancestors or land as dictated by the betel nut myth due to her forced departure from Ba Xuyen that forecloses any possible redemptive return to her homeland. The disjunction between traumatic past and present is caused by the inability to reconcile, on the one hand, mythic notions of cultural identity defined by inhabitation of native homelands and loyalty to ancestors' spirits, and, on the other hand, traumatic departure and modern diasporic life in which return to the native land is impossible. If one cannot return to the land, yet the land defines identity, how, the novel asks us, is the self imagined, constituted, and expressed?

Trauma in *Monkey Bridge* adds a new element to the cultural dilemma often depicted in Asian American fiction between Old World and New. In the commonly portrayed "immigrant conflict" in fiction, the protagonist is caught between the values and perspectives of the "original" culture and those of the adopted culture. As *Monkey Bridge* opens, Mai has already left Viet Nam, but her thoughts are consumed with the "old world" as she situates herself in the new nation. She escapes the chaos in Saigon during wartime only to be socially marginalized and "out of place" in the United States (66). Throughout the novel Mai feels unseen, silenced (often by her mother), or blind to the reality in front of her.

For example, in the first scene Mai is portrayed as confused about the place and time, and "blinded" by the "expanse of white" in trying to locate her mother within the hospital (4). There indeed exists a tension for Mai and Thanh between the country they left and the one they currently inhabit, primarily due to the wartime conditions under which they departed. Both characters have contradictory desires to remember and forget the homeland that bespeaks not only the experience of displacement and exile, but also the experience of trauma. The dialectic between native past and immigrant present, and the related tension between traumatic memory and reality, creates the central conflict Cao employs to depict Mai and Thanh as Vietnamese immigrants in *Monkey Bridge*.

That the experience of displacement is traumatic comes as no surprise. However, it is necessary to understand the function of trauma in *Monkey Bridge*; it is not a pathologic symptom, but a significant force that shapes how the past is remembered and how identity is articulated in the new nation. Representations of psychological trauma in *Monkey Bridge* show a disruption of identity and memory that is caused by war and loss of land, family, and community.

Trauma is generally understood as an external event that threatens one's life and elicits an intense emotional response. Psychiatrist Judith Herman offers the following definition of trauma:

"Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (33).

The concept of trauma, as I employ it, denotes "an event which happened in the external world together with the way it was subjectively experienced" (BenEzer 29). One of the first Western psychologists who specialized in trauma is Sigmund Freud. Freud argued in the nineteenth-century that psychological trauma is a "psychic reaction to external danger" (7). (3) For Freud, traumatic neurosis arose from the response to threats to life. Contemporary psychiatrist Judith Herman extends Freud's definition when she writes about the social dimension of trauma: Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (51). Trauma disrupts one's sense of self and relation to others by undermining belief systems and notions of basic trust and safety. Thus, one's relation to place and meaningful connections to the world are forcibly reconstituted after a traumatic event.

In addition to contributing theories on trauma and traumatic memories, Freud and Joseph Breuer theorized that traumatized individuals suffer from thoughts or "reminiscences" that can cause physical pain and distort reality (7).

Pierre Janet came to a similar conclusion that alterations in consciousness can be produced by "unbearable emotional reactions" to traumatic events (Herman 12, Janet 10). Freud and Breuer use the term "double consciousness" and Janet employs the term "dissociation" to describe the altered state of consciousness or psychic splitting caused by trauma. In the late 20th-century, dissociation was defined by the American Psychiatric Association in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment" (447). (4) Dissociation, according to Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Kirmayer, "implies a narrowing or splitting of consciousness.... Dissociation refers to the gap in the normal integration of memory, identity, and experience" (179). American psychologists Sivers, Schooler, and Freyd define dissociation as "a psychological state involving alterations in one's sense of reality and one's identity" (169). Each definition describes the sense of doubling or splitting of the self; there is an overlap of two different realities, often past and present, as found in Mai's dissociation in the hospital in the first chapter. Dissociation is often linked to the experience of trauma because it acts as a coping device to deal with unbearable pain or feelings. However, dissociation is not an inherent response to trauma, and, as the novel shows, the varied responses to trauma can include feelings of terror but not dissociation, as experienced by Thanh.

What one might view as a "gap" between the past and present in Cao's narrative is caused by trauma and the events of war and family betrayal that create feelings of disjunction between memory and reality in each character's recollections. This disjunction between past and present is produced by a representation of traumatic memory and/or dissociation; it is not a "gap" in meaning created by linguistic or epistemological "tricks," as some critics claim such as Michele Janette in "Guerilla Irony in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*" (50). Janette's investigation of Cao's employment of irony is accurate in attesting to the disturbing effects of America's military intervention in Viet Nam, but takes an overly celebratory and recuperative interpretation of the permanence of war trauma. Janette argues that the novel inhabits the gap of dissociation in an effort to show the ways trauma can exert a subversive power on identity and meaning. Yet, a corrective to this line of analysis is found in making a clear distinction between trauma and dissociation, as well as the claim asserted by the novel itself that trauma does not exist in an epistemological "gap." However absurd and meaningless traumatic events in *Monkey Bridge* may seem to the victim, witness, or reader at the time, trauma is marked on bodies and actual landscapes, thus confirming the novel's insistence that trauma consists of specific losses situated within a particular cultural context and physical environment. The traumatic past is rendered as intruding upon and invading the present--the past is too close for the protagonists. For this reason, Thanh must write, not speak, her memories of the traumatic past to Mai, because speaking them would be painful and might evoke the terror that Thanh attempts to suppress. The narrative repeatedly returns to the past often with jarring memories that intrude upon the present, as seen in the first chapter. In another example, Mai's experience as an immigrant in America is mediated by the disturbing feelings that "one wrong move" or a lapse of mental vigilance will transport Mai back to wartime Saigon.

Moreover, to employ the concept of trauma without critical examination of its lasting effects on the self misrepresents the complex character of trauma, dissociation, and traumatic memory. The theoretical move to celebrate the "doubled space" of experience and identity that results from trauma has recently become popular in criticism that embraces fragmentation and dislocation as liberatory acts of agency because these fragments allow identity to be multiply interpreted, expressed, and defined. Janette suggests that fragmentation is necessary in a "curative trajectory" of the characters' identity formation in which trauma is "exposed" and "cauterized" after they arrive in the adopted nation (53). Trauma creates an "unsettling" gap that allows the characters, according to Janette, to locate their agency and ameliorate trauma's effects. But, as the novel shows, the aftereffects of trauma are not "cauterized" or healed. Depicting trauma only as fragmentation of the self or as a necessary liberating process ignores the more complex dimensions that include a disruption of perception and previously held beliefs of moral codes and social bonds. (5) The tendency to claim an "unfixed" meaning of trauma leads to a devaluation of the disturbing influences the event continues to exert, and Cao's novel clearly shows the relevance and proximity of the past to disrupt, as well as the profound meaning attached to traumatic experiences. In addition, *Monkey Bridge* shows that the extremity, pain, and

dissociation caused by traumatic events are not seen as a disease that must be cured, but as a response to violence that demands acknowledgment.

Narrative Dissociation

Mai's dissociative moment in the first chapter embodies the paradoxical heart of the novel: the simultaneous struggle to forget the past with the irrepressible drive to remember it in order to define the immigrant self in a new nation. The traumatic relation to the past creates a struggle over how to remember origins as well as how to articulate a diasporic identity and cultivate a sense of place in the adopted nation. (6) Close attention to the emotional or psychological aspects of the protagonist in this scene offers the opportunity to examine the cultural underpinnings that the author gestures toward in her depictions of human suffering and survival. Cao captures the distortion of identity and reality produced by trauma by employing strategies such as narrative dissociation in order to evoke complex states of consciousness that depict the emotional dilemmas of the protagonists. Narrative dissociation is a term I use to explain the writer's literary strategy that depicts psychological dissociation. The author manipulates language and traditional narrative forms in order to represent how the mind works when it confronts trauma: the extreme emotional states and the sense of doubleness and confusion that frequently accompany the experience. The term narrative dissociation emphasizes the author's aesthetic and rhetorical strategies that portray altered mental states induced by trauma that defy simple explanation. Formal strategies of narrative dissociation in *Monkey Bridge* include rapid time shifts; disjunction of time, place, and emotion through use of repetition and negation; violent scenes that are highly imagistic; and doubled consciousness or dual perception.

In the opening hospital scene the narrator, Mai, is confused and disoriented as she walks into an American hospital to visit her mother recuperating from a stroke. Quoted below is a long passage from the first page of the novel: “The smell of blood, warm and wet, rose from the floor and settled into the solemn stillness of the hospital air.... A scattering of gunshots tore through the plaster walls It was all coming back, a fury of whiteness rushing against my head with violent percussive rage. The automatic glass doors closed behind me with a sharp sucking sound. Arlington Hospital was not a Saigon military hospital. Through the hydraulic doors, I could see the lush green lawn that stretched languidly across an immense parking lot.... The American flag, flown sky-high from a sturdy pole, still swelled and snapped in the wind. I knew I was not in Saigon. I was not a hospital volunteer. It was not 1968 but 1978. Yet I also knew, as I passed a wall of smoked-glass windows, that I would see the quick movements of green camouflage fatigues, and I knew. I knew the medic insignia on his uniform and I knew, I knew what I would see next. His face, not the face before the explosion, but the face after, motionless in a liquefied red that poured from a tangle of delicate veins.” (1-2)

After describing the images of death and terror, Mai explains that the doctor and medical crew were killed by an unexploded grenade in the body of a soldier on the operating table. Even

though Mai is in America ten years after the event, the past forcibly breaks into her consciousness as she enters a similar hospital environment. The nonlinear narrative suspends time to show Mai as she dissociates from the present reality and returns to the past where she grapples with meaning and context, then tries to return to the present.

The passage demonstrates narrative dissociation by showing a transformed state of consciousness in which the psyche is split between the past and present, causing an altered sense of reality and identity. The protagonist's disorientation is expressed in a narrative that shifts rapidly between time periods in alternating sentences, and, at times, in the same sentence. These time shifts create the impression that both scenes are happening simultaneously because normative narrative markers that suggest temporal movement are absent. The past is the present. She sees the American flag, hears the Saigon gunshots, looks at the "lush, green lawn," and sees the bloodied face at the same moment. Mai "feels the sharp, unsubdued scent of chemicalized smoke settle" in her nose from the exploded grenade and it becomes inconsequential if she is actually in Saigon in 1968 or not because it is the response of her mind to these events in the present moment that disturbs and interrupts her ability to clearly comprehend the present moment (2). This view of reality is one that maintains a contradictory perspective and establishes a sense of doubled consciousness and perception.

Notice that the passage is highly imagistic and contains strong emotional content, but the narrator maintains an emotional distance. The lack of feelings expressed by Mai underscores the dissociative moment where the viewer/witness is portrayed with a doubled consciousness that allows her to narrate the events that happened to her while not providing a narrative of her own emotional response. The protagonist describes the screams of other people, but not her own. She describes what faces looked like after the explosion, but does not detail how she feels about witnessing this. Mai revisits the traumatic memory in her body, not her emotions: "It was all coming back, a fury of whiteness rushing against my head with violent percussive rage." The "fury of whiteness" could be the hospital walls or the memory or a transmutation of both. However, the "violent percussive rage" is experienced as a physical blow against her head, not an emotion. The rage is not her rage, but the force of the memory "rushing" into her mind's eye. Mai seems to be simultaneously in the middle of the terror and curiously removed from it; it is as Mai looks down upon the scene from a great height as she registers the after-effects of the explosion in her body, but views the scene without a narrative of her feelings. We also notice that she walks through "glass doors" which symbolize her mediated vision in which she can look out, or back, into the past, but is held inside the hospital in the present.

Narrative dissociation is further conveyed through the repetitive use of the verb "to know." The stress on knowing ironically suggests that Mai has not fully integrated. In this moment, there exists no absolute claim to knowledge of the past or present, nor of the "I." Perception of the world is split between the bloody Saigon hospital room and the clean "blinding white" of the American hospital. In effect, the repeated negation creates a double vision that sees both the

present and past simultaneously. The past and present slide over each other like photographic negatives transposed onto a print so that the image is a composite and the borders between the two disappear. The protagonist attempts to create an internal narrative which will allow her to rehearse her proper place in time by situating herself in relation to the external world: "This is Arlington Hospital, I reminded myself. There, beyond the door, was the evenly paved lot, its perimeters unenclosed by barbed wire or sandbags" (3). The landscape offers referential points to gauge her knowledge of self and reality. Thus, the complex relation between knowing and not knowing is mediated by the physical environment. By locating the "perimeters" of external reality, Mai hopes to outline the limits of her internal world. (7)

Asian American Dilemmas: Cultural Identity and the Traumatic Past

The centrality of trauma in *Monkey Bridge* not only forces the individual to question the self and external reality, but also causes Mai and her mother to question previous formulations of a cultural identity that is defined in relation to their native landscapes. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity, or identity defined by a shared cultural history and ancestry, is based on connection to and articulation of the past. However, this collective past is under constant revision in order to fit the needs of present day survival. In the same way that identity is fluid and changing, so too the past is not fixed and continues to be shaped by the present for immigrants. Hall explains, "[Cultural identity] is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning" (395). The articulation of cultural identity occurs through the relationship to the past and the desire to position the self within a narrative of belonging to a particular place. Hall suggests that the fluidity of cultural identity accords the "New World" subject the choice to position the self in relation to the past, wherein the "Old World" is largely imagined based on desires for "lost origins" and a wish to "return to the beginning" (402). For example, the realization of the impossibility of return coincides with the dream of return for the immigrant protagonists in *Monkey Bridge*, which thus fuels the fictional recreation of the past that informs the present New World identity in Little Saigon, a Vietnamese community in Virginia. After living in Virginia for several months, Mai realizes that she "would not be returning to the familiarity" of her former life (39). Mai observes that moving to a new country allows unlimited invention of the past in Little Saigon. The ability to change the past offers new freedom to interpret the self and even change one's destiny. In another example, members of their Vietnamese immigrant community register a new birthday or change their name for better "Karma" or revenge on ex-husbands or landlords. Mai notices that Mrs. Bay, her mother's friend, "gives herself a new birthday the day she applied for her Social Security card, for no other reason than that she no longer wanted to be associated with the Year of the Rat" (40). Likewise, Thanh's facial burn scar from the napalm is explained as a kitchen accident in order to hide the truthful origin of the wound.

A significant point that Hall does not address is that in instances of trauma, such as experienced by Thanh and Mai, memories of the past are not easily controlled so that a positioning in relation to the past is not an option--the past invades without consent. Thanh tries to "reposition" parts of her past and identity, but fails. Certain parts of the past are traumatic for both mother and daughter, thus rendering it difficult, and at times impossible, to verbally communicate.

Thanh and Mai can choose how to position themselves in relation to their nation's history, but have much less choice in how they position themselves in relation to the traumatic past. In contrast to Hall's theory, the novel suggests that identity is much less malleable once marked by trauma or situated within a Karmic paradigm. The protagonists attempt to control the new formulation of their identity in the adopted nation and "reposition" their identities in past in the Vietnamese immigrant community of "Little Saigon." But, Thanh fails to reinvent herself and her past through imaginative literary revisions, and Mai also fails to block out the nightmares and flashbacks by her "force of will" (11).

For both women, the intrusion of traumatic memory prevents the ability to reconstruct cultural identity in the ways that are expected by the "Little Saigon" community. In other words, traumatic displacement caused by war and relocation does not provide many choices for the ways in which Thanh or Mai can express or "position" their identity in relation to the past.

Cao's portrayal of the divided self of the immigrant protagonist induced by trauma, displacement, and cultural alienation creates a double consciousness that affects how the characters imagine their identities and relation to place.

The process of establishing meaning and a sense of belonging in the adopted nation involves unique forms of forgetting and remembering practiced by Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. The sense of "cultural alienation" brought about by being a "minority" drives Mai and primarily her mother to find a sanctuary in the "Little Saigon" community in Virginia. On the one hand, the Little Saigon community in Virginia provides support to Thanh and Mai who must confront and resist dominant American perceptions of Vietnamese as "backward peasants" and "enemies." (8) Cao's novel shows that the Little Saigon community offers support, stability, and protection to Mai and her mother.

However, on the other hand, the "Little Saigon" community also creates "optical illusions" about the past which allows immigrants to recreate their identities through inventing, or in the language of the novel, "rebirthing" the past (41). Mai ironically comments on the power of forgetting and fantasy in the Little Saigon community: "The obsession with optical illusion was something I might have learned from my mother's friends. It became something of a community endeavor, the compulsion to deceive.... Little Saigon was the still-tender, broken-off part of the old, old world, and over here so far away from the old country, our ghosts could roam unattached to the old personalities we once inhabited" (39-40).

This quote suggests a divided or doubled consciousness. The "compulsion to deceive" is a strategy to deceive the dominant culture, but it sometimes backfires in the novel. Self-deception and historical revision allow Thanh as an immigrant in the U.S. to reconstitute her identity and "roam unattached" from her traumatic past. The process of forgetting can also be viewed as a strategy of resistance against assimilation and a sign of freedom to invent themselves again: "There was, after all, something awesome about a truly uncluttered beginning, the complete absence of identity, of history" (41). The problem with attempting to create a "truly uncluttered beginning" is that origins can never truly be forgotten, however partially erased or imagined they might be.

The urge to establish a new cultural identity based on American citizenship for immigrant protagonists in *Monkey Bridge* in the form of assimilation is a painful and highly contradictory process. Mai explains her social and emotional experience as an immigrant trying to assimilate to U.S. culture: "It was, in many ways, a lesson in what was required to sustain a new identity: it all had to do with being able to adopt a different posture.... The process, which was as surprising as a river reversing course and flowing upstream, was easier said than done" (39). The immigrant protagonist must conform to a new standard of behavior, language, education, and legal rights, thus creating deep conflicts between old and new standards of knowing the self and the world. The process of "sustaining a new identity" for Mai and Thanh causes a schism in consciousness that Mai describes as a re-positioning based on a contradictory awareness that the world is different, yet one is expected to function outwardly as if no difference exists. Mai explains she must "adopt a different posture," but this altered position is predicated upon "pretending ... that the world was the same now as it had been the day before." The struggle with a new identity reveals a doubled consciousness in Mai as she travels between her and her mother's old world and the new nation in which Mai can speak English fluently, though her mother cannot, an experience of a divided self that is frequently portrayed in Asian American fiction.

Moreover, Mai and Thanh are confronted with a traumatic past, one that resists narration and integration, thus causing a greater ambivalence between past and present because the separation from the past does not only create mourning, but also relief to be free of physical danger and immediate terror. An expression of this ambivalence is found in Thanh's journal entries. Trauma disrupts the normal integration of the past, an integration that is already "under siege" for Vietnamese immigrants in America, therefore leading to a disruptive reordering of the conceptualizations of self and society.

A Current of Grace: The Legacy of Trauma

In significant ways, Thanh's journal entries function as a creative act of survival in an attempt to reformulate identity and create a carefully controlled relation with her daughter based on a past without trauma. Revising the past in her writing is an imaginative effort of the mind to change the Karmic cycle she believes is at work in her life. The rural areas and rice fields of Ba Xuyen

in the Mekong Delta become a "symbolic repository of value" that Thanh revisits through writing in order to reconstruct an idealized past absent of traumatic events (Marx 20). In order to combat spiritual death caused by disloyalty to ancestors and homeland, Thanh's diary entries repeatedly return to the "beauty" of the rural Mekong Delta landscape and especially the rice fields near Ba Xuyen in an attempt to forget the past. As well, these entries function to maintain a mother-daughter relationship wherein the mother conveys her allegiance to family and nation based upon ethnically normative values that direct the daughter's identity and sense of loyalty. Thanh's last entry is a suicide letter addressed to Mai in which she writes: "My daughter, who was born into a country already at war and sheltered in Saigon, has never known a ricefield and the current of grace that runs through it like golden light.... To know a rice field is to know the soul of Viet Nam.... That's why the war was fought in the rice fields, because it was war for the soul of the country" (172). The sublime landscape imagery describes a paradisiacal rice field that reflects the "soul of the country" through highly lyrical language and elevated diction. The entry chides Mai for not knowing the beauty of a rice field and "the current of grace that runs through it like golden light." The repeated stress on "soul" in this passage suggests that nature symbolizes national identity. According to Thanh's perspective, the "character" or quality of the nation is best defined by the rice field, just as Thanh expresses her sense of self through a romantic vision of the land.

Similar to descriptions found in the Betel Nut story, the land functions in Thanh's suicide letter as a referent for conceptualizations of the self. Descriptions of the external world reflect how the viewer perceives her own identity to the degree that the revisionary strategies in Thanh's diary entries are acts of survival to re-write her own destiny. The beauty and grace in the rice field portrays an image of peace and harmony that Thanh employs to represent her own soul as pure, containing a mythic quality of beauty and grace. Thanh believes her soul is defined by and expressed through the land.

When the land is wasted by fire, she believes her soul is also wasted and wounded.

Anthropologist Keith Basso argues that the conceptualization of landscape reflects culturally based assumptions and beliefs: "the meaning of landscape and acts of speech are personalized manifestations of a shared perspective on the human condition" (100). It becomes clear that the rice fields in Thanh's narrative indeed reflect a "shared perspective on the human condition," especially a mythically informed view, and thus function as a symbol for feelings of totality, wholeness, and regeneration--all of which Thanh can never return to or locate in the U.S.

Images of the rice fields and "romanticized" rural lands are often connected to loss in the novel and, in certain ways, become "traumatized" landscapes that evoke mythic and apocalyptic dimensions of the human condition in wartime. The ways in which Thanh represents the rice fields as a "current of grace" and the "soul of the country" confirms Basso's claim that "acts of speech" that describe the land reflect how the individual or a group view human life. Basso writes, "Landscapes are available in symbolic terms as well, and so chiefly through the manifold

agencies of speech, they can be 'detached' from their fixed spatial moorings and transformed into instruments of thought and vehicles of purposive behavior. Thus transformed, landscape and the places that fill them become tools for the imagination, expressive means for accomplishing verbal deeds, and also, of course, eminently portable possessions to which individuals can maintain deep and abiding attachments, regardless of where they travel." (102)

Thanh's remembrance of the rural landscape of rice fields becomes a "portable possession" that allows her to re-imagine an untraumatic past. Thanh returns often to the "beauty of the rice field" in order to substantiate a cultural identity rooted in a rural, pastoralized, and mythic landscape. In effect, the rice field imagery is a tool for the imaginative reconstruction of identity in America for Thanh as a Vietnamese immigrant. Thanh can rehearse the beauty of the rice field to Mai in her diary as a way to further enforce the idea that her identity is located in the native land. (9) Thanh's diary acts as a corrective in an attempt to place coherence on the experience of profound loss and fragmentation. The protagonist does seem to believe that her spirit belongs in Ba Xuyen, but she cannot accommodate this belief with the reality of terror she experienced before leaving Viet Nam. In the final "true" written account of her past, Thanh describes the "death of her village soil" due to bombing, and her own near-death experience after her father's betrayal. Thanh's description of displacement and survival culminates with the quote below that demonstrates the profound loss induced by trauma:

"What could I have done? A part of me died forever by that river's edge, and I have never been able to touch it since, that most wounded part that still lies inert beyond my grasp, like the sorrow on my face, seared by fire dropped into the free-fire zone from a plane as I fled from the cemetery toward the safety of the boat. Everything was on fire. I will always remember that moment as the moment the earth screamed its tormented scream. From the ground where I was lying face-up, I could see the gathering red that poured from a lacerated sky, the red of fire bisected by a black, black smoke as far away as the untouchable line where heaven meets earth." (250-1)

Thanh's moment of terror unhinges the doors of perception to allow a view of the world and self that is decontextualized and exists beyond the normal parameters of meaning. This view of reality that derives from a traumatic perspective or traumatized moment constructs a world without normative meaning and value. The ethical borders that guide human behavior and comprehension no longer exist. It is a view of the world that some might describe as transcendent or mystical. Indeed, critic Roberta Culbertson argues that the moment of trauma takes place in the nonordinary, mystical, or supranormal at the level of the body (176). She writes that "a part" of her died in this traumatic moment, and a part of her continues to die on the river's edge because the memory returns to wound her.

Similar to landscape descriptions of the rice fields in Thanh's earlier diary entries, the land here continues to function as the representational medium through which trauma is conveyed to those

who were not there. If we agree with Basso that representations of the land act as "personalized manifestations of a shared perspective on the human condition," then we see that through landscape description the victim communicates her experience of trauma. The apocalyptic vision of a burning earth mirrors the extent of horror that Thanh feels but cannot communicate in first person.

The profound paradox of trauma is that in order to express the event, Thanh must revisit it and employ knowledge and meaning which have been abandoned during the traumatic event. To return to the trauma, Thanh must return to notions of totality and redemption in terms of specific relationships to father, family, ancestors, and land. But these beliefs or "truths" have been rendered untenable. In communicating the traumatic event, Thanh is faced with the reality that either her soul is not tied to family and native land, which means she will not find eternal life, or her soul is tied to family and land and she will forever be haunted by her father and fire from the war planes. In addition, the protagonist's trauma occurs at personal, cultural, and political crossroads. Scholar Roberta Culbertson argues that trauma always occurs on personal and political levels, between the "poles of body and culture" because violence is about pain and wounding and dissolution and the communication about it happens between the poles of body and culture themselves wrapped in the meaning created or destroyed in the moment of harm" (173). Thanh's wounding involves a collision of realizations and events that wound the psyche and body: witnessing Baba Quan murder the landlord, realizing that Baba Quan works for the Viet Cong, and suffering burns from napalm dropped by soldiers who were meant to protect her.

The protagonist's moment of trauma depicts the compendium of events that makes spiritual regeneration nearly impossible. Rather than support the mythic legacy of the betel nut that announces the strength of family bonds situated in the land and community, Thanh's traumatic departure dislocates preconceived notions of loyalty to family, nation, and land.

Furthermore, the landscape descriptions in the above passage recall the Betel Nut's mythic landscape because like the woman in the myth, Thanh also lies by the riverbank close to death. The river is a 'character' who plays a central role in the contemporary traumatic events of the novel: The murder of the landlord by Baba Quan takes place by the river, Thanh's mother's body is left unburied near the river, and Thanh is nearly killed by the river. Contrary to mythic symbolism of the river as source of regeneration, the river in *Monkey Bridge* is the locus of trauma and death. In contrast to the Betel Nut myth, the river here does not carry Thanh toward eternal life or regeneration. Rather, the river is the source that covers up the act of murder born out, in part, from the class conflict between Baba Quan as a poor farmer and Uncle Kahn as a rich landlord. In addition, Thanh has failed her duty and devotion to family by not burying her mother in the ancestral grounds that would allow her mother's soul to move into a "non-earthly, everlasting existence" (247). These events undermine the symbolisms of the Betel Nut myth and disrupt notions of continuity and morality. In certain ways Cao's novel is a recapitulation of the ancient myth into a modern one, save on large difference: regeneration is unattainable. Thanh

must continue to live in a body with the wounds of war and in a land where the soil is "poisonous" to her soul (253).

Thanh's traumatic experience dismantles the symbology that underlies the creation of cultural identity found in the Betel Nut myth and prevents her from participating in the cultural myth that defines ethnic identity. The "inextricable connections" between family and land are rent apart in a single moment when "everything was on fire." The "inextricable connections" between family and ancestors promoted by the Betel Nut myth are precisely the connections that "haunt" Thanh because she cannot escape the betrayal of her father or the memories of herself and the earth on fire.

The symbolic order of the Betel Nut myth that positions the individual in relation to family, community, land, and nation is disrupted by traumatic events, which thus leads to a disoriented perception of world and self. Myth, according to Slotkin, "becomes a basic constituent of linguistic meaning and of the process of both personal and social 'remembering'" (5). The process of remembering is interrupted to such a degree that interpretation of the past and images of self cannot rely on traditional symbolism found in the Betel Nut myth. Trauma forces Thanh to reconsider traditional ideologies of her culture that promise eternal life through devotion to family and inhabitation of native lands. Thus, trauma disallows concepts of regeneration and the afterlife found in the traditional myth because trauma disrupts the symbolic order of linguistic meaning and corporeal knowledge.

Perhaps most importantly, Thanh views the traumatic events of war and murder as the function of Karma. She understands her wounding in war as a result of larger imbalances in her native nation's power or powerlessness in the world. Thanh writes: "Karma is ... a continuing presence that is as ongoing as Baba Quan's obsession, as indivisible as our notion of time itself" (252). When she witnesses her father kill their landlord and deposit the body in the river, she writes, "There was the legacy that coursed through the landscape like a slow but steady rush of death foretold" (250). Her past which she calls a "legacy" of "sin, death, and murder" is a result of Karma. Karma is the spiritual force that creates balance in the world between good and evil. Thanh feels that the crime her father committed is an evil force that will haunt her, just as the invasions of other nations in the historical past by her own country will negatively influence her personal life. The novel suggests that Thanh sees her own trauma not only as a result of U.S. intervention, but also as a karmic result of a long military history of her nation that includes several invasions, occupations, and revolutions. With this perspective, Thanh acknowledges her country's own destructive actions and domination of other peoples. Thanh writes to Mai, No one can escape the laws of Karma. Nor can a country divest itself of the karmic consequences of its own actions. ... For every action there is a reaction, for every deed of destruction there is a consequence. It's something as exact and implacable as the laws of physics.... Karma is based less on rights and entitlements than on moral duty and obligation, less on celebration of victories than on repentance and atonement. (55-6)

Although Thanh accepts that her suffering is caused by present politico-cultural circumstances and U.S. involvement, she also views the traumatic experience as a result of her government's foreign policies. The consequences of her nation's political practices are placed within a karmic paradigm and thus the repercussions are enacted upon her individual body.

The protagonist's cultural, political, mythical, and especially karmic perspective on her suffering offers an alternative way to think about trauma situated within a Confucian worldview that accepts the laws of Karma. In certain ways, notions of Karma correspond with Western notions of trauma--the return of the repressed, the past cannot be forgotten, the past "haunts," and bad or evil continues to affect you and create "symptoms" such as "dissociation." Cao purposefully creates the comparison between Karma and trauma: one cannot simply forget the past because one must live within the larger life cycles of Karma, rather than having the Karma live within you. In other ways, Karma is very different than the concept of trauma because trauma is almost always understood in the West as a reaction to a specific event; whereas Thanh's Karmic worldview in *Monkey Bridge* concludes that negative events stem from personal, global, and even mythic events. In addition, although Thanh does not recover through the re-writing or "truthful" recollection of the traumatic past, she is not portrayed as pathologic. Not having the ability to heal from the traumatic past is represented not as a pathology, but as one possible outcome when confronted with the inability to write a new story of the self after a traumatic event.

Conclusion

Monkey Bridge draws our attention to the specificities of trauma by focusing on the historical moment and cultural customs that shape the experience and recital of trauma and healing. Cao situates trauma at the intersection of individual and cultural forces to show that responses to traumatic events of war and betrayal are not pathologic, nor the sole defining marker of identity. The place of trauma is significant insofar as that place highlights the ways cultural values and mythic stories are connected to specific lands and communities that influence the remembrance and recital of trauma and healing. (10)

Continuing the thematic tradition found in twentieth-century Asian American novels, Cao emphasizes the generational-cultural divide between the immigrant mother and daughter wherein Mai views her mother as "crazy" and Thanh views her daughter as too Americanized or "Western" because of her fluency in English. Thanh is seen by Mai, at times, as a figure of trauma itself, "a war wound fastened to a bed in a suburban hospital" unable to heal (7). But, although Thanh is seen by Mai as crazy, these are temporary phases or states, and Mai eventually realizes that some of her mother's behavior and desire to reinvent the past are caused by traumatic events. The scar on Thanh's face caused by the napalm represents for Mai the contradictions of trauma that leave one "marked" with explosive rage and an abiding nostalgia for a pre-traumatized past (8). Mai avoids her mother's face not only because of the scar, but also

because of the unknown emotions that could "explode" at any moment. Mai says "I could see frustration, nostalgia in the looks she gave me, beneath the fault line of rage that threatened always to crack open and explode. In the eerie silence of the room, I could practically hear the sound of old memories ripping their way through her face" (9).

The novel demonstrates that trauma is an overwhelming experience that can offer an opportunity for change of consciousness, however painful this may be, that invites new meaning and reconceptualizations of self and world.

However, *Monkey Bridge* clearly indicates that trauma's impact and meaning are very different for mother and daughter, therefore refuting claims made by literary critics such as Cathy Caruth that trauma is contagious through narration or that trauma's effects are universally experienced. For Thanh, traumatic events produce a sense of doom and eventually death. For Mai, trauma produces new meaning and a kind of psychic rebirth. Mai's search for the "truth" of the past becomes a search not only for an articulation of identity and relation between self and culture, but also an exploration of the contours of her relationship to her mother--a relation that is largely mediated by the presence of trauma in both women's lives, yet primarily communicated through the act of writing.

In addition to thematic and epistemological concerns that are raised by the depiction of trauma in *Monkey Bridge*, Cao employs structural and rhetorical strategies, such as narrative dissociation, to portray extreme emotional states of the individual who confronts and retreats from traumatic memories. In significant ways, the subject of trauma places unique demands on the narrative structure, thus giving rise to formal innovations such as narrative dissociation that reveal the tensions that arise between experience and language, identity and memory. For Cao, trauma's impact on memory and identity within the contexts of immigration and social assimilation creates alternative meanings and states of subjectivity that, in turn, produce divergent narrative forms.

The novel's depictions of trauma and traumatic memory remind us that individual traumatic memories are firmly rooted in a historical period that have social and political values, forms of language, and even ideologies that guide how the story of trauma is interpreted and expressed. Cao magnifies the significance of the physical environment of the traumatic event in order to situate individual trauma within a larger cultural context, and to emphasize that the event and effects of trauma are bound within the social sphere, regardless of how private or solitary the experience may be. Place, therefore, takes on a central role in defining trauma and its aftereffects on daughter and mother. Cao's novel suggests that there is never a singular, transparent, or transhistorical definition of trauma because each character's trauma and healing are experienced and narrated differently due to personality variants and temporal specificities. Moreover, Cao's emphasis on non-Western perspectives of trauma, such as Thanh's belief in Karma (which she employs to comprehend her life), indicates that the experience and story of trauma does support a

Western paradigm of pathology frequently employed by psychologists to explain trauma's effects. The novel unequivocally asserts that trauma is a profound loss that disengages the protagonists from previous conceptions of self, knowledge, and relations to family and ethnic community. However, traumatic experience importantly broadens knowledge of self and world, which is not seen as a disease, but rather as an opportunity for change of consciousness.

Monkey Bridge is a novel that explores the broad ranging implications of trauma that reach beyond the personal to illuminate cultural trauma. The novel indicates that individual trauma is understood in relation to cultural traditions and values, structured by ethnicity and gender that influence the experience and recital of trauma, and thus shape the reconfiguration of identity. This is not to say that fictional representations assume that massive trauma experienced by a certain cultural or ethnic groups can be transmitted transhistorically to descendants of those groups. Rather, fictional representations create a 'traumatized' character that can point toward historical instances of trauma experienced by a larger group of people. Trauma in fiction thus posits a provocative paradigm: the narrative asserts the specificity of trauma while simultaneously making the claim that the protagonist is a representative cultural figure for groups identifying themselves according to ethnic, gender, class, or political affiliations. *Monkey Bridge* demonstrates the ways trauma influences the relation between past and present, and the particular ways traumatic memory affects immigrant identity in America. Cao's novel develops a significant thematic concern in American literature regarding questions of identity and the role of memory in the artistic rendering of immigrant experience in America.

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NOTES

(1) I use a capital "K" to write "Karma" in accordance with the spelling and usage in the novel.

(2) The mythology of the betel nut conveys a moral consciousness defined by familial and tribal loyalty, which leads toward fertility and agricultural abundance. The tree produces an abundance of fruit all year regardless of drought, thus representing the possibility of regeneration found in devotion to family, community, and land. Historian Richard Slotkin explains how mythologies function to transmit certain cultural ideologies: "Myths are stories drawn from society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing moral consciousness--with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain" (5).

Each symbol in the myth conveys the ideology of regeneration through family devotion that requires inhabitation of the local lands. Chewing the betel nut produces regeneration for the soul and also assures a plentiful harvest from the land.

(3) See also the nineteenth-century work of J.M. Charcot on trauma and "hysterie traumatique," or traumatic hysteria, and the writings of Hermann Oppenheim on trauma and "traumatische Neurose," or traumatic neurosis.

(4) See the American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition. Washington, DC: APA, 1994, 477. The DSM-IV defines dissociation as "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception in the environment" (477). For additional definitions, see Sivers, Heidi, Jonathan Schooler, and Jennifer Freyd, "Recovered Memories." *Encyclopedia of the Human Brain* 4 (2002): 169-184. See also Kirmayer, Laurence. "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation." *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. Eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek New York: Routledge, 1996, 179.

(5) See Lynn Layton, "Trauma, Gender Identity, and Sexuality." *American Imago* 52.1 (1995): 106-125, for further analysis of poststructuralist glorification of fragmentation. Layton explains, "More recently, other strains of poststructuralist thought (such as Derrida's and Barthes' notions of the free play of signifiers) have crossed with Lacanian theory or with British Cultural Studies to produce cultural criticism that celebrates diversity, ambiguity, and fragmentation. Theorists as different as Judith Butler, Constance Penley, E. Ann Kaplan and Ellen G. Friedman posit the fragmentation of the subject as a strategy of resistance and/or guarantee of indeterminacy, especially gender indeterminacy. Whereas Mulvey and Rose argue that the symbolic system violently fragments the female subject, in much recent cultural criticism the pain of this fragmented subject is forgotten or bracketed and she is rather figured as able to subvert the system by enjoying, rearranging, and playing with her fragments." (106-7)

(6) The struggle over memory and articulation of identity is also presented within the context of an adopted nation that has its own racist and anti-immigrant policies that add to the problematic nostalgia of returning "home" for both Thanh and Mai.

(7) Throughout this passage the narrative repetition of knowing or not knowing invites the reader to question how trauma is conveyed. The problem of the past is that it is traumatic and resists integration into normal memory. However, for Mai and Thanh as Vietnamese immigrants, the problem of the past is not only that it is traumatic, but that the past can only be conveyed in limited terms to Americans, who, for the most part, view Viet Nam only in terms of the recent civil war and U.S. military involvement. Thanh explains to Mai the American sentiment toward them as immigrants:

"They'd jump at the chance to send us all back. Nomads, that's what we've all become" (15). Mai rationalizes in turn, "I knew from my own reading that immigrants were a burden to the community.... We were, after all, a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (15). The novel suggests that a broader view of Viet Nam, one that acknowledges the hundreds of previous wars and invasions of Viet Nam, is not easily transmissible to dominant American culture because the media represents the country as a place of war with "rocket fire and body bags" and Vietnamese as "the enemy" (128).

(8) See Linda Trinh Vo, "The Vietnamese American Experience: From Dispersion to the Development of Post-Refugee Communities," *Asian American Studies*. Eds. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002, 293. Vo writes about the significance of ethnic communities for survival and sustaining a cultural identity: The formation and maintenance of these ethnic enclaves defies the assimilationist theories, which suggest that the longer the immigrants are here, the more Americanized they will become. Some consider these communities as ethnic enclaves that will marginalize the ethnic groups and prevent full participation in American society; others see these ethnic clusters as a resource. (300)

Thanh tells Mai, "Even the store clerks look down on us" (39).

(9) The romanticized description of rice fields lessens the pain associated with tending the fields and the back-breaking field labor of farmers. Although Thanh's parents farmed on leased land, she had the privilege to live with the landlord and attend school. She married a scholar from an upper-class family, further distancing herself from her working-class roots. Thanh's narrative description of the rice field contains mixed longings of the "simple" life in the fields which reflects her disappointment with her husband and skepticism of upper-class lifestyle in the city. As an adult, Thanh's relationship to the rural landscape changes as she moves to Saigon with her husband and daughter. The contact she has with rice fields becomes one of luxury as the family vacations to Vung Tau, a beach resort (68). Yet, even in vacationing in the "countryside," the land still exerts an influence on Thanh and Mai to remind them of their national and cultural heritage. Driving to Vung Tau in their Citroen, they always passed a military cemetery with a life-sized statue of a soldier. Mai remembers, The soldier honored was a soldier of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, of course, and stories about it abounded. My father told me that the statue could lift itself out of the ground and walk at night. It was known that on hot summer days the soldier had asked passersby for water ... A severely wounded South Vietnamese soldier, a survivor of a battlefield massacre, had come to the statue one evening and seen hot tears in its eyes.... We had never driven to Vung Tau without stopping [to observe a few moments of silence]. (68-9)

Here, there is a sacredness and respect reserved for the warrior and military deaths. In contrast, Thanh, who is a survivor of war and an immigrant--a different type of warrior (a late-modern,

diasporic warrior) feels only shame for her experience, not honor or respect, for having survived in the "battlefield."

(10) The novel suggests that traumatic events of the past are a powerful force that continue to shape identity and memory, yet trauma is not the single determinant that defines Cao's depictions of female Vietnamese immigrant identity in America. Thanh and Mai's pasts are not only traumatic, just as their native nation's history is not only defined by America's military presence in Viet Nam's most recent civil war; however both personal and political traumas have irrevocably changed conceptualizations of the self and world. Moreover, the novel provides a rare perspective of trauma wherein trauma's meaning and impact are placed within overlapping frames of reference and world views that include the dominant American culture, the Vietnamese mythological narrative of the Betel Nut Myth, Confucian cosmology and the functions of Karma. Cao's focus on the ways trauma alters memory and identity serves in many ways to question the mythic notion of cultural identity tied to native lands. This notion suggests that a return to the native land will be a redemptive journey that will ease the pain of displacement and exile. *Monkey Bridge* reveals the limitations of this idea and demonstrates the conflicted state of existence in a new nation where "home" is difficult to rebuild. Rather than simply discount the notion of redemptive return, Cao represents it as a problematic force in defining immigrant identity and memory and establishing a sense of place in the new nation.

