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"An Outsider with Inside Information:" The 1.5 Generation in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

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Introduction

Lan Cao begins her debut novel *Monkey Bridge* with a hospital scene emblematic of the difference between first-generation and 1.5 generation memory. In Arlington, VA, high school student Mai is visiting her mother who suffers from what the hospital staff vaguely describe as "complications" (11). She hears Thanh, her mother, screaming out "Baba Quan" before losing consciousness. As the novel unfolds, we learn that Baba Quan is the grandfather left behind in Viet Nam when Saigon fell to the Communist North. As US forces began withdrawing from Viet Nam, Uncle Michael, an American colonel and family friend, took Mai with him to the United States, where she lived with his family in Farmington, CT before her mother's arrival. Thanh and Baba Quan planned to meet up in Saigon and, together, leave for the United States, but, for reasons unknown to Mai, Thanh arrived without Baba Quan. The mystery surrounding the disappearance of the grandfather, which as it turns out is a mystery for Mai alone, functions as a catalyst for Cao's narrative about a mother and daughter struggling to cope with memories of Viet Nam while adapting to the new culture and language of the United States. Mai observes:

> For the past three and a half years, my mother and I had lived quietly with the tragedy of my grandfather's disappearance, and I, in moments alone, had tried to piece together the missing minutes that led to his absence. The muffled stillness of that day continued to cast a long, heavy pall over our lives. What had happened to my grandfather? This question continued to linger in our midst and shroud our lives in a ravenous expanse with no discernible seams or edges. (10)

Cao employs the mother-daughter relationship of Thanh and Mai to illustrate how the historical and political violence of the Viet Nam War, or, what the people of Viet Nam called "the American War," affected families. Although the war is "over" and they are "safely" living in the United States, both Thanh and Mai continue to feel the transnational legacy of that war weigh on their mother-daughter relationship and on their identities as Vietnamese refugees. Watching her mother communicate with the "ghost" of her grandfather, Mai observes how memories of the political and familial violence of the Viet Nam war take

possession of her mother's body as it writhes convulsively on the hospital bed: "[t]he memory of that day continued to thrash its way through her flesh, and there were times when I thought she would never be consoled" (5). Mai, too, is haunted by the past, despite the fact that, unlike her mother, she does not yet know what hides under its "ravenous expanse." To keep these ineffable memories at bay, she takes caffeine tablets, her "antidote to the sin of sleeping and the undomesticated world of dreams" (11). In this way**,** Cao employs various degrees of haunting to contrast the existential experience of the first generation with that of the 1.5 generation survivors: Thanh is possessed by and lost in the past while Mai looks on helplessly, her feet ostensibly planted firmly in the present even as she feels the past closing in on her.

Although both mother and daughter suffer from their shared past, each responds to it differently, in accordance with the position from which she experienced it. In this paper, I argue that the precise nature of Mai's traumatic 1.5 generation memory, with its gaps and mysteries, must be understood as distinct from her mother's traumatic adult memory but no less oppressive. As someone who experienced the Viet Nam War as an adult, Thanh had the knowledge and experience to understand the historical and familial forces that kept Baba Quan from entering the United States. As Mai's mother, Thanh is motivated by her desire to protect her daughter from the past. Mai, in contrast, must wrestle with an awareness of past events without having real knowledge of them. Motivated by a desire to understand, she grows obsessed with discovering the reasons behind her grandfather's disappearance, unaware, as someone who survived the war at a young age, of the potentially damaging truth she might uncover about her grandfather's identity. As a 1.5 generation survivor whose identity is not yet fully formed, she needs guidance from her mother to understand her family's violent past, what Thanh calls "the family's karma" that Mai will no doubt inherit**,** and incorporate this past into her Vietnamese-American identity (229).

To better understand this 1.5 Vietnamese-American identity (as represented by Mai), it is important to place *Monkey Bridge* within the context of Viet Nam war literature and to understand its significance as part of an emergent group of 1.5 Vietnamese-American narratives. Furthermore, because this 1.5 Vietnamese-American identity is intricately connected to the violent experience of war and displacement, I also employ the works of Holocaust scholars Marianne Hirsch and Susan Rubin Suleiman, with specific emphasis on their analysis of memory, postmemory, and the 1.5 generation of Holocaust survivors. Using Kathleen Brogan's work on cultural haunting, I then discuss the differences between Thanh's and Mai's experiences of haunting as well as their experiences of being a refugee. Ultimately, using as an example Mai's quest to learn about her family's past, I argue that the novel illustrates how Mai learns to put the past to what Brogan calls "the service of the present" in the process of forming her 1.5 generation identity,

thereby making this novel one of the earliest examples of 1.5 Vietnamese-American Literature (4).

Viet Nam War and the 1.5 Vietnamese-Americans

According to Philip K. Jason, American writings about the War in Viet Nam can be divided into three groups: combat literature, return narrative, and "representations of the Vietnamese in America" (43). Written by Western writers, these texts are primarily concerned with the perspective of American soldiers: their combat experience in Viet Nam, their difficulty adjusting to civilian life in the United States, and their interaction with the Vietnamese diasporic community. Literature addressing the latter interactions generally portrays Vietnamese refugees in the United States as a haunting presence that symbolizes how "the long hand of the war reaches into the present to extract vengeance, penance, or a mix of both" (Jason 45). As Jason convincingly argues, this tension between the present and the past, between the United States and Viet Nam, most frequently works itself out in romantic relationships where the veteran reconciles himself to America's memory of Viet Nam through physical intimacy with a Vietnamese woman. In *The Viet Nam/The American War,* Renny Christopher critiques the Orientalist tendencies of such writings and analyzes the ways in which Vietnamese writers in exile, such as Tran Van Dinh, Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, and Le Ly Hayslip, tried to insert a more properly Vietnamese perspective into American discourse on the war in order to create, as Christopher's own title suggests, a bicultural understanding of U.S.-Viet Nam relations in their American readers.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Cao moves away from both the question of American understanding of the war and, to some extent, the bicultural narratives of Vietnamese writers in exile. She belongs to what Christopher describes as, "a generation of young Vietnamese American writers…who have grown up in America but who carry the heritage of the Vietnamese experience of the war" (105). These younger writers are interested in understanding the complexities of their own identity as 1.5 generation Vietnamese-Americans. This interest in identity issues moves writers like Cao beyond the concerns of Viet Nam War narratives, strictly-speaking, and brings them into closer contact with the field of Asian-American writing as a whole (106), which at its inception focused on the experience of Americans of Asian descent, examining issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality that affect the way Asian-Americans are perceived, act, and understand themselves as Americans. Yet, the 1.5 generation Asian-American may not fit within this early conception of Asian-American identity, as its members are affected by issues in both the United States and Asia. Not only do they have personal connections to Asia through their parents and grandparents, but they also have childhood experiences

and therefore early memories of Asia. In *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, Sucheng Chan describes the 1.5 generation as follows:

> Immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms … often act as cultural brokers, regardless of whether they wish to do so, between their grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, on the one hand, and the younger, usually American-born members of their families, on the other. (xiv)

Known as the bridge generation, 1.5 generation Asian-Americans are caught between the often warring camps of the first-generation and second-generation members of their family. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they do not have the adult understanding of their birth country—although, as Chan points out, they usually know how to speak its Asian language and are familiar with its cultural norms. Lacking this adult awareness, they may not have the same nostalgic longing for the Asian country as their parents and grandparents do. Similarly, the 1.5 generation Asian-Americans may not have the same intimate knowledge of American language and culture as the younger, American-born members of their family. In short, they are caught in this liminal space between being and understanding, where they have both fragmented memories of Asia and partial understanding of America.

Vietnamese-American writers such as Cao, lê thi diem thúy, author of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, and, most recently, Bich Minh Nguyen, author of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and *Short Girls*, have produced literary works that depict this 1.5 generation condition, with young narrators haunted by memories of war in Viet Nam, grappling with issues of identity and belonging, and struggling to find a sense of "home" in the United States.

Haunting in the First and the 1.5 Generations

Although it is highly relevant to place the experience and literary production of Vietnamese Americans within the discourse of Asian American studies, it is important to note that what distinguishes the Vietnamese, as well as the Cambodians, the Laotians, and the Hmong in America from the experience of early Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants, is the experience of war—specifically American involvement in Viet Nam, a war that also engulfed Viet Nam's neighboring countries and sent many Southeast Asian refugees to "first-world" countries such as France, England, Australia, Canada, and the United States. In that sense, it is surprising how little has been written about the possible connections between Holocaust survivors and Vietnamese refugees, as both share similar experiences of war, immigration, and ethnic repositioning in the United States. In other words, a useful link could be made between Holocaust studies and the study of Southeast Asian refugees through the

lens of war and its traumatic effects on survivors and their children. Certainly, Asian American studies scholars have explored trauma studies, with works such as Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* and David Eng's *Racial Castration* and *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, but the traumatic violence studied in these texts has its origins in racial and sexual differences. It is for that reason that I turn to scholarship in Holocaust Studies, specifically the works of Marianne Hirsch and Susan Rubin Suleiman, who look at generational differences in the ways survivors respond to the all-encompassing historical trauma of Shoah. Only when these insights on trauma are combined with Chen's discussion of 1.5 generation Vietnamese-American identity in cultural terms, can the reader understand the most vital dimensions of Mai's 1.5 identity.

In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Hirsch differentiates between the traumatic memory of Holocaust survivors and what she terms the "postmemory" of children of these survivors. For survivors, their memory is born out of the experience of the Holocaust event, and is related to a certain type of mourning that is "often tempered by anger, rage, and despair" (243). Their works are "acts of witness and sites of memory" for a world destroyed by the Nazis and they seek to preserve memories of destroyed cities, towns, and of neighbors, friends, and family members for future generations through the use of family portraits, journals, and diaries (246). Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" to describe the type of memory that children of survivors develop while growing up hearing Holocaust stories from their parents. Haunted by their parents' stories, these children experience various degrees of guilt about and ambivalence toward the Holocaust, knowing that they will never understand what their parents went through. Unlike the memory work of first-generation Holocaust survivors, the works of postmemory are concerned with the impossibility of accessing the past, and are frequently meta-textual in nature to reflect the inadequacy of the attempt.

While useful for its generational emphasis, Hirsch's study does not account for the memory work of the 1.5 generation, and what it might look like. In fact, with the exception of the work of Suleiman, few scholars have studied the experience and cultural production of the 1.5 generation of Holocaust survivors. These survivors experienced the Holocaust as children or, more precisely, at an age "before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self" ("The 1.5 Generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust" 277). Suleiman identifies the age of eleven as a "useful boundary" for the 1.5 generation because, according to psychoanalysts and cognitive psychologists, "for the former, it marks the move from latency to early adolescence; for the latter, it signals an important stage in the capacity for logical reasoning" ("The 1.5 Generation: George Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*" 373). During the Holocaust, the 1.5 generation survivors were in a transitional stage of development, where a mature identity had yet to be formed. Neither children nor adults, these 1.5 generation survivors experienced a

disruption of their normal growth before developing into an adult frame of mind where "one is both capable of naming one's predicament and responsible for acting it in some considered way" (374).

Particularly relevant to my discussion of Cao's *Monkey Bridge* is the idea that the 1.5 generation survivors had yet to acquire adult understanding of the world and master the language for naming the various aspects of that world. In a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, where a fully formed identity has yet to be achieved, the 1.5 generation survivors have experiential memory of the past, but they lack the tools necessary to understand its significance. In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai, like her mother, is haunted by violent memories of Viet Nam and the war. But unlike her mother, she does not have the knowledge of both national and family histories to give context and meaning to those memories. And, unlike the second generation whose postmemory is connected to an "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" ("The Generation of Postmemory" 107), Mai's connection to the past is very "real." In other words, the 1.5 generation exists between the worlds of the first and the second generation, precariously constructing a fragile reality—part invention, part fragmented memory—that is designed to hold the various forces of the past and present together in a delicate balance that could implode at any moment.

For Mai, the secret of why Baba Quan disappeared the day before Saigon fell is one of the forces threatening her construction of reality. In order to forge a more solid reality, Mai must therefore confront this mystery that is haunting her, "shroud[ing]" her and "cast[ing] a long heavy pall" over her life (10). In *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Brogan analyzes the tropes of ghosts and haunting in American ethnic literature within the framework of cultural memory, minority history, and ethnic identity. She argues that images of haunting in American ethnic literature evoke "the crises of a larger social group," specifically an ethnic group that has experienced political exclusions and historical trauma (2). In this sense, these narratives use haunting to represent these unmarked and unresolved histories, allowing the writer "to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (2). The purpose of ghosts and haunting is, then, "to recreate ethnic identity through an imaginative recreation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present" (4). These narratives act as "rituals of mourning," in which the community works through its traumatic memory, turning "bad haunting" to "good haunting" (134).

For ethnic and oppressed groups in the United States, literature becomes, through Brogan's lens, a political act, where the writer returns to the past to reclaim her people's history and emerge from this ritualized act of recovery with a new consciousness. In highlighting the necessity of this return to past traumas, *Monkey Bridge* begins with the "bad haunting" of Thanh in a hospital in Virginia, where her body and mind are literally possessed by memories of Baba Quan and Viet Nam. Mai, who watches

helplessly as her mother struggles with her memories, is herself haunted by what she does not know and both desires and fears the possibility that now "everything was pouring out" (12). As a member of the 1.5 generation, she seems to be aware of the pain that the past could dredge up, but she does not yet understand its full impact. As critic Michelle Satterlee observes, "[t]he yearning to find out what happened to Baba Quan is the mystery that Mai intends to solve when the novel begins" (139). By contrast, as we learn later in the novel, Thanh is driven by maternal love to keep her daughter from solving this mystery.

The plot of *Monkey Bridge* is driven, then, by these two contrasting narrative impulses: one is the daughter's desire to know the reason behind Baba Quan's separation from the family, and another is the mother's desire to keep the secrets leading up to that day hidden from Mai. I argue that these two narrative impulses are emblematic of the different, often conflicting desires of the 1.5 generation and first generation refugees. Although both generations find themselves relocated to the United States by the historical forces of the Viet Nam War/American War, one generation looks to the west with a sideways glance to the east, while the other generation desperately clings to memories of the east, longing for a return to old Viet Nam.

This difference in desire between the first generation and the 1.5 generation refugees, as represented by Thanh and Mai, ultimately creates a role reversal in parent-child relationship. After Thanh's arrival in the United States, she moved her family from Farmington, Connecticut to Falls Church, Virginia, a place that the mother believes to be safe because of its proximity to the nation's capital. Although both mother and daughter arrived in the same year, with Mai brought to the United States by Uncle Michael only six months ahead of her mother, their experiences are worlds apart from one another in terms of the speed of their relative adaptation and assimilation into their new context. Responding to her mother's reason for choosing Falls Church, Mai quips: "She did not notice that we had left the age of guerrilla welfare. That, in a nuclear age, Washington, D.C., and its vicinity would probably be the first target of an intercontinental ballistic missile launched by the Soviet Union was not a possibility she had truly considered" (30). In moving the family to Virginia, Thanh is only trying to shelter and protect her daughter Mai. Using a pairing of time-honored but quaint analogies to explain herself to her daughter, Thanh attempts to impart her true intention: "The capital of any country is like the king in a game of chess. It's what you protect first and foremost, because it's the most precious … The way a mother lion embraces its cubs in the folds of its own body" (30). Such disparate understandings of modern warfare in general and the Cold War in particular are examples of the generational misunderstanding and tension that is prevalent among immigrant and refugee families. In this case, Thanh's status as a mother/authority figure diminishes before Mai's eyes. In the above quote, Mai reveals a condescending attitude toward Thanh, and a vision of her mother as someone who is still operating according to

the old ways of Viet Nam, where strength in combat came from local and limited mastery of "guerrilla warfare" techniques rather than accepting the fact that they are now living in the "nuclear age" in the United States, with a set of new rules for conducting oneself under the vast, global threat of "intercontinental ballistic missile[s]."

What follows from this difference in consciousness is the emergence of a role reversal in the parent-child relationship, where the parent becomes childlike, depending on the child for survival, and the child, consequently, takes on adult responsibilities and concerns. As someone who arrives in the United States as an adult, Thanh has difficulty adapting to the new language and culture. Ordinary tasks such as grocery shopping frustrate Thanh, who is more used to "the improvisation of haggling [than] to the conventional certainty of discount coupons" (34). Mai thus becomes the person who translates and speaks for her mother in this new world. When they first arrive in Falls Church, Thanh believes that their apartment is cursed and tells Mai to talk to the building manager about giving them a different one. Foreseeing that the manager will find the reason for relocating to a new apartment "crazy" (21), Mai translates her mother's fear of a cursed apartment into a story about her finding a green snake in the drain, embellishing the narrative with the word "phobia," a word that she had recently learned when Uncle Michael told her that "Psychology is the new American religion" (22). This deft translation on the part of Mai suggests why the 1.5 generation is also known as the bridge generation, as Mai understands where her mother is coming from and also knows how the new American culture operates. As one critic observes, "Mai's translation testifies to her expertise in negotiating the culture gap in a way that her mother refuses even to attempt" (Stocks 87). It also reveals how distant the mother is from the reality of the United States. Mai observes with a tinge of sadness, " … the dreadful truth was simply this: we were going through life in reverse, and I was the one who would help my mother through the hard scrutiny of ordinary suburban life" (35). What Mai terms their "shift in status" is even more evident in language acquisition, as she becomes her mother's guardian, sheltering her from the darkness of the world (35). She describes in a strangely biblical language her new role as cultural translator for her mother:

> Inside my new tongue, my real tongue, was an astonishing power. For my mother and her Vietnamese neighbors, I became the keeper of the world, the only one with access to the light-world. Like Adam, I had the God-given right to name all the fowls of the air and all the beasts of the field. (37)

Such a power shift in the mother-daughter relationship, where Mai feels almost anointed by God through her mastery of the English language, implies Mai's sense of superiority over her mother and her accompanying desire for autonomy. Early in the novel, Mai sees her mother as a burden, as someone who keeps her from realizing her full potential, i.e., from attending college. Mai wishes her grandfather would be her guardian, taking her mother's place, so that she could attend college without her

mother feeling "abandoned" (17). It is only as the novel progresses, and Mai keeps stumbling over her desire to know what happened to her grandfather even as she eventually completes the college application process, that she realizes that she is tied to her mother not only through her mother's dependence on her knowledge of the U.S. but also through her own need to hear her mother's stories and memories of their homeland. Ultimately, Mai comes to understand the importance of incorporating the past into her 1.5 generation Vietnamese-American identity. Feeling the weight of what Thanh is hiding from her, Mai begins, midway through the novel, to experience her own "bad haunting." She recedes into a transitional state, which she likens to a ghostly existence of disconnection, where she is neither in the United States nor fully connected to the past:

> I could feel myself slip into an inverted world, a parallel existence insulated from those around me but strangely connected with the mysteries of April 30, 1975, a day that was, for me, still packed with the tight, coiled force of the unknown, a force with sufficient potency to blow the daily routine off its hinges. This was, perhaps, what an earthly, nonphysical existence could be like, I thought, a furious connection not so much with the here and now as with some other inexplicable time and place, a world that could only be reached by blasting open the mysteries that hovered in the vicinity. What had happened to my grandfather? What sort of sorrow was my mother living with? (166)

Thus Mai realizes that her mother is not the only one in the dark**.** In fact, Thanh is not as utterly in the dark or as lost without her daughter as Mai believes her to be. When it comes to the world of Viet Nam and the mysterious disappearance of Baba Quan, it is Thanh who becomes "the keeper of the world." As her daughter searches for the past to understand herself, Thanh deliberately writes a "diary" that she eventually intends her daughter to read, in which she discusses the customs and rituals of Viet Nam: from the myth of the betel nut to the importance of family, tradition, ancestors, and land in the Vietnamese identity. And, as critic Lisa A. Long points out, the diary also allows Thanh to connect with her daughter Mai, who, as a refugee in the United States, feels rootless by sharing with "her increasingly Americanized daughter" her own experience of feeling uprooted after she got married (15). In short, the diary is Thanh's subtle way of expressing her motherly responsibility and maternal love for Mai. With a tone of sadness and motherly devotion, she writes to her daughter for whom she "feel(s) sorry" because she is "so lost between two worlds that she can't find her way back into the veins and the arteries of her mother's love" (53).

Naturally, Thanh's ability to sympathize with her daughter for being "so lost between two worlds" stems from her own feelings of being trapped, locked in a linguistic, cultural, and geographical borders within the United States. While Mai, emblematic of the 1.5 generation, looks to the West for the future but glances back to the East for self-knowledge, Thanh, the first generation, longs to return to Viet Nam. Cao uses the image of the physically split self, where one side of the body is literally

paralyzed, to describe Thanh's emotional condition: she "suffered from what the nurses called 'left neglect,' meaning that her left side could appear as separate and apart from the rest of her body as somebody's else's disembodied left side" (135). Both mother and daughter experience this split existence, where they are partially disconnected from part of themselves. Mai, the 1.5 generation, feels left out and alienated from the world of Viet Nam. Thanh, the mother, feels disconnected from the present reality of Falls Church, VA; she, along with fellow first-generation Vietnamese refugees, are obsessed with the possibility of returning to Viet Nam.

Although immigrating to the United States provides the Vietnamese refugees with an exciting opportunity for self-invention, during which important documents sometimes go conveniently "missing" or are accidentally "burnt" in the process of emigrating, the past continues to overshadow their lives. At first, Mai observes the first generation embracing the many possibilities that living in a new place promises: "There was an odd element of righteousness in this transformation … A bar girl who once worked at Saigon's Queen Bee, a nightclub frequented by American soldiers, acquired a past as a virtuous Confucian teacher from a small village in a distant past" (40). Nevertheless, as critic Claire Stocks quickly observes, "despite such attempts to rewrite history, the erasure is not wholly successful" (85). Haunted by what Stocks calls an "inescapable history," the first generation of Vietnamese refugees begins to long for the home they left behind, a home that Mai, who is emblematic of the 1.5 generation, feels excluded from (qtd. in Stocks 85). As Mai herself feels, she is nothing more than "an outsider with inside information" (Cao 212).

In the Little Saigon section of Falls Church, the first-generation Vietnamese refugees' hunger for anything that reminds them of Viet Nam is palpable. In this ethnic enclave, each entrepreneurial endeavor caters to the refugee's nostalgia. The Mekong Grocery store where Thanh works becomes the hub to which many Vietnamese refugees and Vietnam veterans flock, exchanging stories and memories of old Viet Nam, purchasing a variety of Vietnamese food items, fabrics, and accessories, and experiencing "a familiarity for our own comfort" (64). Thanh and her friend Mrs. Bay pool their resources to start up a bakery so that their compatriots' "nostalgia could be exploited—with sensitivity, of course" (142). In the evening, Thanh and her friends gather at her apartment to play *hui*, a traditional game which involves "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" (141), to eat Vietnamese food, and to listen, with anxiety and excitement, to the words of a fortune-teller, who is asked to predict the future of Viet Nam. The fortune-teller affirms her fellow refugees' ultimate desire: "The communists will destroy each other soon enough, and in no more than two or three years, we will be going back home" (149).

Observing this communal gathering, Mai, who feels left out of this community of first generation Vietnamese refugees but cynical about their hopes for the future, comments: "Little Saigon was once again resurrecting hope from a dead space" (149). While Mai sees Viet Nam as "a dead space," i.e. a place that belongs entirely to the past, her mother does not see any future in the United States. For Thanh, their Church Falls apartment is a "mere way station, rootlessly sparse" because she has "no claim to American space, no desire to stake her future in this land" (91). The novel's plot alternates between the mother's narrative, which takes the italicized form of the diary and a personal letter recounting in nostalgic fashion an idealized life in Viet Nam, and the daughter's narrative, which is represented in non-italicized font and focuses on the present reality of the United States. Not only do the two modes of representation provide a visual contrast, the mother's narrative also points to a linguistic mark of difference, an otherness, in its italicized form, one that is different from the "regular" fonts of the daughter's narrative. This visually and linguistically marked difference also encodes the mother's story with a haunting presence/absence, as the suicide letter is a living trace of a person who once existed. One is reminded of the private documents, "the family portraits, journals and diaries" left by first-generation Holocaust survivors, that Hirsh points out in *Family Frames.*

The Emergence of the 1.5 Identity

By the end of the novel, Thanh has lost her battle with memories of the past and can no longer envision her future anywhere. She has committed suicide, leaving Mai with only her diary and a suicide letter as traces of her passage through life. In the suicide letter, she finally reveals to her daughter the truth about Baba Quan and her own experience in Viet Nam that she had been unable to speak of while she lived: Baba Quan was a soldier of the National Liberation Front, or what the South Vietnamese government and the United Sates referred to as a "Viet Cong." The letter goes on to detail the tragic events that occurred in the six months that separated Mai's and Thanh's departure from Viet Nam, but whose roots reached back to Thanh's birth. Before the War in Viet Nam, Baba Quan and his wife, Thanh's mother, were farmers living in a village near the Delta Mekong River. They worked under the wealthy landowner Uncle Khan, whose wife could not bear children. When Baba Quan found himself in debt to Uncle Khan, the grandfather agreed to Khan's request that Baba Quan's wife act as a surrogate mother for Uncle Khan and his wife. Thanh was therefore the product of this arrangement between the peasant and the landlord. Although raised as Baba Quan's daughter, she was financially supported by Uncle Khan, who sent her to a French school, where she learned to love Baudelaire and Verlaine.

After defeating France in the Indochina War, Viet Nam underwent a period of political instability. Fearing that Viet Nam and the rest of Southeast Asia would become communist, the United States intervened and helped South Viet Nam fight against the communist North. When the war reached Baba Quan's village, he and his family, along with the rest of the villagers, were relocated to a "strategic hamlet" of barbed wires, where Thanh's mother fell sick and passed away suddenly (246). Following the dictates of Vietnamese tradition, Thanh returned to their old village to bury her mother and, from afar, spotted Uncle Khan kneeling in front of his own mother's grave, honoring her on the anniversary of her death. At that moment, Thanh was stunned to see Baba Quan and a Viet Cong comrade suddenly sneak up on Uncle Khan and murder him. After witnessing this brutal slaying, where her surrogate father—who had apparently joined forces with the communist North—murdered her biological father, Thanh fainted. Simultaneously, US planes began dropping bombs on her village, leaving her in a coma for six months and with a permanent scar on her face, a physical trace of a single moment in her life where complex political forces, class warfare, and family tragedy were indelibly intertwined. Importantly, this scar also serves a significant marker of Thanh's decision to deny Mai access to this past, as Thanh responds to Mai's question about the scar by claiming that it was from a kitchen accident. In this way, Cao draws a symbolic connection between the historical forces of war, class, and family on the female body: "Thanh's body becomes a living symbol of the fragmentation of war and exile … Thus the wounds supposedly suffered in the name of domesticity are both superseded by and politicized as the wound of war" (Long 16).

In her suicide letter, Thanh expresses a feeling of disappointment over her inability to bury her mother, and the guilt haunts her. "Years ago," Thanh writes to her daughter from the edge of her own grave, "I followed your grandmother into the phantom world by the river's edge, across the dead world of our village, and I have never found my way back" (253). Seeing her inability to give her mother a proper burial as a failure in filial duty, Thanh does not want to fail also in her maternal responsibility to Mai. She explains that she always felt obligated to protect Mai from the deep dark family secret and the "phantoms and apparition that comes with it" (259). And so, with motherly love, she hid the secret identity and murderous deed of Baba Quan, the man who was "consumed by a resonating anguish," where "love and hate rivered through his veins and blasted through his flesh" (251), in an effort to protect her daughter from inheriting "our family's karma" (229). She explains:

> I fear our family's history of sin, revenge, and murder and the imprint it creates in our children's lives as it rips through one generation and tears apart the next.
>
> This is how your mother loves you, Mai. This is how I want to shield you from the misfortunes of our family, to keep you from living and reliving your grandmother's and mother's multitudes of lost lives. (252)

In protecting her daughter from "inescapable history" (42), Thanh allows herself to be possessed and ultimately consumed by "the phantom world" (253). At the end of the letter in which she unburdens herself of the truth about her family's past and Baba Quan's identity, Thanh admits that she feels something she has not felt "in a long time," i.e. "an unburdened sense of tranquility palpable enough that I can almost run through it with my hands" (253). It is this message of hope and renewal that Thanh ultimately wants to convey to her daughter Mai. After years of suffering from repressing the past, Thanh momentarily realizes the importance of confronting and sharing the past, no matter how painful it may be, and incorporating it into the present. Although she believes it is too late for her, the decision to pass both this painful knowledge and this insight down to her daughter suggests that she has faith that her daughter will learn a healthier way to live with the past.

Even before reading her mother's suicide letter, Mai has already begun the process of incorporating her familial and cultural past into her present-day identity as a Vietnamese-American woman. Unlike her mother's generation, the Vietnamese refugees who assemble in Thanh's apartment and listen longingly to the fortune teller about Viet Nam, Mai learns to look to Viet Nam as a guide to help her navigate life in the United States. During her campus interview at Mount Holyoke College, Mai imaginatively evokes Vietnamese legends and folktales, such as the tale of the Trung sisters, as a source of inspiration and guidance, because they provide "brilliant battlefield maneuvers that I could imitate to win over the interviewer" (118). This does not mean that Mai does not also struggle to manage the history she has inherited from her mother. Quite affected by her mother's suicide and the ghosts that haunted both of them, Mai understands that "[o]ne wrong move, one wrong move, and the entire mess can just disarrange itself and collapse like a hundred pieces of flying metal for the world to see" (257). As a 1.5 generation survivor, Mai precariously balances between the demons of the past that consumed her mother's life and the everyday struggle of living life in the United States. Unlike the second-generation survivors who can only access the traumatic past through their parents' stories, the 1.5 generation survivors must learn to reconcile their parents' stories with their own fragmented, often free-floating memories whose significance they may not entirely understand. Like Mai, they construct a fragile structure to keep in balance the various forces of the past and present, knowing full well that in one unforeseen and uncontrollable instant, "the entire mess can just disarrange itself and collapse."

The novel concludes with the suggestion that the hope and renewal Thanh wished Mai to experience is within reach. As Mai prepares for her first year in college, she looks out the window and sees a touching image in the evening sky: "a faint sliver of what only two weeks ago had been a full moon dangled like a sea horse from the sky" (260). The sea horse, whose shape is commonly used to describe the shape of Viet Nam on a map, functions as a reminder of not only Viet Nam but also her mother

Thanh. Michelle Janette and Claire Stocks read the novel's ending as a confirmation of the novel's vision of "inescapable history," although each has a different stance on its impact. For Janette, the image of Viet Nam in the shape of a moon attests to the mother's failure "to break the karmic chain" (57). In Janette's reading, even the suicide letter is an effort on Thanh's part to dismantle "Mai's attempt to recover that past" by providing an unsympathetic image of the grandfather (57). Janette argues that "the novel ends not by affirming Mai's closure of adolescence and preparation for her new life, but with the ironic return of her own history" (59). In this reading, the past is seen as a trap that is all-consuming. Stocks, on the other hand, sees a positive correlation between the past and the future. She concludes her essay by pointing to "the tenuous link between the past and the future that testifies to the inescapability of the Vietnamese past in the formation of refugee identity" (99-100). Similar to Brogan's position on the importance of returning to the past, Stocks's reading links the past to identity formation, where it is a haunting presence that must be acknowledged, confronted, and revised for "the service of the present" (Brogan 4).

Indeed, Janette's reading of an unbreakable "karmic chain" appears to apply more properly to Thanh than to Mai since Cao gives little possibility of hope and renewal for first-generation Vietnamese refugees such as Thanh. For Thanh, the past is a haunting, intimate force that possesses and ultimately consumes her. Alienated from the new culture and language of Falls Church, VA, longing to return to a Saigon that does not exist since the communist takeover, and burdened by knowledge of her family's past, she committed suicide. For the 1.5 generation Mai, however, the past is a mysterious force that she tries to suppress but eventually learns to confront, embrace, and absorb, transforming it from a negative haunting to a reservoir of guidance, support, and comfort. It is important to note that the seahorse-shaped moon that appears outside Mai's dorm window at the novel's end is indicative of a permanent and yet uncertain relationship that Mai has with Viet Nam and, more importantly, her mother. Since the moon periodically waxes and wanes, Mai can feel comforted by the thought that her mother will always reappear to protect and take care of her, and that Viet Nam will remain a reliable part of her 1.5 Vietnamese-American identity wherever she goes. At the same time, the changing shape of the moon and its distance from the earth suggest that Viet Nam will not be an oppressive presence with the power to overdetermine or overshadow her new life**;** from this perspective, Viet Nam can potentially lose its cultural influence on the young 1.5 Vietnamese-American.

Conclusion

The tragedy in Cao's *Monkey Bridge* lies in the lateness of Thanh's decision to reveal the family secret to her daughter Mai, which therefore

preempts any possibility of understanding and reconciliation between mother and daughter. Although both mother and daughter are haunted by memories of Viet Nam, Thanh is overburdened by the responsibility of witholding from the daughter she wishes to protect the details of the past that possess her. As an unintended consequence, however, Thanh closes in her daughter's face the door to the world of Viet Nam: a world that contains a large part of herself, a world that she, her friends and compatriots, even Vietnam veterans, continue to come together in nostalgia to celebrate, a world that no longer exists but to which she longs to return, a world that ultimately consumes her. As a 1.5 Vietnamese-American, Mai is driven by a desire to understand her fragmented memories of Viet Nam and the reason behind Baba Quan's absence; more importantly, unbeknownst to her mother, Mai desperately desires to be a part of Thanh's world in order to find her own sense of place and belonging while she navigates through the cultural terrain of the United States. Not only does the novel's title refer to the bridging of the United States and Viet Nam, which is, by definition, the located identity of the 1.5 generation, but it also advocates for the first generation's responsibility in assisting the 1.5 generation by keeping open the lines of communication between the generations.

In this sense, Cao's *Monkey Bridge* joins lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, Andrew Lam's *Perfume Dream,* and Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and *Short Girls* as a foundational 1.5 generation Vietnamese American narrative. Unlike most Euro-American writings about Viet Nam/American War, these texts are written from Vietnamese perspectives. And unlike early edited collections of oral narratives, such as James Freeman's *Hearts of Sorrow* and Lucy Nguyen-Hong Nhiem and Joel Martin Halpern's *The Far East Comes Near*, these 1.5 narratives use literary modes (novels for Cao and thúy, literary essay for Lam, and memoir for Nguyen) and tropes to depict the process of formulating a Vietnamese-American identity. In this sense, they are important works for any scholar interested in understanding the process of "becoming American."

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