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MICHELE JANETTE

Guerrilla Irony in Lan Cao's
Monkey Bridge

One might picture novelist Lan Cao writing from the middle of an intersection of cultural highways. As one of the first Vietnamese American novelists, Cao risks being taken as representative of "her people" and joins a tradition of American ethnic literature that has long practiced strategic essentialism. As a novelist of the Vietnam War, she enters a realm whose coin has been authenticity yet whose authors frequently resist truth-telling. And as postcolonial, exile, and/or immigrant writer, she self-consciously writes as "an outsider with inside information" (*Monkey Bridge* 41).¹ I argue that from this position, Cao deploys irony to disrupt understandings and expectations of sincere, authentic, or sentimental narratives of Vietnam. As Renny Christopher has shown, "authentic" Vietnam stories tend to

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1. Both reviewers and the book's cover abet readings of *Monkey Bridge* as culturally representative: on the back cover, the novel is promised as a chart of "the mysterious terrain of the Vietnamese American experience" (emphasis added); the *Orange County Register's* reviewer promised that "Readers will learn more about Vietnam's essence through Cao's brilliant tapestry than they could ever accumulate from a stack of history books" (Phan F24). For examples of Vietnam war narratives that resist claiming authenticity, see the works of Tim O'Brien, W. D. Ehrhart, and Dale Ritterbusch. See also Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* and Neil Sheehan's *Bright Shining Lie*. A short list of other novelists who write as informed outsiders includes Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Bessie Head, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Frank Chin.

draw heavily on Orientalist discourse and reinforce our Orientalist "knowledge" of Vietnam, its culture, and its people. Cao's irony is anti-Orientalist, drawing our attention to what we do not and cannot know, to the discursive situatedness of knowledge, and to how representations and narratives construct our conceptions of "truth." In her first novel, *Monkey Bridge*, Cao writes an ironic rather than a sentimental or allegorical narrative of war and immigration, bringing together postcolonial tricksterism, the epistemological doubt of many war narratives, and awareness of the possibilities and prices of assimilation or its resistance. Rather than offering comforting assurance of authentic cross-cultural expertise, Cao leaves readers with the uncanny feeling of knowing that their knowledge is a problem, is partial, and comes to them pre-scripted.

In contrast to her currently better known literary compatriot, Le Ly Hayslip, Cao refuses the gestures of authenticity and self-allegorization possible in autobiography. Hayslip's self-avowed project to heal the war's wounds through her books and through the clinics she builds with their profits requires that we absolutely believe the stories she tells us in *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*. She encourages us to allegorize from these stories, to see the experiences of her body as metaphors for the experience of her birth nation, as when she describes herself allegorically in a scene just after she has been raped: "Both sides . . . had finally found the perfect enemy: a terrified peasant girl who would endlessly and stupidly consent to be their victim—as all Vietnam's peasants had consented to be victims, from creation to the end of time!" (*When Heaven* 97). Whereas Hayslip here encourages us to see her as representative, indeed metonymic, of all Vietnamese, Cao resists such generalization, abstraction, or cathexis. *Monkey Bridge* doesn't forgive, it doesn't heal, and it doesn't nurture. Its telling epigram is T. S. Eliot's "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

Cao's ironic narrative doesn't allow us to fix the meaning of this war. As Susan Jeffords has shown, such fixative tendencies usually result in reinforcing militaristic and aggressive policies and attitudes. *Monkey Bridge* remains harder to resolve. It refuses earnestness, insisting on distance and multiplicity, on an unsettling gap between what seems to be going on and what is going on. Permanent irresolution may be a potentially hopeful position regarding

this war, if we follow George Lipsitz in believing that “change comes from inhabiting contradictions.”² Kalí Tal has argued that such difficulty, though, is particularly pressing upon the traumatized author, for whom the gap between language and referent, and between author and audience, is inherently, and acutely, uncrossable (16). Ironic narratives such as *Monkey Bridge* inhabit this doubled space by insisting on double meanings, resisting the direct symbolism of metaphor in favor of the uncertainties and instabilities of ironic, contrastive, unsaid doublings. One can be fairly sure that one has “accurately” appreciated irony, but one can never be entirely sure. In the words of Hugh Kenner, “Irony cannot be trusted” (qtd. in Hutcheon 13).³

Refusing to be trustworthy, *Monkey Bridge* resists easy consumption. Rather than calm American heartburn over the war, its irony unsettles. And rather than offering herself as soothing spokeswoman for Vietnamese Americans, Cao gives us a book that remains indigestible, speaking to us with an irony whose target just might be ourselves. In a field plagued by ethnographic readings, *Monkey Bridge* remains unfixable, multiply interpretable and therefore neither claiming nor endorsing claims of representativeness.

And yet *Monkey Bridge* is frequently read in ways that make it conform to assumptions rather than challenging them. Reviewers in both the *Christian Science Monitor* (Rubin) and *Publishers' Weekly* (Steinberg) intoned that the heroine of *Monkey Bridge* was “airlifted from Saigon” “on one of the last helicopters to leave Saigon”—this despite the fact that the novel makes it perfectly clear that Mai Nguyen left Saigon on a “Pan Am flight,” including such details about the “plane” (a word used no fewer than five times) as the “overhead luggage compartments,” “assigned seats,” “aisle,” “pressurized cabin,” “flight attendants,” and “wing flaps.” Twenty years after Edward Said insisted that we recognize our Orientalist preconceptions, and Maxine Hong Kingston further chided “cultural misreadings by American re-

2. Linda Hutcheon, though, warns us against the too heady celebrations that some deconstructive readers have made of ironic instability, reminding us that irony itself has no necessary political agenda and can be used to subvert or to enforce any position, dogma, or agenda (37).

3. Kenner, “Irony of Ironies,” *Times Literary Supplement* 17 Oct. 1986: 1152.

viewers," such readers continue to impose preformulated scripts onto the text. These are not simply careless readers, but readers who demonstrate the difficulty of escaping the discursive frame through which we have grown accustomed to seeing Vietnam. The image of helicopters fleeing the Saigon embassy so dominates the American imagination that anyone leaving Vietnam in the seventies is assumed to have departed in precisely this manner.

We learned from Michel Foucault to appreciate the power that such discourses have to shape how we interpret the world. Foucault also acknowledges that there is no Archimedes' Point from which we can simply escape our own discursive contexts. *Monkey Bridge* does not offer us a "true" or "authentic" narrative to replace a "faulty" one. It can, however, if read ironically, disrupt readers' familiar ways of knowing, rendering them situational and mediated. I call this strategy "guerrilla irony." Such thrust-and-parry irony resists passive and comforting assimilation into a universal reader community. It doesn't encourage spectacular (and consumerist) rapture, but critical interpretation. Its invitation is to an in-group of skeptical thinkers rather than to empathetic universality. In resisting normative settling for its own narration, it further encourages us toward permanent skepticism and instability in our "knowledge" of Vietnam.

Like the guerrilla fighter who is at once soldier, farmer, and parent, Cao's tale operates in several modes: ironic, sentimental, fantastic, and quotidian. The novel is plotted as a sentimental detective story, in which a daughter seeks out her mother's past in order to understand and heal her. The plot of familial reconciliation and filial duty serves as vehicle for Mai to investigate and understand her own heritage and identity. In addition to her constant fear that her American present will metamorphose into a traumatic flashback from her past in Vietnam, Mai carries the anguish of her mother's presumed abandonment of Mai's grandfather. It is this angst that binds mother (Thanh) and daughter (Mai) powerfully together. Mai hopes to restore wholeness to her psyche and to her family by finding out "what really happened" the day her mother left Vietnam without the grandfather. As a good "detective" (195), Mai in-

terrogates eye witnesses such as the colonel who sponsored her immigration to the U.S., she attempts to pick up the trail at her grandfather's last known location in Vietnam, she examines and cross-examines her mother for information, and she finds secret documents (her mother's diary) to aid her search. While her mother is in the hospital, Mai pores over Thanh's diary, searching for hints about that final departure. She finds instead the history of Thanh's birth and marriage and Thanh's analysis of Mai's own character.

Mai's search for her grandfather, and the truth about her mother's departure from Vietnam, is rooted in the fundamental belief that there is a truth to find, and that her family has behaved sincerely according to the ideology of Confucian filiality and fierce anticommunism that they have professed. The finale of the novel is an apparent crescendo of sincerity: Thanh commits suicide, leaving a note that finally "tells all." This letter reveals all of Mai's previous understandings about her grandfather, gleaned from her mother's diary, to have been falsities and fabrications. Not "my own and my mother's history" (168), as Mai believes, Thanh's diary is instead full of "gorgeous fictional reimaginations" (255). The source turns out to be fraudulent, and what Mai has always known, that her mother suffers the guilt of abandoning the beloved grandfather, is equally wrong. Her grandfather turns out to have been not proud and honorable but abusive, alcoholic, and vindictive. Her mother's delirious callings were not *for* him but in fear of him. He was not left to the mercy of enemy forces, he was himself a Vietcong. The diary is exposed as a plant, left where Thanh knew Mai would discover it. In the climactic ending, duplicity is retracted and truth prevails, sentimentally reinforced by the contextual pathos of the suicide. *Monkey Bridge* can be seen as following a curative trajectory of trauma rooted out, exposed, understood, and cauterized. Mai, now understanding her (now absent) mother, closes that chapter of her life and prepares to enter a new one: adulthood, independence, and college.

But I think the novel itself encourages us not to read it this way. Whereas conventions from mystery novels and deathbed confessions endorse Thanh's letter, the novel itself teaches us to read it much more skeptically. I suggest that Thanh's final letter is a red herring, offering false closure and specious security, and that rather

than unveiling an “authentic” truth, the novel urges us to see discursive formations.

Knowledge and truth are complicated and qualified throughout *Monkey Bridge*. The novel is peppered with statements from Mai that begin “I know” or “I knew,” and they are uniformly unreliable. “I knew from my own reading that refugees were a burden to the economy” (15), Mai says, a comment Cao soaks in irony, as Mai internalizes the anti-immigrant rhetoric of her “local paper,” privileging it over other forms of knowledge such as observing the workings of the immigrant community in which she lives. And again, take her insistence on how well she knows her mother:

I knew the inconsolable shame and sadness that she had been carrying in her since the day Saigon fell.

(70; emphasis added)

I knew something about our family history. *I knew* all too well my mother’s singular sorrow over the one defining moment of her life, when she had failed to remove my grandfather from the dangers of a collapsing country. . . . *I knew* she needed to create an untangled path through which she could escape blamelessly from the guilt and shame of abandoning him. *I knew* of her unconscious dreams . . . for a reunion.

(158–59; emphasis added)

I knew we were on sensitive territory. Who wouldn’t be permanently haunted by the knowledge that she had left her father behind as enemy forces were closing in.

(194; emphasis added)

What Mai “knows” here is the version of events her mother has told her, a version she finally retracts, whereupon Mai “knows” something new. This could simply be evidence that Mai can learn, rather than that her knowledge is unreliable. But from the first page of the novel, Cao has redefined the phrase “I knew” from signifying certainty to signifying on the impossibility of knowing. It becomes a sign of paradox and contradiction, conveying anxiety rather than clarity. “I knew I was back there again,” says Mai, introducing a flashback to a Saigon hospital shredded by a grenade blast. “I knew I was not in Saigon. . . . Yet I also knew, as I passed a wall of smoked-glass windows, that I would see the quick movement 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" (1–2). "Knowing" here becomes the familiarity of the fantasy, the flashback, the traumatic symptom. Knowledge is not empirically verifiable truth. It is the expectation of the familiar. It is Foucauldian discourse, reaffirming the structures whereby we pattern our understandings.

At the level of detail as well as proclamation, Cao sows doubt throughout the narrative. When Mai remembers her father, she remembers that "he relished complexities most of all, because extremes of any kind made him cringe. 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself,' he'd say with a shrug, quoting, he claimed, Walt Whitman" (76). In addition to the obvious mention of self-contradiction here, Cao weaves in Mai's doubt that the father knows his Whitman. On the one hand, Cao is deftly sketching the skepticism of a teenager toward her elder's knowledge. On the other, she is reminding readers that our narrator isn't a fully informed judge.

Mai accepts her mother's suicide letter as fact, in contrast not only to the skepticism she showed toward her grandfather, but also to her awareness that nearly everyone she knows is a skillful historical revisionist:

Out of the ruins came a clatter of new personalities. 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 province. Here, in the vehemently anti-Vietcong refugee community, draft dodgers and ordinary foot soldiers could become decorated veterans of battlefields . . . we could become anything we wanted to be in America, we could change what we had once been in Vietnam.

(40–41)

Almost every character in this novel uses narrative tactically rather than transparently. To take Thanh's letter at face value would be to disregard the novel's own lessons in narrative manipulation.

In retracting the version of the past she wrote in her diary, Thanh is more successful in destabilizing all narrative than she is in establishing any truth. There is no definitive proof within the novel in favor of either the heroic or the debased version of the grandfather.

For example, the colonel's tale of the grandfather leading him through a minefield could prove that the grandfather watched the Vietcong and then aided the Americans (as the colonel tells it) (113), or it could prove that the grandfather himself sowed the mines and then saved a personal friend (as the mother tells it) (251). As only appropriate for a tale beginning in a war where scripts and reality are notoriously intertwined, everything the reader learns about Vietnam is a representation, is someone's version.

Indeed, Thanh herself taught us to read a mother's final words for meanings beyond and opposite their literal one, in a parable about a mother who gave deathbed instructions to her contrary daughter: on her deathbed, a mother tells her daughter to bury her by the river, assuming that since the daughter has been contrary since her birth, she will remain so and will bury the mother in the mountains, where she really wants to be. Alas, the daughter repents with perfectly bad timing and buries the mother in the riverbank as requested. She is thereupon punished for having listened to the letter rather than discerning the spirit of her mother's desire. The moral, as Thanh tells Mai, is that one must "distill the true meaning" (171). Like the mother in the tale, Thanh is less interested in the truth of her words than in the consequences of them for her daughter's behavior. Looked at this way, the final confession becomes another tactic which will achieve the same goal Thanh had in writing the diary: to break the karmic chain.

Thanh doesn't want her daughter to reconnect with the past. She fabricates the gorgeous fantasy version of her life to satisfy (in the sense of sate, quell) Mai's desire for that past. She seeks rupture from the past, even at the cost of her own intimacy with Mai: "although it pains me to feel your withdrawal," she writes to her daughter, "it also gives me a strange sense of faith, the faith that the distance slowly edging its way between us might help separate you from the fate of our family" (229). The diary doesn't work. It simply whets Mai's appetite to investigate further. The letter does work. Teaching that the grandfather was the antithesis of the hero Mai sought, the letter severs Mai's desire to recover that past as dramatically (and perhaps as melodramatically) as the mother's suicide severs Mai's ties to Virginia and the Little Saigon commu-

nity there. Mai ends the novel believing she will never "have to see any of these people ever again" (257). "A brand-new slate, that was what my mother had supposedly given me."

Mai seems to be about to depart for a new adventure, a new frontier. In her case, the available script appears to be that of the model minority at an exclusive New England college, as Mai has been accepted into Mount Holyoke. "'A college for women, the challenge to excel.' I could walk right into it. . . . I would follow the course of my own future" (260). And yet, keeping in mind Thanh's fable of the contrary daughter, I think we must see irony as well as success in this resolution. Thanh's parable is of course classically ironic: the mother's wish is foiled because she stakes her plans to her understanding of the daughter's character; the daughter alters her character to be a more filial daughter and thus fails to do as her mother wishes. (The overt reliance of this tale on irony alerts us to the irony in Thanh's moral as well: rather than concluding that the mother should speak directly, she expects daughters to understand accurately their mothers' indirection.) Mai's plans for her future do accord with her mother's "true meaning," leaving the "family history of sin, revenge, and murder" behind for the promise of Mount Holyoke, and yet this very departure is written as a return to the past it purports to escape. When Mai fantasizes that "I could walk right into it," the logical assumption is that she plans to walk into the college, the challenge, the course of her future. But in its full context, Mai's statement indicates that she is walking right into another storybook:

Across the room, on my desk, a glossy color brochure promised us incoming students the openness of an unexplored future and the safety of its sanctuary. "A college for women, the challenge to excel." I could walk right into it.

(260)

Grammatically, "it" could as easily be the "glossy color brochure" as the "college." She may be walking into a fantasy, an advertisement, as much as into her "own course."

Such an interpretation might seem like splitting grammatical hairs, but the novel endorses this possibility in that the language of this scene directly echoes an episode from Thanh's early life.

When Thanh married Mai's father at age fifteen, she abandoned her own education, leaving behind the French novelists and poets she loved for her new life with her husband. Since her husband, too, was well-educated, and philosophically "modern," she expected her life to continue to be intellectually rich. Unfortunately, while the union is modern in the sense that they chose it themselves, Thanh quickly discovers that her marriage will consist of "[her husband's] individual freedom and my old-fashioned obligation" (188). She narrates her expectations in precisely the same language that Mai uses for Mount Holyoke: "I . . . walked into that beautiful dream" (182). Mai herself has read these words before she utters them about the college. If Mai, like her mother, is walking into a beautiful dream, from which she will awake disillusioned, the novel ends not by affirming Mai's closure of adolescence and preparation for her new life, but with the ironic return to her own history. We are left with the suggestion that stability is a temporary structure over which we cross from repetition to repetition. A monkey bridge?

One such bridge between repetitions is the one Cao constructs between herself and predecessor texts. Blending a revision of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* with an invocation of Vietnam's most celebrated women warriors, the Trung sisters, Cao emphasizes her novel's lineage in the Asian American and Vietnamese cultural traditions. In her revisions of this heritage, she alters her predecessors in ways that unbalance rather than comfort her readers.

Thanh's diary includes a revision of Kingston's iconic tale "No Name Woman." Like the silenced history of that unnameable woman, Thanh's tale is a secret story, a story Mai "doesn't know" (46). It is the story of Thanh's magical, Buddha-like ears. Both tales turn on community reaction to a woman's chastity (or lack of it).⁴ Kingston's *No Name Woman* conceives a child "too many

4. The tale of the punished adulterous woman is older than Kingston, of course, who herself sees "No Name Woman" as a revision of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Skenazy 72). I focus on Kingston as the precursor text here because of the prominence of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as icon in Asian American literature and also because Cao has claimed Kingston as one of her major influences (Interview, par. 5).

months" after her husband has left the country, and the villagers punish her:

At first they threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock. . . . Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. . . . 'Pig,' 'Ghost,' 'Pig,' they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house. . . . The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well.

(4-5)

Kingston's narrator famously resists the lessons this episode is supposed to teach: fear of sex, obedience to patriarchal order, and silence regarding injustice. The aunt is sacrificed but is also imagined as gaining a fearful, supernatural power. The silence around her sparks the narrator to critical examination of the power of language, and also to production of multiple narratives to replace the missing story. Meant to shut down one taboo female activity (sex), the story instead produces an extravagance of another (story-telling).

Thanh's story, too, uses the tale of threatened punishment to incite rebellion rather than compliance. Unlike Kingston's *No Name Woman*, Thanh's mother Tuyet herself passes the community's chastity test but then finds out "what had happened many years ago to another village girl" whose wedding-night sheet had not displayed the virginal proof of three drops of blood:

When the wagon passed their houses, the villagers had thrown rocks at the wagon and spat in the girl's direction. Several village elders chased after the cart and cursed her karma with hexes they claimed would last generation after generation.

That night, villagers torched the family's barn and drove all their farm animals and livestock into the fields. Flames leapt into the air, lapping up everything with their fiery tongues. With sledgehammers and scythes, the villagers slashed every animal in sight, and the flesh that hung from the carcasses bled pools of red into the soil. The next morning, the body of the bride was found by an old stream. . . . All the animals were killed, except the pigs. The pigs were spared, so that their ears could be slashed as a warning to bad daughters who ventured beyond the traditional circle of virtue.

(50)

In both Kingston and Cao, we see the destruction of the entire family's livelihood to punish the promiscuity of a daughter; in both, the entire neighborhood is involved in the slaughter; in both, the gory scene ends in the discovery of the drowned woman whose punishment will supposedly forewarn other young women. And again following her literary foremother, Cao depicts change for the women of the next generation. Kingston's autobiographical narrator, the niece of the punished woman, breaks the taboo, tells us the tale, and imagines the whole scenario from the perspective of the aunt, recuperating her rather than acquiescing in her punishment. Thanh, narrating her own autobiography at this point in the novel, embodies the revision to the tale, with her "long, long ears" (51), "ears reborn and made permanently whole to compensate for the stumps of pig ears that had been inflicted generationally on the girls of our village" (52). Yet there are two crucial differences in Cao's version. First, the feminist revision and resistance take place in the Asian country, and second, the mother resists rather than reinforcing the constriction of women. Thanh's ears are described as "reborn . . . to compensate" by Thanh's own mother. In contrast to the isolated heroine in Kingston's text, Thanh, her mother, and the community of women are united in Thanh's tale: "Inside my ears were the rage and revenge of every girl from every generation before whose return with a shameful and earless pig had destroyed her family's lives—lives my mother had now gloriously resurrected" (52). In envisioning the women of the village as united in emancipatory resignification, rather than complicit in patriarchal surveillance and censorship, Cao avoids reinscribing "third world" women as helplessly in need of "first world" feminist rescue or as hopelessly acquiescent to their own oppression. And in narrating this episode through Thanh rather than Mai, Cao avoids scripting the immigrant generation as the embodiment of an outmoded ideology that the second generation vehemently rejects.

Which is not to say that Kingston imagines only battle between mothers and daughters. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator is often explicit about the debt she owes her mother, even as she rebels against her—as when she claims, "[s]he said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). Cao borrows this structure from Kingston as well, as Mai models herself

after the most famous women warriors in Vietnamese culture. Preparing for college interviews, Mai “imagined the multitudes of stories I had been told about the Trung sisters. . . . In this world, I was Trung Trac, . . . expert pole-and-swords fighter” (118–19). As in her revision of the punishment tale, here Cao inherits her woman warrior legacy with the encouragement and participation of her parents, rather than in contradiction to their more direct statements. Cao’s tale continues to invoke and revise Kingston’s. In both Kingston’s retelling of the Fa Mu Lan legend and Cao’s retelling of the Trung sisters’ history, we see women generals trained in a variety of martial arts who recruit, train, and lead their armies to victory, and (in the most direct echo) we see proclamations carved into skin.

Within this frame of reference to previous tales, Cao again twists the paradigm to her own purposes. As in her revision of the No Name Woman episode, we have here a community of women in place of a solitary woman, and Cao’s woman warrior is publicly acknowledged as a woman, as opposed to Fa Mu Lan’s military drag. Trung Trac leads the army in tandem with her sister Trung Nhi, and of the generals chosen for their army, “thirty-six were women” (120). Further, the famous back carving is shifted in Cao from the heroine herself to a tiger she defeats. Thus she can raise its skin as “proclamation urging the people to rise up” without having to be dead herself to do so. (In Kingston, Fa Mu Lan’s inscription makes her useful “even if I got killed [since] the people could use my dead body for a weapon” [34].)

Even though Fa Mu Lan is disguised and Trung Trac is not, the whole of Cao’s fantasy is less concerned with Trung Trac herself than Kingston’s fantasy is with Fa Mu Lan. We spend much less time following Cao’s heroine through her training, she undertakes no personal vendettas (Fa Mu Lan wreaks specific vengeance on the baron that persecuted her family), and she has no personal life (Fa Mu Lan visits her parents, falls in love, and bears a child).⁵

Further, they differ strongly in their fighting style. In major bat-

5. This difference may be accounted for by necessity. As with the tale of the No Name Woman, Kingston is giving Fa Mu Lan a tale of her own to replace missing histories of Chinese women, powerful or common. Vietnamese culture has a greater wealth of existing narratives that celebrate powerful, clever, and intelligent women. The Trung sisters have been revered for centuries, and the Vietnamese national epic, *The Tale of Kieu*, also celebrates the strength and ingenuity of its heroine, Kieu (Nguyen).

gles of each heroine, both use more-than-natural swords to defeat their enemies, but the origin, power, and effect of the swords alters from Kingston to Cao. Fa Mu Lan's sword is a projection of her emotions: "My fear shot forth—a quick, jabbing sword that slashed fiercely, silver flashes, quick cuts wherever my attention drove it" (41). Trung Trac's supernatural sword gains its powers not from projection but rather from representation:

My strategy had been not to fight the tiger but to confound it by painting the metal blades a bright orange which would fling stripes of orange, more magnificent than the tiger's black stripes, into the night air. . . . With each stroke of the blade, I produced a mythical creature with a pitch-black coat carved from the night, marked by sleek stripes of orange fire from my metal knives.

(119)

Trung Trac's weapons are representations, and her strategy is not to oppose directly but rather to confound her enemy, and then, using "its own momentum to throw it off balance," to vanquish it.

These are guerrilla tactics—strategies to defeat an enemy whose sheer strength exceeds one's own. As Trung Trac's battles continue, she develops more and more into a figure for Vietnam's millennium-long struggle for independence, combining centuries-old martial arts with the tactics of the National Liberation Front. Her strategies become set-piece descriptions of the tactics of the Vietcong against the U.S.:

[W]e were preparing for the thrust and parry of all-out guerrilla warfare, the poor person's weapon. My army would strike physically and psychologically at the enemy. We would turn the country into a narcotized landscape haunted by shadows from above and tunnels from below, creating a night voice that would spook the invaders. We would hide in rice fields, jungles, and swamps, and we would attack when the enemy was off guard. We would camouflage ourselves and blend in with the grass and the trees, leaving no footprints and exuding no odor; we would appear and reappear noiselessly in the blackness of nights; and we would unleash terror in the hearts of the enemies. With such tactics, we would unsettle the enemy's nerves and turn even an armed force one hundred times our strength into a terrorized one. . . .

Our aim was not to win every battle, but to confound the enemies and make them paranoid after every encounter.

(120, 122)

This passage reads as a pastiche of familiar depictions and analyses of the VC. But Cao deflects it. Rather than overtly linking Vietnam's revered warrior heroine with the VC who fought against American soldiers, she directs us to America's predecessors in Vietnam: Trung's strategy is the strategy used "to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu" (122).

The catch is, it wasn't. Some strategies are similar: the Vietminh did dig tunnels into the hillside around Dien Bien Phu so they would be invisible from the air, and they did make use of psychological warfare tactics, singing the song of the French Resistance against the French invaders. But "the enemy" was far from "off guard." Impatient for the expected attack, they dropped leaflets onto the hills in which the Vietnamese were camping, urging them to action: "What are you waiting for? Why don't you attack if you aren't cowards? We are waiting for you" (qtd. in Young 33). And the Vietnamese troops were well supplied with modern weapons of war. General Vo Nguyen Giap was supplied with anti-aircraft guns and howitzers (mostly carried overland by foot, but some dropped conveniently by the U.S., three of whose supply planes missed the French base and dropped 119 tons of ammunition for the Vietnamese to use against the French) (Young 34).

Rather than as a mistake, I see this as a form of tactical, guerrilla irony. By directing us clearly toward a French parallel rather than an American one, *Monkey Bridge* appears to avoid endorsing the Vietcong who fought against the Americans, by staying with a less fraught target. But for the reader who connects this description not with the Vietminh tactics of 1954, but the National Liberation Front tactics twenty-five years later, not only is "the enemy" of American troops validated in the figure of Vietnam's most celebrated patriot, but the American "forces of democracy" are rendered equivalent to the French imperialist invaders. In making the point through ironic misleadings, Cao turns discursive hegemony against itself, using "its own momentum to throw it off balance," like Trung Trac.

This camouflaged irony appears again when Cao satirizes polemical resentment of Jane Fonda: "It had seemed inconceivable to them that someone who had sabotaged her country's war efforts had not been arrested or imprisoned. Tolerance for unorthodox po-

litical expression was simply not an ideological possibility" (154–55). Anti-Jane sentiment is alive and well among both American and Vietnamese veterans of the Vietnam War, but here Cao chides only the Vietnamese immigrants for having no tolerance. Whether we are to assume an explanatory ideological context of growing up in a totalitarian regime, or to assume that the Vietnamese immigrants are more tolerant of friendly criticism on this point (certainly the slightest mention of the dreaded Jane provokes at least rhetorically violent reactions among many U.S. veterans), the tactfulness of this passage targets the persistent vitriol which still characterizes some U.S. veteran responses to protests against the Vietnam War.

When writing as a reviewer rather than a novelist, Cao is noticeably more direct. She takes Oliver Stone to task with no holds barred:

[E]ven though "Heaven and Earth" cosmetically changes the landscape, it fails to transform America's apparently irresistible impulse to view Vietnam as anything other than a domestic theater. . . . Although it's the story of one Vietnamese woman, it's part of the succession of Hollywood Vietnam war scenes: frame after frame of the bloodied and bleeding, of steel pot helmets and ammunition pouches and galloping streaks of fire. One cannot help wondering whether America isn't too enamored of its own ability to destroy. Witnessing one's own power may be intoxicating, but there is something inappropriate about America's persistent preoccupation with the underworld of flames it wrought.

More than that, the image is inaccurate.

("Details" 13)

In *Monkey Bridge*, Cao writes this criticism into the voice of Mai, who becomes a critical commentator as she and Colonel MacMahon watch a screening of *The Deer Hunter* together. (The film isn't named, but the plot summary, focusing on the famous Russian roulette game, as well as the setting of *Monkey Bridge* in 1978, make the allusion quite direct.) Rather than seeing the film transparently as a capturing of the experience of U.S. soldiers, Mai is instead attuned to the way it misrepresents Vietnam:

In one hallucinatory scene after another, against a disturbing background of incomprehensible grunts which supposedly constituted spoken Viet-

namese, the roulettelike spin of a gun as arbitrary and senseless as Vietnam would dictate the life and death of American innocence. Vietnam was becoming a huge allegorical black hole into which all things primeval could be sucked.

(100–101)

Mai's viewing experience is not one of identification with the story, or seduction by its allegorical charms. She is instead a deconstructive reader, observing the workings and naturalizations of ideological persuasion as they occur.⁶

While Mai's deconstructive reading practice might be assigned to her essentially different perspective, viewing mainstream culture from the subversive, disruptive marginal position, Cao interestingly qualifies such a possibility. Mai's against-the-grain reading of *The Deer Hunter* is prefaced by Colonel MacMahon's challenge to the authenticity of the movie: "I was in Vietnam for six years and I've never seen or heard of anyone doing this before, at least on this massive a scale," he whispers to Mai "[h]alfway through the movie" (100).⁷ Colonel MacMahon is the idealized military man: he can "appreciate intuitively the durian" (77) and not only knows about swallow's nest soup but can "venture into the rush and agitation of a Saigon sky market to look for [the nests]" (81). He is the figure of Americans who know and understand Vietnam and are able therefore to withstand spurious mythmaking about the war.

But this form of knowledge, too, is exposed for its flaws. The colonel's knowledge serves ultimately as a reassertion of his power over Others. He defines the discursive realm, apparently authorized by expertise. While the colonel's comments make him Mai's ally in resisting the exoticization of Vietnam as a prop for allegories about American innocence, the scene also obliquely reminds us of the hierarchy of voice even in expressions of subversion. Colonel

6. In his novel *Lost Armies*, Wayne Karlin also depicts a Vietnamese immigrant critically analyzing depictions of Vietnam in film, depictions that offer "distorted evil suggestions of an evil dream" which is "not my country" (54).

7. MacMahon here debunks with accuracy—according to Lawrence Suid, *The Deer Hunter's* famous image is not based in anyone's "Vietnam experience." Director Michael Cimino began the movie with the conceit of the roulette game and only later decided to set it in Vietnam, making the game a metaphor for the war in general.

MacMahon speaks first; Mai offers no ideological criticism of the movie until after he does. And while his are spoken aloud, her thoughts remain unspoken. Recent postcolonial criticism has urged us to consider the way white liberal editors, translators, interviewers, and critics often (consciously or not) direct, authorize, and appropriate the position of the “subaltern” speakers with whom they work.⁸ Colonel MacMahon, Mai’s elder and patron, here illustrates the delicacy of the balance of empowerment and appropriation.

Subtly tipping the scale, Mai becomes the colonel’s interviewer, pressing him to make his life into a text for her interpretation: “Did you actually shoot people?” she asks as soon as they leave the movie (101). When he reluctantly answers yes, she pursues the story. For a moment, language seems about to dissolve into Steinian impenetrability, no there in their wheres: when Mai asks where MacMahon was stationed, he responds, “Everywhere. We were sent everywhere.” “Everywhere where?” “Well, everywhere-everywhere . . .” (101). But then the colonel gets rolling and tells Mai his war story, which Mai acknowledges as an unfamiliar, albeit potentially legitimate, construction: “Uncle Michael knew a Vietnam that I did not” (104).

While it may be unfamiliar narrative to Mai, “Uncle Michael’s” story contains the leitmotifs of Vietnam veteran literature: the astonishing beauty of the land, the rainstorms, the leeches, the booby traps, the gear, the constant psychic tension of “always noticing,” and “the shock that comes over you when you realize a terrible mistake has been made and can’t be undone” (104). In this instance, the terrible mistake was to have machine-gunned an innocent boy, already dead, because in his final, dying motion “it looked as if he could have thrown a grenade at us.” “Only after the sizzle of gray smoke disappeared, only then, did we see the shadow of a little kitten” (105). The boy’s mother then arrives, “removed her cone-shaped straw hat and covered parts of him with it. And she left . . . believ[ing] that he had been indiscriminately murdered by us,

8. See for example Doris Summer’s “No Secrets,” as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), and Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972).

a group of grown men highly trained to act only with the utmost amount of precision" (106).

With its classic pathos, replete with small boy, baby animal, and wailing mother, this tale invites skepticism. Rather than a truthful tale, this one again seems tactical. As metonym for the war, the colonel's story offers a replacement for *The Deer Hunter's* nihilistic, absurd roulette game. It counters the sadistic imagery of the Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* with one of compassion and tragedy. It sympathetically rewrites the ubiquitous mythology of the booby-trapped child sacrificed by the Vietcong to kill U.S. soldiers ("the exploding shoeshine boy" scenario). And yet even as this tale asserts the innocence of Vietnamese civilians whose lives were devastated by the war, it also reinscribes the innocence of the soldiers who inflicted this devastation. The men of MacMahon's squad are not portrayed as participants in a project to deliberately inflict injury (which, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, is the objective of war), but as heroic innocents tragically caught in circumstances from which no good outcome is possible. The colonel almost acknowledges that specific innocence can coincide with general guilt: "[W]e had been silently but wrongfully accused of doing something that didn't happen but could very well have. . . . And of course you occasionally wonder whether it had in fact happened, because of the howling, ravenous conviction forever carried by a stranger in a nameless village that it did" (106). In a "war defined principally by fictive narratives" (Baky), MacMahon gives a Vietnamese mother as much authorship of "truth" as the soldiers and accepts responsibility for the fact that "it could have" happened. But crucially, MacMahon also clears himself of the charge. The boy was "already gone," apparently shot in the head, before the colonel's troop happens upon him. Colonel MacMahon is innocent, so the tale becomes about "the struggle between good and evil inside an American soldier's soul, not really about Vietnam at all"—exactly what Cao criticizes in her review of Stone's films. It may be a tale of moral confusion, but it maintains a clear sense of what is right and wrong; transgressions are tragic, but not paradigm-altering. MacMahon's story seems to endorse the terrible lie Tim O'Brien criticizes in "How to Tell a True War Story:"⁹

9. For a discussion of O'Brien's use of traumatic structures, see Jarraway.

If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue.

(*Things* 68–69)

On the one hand, Colonel MacMahon is an image of an insightful, honorable “first world” patriarch—aware of his potential for complicity and nonetheless behaving as ethically as possible. On the other hand, he salvages at least a small bit of rectitude and virtue from his tale, perpetuating the ideology (“lie” in O’Brien’s passage) that war is tragic rather than, say, criminal.

Colonel MacMahon wryly names the wrongful but appropriate accusation of the dead boy’s mother as “irony” (106). In addition to naming the situational irony of the episode, this may also be a key to a more recuperative reading of his entire tale. If we see the elements of his narrative as *stock* elements—the kitten, the wailing mother, the youthfulness of the boy—to enhance melodrama, then perhaps the entire story’s very use of cliché is a signal of the paucity of narrative to express “what really happened”—a theme of ineffability common to Vietnam war narratives.¹⁰

Certainly, ineffability is a theme in this novel. “I wanted to tell her,” Mai thinks during her college interview, “It was not all about rocket fires and body bags” (128). But she can’t: “The Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer mine to explain.” Faced with preconceptions and anger, “seen in so many Americans,” including the school-bus driver who “informed me the first day we met that her husband had done door-to-door combat in the streets of Hue in 1968 . . . [and] lost both his legs,” Mai “hadn’t known what to say” (126). Facing the college interviewer and the school-bus driver (both guardians at the gate of education), Mai cannot assert an alternative discourse. In the context of her family, however, Mai is more vocal. Called upon to translate language and culture, she transforms it as well. She is both a trickster translator and a Foucauldian reader, as we see when she traces the genealogy of “truths” such as the one that

10. The phrase “what really happened” recurs throughout the book. Here it is used by MacMahon (106).

overdetermines American beliefs about departing Vietnamese refugees.

When Mai watches television, that icon of both postmodernism and the Vietnam War, she attends to it as an instrument of mediation. In contrast to the image familiar in American literature and mythology of "middle America" seeing "for the first time" images of war "brought directly into their living rooms," *Monkey Bridge* attends to the effects of such spectacularization.¹¹ When Mai watches the helicopters fleeing Saigon in 1974 and refugees swarming the fleet in the South China Sea, she sees not "news" but discursive construction. Possessing her own knowledge, she evaluates the reportage and its progress into truth: "Already the story was being repeated as standard history" (44). When she is given clippings by her well-meaning American sponsor of anything Vietnamese that appears in the newspaper, she immediately recognizes and resents the Orientalism she finds, even if she cannot do more than acknowledge it to herself: "in clear inexorable print . . . was a story about how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog. . . . What was I supposed to say to this?" (88). In such responses, Mai offers a portrait of an active, critical, ironic viewer of media spectacles and puts into American cultural narratives the image of the viewer seeing "the slow-motion disintegration of *our* country" on TV in 1975 (42; emphasis added).¹² But Mai is more than the model of an ironic perspective. She does not just perceive the "spin" that is applied to events on television, she also becomes a spin doctor herself, turning television into the event that she will mediate, usually for her mother.

As Mai and Thanh watch an episode of *The Bionic Woman*, Mai translates the dialogue into English, and as she does so, she alters the moral of the story. The TV plot has Bionic Woman rescuing a girl who went swimming against her mother's orders. After the rescue, Bionic Woman scolds the girl and extracts a promise of greater filiality. Mai translates to her mother that the girl is being

11. In addition to the scenes of watching Vietnam on American TV, *Monkey Bridge* depicts the watching of American television in a non-American context when Mai and her family watch *The Wild Wild West* and *Mission Impossible* in Saigon (207).

12. Hayslip, too, devotes substantial energy to descriptions of watching the war on TV with her American in-laws, and the cultural myopia they demonstrate toward her perspective (*Child* 25).

praised for having jumped into the lake to save a dog. "Where's the dog?" asks the mother. Mai: "'He's not there anymore, they took him to the vet right away. Remember?' I sighed deeply" (38). "Oh . . . Strong girl, Bionic Woman" replies the mother. Mai doesn't translate; she tells a new story to suit her own purposes. She doesn't even particularly stick to the original plot, inventing a dog where there was none. Her revision endorses a strong, independently acting and heroic young woman being praised for these very traits by an older woman—a plot that can be read as offering her mother a parable for their relationship, copying the pedagogical method we've seen Thanh use with Mai.

The Bionic Woman revision also suggests some criticism of the original. Although the Bionic Woman herself is offered as a model of "strong" womanhood, this adjective is in fact applied to the *revised* version Mai creates. Indeed, Jaime Sommers's Bionic Woman was powerful only through her (male-created) enhancements, she was able to use those powers only in the service of her (male) bosses, and she (like many superheroes) had to die in order to become her heroic self. Mai's re-vision increases the feminism of the episode considerably.

And yet the most direct "target" of the irony in Mai's revision is not the not-quite-feminist Bionic Woman but Mai's own mother, who seems to be fooled by Mai's translation rather than being one of the joke's insiders. The scene is both one of mother-daughter bonding, as the two share in viewing, discussing, and evaluating the program, and one of profound distancing, as Mai establishes her ability to create worlds to which her mother can only acquiesce.

This instance echoes another scene, when Mai and her mother move into an apartment that Thanh finds unacceptable. It is "cursed," she argues, by a television aerial whose shadow strikes directly into their living room. She takes Mai to accost the landlord. Mai again plays the cultural trickster, understanding and manipulating a series of cultural discourses to get what her mother wants: "Tell him to give us another apartment. . . . Tell him we can put several mirrors up to deflect the curse in his direction if he doesn't do something quick," Thanh orders (21). Mai's translation:

"My mother saw a green snake coming out of the drain yesterday and again this morning. There's no way she can set foot in that bathroom again. She has a *phobia* about snakes," I added, making sure to emphasize

the word “phobia.” Psychology is the new American religion, Uncle Michael had once said.

(22)

Mai’s equation of curses with phobias is a wonderful send-up of Western “modernity” as presumed contrast to Eastern “ancientness.” But as the episode proceeds, the irony cuts more strongly against Thanh than against the landlord, in part due precisely to Mai’s revisions. Whereas everything Thanh says is repeated and altered by Mai, the landlord’s comments stand alone. And as the dialogue progresses, Mai cedes the role of translator to the landlord’s girlfriend:

“A snake, Cliff, that’s what she said, isn’t that what you said? And now the poor mother can’t pee. . . . I wouldn’t want to pee knowing a snake is watching me. . . . Don’t worry, Cliff here’ll get you another apartment.” She gave a quick leave-it-to-me look that promised victory.

While one could push this passage to imply feminine solidarity against the property-holding man, and clearly the girlfriend seems to see it this way, it is also clear that the “victory” that the girlfriend promises will be won through sex and the need for women to be protected from nasty things like snakes. And even this power is not held by immigrant women.

Following this model of feminine wiliness, Mai’s next translation also plays to a benign paternal power: “My mother says she’s sure you can help us, because you’re the manager” (23). The irony is only heightened by the fact that in this case, Mai is translating the mother’s increased aggressiveness, Thanh having just threatened to “retaliate” if the landlord refuses. Thanh goes on to revel in her victory—“you have to stand up to the Americans if you want anything in this country”—but even as we may relish her delight, we laugh at the irony of which she is the butt.

This scene again recalls and alters Kingston’s novel, in which *Brave Orchid* sends her daughter to the pharmacist to get “reparation candy” to counteract the curse of having sent unnecessary medicine to the family home. There, too, the mother believes she has been victorious, whereas the daughter sees her mother as embarrassing and absurd (170–71). Kingston’s narrator neither teaches the Americans “good manners,” as her mother believes her

to have done, nor reworks the request to fit American norms, as Mai does. Where Kingston's narrator falls frequently into silence and shame, Cao's wrests a mischievous dignity for herself, by distancing herself from her mother's plan even as she appears to follow it.

It might seem, then, that Cao's novel becomes another member of a lineage Sheng-Mei Ma has recently chastised for exoticizing first-generation immigrants in order to validate second-generation authors at the expense of their more ridiculous parents. But instead, I think *Monkey Bridge* contains its own critique of this phenomenon. Mai herself may be the author of such a script for her mother, but this narrative is juxtaposed against the other first-person narratives that make up the novel: Thanh's. In these portions of the novel, the hierarchy of comprehension and manipulation is several times reversed, as Thanh reclaims ironic know- ingness from her daughter: "that was my gift to her, to allow her the satisfaction of thinking I'm unaware" (53). Thanh also criticizes her daughter for precisely the tendency to exoticize herself and her homeland that Ma delineates:

Where's the cruel mother-in-law, where's the rape, the floggings, the ban- dits and the cannibals, the savage dismemberments? she [Mai] would ask. What she wants to see is a good exciting movie of adventure set in a foreign land where people are as capable of inflicting brutalities—of the kind no one here could be accused of inflicting—as they are of enduring them.

(191)

Thanh here proves herself as capable as her daughter of decon- structing Orientalist spin, as she catalogues both the fantasy and its double standards. In contrast to such "exciting movie" adventures, Thanh offers her own vision of the "Old World."

Thanh, Mai, and Cao all author narratives that are revisionary, am- biguous, tricky, and ironic. When Thanh sarcastically points out the absurd double standard by which the West judges "brutali- ties—of the kind no one here could be accused of inflicting," she focuses our vision through an anti-Orientalist lens. By teaching us

the very codes that allow us to decipher ironic elisions, gaps, and contradictions throughout the novel, Cao provides us grounds for entering the narrative dialogically, neither relying on prior experience nor assuming universal similarity. In following as Mai appreciates (and often revels in) her ironic revisions and translations, we become allied with her in “getting” the joke.

In its offers of allegiance and education rather than appropriation or empathy, Cao’s novel speaks directly to the issues of authenticity, representativeness, and ownership of experience with which I opened this essay. In only one of the many contexts in which “experience” has been argued as a prerequisite to speech, the controversy over Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial revolved for awhile over whether a nonveteran could legitimately be entrusted with representing this war (Scruggs 79; Sturken 54–58). Kalí Tal has suggested both that we critically challenge veteran narratives and that we carefully guard ourselves against trying to fit such narratives into already codified molds. She further reminds us that narratives cannot be traumatic for readers, and that to presume that we have felt another’s trauma from reading or listening is extremely condescending. To read in such a manner would be only to reduce it to a spectacle easily appropriated into the structure that produced it (53–59).

Doris Summer has suggested that texts can sometimes resist this appropriation. Analyzing Rigoberta Menchu’s autobiography, Summer delineates a strategy of refusing us access, of deliberate barriers beyond which the narrative cannot go. These barriers serve not only as protection from the appropriative gaze, but as noticeable reminders that to know is to seek to enter, and that we may be trespassing. Cao similarly signals to readers that her narrative is not available for appropriation or absorption. More than that, her novel actively disrupts “knowing” as practiced within Orientalist discourse. Despite the insistence of its covers that the book is a map or a chart into “mysterious terrain,” the story itself offers both more resistance and more playfulness. It invites us into interpretation and alliance—we can hope to “get” the novel in the sense of understanding, but not of possession. Irony is the monkey bridge that Cao constructs between reader and experience. In its trickiness, its sting, and its layers of meaning, the ironic narrative

invites and resists. It is an irony that stylistically resembles the thrust-and-parry of the guerrilla tactic: unsettling, subtle, and effective. *The Chicago Tribune* may proclaim on the cover that the novel offers us "Vietnam's lush heart," but I would argue that it resists such cannibalistic incorporation. In the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha, another Vietnamese American postmodern trickster, "the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be" (1).

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