

U.S. AMERICAN LITERATURE

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First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas

PAULINE T. NEWTON



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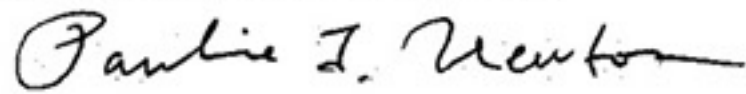
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Chapter 6

Attacking Immigration “Drunken Monkey Style” in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*

As seen through Mai Nguyen’s eyes in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*,¹ the flashbacks on the Vietnam/American War and the promising images of the United States reveal Vietnam and the United States not merely as separate territories linked only by a bridge that allows one to cross “from the wasteland to a place of healing and peace,”² but as entangled and deceptive places riddled with hypocrisy and full of suffering. For Mai, who emigrated from Vietnam to the United States in her early teens, a supposedly peaceful family farmland in Vietnam becomes a region of despotism and violence. She later views an entrance interview at a U.S. American college as a battle scene. Mai’s emigration becomes more complicated than a crossing “from one border to another, whether physically or metaphorically”³ during her transition from her native culture to the U.S. American mainland since she begins to emerge as a transcultural representation of both lands, a process that she does not complete by the end of the novel. The sundry events that Mai faces as a child of southeast Asia and then as an adolescent of the U.S. American mainland include not only a full-fledged war that marks a turning point in the history of U.S. American and Vietnamese politics and colonialism, but also immigration and conflicting familial interests.

Critic Heike Paul emphasizes the importance of “the role and function of the setting, often a specific geography . . .” for female immigrants—that is, the fact that “location and migration” are not merely metaphoric for displaced immigrant women writers—and I intend here to focus still more intensively on the particular ways immigrant writers like Cao show how their characters interact with people within the changing geographical settings in which they find themselves (Paul, *Migration* 7, 6). Many of the incidents in Mai’s experience involve contacts with people from her homeland—most centrally with her mother—and from the United States, including interactions with U.S. American veterans of the Vietnam/American War and schoolmates. Not only must Mai face the complexity and burden of leaving Vietnam’s world of clashing desires for independence—whether from the U.S. Americans, the French, or the Communists—and adjust to a U.S. American-style democracy, she also must grapple more intimately with the overlapping yet conflicting differences between people from her native land and from the United States, each of which influences the development and portrayal of her identity. Through Mai’s perspective on these interactions, readers gain an

understanding of her cross-cultural position, which grows in the United States but begins to form prior to her departure from Vietnam when she befriends and observes U.S. American soldiers. After she departs from her homeland, she then observes the effects of immersing herself in a separate Vietnamese island in the United States with her mother and her ancestors, known and unknown. She also establishes ties with U.S. Americans, some of whom she meets prior to her immigration and others in her new home or school. Meanwhile, Mai's mother's account, told in her own voice through notes to her daughter,⁴ slowly reveals that Mai's cross-cultural position is still more complicated than Mai imagines. This chapter will explore the dynamics of Mai's experiences, as portrayed through her relationships, in order to demonstrate how this young female migrant endeavors to form a transcultural identity by learning to navigate and to accept diverse cultures.

In order to understand fully how Mai's immigration experiences influence her development, one must consider her native environment: Vietnam represents an interesting potpourri of cultural groups, many of which, not unlike Mai, struggle to adjust to cultural differences. Foreigners and natives constantly exchange goods, habits and ideas. If U.S. American soldiers and journalists can westernize Vietnam with their money, lingo and illegitimate Amerasian children,⁵ and cannot always leave behind the country or the war after their physical departure, neither can Vietnamese citizens who flee to the United States leave all this behind. For example, numerous U.S. American or Vietnamese male soldiers such as Tim O'Brien, U.S. American soldier and author of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going after Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, or Bao Ninh, Vietnamese veteran and author of *The Sorrows of War*, present comparable narratives of wartime experiences and disillusionment during and after the war. Although U.S. American soldiers fought the Viet Cong in the jungles or the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in the highlands, they also mingled with Vietnamese civilians as they burned their hamlets, copulated with prostitutes and haggled in the markets. This type of lifestyle in a horror-filled, war-torn country forced Vietnamese peasants and their families to live constantly in self-defense. Survivors from both countries share the same wish—they want to escape from enemies, bombs and sniper fire—but neither adversary can refrain from mingling with the other. Thus, during the war years, “the dividing line” between the two nations became “a blur,” prohibiting a clean-cut separation.⁶ The autobiographies of Vietnamese-American author Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, also show how the westernization of Vietnam and the entangling of the two nations shapes Hayslip's lifestyle at home and abroad, compelling her to recognize her diverse cultures' differences. Hayslip's early years revolve around her farm-life heritage, but as she interacts with Vietnamese and U.S. American soldiers on a daily basis, she learns to accept her fate both as a warrior and a victim, and subsequently to adapt to a peaceful adult lifestyle in the United States. If Mai hopes to overcome the psychological and emotional strain of the Vietnam/American War, like Hayslip she must analyze her past and plan her future, thus building a domain that accepts and integrates various cultures in which she can dwell comfortably.

However, unlike Hayslip, O'Brien, or Bao Ninh, Mai has not learned this lesson fully by the end of her story, perhaps because she is only a youth, and since Cao concentrates closely on the crucial adolescent years, the war and its repercussions profoundly affect Mai's development. Mai immigrates to the United States at thirteen years of age in February 1975, two months before the fall of Saigon. Although Hayslip often focuses on her childhood years in *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, she left Vietnam as a young mother in 1970, long before the war reached an apex of violence and horror around the time of Saigon's fall. This fall signaled the beginning of Communist rule and the end of hopes for independence for South Vietnam. This blow was especially devastating because the Vietnamese, whether from the north or the south, had fought for independence for centuries from the French, U.S. Americans,⁷ Communists and even Asians, and they could not forget decades much less centuries of sacrifice easily, nor could they instantly stop loving their land and ancestors. Yet many Vietnamese, fearing the wrath of the northern army and the economic and social aftermath of the war, deserted their war-ravaged ancestral lands. According to Ronald Takaki, author of *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, "in a frenzy during those last days of April 86,000 Vietnamese were airlifted out of the besieged country."⁸ Takaki also marvels at the wave of immigrants, including Cao (and her fictional character), who fled to the United States shortly before and after that fated April: "in 1964, there were only 603 Vietnamese living in the United States. . . . the 1975 wave of Vietnamese migrants did not choose to come here [to the United States] . . . for they were driven out . . ."⁹

The fictional Mai's mother, frightened for her daughter's safety, arranges for Mai to leave Vietnam without her by forfeiting her parental rights to a U.S. American soldier, Uncle Michael McMahon, who legally adopts Mai. For these veterans and for women like Mai and eventually her mother who manage to escape during the most frenetic days of the war, the war continues in their minds long after Saigon's fall. Mai flees so abruptly during the climax of the war that she cannot scrutinize its effects until after she settles in the United States. Mai must meditate on the experiences she underwent and the relationships she formed during and shortly after the war before she can concentrate on her present status as an immigrant, a status of which she gradually becomes more mindful. And then she builds an islanded world for herself in the United States. Mai's familial influences, chiefly those of her mother in addition to those of her father and paternal grandfather provide crucial insight into Mai's struggle. Also significant are Mai's interactions with U.S. American figures, ranging from media models to adopted parents to schoolmates. Finally, to determine the significance of Cao's emphasis on the formation of an immigrant adolescent's transculturality, a topic largely unexplored by critics in scholarly works that concern *Monkey Bridge*,¹⁰ I explore the direction that Cao's text indicates that Mai will take as she becomes a woman. I also consider how *Monkey Bridge*, published more recently than most texts in this study and written by a younger author, provides an intriguing cross-cultural example for migrant women writers in the 1990s and beyond.

The primary relationship that Mai considers after her emigration is that with her mother. As a former wartime hospital aide who wishes to forget the war as quickly

as possible and to integrate herself into U.S. American culture seamlessly, Mai physically and emotionally isolates herself from her principle reminder of Vietnam: her mother, Thanh. According to Olivia M. Espín, author of *Women Crossing Boundaries: A Psychology of Immigration and Transformations of Sexuality*,

Adolescent girls or young women who leave their country without their families may find themselves affected by a premature and traumatic separation from their parents . . . The rapprochement period is characterized by an ambivalence between the desire to return to the mother and a need for distance from her.¹¹

Since Mai's mother does not join her daughter in the United States for almost six months, Mai must acquire survival skills as quickly as possible with little maternal guidance. During this "premature and traumatic separation," Mai grapples with the construction of her identity. When her mother finally arrives, Mai deliberately Americanizes herself further so that her novel ways separate the two. Mai certainly does not express the strong affection for her mother that Kincaid's Annie does. Mai refuses to believe in karma, instead professing "Manifest Destiny," which she defines as the U.S. American ability to mold one's own life just as one pleases:

Not only could we [Vietnamese-American immigrants] become anything we wanted to be in America, we could change what we had once been in Vietnam. Rebirthing the past, we called it, claiming what had once been a power reserved only for gods and other immortal beings. (Cao, *Monkey* 40-41)¹²

Mai believes that a U.S. American education will allow her to live according to her "Manifest Destiny" principles, so she insists that she needs to attend a U.S. American college away from her mother, telling her mother that every "serious student in America embarked on a four-year quest, to be taught by a master teacher at a college far away from home . . ." (Cao, *Monkey* 31). Rather than viewing herself as a victim of Western expansion, Mai thinks that her new principles will allow her to become a self-sufficient "master teacher" who does not need a Vietnamese mother's tutelage. By ignoring her mother's advice or by refusing to acknowledge her parentage, Mai rejects the role of the mother in the construction of her identity.

Mai endeavors to ignore this mother figure by welcoming the U.S. American ways that her mother discards; Thanh does not have the ability or will to adapt to the United States's "orderly" and affluent lifestyle. For example, Mai notes, "inside, the A&P brimmed with unexpected abundance. . . . But my mother did not appreciate the exacting orderliness," and Mai turns her nose up at her mother's inability to embrace this U.S. American establishment (Cao, *Monkey* 32-33). Mai's mother longs for Saigon's "sky markets," and so, unlike her United States-loving daughter, she becomes increasingly dispirited in the United States's enclosed edifices (Cao, *Monkey* 33). Mai notes "with a sense of neither drama nor calamity, my mother's ability to navigate and decipher simply became undone in our new life" (Cao, *Monkey* 34). Mai knows that she cannot survive in the United States if

she rejects its ways or islands herself in Little Saigon as her mother does. Since Mai accepts the United States's habits and language, she becomes the primary household leader, all the while maintaining a distanced, cool attitude. She wishes to create her own U.S. American island that Thanh cannot visit so that Mai can flee Vietnam's "phantom world," to which her mother, an already ghostlike, fading image to her daughter in the United States, belongs (Cao, *Monkey* 32).

Ironically, Mai's thoughts betray her just as she believes that she has established a distance between Thanh and herself, and so when examining their relationship she consequently undergoes the "ambivalence" that Espin describes. For example, when Mai visits her mother in the hospital, she expresses disgust at her mother's "carrying on in her usual convoluted language about karma [she] could not make out. . . . This was alien territory, very alien, even for" Mai (Cao, *Monkey* 10). Mai blames her mother for these sudden reminders of karma or of her former lifestyle that draw her back to a culture she desperately desires to forget. However, Mai almost simultaneously acknowledges that she knows her mother's "language" too well. She admits, "I blamed my mother for my flawed eye. . . . My mother was my karma, her eye my inheritance" (Cao, *Monkey* 20). The more Mai denies her mother's influence, the more she realizes that she is "perfectly [her]self, and, perfectly . . . like [her] mother" (Cao, *Monkey* 16-17). Although to critics like Vu T. Do Mai's adolescent "ambivalent" reactions might indicate that the bond between Mai and her mother is "traditional," thereby placing *Monkey Bridge* as a "quintessential immigrant mother/daughter narrative," the powerful and slightly uncanny nature of their relationship, seen in scenes like the above, contradicts this hypothesis.¹³ Mai's recognition of their bond becomes more haunting as Mai's mother figuratively and literally becomes more and more like a Vietnamese ancestral ghost.

Thanh's death does not free Mai from her mother's sense of karma and the traditions of her Vietnamese culture; instead, Mai's memories of her mother repeatedly remind Mai that she and her mother "inhabited the same flesh . . . like the special kind of DNA which is inherited exclusively from the mother and transmitted flawlessly only to the female child—the daughter," and Mai acknowledges, "a part of her would always pass itself through me" (Cao, *Monkey* 259). Thanh's writings become one way her voice and presence continue to "pass through" her daughter; despite the daughter's refusal to acknowledge this intimidating mother, the writings reveal diverse aspects of the daughter's identity. Thanh's troubling account shows readers that Mai's supposedly self-sufficient, anti-Vietnamese island is built on sand. For example, when Mai acknowledges that she has fooled her mother into believing in the importance of college in the United States as a "four-year quest," her mother writes, "*this child of mine [is] so lost between two worlds . . . She wants me to let her walk blamelessly out of one life and into another. And that was my gift to her, to allow her the satisfaction of thinking I'm unaware*" (Cao, *Monkey* 31, 53).¹⁴ When Mai later obtains Thanh's writings and realizes her mother's pretense at ignorance, Mai eventually must also recognize that her mother, tied by bonds of love and blood, understood her daughter's desires more thoroughly than Mai thought.

Mai thus continues “ambivalently” to recognize and to reject her mother’s maternal bond even after the latter’s death. She does not forget wholly her understanding of Eastern philosophies about the soul and karma, and she learns about the replication of genes in the United States. Yet she also cannot dismiss U.S. American ideas like that of “Manifest Destiny” or the American Dream—however naïve they may be—as lightly as her mother does. Western ideas become a part of Mai’s composition, and U.S. American culture becomes too entangled with Vietnamese identity to allow an easy separation.

The difficult pattern of recognizing and rejecting one’s maternal ancestry and its culture surfaces in Hayslip’s works as well. Hayslip experiences little maternal support¹⁵ as she encounters her new country’s ways first-hand and as she acquires her multicultural ways. After leaving her mother in Vietnam, Hayslip arrives in the United States with her U.S. American GI husband and children. By observing Vietnamese and U.S. American traditions, gradually she becomes “a woman with two [or more] cultures instead of one.”¹⁶ However, although Hayslip misses her mother dearly, her mother cannot hinder Hayslip’s adjustment to a new culture by reminding her daily of Vietnamese practices and beliefs. Hayslip and her sons struggle together to adapt to U.S. American lifestyles, and Hayslip does not insist that they hold onto their Vietnamese customs by rejecting U.S. American ways. In contrast, in *Monkey Bridge*, Thanh does not encourage her daughter or herself to face new lifestyles and traditions boldly, and her refusal to mingle often irks Mai. Thanh, who gave birth to Mai after several years of marriage and miscarriages in Vietnam, does not have the energy and elasticity that a young immigrant mother might. Thanh does not interact with U.S. American soldiers in Vietnam’s military hospitals or markets, nor does she attend U.S. American schools. Thanh chooses to follow Vietnamese customs and helps to complicate the development of Mai’s cross-culturality.

Mai demonstrates her willingness to become a U.S. American by accepting her admission into a U.S. American college shortly after her mother dies; yet in the same moment that she reflects on this decision, stating, “I would follow the course of my own future,” she recognizes her love for her “sea horse” country through the shape of the moon she sees in the U.S. American sky (Cao, *Monkey* 260). In this scene, in her mind, Mai combines her perceptions of and love for her homeland, Vietnam and its people, including her mother, with her new culture and its surrogates.¹⁷ She has just begun to recognize her “double perspective” as Salman Rushdie calls it, though this “perspective” also could be called multiple (Rushdie, “Homelands” 19). Rushdie also suggests that “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated,” but for Cao and Mai, old memories of Vietnam merge with newer images of the United States, resulting in a complex array of perceptions (Rushdie, “Homelands” 12). In this concluding point in which diverse memories and perceptions mix, Mai has begun to mold her transcultural niche.

Mai’s “ambivalent” manner of accepting and rejecting her ties to her mother (and motherland) further emerges through the inclusion of the letters or journal entries or of Thanh’s narrative voice. Cao states that this narrative device allowed her “to shift between past and present,” or between Vietnamese and U.S. American worlds (Cao, “Lenses” 174). The consequent layers of narration have the effect of

revealing subversive interactions among the fictional narrators and between these narrators and the author. According to Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, the phenomenon of literally

Being *between two covers* with somebody ultimately replaces singularity with alterity in a way that is dramatically female, provides a mode of resisting reification and essentialism, and, most important, allows for more radical experimentation . . . (Brodzki and Schenck, "Introduction" 11; Brodzki and Schenck's emphasis)

Although the idea of including two or more narrators or even authors "*between two covers*" is not as unusual as Brodzki and Schenck declare,¹⁸ the multiply narrated text does become a hotbed in which the narrators and/or authors compete for the dominant role, and the dual narration of Mai and her mother is no exception.

Since Mai immerses herself in U.S. American culture by professing her version of "Manifest Destiny" and a U.S. American education and by learning the language, she poses a compelling threat to her mother's authority. Mai's desire to thwart her mother's role transcends mere adolescent avarice for authority; in order to survive, Mai must recreate or define her identity in the United States, and she perceives her mother as a hindrance to this process. At the same time, Mai's mother intuitively understands that her daughter needs to feel empowered and to form this self-sufficient U.S. American persona, and so Thanh feigns ignorance, as discussed earlier. However, Thanh's knowledge and writings restore Thanh's authority as the maternal storyteller. These stories reveal the importance of oral tradition, which allows the listener to reach back to her roots. Yet Thanh's notes also indicate that Mai must construct her own island in U.S. American society if she hopes to survive. As Gloria Anzaldúa, author of *La Frontera/Borderlands* says, "*un choque*, a cultural collision" should occur so that "the lifeblood of two worlds" can form another realm (Anzaldúa, *La Frontera* 78, 3). Without Thanh's notes about Mai's grandmother Tuyet, Vietnamese wedding traditions, the good luck that Buddha ears bring, and the secret about Thanh's illegitimate and arranged birth,¹⁹ Mai never would understand or be able to share her heritage as contained in her family's stories. But neither could she develop fully her new U.S. American identity without her mother's choice to submerge her maternal authority. Still, Mai's mother's authority remains an obstacle in Mai's attempt to Americanize herself, and in a sense, Thanh's articulation of this in her writings only extends and intensifies Thanh's authority as a mother.

Although Mai and Thanh are not "'feminine' and 'masculine'"²⁰ figures, they hold mother and daughter positions, and as both the primary narrator of this novel and the primary English-language speaker in this relationship, Mai seizes the dominant "masculine" position as she tries to thwart Thanh's role as a maternal storyteller. The relations between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, as discussed by Sidonie Smith, author of "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," parallel those of Mai and her mother or of Cao and her narrators, although no sexual relationship exists between Mai and Thanh. Smith notes, "Stein assumed the role of 'husband' to Toklas' 'wife,' the lesbian couple thereby reiterating the heterosexual model of domesticity."²¹ Although dominant and

submissive roles in mother-daughter or other relationships might not seem unusual, readers should note the way in which the dominant person or storyteller manipulates the other's language. Specifically, Stein reinforces her dominant role by writing Toklas's autobiography. And since Mai grasps the English language with more ease than her mother, Mai can manipulate her own translations. In essence, Mai becomes the husband-parent who ushers the child wife-mother through daily activities, such as watching television or negotiating with the landlord. Mai explains: "I was the one who would help my mother through the hard scrutiny of ordinary suburban life" (Cao, *Monkey* 35). For example, Mai notes, "since my mother couldn't understand half of what anyone was saying, television watching, for me, was translating and more," meaning that Mai can alter the plot of the shows when she wishes (Cao, *Monkey* 38). When Mai's mother reacts superstitiously to a TV antenna, she expects Mai to explain to the building manager that she wants a new apartment that is not "hexed with a curse"; knowing that the manager would not tolerate this rationale, Mai dramatically tells the manager that a snake has crawled out of their bathroom drain (Cao, *Monkey* 20). Mai's mother cannot check her daughter's translations, and so her daughter learns, as Judith Ortiz Cofer does, that "The right to name . . . also meant the right to stand guard over language and the right to claim unadulterated authority" (Cao, *Monkey* 37). Once Mai begins to recognize the authority language gives her, she takes advantage of the power it lends so that she can thwart her mother's dominant position.

Cao, too, undercuts her characters' roles while empowering herself as the author. Cao's approach resembles the way in which Stein tells Toklas' story. For example, although Stein gives Toklas an opportunity to share her life through the process of writing the autobiography, she literally becomes Toklas' speaking voice, thus influencing it and the narrative process.²² Cao gives her fictional characters a chance to share their stories, but she creates and controls their words. For example, although Mai's mother speaks through her writings and her stories,²³ Thanh's voice, too, is dominated by Cao. Cao silences Thanh's voice through her death so that Mai can have a "brand new slate" (Cao, *Monkey* 257). Yet despite her death, Thanh's presence remains in the reader's and writer's minds, Thanh's writings and Mai's memories. Cao cannot quiet her easily, and Cao may have realized that a person's voice and authority may linger after death, especially since her own mother died in 1992, five years before the publication of *Monkey Bridge*. Cao herself has struggled after all to shape and to define her authorial self as an immigrant and as a writer; as Shari Benstock explains in her essay, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," "From a GUSDORFIAN perspective, autobiography is . . . the building of a linguistic fortress between the autobiographical subject and . . . interested readers" (Benstock, "Autobiographical" 148-49). Cao erects a "fortress" by insisting, "I don't consider my novel [*Monkey Bridge*] to be historical fiction" (Cao, "Crossing") or an autobiography or memoir (Cao, "Lenses" 173). In other words, Cao stresses that Mai is not an autobiographical subject (Cao, "Lenses" 174). However, by sharing the events in this novel, Cao may have desired to reveal her own mother's story in part. The novel is dedicated to her mother, and Cao "slipped into writing the book by accident" when her mother became ill (Kossoff,

"Professor"). Cao remarks, "I was on the shuttle flight from New York to Washington, D.C. . . . I made that shuttle trip often, and on the flights, I started writing about her illness"; this first impulse led Cao to write the opening hospital scene (Kossoff, "Professor"). Thus, she becomes a storyteller who shares a tale that she could "pick off from [her] own life" (Cao, "Lenses" 173). *Monkey Bridge* then becomes yet another work that constructs a "provocative blend" of autobiography and fiction; readers should not be fooled by the suggestion that "autobiography [is] a separate genre to be distinguished . . . from fiction" (Hall and Morgan, eds., "Introduction" 5).

Even though Cao occasionally gives Mai's mother her own voice through Thanh's written notes so that Mai's and Thanh's narratives resemble a multicultural conversation, unlike other daughter-narrators such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mai, the primary storyteller, becomes the instrument through which Cao speaks; moreover, Cao ventriloquizes through Mai so that Cao can subvert the fictional daughter's as well as the fictional mother's positions as storytellers. By arranging the text into sections in which different narrators (Mai and Thanh) speak, Cao controls the characters' and readers' perception of the former's situation as immigrants. The contrast between the two narratives slowly allows readers to realize—before Mai does—that without an appreciation of Thanh's Vietnamese customs, Mai cannot survive in the United States. Simultaneously, readers learn that Mai must shy away from her mother's culture if she wishes to dwell in the United States. This limited and carefully staged omniscient point of view allows Cao to demonstrate the dismantling of Mai's artificial self-isolation that prohibits any Vietnamese interactions; the interjection of Thanh's account reveals Thanh's refusal to support her daughter's desire to cut herself off. Thanh steadfastly acknowledges her duty to point a "magic finger" so that Mai "will know which route to follow," despite Mai's attempts to ignore this guiding "finger" (Cao, *Monkey* 57). Thus, Cao's careful arrangement of narrative voices unveils and produces that individual evolution that Mai must undergo in order to appropriate practices and beliefs from both worlds.

Cao's controlled narration also provides an interesting contrast to those of other migrant women writers, especially since she achieves a qualitative and experimental level of writing that some migrant women writers do not. Lim praises the "playfulness, boldness, and experimentation" of "writers . . . in their 30s" (such as Cao) who are "a generation younger" than Lim.²⁴ Cao's text signals recent trends by twentieth-century women authors, whether migrants or not, who think "back through [their] mothers"²⁵ in order to carry on "the creative spark, the seed of the flower they [our mothers and grandmothers] never hoped to see,"²⁶ as Alice Walker says. But Cao offers a remarkable way to reflect back since she allows Mai's mother to interject her narrative voice into Mai's own story. Although Julia Alvarez, Jamaica Kincaid and other first-generation migrant women writers experiment with including mothers' voices in their texts, they either demarcate their accounts or do not reveal their mothers' roles in their lifetime. Alvarez devotes sections to Laura, the fictional mother in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Yo!*, but Laura's brief sections are conarrated in round-robin sessions with her daughters and her husband, with few exceptions. Kincaid's fictional work,

The Autobiography of My Mother, shares the story and perspective of a “mother” who refuses to bear children but in a period that occurs before the time in which her children would live,²⁷ whereas although Thanh recounts ancestral tales, much of Thanh’s narrative concentrates on events during Mai’s lifetime.

Elizabeth Kim, a Korean-American immigrant and author of the autobiography *Ten Thousand Sorrows*, provides an intriguing perspective on the roles of mothers and daughters as sometime collaborators in texts. Kim’s mother, Omma, like Cao’s, is dead, although Omma died when Kim was a small child. Kim struggles—not very successfully—to give Omma a storytelling position in her autobiography through Kim’s own voice and perspective since her memories are few. This feat is remarkable, especially given Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s inability to demonstrate what her mother’s storytelling role might have been like. Kim does not endeavor to use letters or journal entries or long dialogues to allow Omma to speak, but she incorporates vivid descriptions of Omma’s loving and nurturing ways. Interestingly, meanwhile, Kim permits her daughter, Leigh, to include brief thoughts. She indicates where Leigh is allowed to write in her autobiography, thereby limiting the appearance of Leigh’s words. This authorial relationship with Leigh allows Kim to retain her position as a maternal storyteller figure, especially because Omma cannot contradict Kim’s stories with her own.

In contrast, since Cao and Mai do not have command as mothers, they must comb through their mothers’ stories as well as their own memories of their mothers in order to convey information with their own storytelling authority. Mai’s struggle to give her personal perspective on the events in her life as an immigrant becomes more challenging than Kim’s because Mai’s memories of and interactions with her mother occur frequently, and since Mai endeavors to establish an independent identity, so *Monkey Bridge* becomes, in part, a conflicting account of the daughter’s desire to overtake her mother’s status as a maternal figure and storyteller.

Thanh plays a particularly centrifugal role in Mai’s life since her daughter’s other family relationships are cut short: Mai’s father dies suddenly though nonviolently before the climax of the war, and Mai’s supposed grandfather, Baba Quan, mysteriously vanishes the day he and Mai’s mother are scheduled to leave Saigon. These abbreviated relationships prevent Mai from understanding her familial and gender differences as a daughter and granddaughter; she cannot see the complexities of her identity mirrored through her paternal relations. She uses a few memories and family stories to build a makeshift reflection of herself as a daughter and granddaughter. Even with these memories and stories, Mai cannot imagine how her paternal forbears perceive her, and this problematizes her desire to view herself as an other in relation to these relatives. She rarely recalls times in which she worked or spoke with them. For example, as a child, Mai knows about her intellectual father’s alliance with the Third Force, “the opposition movement that presented itself as the middle ground, the alternative to both the Vietcong and the government,” by listening to conversations he holds with U.S. American soldiers and Vietnamese citizens (Cao, *Monkey* 76). Mai also admires her parents’ collaboration on her father’s work:

By the way my father tilted his head in quiet concentration, I could guess that the ebb and flow of [my mother's] convent-school French was something exquisite. My father . . . never published his papers without submitting them first to the flawless logic of my mother's mind. (Cao, *Monkey* 66-67)

Mai does not interact directly with her father in either scene, nor does she recall any other moments in which they spent time alone together. He always remains aloof from his daughter, and so she cannot determine whether he views her as a powerful woman warrior or as a marginal female other. Only through her mother's writings does Mai learn more about her father and how he generally treats women. Moreover, Mai misperceives the scene in which her parents work together on her father's papers. Thanh does not consider herself a collaborator in her husband's work or life and endured years of inner struggles to support this intellectual. She describes her marriage as a "*million red ants crawling inside a silk sheet*," and notes that although she desired and obtained a man who had a noteworthy intelligence like her own, "*the dream that was supposed to be a common dream had in fact never been commonly shared*" (Cao, *Monkey* 178, 187). Mai's father did not care to share his modern ideas and freedom with his wife, whom he left behind to care for his parents for ten years while he educated himself at the University of Saigon (Cao, *Monkey* 188). Since Mai's mother does not tell her daughter about her loneliness or intellectual struggles until she reveals them in her writings, her daughter dwells in ignorance to an even greater extent than Mai originally believes. Thanh's reticence ultimately complicates the construction of Mai's transcultural identity since Mai cannot correctly recall even her own mother's ties to her father.

Mai's view of Baba Quan is still more naïve and sheltered, and she does not know how he might regard his granddaughter. Mai recognizes Baba Quan as a devout Confucian farmer, and she desperately wants to contact him in order to bring him to the United States. She adores him for leading Uncle Michael and his unit safely through the Viet Cong chessboard jungle of bombs and is proud of the U.S. American medals he earned for this deed. Since Mai spent very little time with her grandfather, she must rely on stories like her Uncle Michael's and on idealized thoughts in order to assemble an image of him:

Because my grandfather had no permanent, definable shape, except the shape I myself provided with my own memories and imagination . . . [he] was capable of anything, a majestic grandfatherliness unminiaturized by the little disappointments of daily life He was free to be everything (Cao, *Monkey* 108)

Since Mai is forced to create her own images from scarce memories and from sometimes false stories of Baba Quan, she cannot know his perception of her.

Mai builds her familial heritage from these few and false representations, thereby projecting her own image as an other in the Lacanian mirror. She envisions herself as the beloved granddaughter of a valiant and kind man. Mai does this because she needs to see the "image of a community that gives her an identity," as Doris Sommer explains in reference to other texts.²⁸ Like a set of facing mirrors,

the different reflections of Mai's identity should reveal her diverse positions in her family community. However, Mai's own falsely constructed image shatters when Mai later learns through Thanh's notes that Baba Quan is not the gentle family man she thinks he is. Thanh bitterly tells Mai, "*my father, your grandfather, is . . . a husband fully capable of asking his wife to prostitute herself to a rich landlord . . .*" (Cao, *Monkey* 229). Worse, he is an alcoholic, a Viet Cong, and a murderer. Right before Thanh's eyes, he killed her biological father, thus destroying Thanh's love and trust and causing a chain of events in which Thanh falls into a coma and is forced to leave Vietnam without properly burying her biological parents or confronting Baba Quan. Although Cao does not show visually the impact of this information on Mai, Thanh's notes certainly destroy any warm memories about or perceptions of Baba Quan. Mai can no longer imagine Baba Quan to be "free to be everything," nor can she picture herself as the granddaughter of a noble peasant. The cold reality of Thanh's revelation forces Mai to accept the repercussions of these events. Since Thanh partially protected Mai from a war that could have stunted her development with its trauma by allowing her to believe in the goodness and kindness of her grandfather for so long, Mai must learn to build relationships piecemeal and must do so in a U.S. American world that forces her to confront her heritage and roles as a daughter of an Asian homeland and a stepdaughter of U.S. American society.

In order to construct a U.S. American identity, Mai observes U.S. American citizens and their lifestyles, including television characters such as the Bionic Woman, who provide Mai with an early view of her new culture and its people. Little Saigon, in a suburb of Washington, D.C., is filled with many Vietnamese figures, so the Bionic Woman (Jamie Sommers) provides an entry into Anglo-American society for Mai and for her mother. Mai does not crave the fair skin of the Bionic Woman, yet she admires this woman's superior strength.²⁹ Cao admits that she too "love[s] the Bionic Woman," who reminded her of powerful Vietnamese warrior women who were not docile, submissive creatures who participated in "foot binding like the Chinese" (Cao, "Lenses" 180, 181). The Bionic Woman, as a reminder of Vietnamese culture but a product of U.S. American television, literally and figuratively represents a cross-hatched figure in this text. She has some natural body parts in addition to bionic elements; thus she becomes a model for and symbol of Mai, who has Vietnamese roots, but who tries to replace them with U.S. American ones. Mai even implies the parallels between the two: "The Bionic Woman was a little bit of Shaolin kung fu mixed with American hardware, American know-how" (Cao, *Monkey* 9). If the Bionic Woman can survive—with bionic strength—as a mixture of cultures or parts, then so can Mai. This TV cross-hatched figure proves unusual since the other writers in this study, particularly Alvarez, transform their physical appearances so as to appear more Anglo-American. They do not consciously fuse their homeland's representations of women with those of U.S. American society. Interestingly, Mai does not groom her hair or long for stylish Western clothes with the same passion as do Alvarez's García sisters or Kincaid's Lucy. Mai concentrates more on mastering the U.S. American language and on allying herself with people who mingle with and survive in the mainstream culture.

Aunt Mary, Uncle Michael's wife, introduces Mai to the United States by bombarding Mai with its language and lifestyles. To Mai, Aunt Mary is another role model, but one who is a native-born U.S. American who knows the country's tricks. She and her husband give Mai "an inheritance [her] parents never gave [her]: the gift of language" (Cao, *Monkey* 36). Mai also accompanies Aunt Mary on her daily routines such as shopping so that she can absorb U.S. American ways. Mai observes: "I thought Aunt Mary was a genius shopper. She appeared to have the sixth sense of a bat and could identify, register and record every item on sale. She was skilled in the art of coupon shopping" (Cao, *Monkey* 32). However, although Mai quickly and gratefully absorbs these lessons, she does not consider Aunt Mary a surrogate mother. Mai does not construct her identity under the gaze of another mother figure; rather, she mimics this substitute mother while realizing that she never can be exactly like this non-cross-cultural figure. Aunt Mary, like other U.S. American models in this text, inspires Mai to "appear as a chameleon-like figure who is staged to inhabit different positionalities in which she acts out different roles," a characteristic that Paul attributes to female immigrants (Paul, *Migration* 118).

Aunt Mary may be a wonderful U.S. American example, but she does not possess the multifaceted knowledge that Mai has acquired. When Mai faces her college interview, Aunt Mary says, "be yourself," and Mai criticizes this advice (Cao, *Monkey* 124). Mai decides to attack the interview like a Vietnamese woman warrior, "drunken-monkey style," acknowledging that "Aunt Mary couldn't possibly understand that immigration represents unlimited possibilities for rebirth, reinvention, and other fancy euphemisms for half-truths and outright lies" (Cao, *Monkey* 129, 124). Mai also recognizes that her "mother would agree" with Mai's reactions, showing that Mai respects her mother's primary maternal role even though she constantly rejects Thanh's ways so that Mai can survive as a U.S. American immigrant from Vietnam (Cao, *Monkey* 124).

Mai's friend Bobbie provides her with the strongest link to "American know-how," and Mai appreciates this gesture of friendship, for she hopes that by forming U.S. American relations she can burn the bridge that links her to Vietnam and start her life anew. Since Bobbie is a native-born U.S. American, untroubled by cultural differences, Mai, who longs to be like this "bundle of normality" with "sweet, uncorrupted innocence," hopes to reconstruct herself as an untainted and uncorrupted U.S. American girl (Cao, *Monkey* 17, 14). Mai is grateful to her friend who makes "borders . . . easier to cross" and the "future itself raucous with possibilities" (Cao, *Monkey* 27).

Yet Mai slowly begins to recognize that "rebirthing the past" is more easily imagined than done, and she becomes more alienated as she tries to forget her Vietnamese culture. She realizes the "boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other'" that stand between herself and Bobbie (Benstock, "Autobiographical" 148). Mai admits that in "one moment off guard" (Cao, *Monkey* 27), she easily can slip back into her Vietnamese "phantom world" of blood and of maimed bodies. As Mai ambles through U.S. American stores with Bobbie, haunting images of the war flash before her eyes. Mai recalls,

We were once in a music store As Bobbie's fingers played an experimental tune on the Steinway, her finger, her index finger—her right-hand trigger finger, to be precise—was turning into a blanched, pulpy stump of gauze and bandages that moved spastically like the severed remnant of a lizard's tail. Stitch by stitch, the superficial cloak of calm holding me together was unraveling . . . (Cao, *Monkey* 28)

The image of Bobbie's fingers playing on a piano and the recollection of the Vietnamese practice of cutting off trigger fingers so that sons could avoid the draft show how Mai begins to fuse the two countries together in her head. Mai must consciously suffer her cross-cultural identity in these memories and images.

Mai's first U.S. American alliance, which takes place in Vietnam during her preteen years, starts the cross-hatching of her different cultures, though she does not fully recognize the influence of this link until after she emigrates to and settles in the United States. Mai befriends Uncle Michael, a U.S. American soldier, in the Vietnamese hospital where she works, and later he becomes a family friend and surrogate father. In the United States, Uncle Michael enables Mai to earn her green card and to gain a solid education. Uncle Michael also suggests his awareness of Mai's grandfather's Viet Cong position and hypocrisy, thus slowly and gently educating Mai about her heritage. He cautions, "I would be surprised if someone like your grandfather would even want to leave his homeland" (Cao, *Monkey* 215). However, Mai does not mimic Uncle Michael's U.S. American habits as she does with Bobbie and Aunt Mary. Nor does Mai look to Uncle Michael as an innocent child might to a beloved adult; both are survivors of a war that has aged them beyond their years, and so Mai turns to Uncle Michael as an equal for the facts about the war and about her family, rather than for protection from her past. She and Uncle Michael represent cross-cultural figures of different races and from different homelands since he is a U.S. American soldier transformed by his duration in Vietnam, and since she is a Vietnamese civilian affected by the war and by her permanent migration to the United States.

Since Mai is younger and more willing to accept U.S. American society at face value than are her elders or GI companions, she again becomes the lone inhabitant of a self-constructed island. In contrast, Vietnamese refugees like Thanh and her friends congregate with GIs in Little Saigon to swap stories and to share their pain. Thanh and her friends claim that their fates are "linked cross-eyed with the fates of the GIs themselves" (Cao, *Monkey* 65). However, Mai's own fate does not seem to carry this same "link." When Mai's mother converses with a GI, Mai realizes that her mother considers Mai, not the U.S. American soldier, to be "the outsider with inside information" (Cao, *Monkey* 212). Since Mai does not meet adolescents who also remain in this cross-hatched situation, she has no one with whom she can share her isolated status. After realizing this plight, she expresses her despair: "I would continue to go through life looking for goals to be met, but would I fail to make an essential human connection that would truly sustain?" (Cao, *Monkey* 226). Mai's position demonstrates that she has not reached a stage in which she openly welcomes a transcultural status, and so at this level of development, she has not yet learned to articulate her regard for her root culture to the extent that Ortiz Cofer or even Alvarez, Kincaid and Lim have. Nor has she discovered other first-

generation, nonwhite, non-European migrant women who straddle cultures. In an aside during her college interview, Mai reflects, "I'd concocted a habit of silence where Vietnam was concerned," but she craves to tell her interviewer "something palpable, something that would make the country crack open I could tell her about the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month . . ." (Cao, *Monkey* 127-28). However, Mai bitterly notes, "The Vietnam [of rocket fires and body bags] delivered to America was no longer mine to explain" (Cao, *Monkey* 128). If Mai can share her immigration experiences with another female immigrant or cross-cultural figure, then perhaps she can "crack open" her country and develop her transcultural status.

Since Mai's story ends with her expected admission into Mount Holyoke, and since she does not develop any intimate relationships with U.S. Americans or with Vietnamese or other non-Europeans, readers may wonder how Mai ultimately will fare in U.S. American society. Will she find a niche in the mainstream Anglo world? Or will she retreat into Little Saigon like Thanh and Thanh's friends? Or will Mai set out to build her own place in U.S. American society? In an interview, Cao remarked that she concluded Mai's story without exploring further possible relationships and angles of her immigrant experience simply because she wanted to end with the first phase (Cao, "Lenses" 182). However, Mai's time of immigration, when compared to those of the other writers in this study who often explore adult stages of immigrant experiences, reveals two interesting factors.

First, Mai's immigration at the age of thirteen in 1975 eases her transition into a U.S. American society that, by that time, had accepted non-European and nonwhite immigrants for a decade.³⁰ Even though the United States has not largely consisted of Anglo-Europeans since its first days despite myths that suggest this characteristic, since Cao herself migrated during this transition time, she entered a more cross-culturally aware U.S. American society than did her forbears. In contrast, Lim recalls,

What I remember sharply of my first contact with the U.S. in 1969 in Cambridge and Boston was my surprise at how parochial and MONO-cultural the U.S. was. The U.S. has changed tremendously in the last 30 years; especially, demographically, it has become less of a white majority and in some regions has become a minority-majority society. (Lim, "Rot" 166; Lim's emphasis)

Granted, Mai lives for a brief time in a "white majority" society in Farmington, Connecticut, but Little Saigon and Washington, D.C. in the 1970s certainly could not be called "mono-cultural." By the time Mai immigrates, U.S. Americans had mingled with Asian and Caribbean immigrants more frequently than they had prior to the American/Vietnam War and to the passing of immigration acts.

Second, Mai's early experiences in a society that recently had absorbed a wave of multiethnic immigrants often corroborate those of other recently published first-generation U.S. American migrant women writers who grew up in the culturally aware 1970s and 1980s. These younger migrants from Asian and Caribbean countries are not the pioneers that their predecessors were in the 1950s and 1960s. Women in the 1950s and 1960s, especially Ortiz Cofer, Alvarez and Lim, express

loneliness in their single lives as recent migrants, but they eventually recognize that marriage could provide them with economic and emotional security as well as advantageous positions as migrants paired with Anglo-Saxon migrants who blend easily into the U.S. American scene. However, the migrants of the latest wave, including Mai, often remain on their own and single, realizing that mingling with or marrying people of mixed backgrounds does not always yield positive results. In "Disassembling Helie," Korean American Helie Lee shares her frustrations with men of different races and backgrounds: "All the [multicultural] things that impressed my [Anglo-American] boyfriends in the beginning began to bother them. They got sick and tired of eating sticky rice . . ." ³¹ Yet when Lee turned to a relationship with another Korean American, she recognized that their "cultural and generational differences still proved to be unbridgeable" (Lee, "Disassembling" 136). Like other first-generation immigrants of her era, including Mai, Lee notes that she simply cannot "unilaterally wipe out [her] ancestral heritage and then reinstate it at a whim" (Lee, "Disassembling" 136). While Lim and Alvarez (and to a minimal extent, Kincaid) discuss cultural, racial and emotional differences between their spouses and themselves, these younger migrants who openly recognize and discuss their multiple identities, living in a more multicultural and racially mixed society, go further to question how they can pair with another person, whether racially or culturally mixed or not. Perhaps Cao still contemplates questions about intimate relationships since, as Cao notes, *Monkey Bridge* deliberately halts at the end of the first stage of Mai's immigration experience. ³²

Despite their struggles with intimate relationships with partners and family members, younger first-generation women migrants, like Cao, sometimes are upbeat about celebrating cultural diversity, and their writing echoes the respect they have for U.S. Americans from other non-European and nonwhite countries and from racially mixed backgrounds. Although Mai does not encounter other multicultural, nonwhite, non-Vietnamese immigrants in *Monkey Bridge*, Cao insists in an interview that she is not satisfied with remaining in a Vietnamese-only island in the United States because she loves to mingle with diverse people (Cao, "Lenses" 176). Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American who grew up in Brooklyn in the 1980s, also recognizes the diverse groups with whom she interacts. She recalls the multicultural sounds of Puerto Ricans and blacks in her neighborhood from her childhood. She acknowledges that these groups belong to other cultures, but she does not view them as other or as marginal. Although she recognizes the Americanness of "blond boys" and "apple pies," she claims her own place in U.S. American society: "I may never be apple pie, but more and more, America is becoming like me, like us." ³³ The United States, as Lim implies, has shifted away from its "mono-cultural" ways, and although some communities remain unexposed to racially mixed or diversified customs, the dominant culture no longer can declare itself as solely European or Anglo-American. The United States, "young . . . restless, changeful [and] diverse" (Lim, "Rot" 169), will shift with its waves of once-marginalized migrants, just as Mai herself did in order to adapt:

I strove for the ability to realign my eyes, to shift with a shifting world and convince both myself and the rest of the world into thinking that, if the earth moved and I

moved along with it, that motion, however agitated, would be undetectable. The process, which was as surprising as a river reversing course and flowing upstream, was easier said than done. (Cao, *Monkey* 39)

This procedure may sound daunting, but Mai is willing to shift along with the world, and the added weight of herself and of other recent nonwhite migrants exerts force on this world, thus transforming its movement.

The amount of force Mai exerts cannot be determined fully since her tale ends before she reaches adulthood. Although Kincaid's texts *Annie John* and *Lucy* end during their characters' youths, the texts unveil their heroines' expected maturation; the latter ends with Lucy's recognition of herself as the artist as a young immigrant woman. Mai has not reached this level of development since she has just entered a new phase where she envisions a ladder³⁴ in which she can "make it up . . . with [her] mother leading the way, step by step, into perfection" (Cao, *Monkey* 259). This "ladder" will enable Mai to become less isolated and more transcultural. However, Mai does not know what this "perfection" signifies, nor does she know where the ladder leads. She even warns herself, "Don't look . . ." (Cao, *Monkey* 258). These words and this scene signal that Mai understands she has a mission, but she does not know exactly where this mission will take her. However, Mai cannot accomplish this mission quite yet because she has spent only a few years mastering the United States's language and culture. Mai notes that after

the fourth or fifth week in Connecticut, the new language . . . began gathering momentum . . . [and] out of that difficult space between here and there, English revealed itself to me with the ease of thread unspooled . . . (Cao, *Monkey* 36-37)

but her transition into a new culture has not unraveled itself quite so easily. Even after four or five years in the United States, Mai needs at least a few years in college and beyond to digest her immigration experiences. This climbing process is slow and cumbersome, for as Anzaldúa explains, "Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* [the racially mixed woman] undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa, *La Frontera* 78). Although Mai is not a *mestiza* caught in a physical border zone, she is an immigrant of mixed cultures who must climb through and, she hopes, out of this "inner war" area.

Cao, who recognizes her most difficult immigration hurdle as the language (Cao, "Lenses" 177), may also still be climbing her ladder. Although Cao certainly has discovered her vocation as a writer who needs to project a Vietnamese-American female immigrant's experiences through fiction, as mentioned earlier, Cao's mother's illness inspired her to begin her novel; perhaps she desired to preserve her Vietnamese culture through Mai and Thanh. *Monkey Bridge* unveils a first step in this process.

Despite the fact that Cao does not discuss her position as a writer, whether in *Monkey Bridge* or in other writings to the extent that Alvarez, Lim, Kincaid and Ortiz Cofer do, she successfully narrows her focus primarily to Mai's developing consciousness in a style not unlike what Ortiz Cofer utilizes in *Silent Dancing*

(although Ortiz Cofer rarely allows her mother to participate in storytelling, and even then she discredits her mother's version, arguing "But that is not how I remember . . ."; [Ortiz Cofer, *Silent* 156; Ortiz Cofer's emphasis]). Cao's mixing of narrative voices reveals her own developing consciousness as a migrant daughter and as a writer. By introducing a writing technique which allows a mother and a daughter to speak directly to each other and to a readership, Cao leads the way toward revealing her transcultural state, not just as an immigrant, but as a migrant daughter who must evaluate her position as a U.S. American, as a Vietnamese, and as the daughter of a Vietnamese mother who knows only Vietnam as her native world.

Notes

¹ *Monkey Bridge* is Cao's fiction debut.

² Mirinda Kossoff, "Visiting Law Professor Lan Cao's Vietnam Memories Turned into Praised Work of Fiction," in *Duke Law Magazine* Spring 1999, 7 June 2000 <http://www.law.duke.edu/alumni/spring99mag/lancao.htm>. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.

³ Lan Cao, "Crossing Bridges: Bookgrrl Interviews Lan Cao," interview by Susan Geller Ettenheim, in *Bookgrrl* 7 June 2000a <http://www.cybergrrl.com/fun/bookgrrl/art373>. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Do calls Thanh's writings "journal entires [sic]" but since these "journals" sometimes address Thanh's daughter directly, they also are letters (Do, "Reconnected" 80).

⁵ Since these youths were not only illegitimate, but also hybrids (Amerasians), the Vietnamese shunned them.

⁶ Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Plume, 1990), 190.

⁷ Ho Chi Minh originally viewed the United States as a Good Neighbor, particularly under the Franklin Roosevelt administration, since Roosevelt disapproved of France's imperialist grip; only after the Truman Administration (which decided to favor the French empire) ignored Ho Chi Minh's repeated calls for economic and moral support did he turn to Communism to resist the French and the U.S. Americans. See Paterson, Clifford, and Hagan, *Policy*, 525-27.

⁸ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1989), 449.

⁹ Takaki, *Strangers*, 448-49.

¹⁰ Only a handful of critics and scholars have reviewed or discussed *Monkey Bridge*. Reviews appear in *People's Weekly* and *Publisher's Weekly*, and Do and Karim Persis Maryam in "Fissured Nations and Exilic States: Displacement, Exile, and Diaspora in Twentieth-Century Writing by Women" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1998), discuss the text, although neither Do nor Maryam emphasize the female immigrant's struggles to become a transcultural representation of diverse cultures. Do concentrates on immigrant mother-daughter dynamics, language and identity in terms of separation and connection, while Maryam relates the diasporic traits of Cao's text to the Cold War.

¹¹ Olivia Espfn, *Women Crossing Boundaries: A Psychology of Immigration and Transformations of Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26.

¹² Thanh also reflects on Mai's definition of "Manifest Destiny": "*Karma is the antithesis of Manifest Destiny, the kind of Manifest Destiny they teach my daughter in her history book about the great American West*" (Cao, *Monkey* 55; Cao's emphasis), but, perhaps ironically, neither Thanh nor her daughter directly weighs the historical implications of "Manifest Destiny," or the "moral justification for American expansionism, a prescription for what an enlarged United States could and should be. At its worst, it was a cluster of flimsy rationalizations for naked greed and imperial ambition," particularly around the 1840s as settlers explored and disputed the Santa Fe, Oregon, California and Texas-Mexico border areas. In the context of Mai's story, Vietnam represents a twentieth-century, non-domestic territory of imperial interest to U.S. Americans (David E. Shi and George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, Brief 3rd ed., Vol. I [New York: W.W. Norton, 1993], 337).

¹³ Do, "Reconnected," 24, 94. Do's later unusual suggestion that Mai gives "birth to herself," thus completing "the cycle of motherhood" by reading the "written text that is mother," or Thanh's notes, letters and journals, contradicts his idea of their relationship as "traditional" (Do, "Reconnected" 89). See p. 131 and note 4 above.

¹⁴ Thanh's written words are indicated in italics throughout *Monkey Bridge*.

¹⁵ Hayslip explains, "When I moved to America, as I state in the book *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, my mother did not know of my departure. So after I came to America, I wrote only a few letters in 1970. . . . [And] from 1975 to 1982 [after the war's end], there was no communication between my family and myself" (Le Ly Hayslip, "Bringing Together the United States and Vietnam: An Interview with Le Ly Hayslip," interview by Pauline T. Newton, tape recording, 20 November 2000, 198).

¹⁶ Le Ly Hayslip, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 134. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ Do also mentions Cao's seahorse references, including the one in which Mai's mother resembles a "sea-horse curve." See Cao, *Monkey*, 161 and Do, "Reconnected," 92.

¹⁸ This statement was published in the 1980s, and since then, many writers, including Barbara Kingsolver, author of *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998), Toni Morrison, in *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), and in earlier texts such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* (New York: Signet, 1991) and *Jazz* (New York: Plume, 1993), and Alvarez, in her fictional works in this study, have written texts with multiple narrators. Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) is another multiply narrated text in which the narrator seems to turn against himself to tell other sections. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* wraps readers in the mystery of Grace's own plural identity. Perhaps Grace did not murder; maybe her alias did. Grace does not know herself, and perhaps her alias does not either. The plurality of these narrators is compounded by gender, immigrant status and/or race, among other factors. In this study, the female immigrant, as a fissured self who belongs to two or more cultures, can create a type of alias for herself.

¹⁹ Thanh's birth was arranged by Uncle Khan, who owned the land on which Thanh's mother and supposed father (Tuyet and Baba Quan) lived so that Uncle Khan and his barren wife could have a child. Uncle Khan, not Baba Quan, and Tuyet are Thanh's and Mai's ancestors.

²⁰ Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 112.

²¹ Smith, "Performativity," 112.

²² In *Women Coauthors* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2000), Holly A. Laird presents a compelling argument in favor of casting *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as a text coauthored by Stein and Toklas rather than as one that is written by one or the other.

²³ Even though Stein and Toklas collaborated in the writing of this autobiography, Stein's solely printed name suggests, on the surface, that she is the single narrator of this text, and the narrators in Cao's text become conarrators in a sense as well.

²⁴ Lim, "Interview," Manaf, 13.

²⁵ Woolf, *Room*, 97.

²⁶ Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*, ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 664.

²⁷ Torn by her own mother's inability to use birth control and by her contempt for her mother, whom she feels never should have borne children, Kincaid presents a terrific fight for authority by prohibiting the narrator of *The Autobiography of My Mother* to bear children and by undermining this "mother's" role as a storyteller.

²⁸ Doris Sommer, "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 123.

²⁹ Ortiz Cofer admires another U.S. American superhero, Wonder Woman: "I daydreamed of leaping up above the gray landscape of the city to where the sky was clear and blue, and in anger and self-pity, I fantasized about scooping my enemies up by their hair from the playing fields and dumping them on a barren asteroid," although Ortiz Cofer also covets Wonder Woman's body and cleavage (Ortiz Cofer, *Deli* 141).

³⁰ Although other nonwhite immigrant groups arrived in the United States prior to 1965, the pre-1965 immigration laws severely curtailed the number of nonwhite and non-European immigrants. See Chapter 1 for details surrounding the 1965 Immigration Act.

³¹ Helie Lee, "Disassembling Helie," in *Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation Women Writers*, ed. Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 133. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.

³² Since Cao is single, perhaps she, too, seeks answers to the same questions about marriage or relationships with significant others that Lee asks.

³³ Suheir Hammad, "A Road Still Becoming," in *Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation Women Writers*, ed. Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (New York: Hyperion 2000), 89, 94.

³⁴ In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid also discusses a ladder in relation to the narrator's deceased mother who, in a recurring dream, wears "a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels, and that was all that was exposed, just her heels; she came down and down, but no more of her was revealed. Only her heels, and the hem of her gown" (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 18). The narrator wishes to see and to know more of this mother who "died at the moment [she] was born" (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 3). Korean American Elizabeth Kim shares another haunting image of the feet of Omma, her mother, in *Ten Thousand Sorrows: As Omma's killers "pulled the rope taut, [Omma] rose in the air until all I could see through the bamboo slats were her bare feet, dangling in midair. I watched those milk-white feet twitch, . . . and then grow still. They seemed to stretch, the toes pointing straight down to earth as if she was going to pirouette on their tips" (Kim, *Ten* 10). In her dreams and thoughts, Kim often reaches for this mother, whom she never can quite find. Neither of these narrators can communicate with their deceased mothers, but the narrators know that their mothers precede them—and perhaps encourage them to follow—into another world in which they can communicate their beliefs and stories.*

Chapter 7

Afterword

The second chapter in this study discusses how Judith Ortiz Cofer strives for transculturality, urging her audience to “Get past the color, get past the language,” and the sixth chapter shows Lan Cao’s recognition that transculturality (even for young female U.S. American migrants of a later, more diverse generation than that of Ortiz Cofer) cannot be achieved easily (Ortiz Cofer, “Ground” 157). Cao states that one’s “personal comfort” and racial origins, to name just two sets of factors, influence how a migrant adapts to an increasingly cross-cultural U.S. American society (Cao, “Lenses” 177). Yet all the writers in this study, whether they migrated in the 1950s or 1970s, emphasize the importance of examining and conveying their cultural and other differences. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim cautions in an interview, women of color who want to write “have to understand that it’s going to be a tough struggle . . .” (Lim, “Interview” Kong).

Ortiz Cofer, Julia Alvarez, Jamaica Kincaid, Lim and Cao are more than willing to engage in this “tough struggle,” and yet their powerful stories and their economic and academic success might make this “struggle” appear comparatively easy: readers must not forget the myriad stories that remain untold. Mimi Abramovitz notes in her foreword to Grace Chang’s *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*,

Many of us have heard at least one news story about sweatshop workers, home-care attendants, mail-order brides, and foreign nannies—mostly immigrant women who come to the United States to work. But what do we really know about the lives of the women (and men) who take these jobs or why they come here?¹

The works of the writers in this study provide only a tiny glimpse into “how government policies regulate the lives of women in the increasingly global labor market” and how “the dynamics of immigration are less a matter of individual choice and more a product of the interest of First World nations whose economic investment policies often bring harm to Third World people and places.”² Ortiz Cofer, Alvarez, Kincaid, Lim and Cao are aware of the economic perils and other conditions that their contemporaries face, but readers must train their eyes to recognize the diverse portrayals of such conditions.

The writers in this study deliberately and yet craftily expose some of the conditions of which Chang speaks by rendering experiences that shatter myths about migration and identity, including beliefs about the racial or cultural homogeneity of the United States and its migrants. For example, they challenge the concept of islands or peninsulas as paradisiacal or isolated regions, a central issue

root that I had ignored in my affirmation of my Malaysian and American selves. I almost would say “cultural rot,” for there is a sense of the fertilization of the decay of certain roots. “Chineseness,” I would say, is more of a fertilizing rot than flourishing root for me; but it nourishes in unexpected ways; and this is what I am figuring out in Hong Kong.

N: I admire your refreshing no-frills approach in *Among the White Moon Faces*. Not only do I find your dedication and perseverance to your students and to your writing inspiring, I also can relate to some of your struggles on a personal level. This may sound odd, because I am an American-born citizen of nationals (though I did live in South America for the first five years of my life). I have fought—all my life—to fit into mainstream American culture as someone who has a profound hearing loss and who chooses to speak and listen rather than sign, and, like you, I have run into people who need to be convinced that physical, cultural, or other differences should not—and do not—hinder people’s talents and abilities. Thank you for spreading the message!

L: Thank YOU for your final statement. Finding readers like you is what writers hope for.

Interview C

“Different Cultural Lenses”: An Interview with Lan Cao, October 24, 2000

Pauline Newton: In a recent interview with Susan Geller Ettenheim of *BookGrrl*, you said that *Monkey Bridge* is not “historical fiction” although it is classified as fiction and it recounts some actual events, to some degree, in your life (Cao, “Crossing”). Would you call it creative nonfiction?

Lan Cao: No, I would just call it fiction. It is not historical fiction because when you think of historical fiction, you think of events, stories that are definitely more embedded, much more intertwined with the historical details of a particular historical event, and the historical details themselves are all as much a part of thought as the individual story. Readers who read historical fiction are as equally interested in the “private” story as they are in the historical setting that the “private” story is set in. Whereas this is just fiction that happens. The focus is really on the story of a family, and that family lives in a period during the war in Vietnam and then the period after the war in Vietnam. I would not put the setting as the main character. Whereas with historical fiction, I would think of the historical event as equally the main character as the characters themselves, and this book is not at all nonfiction, nor is it historical fiction. I would just call it fiction with some historical details.

N: I wondered how autobiographical part of the story is. You say that it’s not based on just the history of what was happening with the character during her lifetime. But how autobiographical are Mai and her mother in the story in relation to yourself and your actual life?

C: Well, the feelings, the emotions, perhaps, are autobiographical in that sense, but it is not a memoir, so it is not as if every event actually happened. A lot of it is reinterpreted, remade truth. So, parts of it are things I pick off from my own life, but that is why I did not want it in a memoir format. I did not want to be constrained by the truth of my own life. I only wanted to explore a few kernels of things that happened in my own life and go on from there and sort of reweave something different even. So, it is not at all autobiographical in the sense of tit for tat.

N: Now I am going to go on to the inclusion of Mai's mother's narrative. I think it is fascinating. I have seen other writers of nonfiction and fiction struggle to "think back through their mothers"—to quote Virginia Woolf—to a time which often takes place before their daughters' lifetime so they are thinking back on their mother's lifetime before the daughters were alive sometimes. But, in my opinion, the writers do not quite achieve the level of intertwining the mother's narrative with the daughter's as you do in *Monkey Bridge*. So, I was wondering if this process of interweaving narrative voices was a difficult one. How did you go about it?

C: Well it is natural, in fact, for me. When I write, my natural inclination is whether to shift between past and present. It's not an effort for me. It's not a design or a device. It just happens very naturally, shifting from past or present, because I think as an immigrant what happens is that when you look at an event or an object even in the present world, very often you view it the way you view it now as well as the way you view it in a different cultural context. So, because I have that baggage with me, I see an event and see it through two different cultural lenses almost simultaneously. Without even necessarily noticing it—it's now just a natural part of how I view things. So, the past/present is simultaneous to me and, therefore, also when I shift in the narrative, one event—

N: Shift to what?

C: Shift in narrative from mother to daughter. For example, it follows from the shift from past to present. So it's just natural for me, and sometimes I have to restrain myself from doing it too much because sometimes I know that readers want to get one story forward and finished rather than be interrupted. But past/present is just so—past/present, simultaneous voices. That's how I naturally think and naturally write, and if I do not do it that way it is my conscious design. So, it is the reverse, I think, of maybe the way other people write.

N: I was wondering how you got the idea of weaving into that past and present, and I was wondering if maybe your mother left behind some actual letters for you that you used in conjunction with *Monkey Bridge*?

C: No, no, not at all. A totally made-up device.

N: So, how did you get to the idea of using the narratives of the mother's letters when you were thinking in the past and present? You just thought of it along the way?

C: I do not even know how. It was sort of one of the things that popped up. I cannot recall why it came out that way. It just did and I went with it.

N: That is interesting. Many of the female immigrants in my study came from "Third-World" islands or peninsulas: Antigua, Puerto Rico, the Dominican

Republic, Malaysia, and Vietnam. They often experience "islandness," which could be considered an insulated tropical lifestyle or isolation among other things, even after they migrate and adapt to the United States, so how might you define "islandness" in relation to your own life? And during what particular moments or times or events in your life do you feel or recognize this "islandness?"

C: I think "islandness" would just be kind of a separation, I would say, right, in any moment of separation that one feels, a gulf, between one's self and the outer world. Yes, it is just an issue of feeling separate from the outside world. I think anybody can feel "islandness." And, so in that way it is a very universal experience. Certainly, I can imagine that if one is an immigrant, let's say, coming to a new place, one would, as many recent immigrants do, remain within one's own enclave. One would have a separate community that is built and that community could be very self-sufficient, like, for example, a Chinatown. It has its own shops, supermarket, everything. It could be very self-sufficient and you could live there without ever venturing forth into the mainstream world. So, that is, immigrant communities can be islands in and of themselves. And, certainly, that would make one feel both a sense of community with one's own fellow immigrants, but it also would make one feel separate from the rest of the mainstream society. So I think that is a condition that many immigrants face, this feeling of isolation and community simultaneously because the community is separate from the outside world. At the same time, however, I do not think that that sense of "islandness" or isolation is really limited to any one group. One could be completely a part of the mainstream, the majority, and would still feel a psychic or a psychological "islandness." I think loneliness is a very common and universal human experience. It may have particular characteristics that are culture-related and that are related to one's personal experience of migration, but that is a particular variation of "islandness" and not the sole possession or the sole condition of being an immigrant. So I think in that way, many other people can relate to that feeling if that is what you write about.

N: What about your life particularly?

C: Well, it was more intense at the beginning because I was still trying to cope, and as one moves forth and knows English and knows the ways of the new world, one feels less of that. But, again, as I say, that is an exterior form of "islandness." Now you have the tools to cope but I do not think that is the interior "islandness." I think people always feel lonely to a certain extent.

N: Let me go onto the next question. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, a Malaysian American, author of *Among the White Moon Faces*, states that writing her autobiography "forced [her] to deal with [her]self as an American" (Lim, "Interview" Kong). Now that you have written about your experiences in American culture, how did writing enable you to find your own niche or island, if you will, in an American or in Vietnamese society?

C: I dealt with this before I wrote the book, so the book really did not help me come to terms with it one way or another. That sense of coming to terms—Is one an American? Is one a hyphenated American? There is now a new term, ampersand, which is Vietnamese&American rather than Vietnamese-American. There are all these different emphases. Do you focus on the ampersand? Do you focus on the hyphen? How do you define yourself? I think I grappled with those questions way before I wrote the book. So, the writing of the book sort of made the process more pronounced because one is now having to put it down on paper and put language in the feeling. Because any time you put language in the feeling, you change that a little bit, because in many ways writing a diary makes you think of an experience differently. Because sometimes when you write a diary or when you recount a story, it may make you feel about the story differently. But I did the process of grappling before I wrote the book. And, as far as finding niches, I have to tell you maybe it is really my own personality, because I think each of us cope and navigate our own life in different ways. I was never interested in finding niches. I was always much more interested in bridges. And, I do believe in communities, say for example, Orange County in California has a lot of Vietnamese, the largest Vietnamese American community in the U.S. and I visited it when I was on sabbatical in California. I was really impressed by it and I thought it formed a wonderful function. And it is right for a lot of people to have that. Little Italys, Chinatowns, the Lower East Side for the early Jewish immigrants—those are all very important gathering places. But, for me, I would not want to live in those places, because it just does not fit in my own life. I have never sought out niches. I have always sort of found my own niche no matter where I am. Because I really think the niche is much more interior for me than geographically bound and so while I think the niche is very important for a community to have, I would not want to locate myself in any kind of permanent way in a niche. Like whether it would be an immigrant niche or any externally defined niches. Which, again does not take away from the intrinsic value that those places have always had politically, economically, socially, psychologically for new immigrants, and I think they are really important. I tend to be more interested in staying within myself and making connections no matter where I am.

N: I found it interesting because some of the other writers in my study—take Shirley Lim, for example—were older when they came to the U.S. Lim also had a very tough childhood. Her mother left her when she was young. I do not know if you have had a chance to meet with her or talk to her.

C: No.

N: But she had never really thought that she could find any sort of personal niche or any connection with anyone in society. So I find it interesting because I wonder if maybe because you came here when you were younger—in 1975—you were more able to find your place in American culture.

C: I do think it is also a matter of personal comfort. Because I have cousins who came when they were even younger than I was who have remained very embedded in the Vietnamese community in Northern Virginia. They have never left it. They have married from within. They stay there. They are very inter-connected. And I do not feel that I necessarily get automatic connections from people with whom I have cultural connections. I do not sense that. Sometimes it is more on an individual and personal basis for me. I do not think that a person from my own culture with my same history and my same growing-up experiences necessarily understands me more. Or that I can relate to that person more than a person who has nothing of that in common with me. And that is why I like writing, because I think in literature, in fiction, you create your own world, and it's that own world when I meet a new person—if that person creates their own world also in a way that is compatible with mine—that is where I find the psychic connection. The creation of one's own identity, one's own world, one's own definition. Of course, with what we carry with us. Nobody is an unencumbered person. We all come with our own inherited identity. But, if I stay only with people who have the same inherited identities that I have, that does not necessarily create the connection to me or for me. So, of course we all are rooted in our community. We all carry our own history with us that we inherit from our culture, our history, our ethnicity, and all of that. But, I relate more to those who take that and make something else with it. It is that new world that is created from the old and the new. Those people who do that with me are the ones that I am more compatible with.

N: You may have already answered this, but what barriers or borders did you as an immigrant have to overcome or cross in order to share your story?

C: Language. I think that probably the primary objective for me from '75 until '79 was learning English and overcoming the language barrier. Because you really need language to express yourself, obviously, in any world, and unless you can express yourself in a way that others can understand you, I think that your access to the predominant outside world will be very restricted. So, the moment the language issue was settled for me, that really was the main thing for me.

N: You were talking about finding people who have stepped out—who have bridged cultures. You relate to those people and I was wondering if your writing has been a means for you to find a community or some kind of family you share some of your concerns and interests with.

C: Yes. My friends, the people I feel close to, they are not necessarily all writers. But some are, and the others, even if they are not writers, they definitely are very literary. They love reading books. They love to explore ideas and stories that are told in books, and in some ways the world of books is sort of our world too. So, that kind of thing. And, again, they could be from any culture as far as I am concerned. They could be completely from North Carolina and grow up there, and I may feel a much greater affinity to them than to somebody who came to the U.S. from Vietnam the same way I did. So, yes, those who are very interested in

language and storytelling and reexamining the past. See, the problem I have found with those who are embedded in culture and history and community is a tendency in many ways to kind of allow the past to define them too much. The past—traditional communities—have a lot of prejudices, too. They are not necessarily models of openness nor are they necessarily models of understanding. They have a pretty oppressive side to them. They make you fit in. If you do not fit in you are ostracized. So community is great, but there are negative sides to community, and if you are forever community defined, I find it to be intolerable, and so I like the idea of creating one's own community using the community one inherits but making it fit oneself in a way that is more conducive to individual growth.

N: Susan Sachs, author of "For Immigrants, a New American Dream," suggests that even though non-Anglo female immigrants constantly struggle to transcend their root cultures (in this case, your Vietnamese one) in order to become Americans, they never assimilate completely, unlike their Anglo-European "real and literary forebears" (Sachs, "Immigrants" NE 23). Instead, these recent immigrants literally and figuratively become cross-cultural women of sundry lands and cultures. Could you share how your immigrant status might complicate or prohibit your complete assimilation?

C: Well, this, the process of going from immigration to Americanization is the process that really is the definition of this country and in this country, except for the African Americans who were not immigrants or the Native Americans who are also not immigrants; so excepting those two major groups in this country, this is a country of immigrants. It is defined by immigrants in a way that is very different, I would say, than let's say another country that has a lot of immigrants. I guess what I am trying to say is France has a lot of immigrants. Germany has a lot of immigrants but I do not consider them to be a country of immigrants. It may very well be that Germany takes in more immigrants now than the U.S. I have no idea. But let's say it does not. In my mind, Germany will never be a country of immigrants the same way this country is a country of immigrants. This country is defined inextricably with its history of immigration. So, the idea of Americanization from the initial process of immigration is the idea of this country itself. So in that way, any story that tells the story of immigration and Americanization would relate and have some kind of resounding effect to many Americans because a lot of people can trace their roots back to immigration of one form or another and every generation has faced this issue which is the issue of—How much do you retain of your own culture? How much do you shed your own culture?—and in the process you could very well end up psychologically murdering yourself in order to become somebody else. Right? And the process can be an extremely violent one. You can inflict great damage to yourself in order to make yourself into an image that is externally defined by whatever the Americanization, whatever an American is. You could very well do damage to yourself in the process. So, yes, these are, I think, things that every immigrant generation in the U.S. has faced and I do not think it is necessarily particular to Vietnamese immigrants.

But, I do think that when you are non-Anglo, of a different race, then there is an additional complication. But that complication is not because of immigration. It is because of the race experience in this country. The immigration experience, I think, would be quite the same in terms of shedding or keeping your culture, the generational conflict between the new generation and the old generation, new food versus old food, McDonald's versus spaghetti. Whatever it is, it will always have that kind of thing. The race issue is a separate and totally different issue. Of course, there is no way that you are going to change your race and that will be something that you will always take with you, no matter how many generations you have been here. That is an issue that I think is particularly unique to Asian immigrants primarily because, for some reason, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans tend to not be very concerned about public and political and social modes of assimilation. In other words, you do not see many Asian Americans on television. The representation of Asian Americans in public spheres is not particularly dominant or highlighted, and so basically, if they are at all, they always have an accent. You have "Happy Days." The Asian guy in "Happy Days"—Pat Morita, I think he plays—he has to have an accent. So, in American eyes and the way popular culture has represented Asian Americans they are always somehow retaining their foreignness. And the Chinese have been here since the 1800s, probably as long as many Italians, as long as many Irish, but I'll bet you every Chinese American whom you have met will have been asked, "Where do you come from?" I think that is a common experience that almost every single Asian in this country has been asked. They could have been born in this country. Their grandfather or grandmother could have been born in this country. It does not matter. So, I think that issue is an issue unique to Asians because that alienness will always remain with them. Whereas, for example, black Americans, African Americans, have a different history. They will not be asked where they come from. They will be asked other questions maybe equally problematic and equally difficult. But that is because there is a different history behind it. But, I do not think that this particular issue is a minor one. I think if you are constantly being reminded or being seen as the outsider, it makes it easier, for example, to allow Japanese Americans to be relocated to camps during World War II, because if you are seen as an alien, then you are in danger. I have no idea whether or not Doctor Lee, the fellow, the scientist in the lab in Los Alamos, is or is not a spy. But, if it is the case that he was singled out and nobody else was, then I find that problematic and the idea is, again, if he is of a certain race and he is more suspect, he is more alien; others are more American. The idea that there are some groups that are more American than others, that is the problematic one to me. But, that has to do with race and Asianness, in particular, and not immigration.

N: I wonder if it partially had to do with the fact that the immigration laws prohibited people from Asia to come over to the United States until the 1960s or the 1950s and 1940s at the earliest. And I also wonder how the immigration experiences of people from South America or Mexico might relate to those from Asian cultures.

C: I think each group is going to have its own particular problems. I am sure that the Latin American immigrants will forever experience problems with the race issue—I have no idea. I am just guessing—If you live in California and you look Hispanic it could very well be that if you cross a border you are probably going to be checked more especially if they think you are “illegal.” So, I think each group has its own particular difficulties “becoming American” in different format.

N: I find your references to the Bionic Woman in *Monkey Bridge* interesting because the Bionic Woman is kind of a mixture of parts, or as you say, “A little bit of Shaolin Kung Fu mixed with American hardware and American know how” (Cao, *Monkey* 9). Since you represent two or more cultures—as a Vietnamese American—do you see the Bionic Woman as a sort of alter ego to Mai or to yourself?

C: I love the Bionic Woman. I really, really, really liked it when I got here, because when I grew up, one of the things that was very popular in Vietnam was these kinds of martial arts novels. Every kid reads them and they are a series. Each story has about 10 volumes and so sometimes you rent the book and then you hurry up and you rent the next one. They are very addictive. And they always involve male heroes who are very good in martial arts but female heroes who are also very good in martial arts. In other words, it is interesting when you see stories, traditional stories that 7-, 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old children in Vietnam read. Women are not represented, let's say, as Snow White, kind of like waiting for Prince Charming to come. And he like wakes her up and gives her life or not. We have “Snow White” as a story but that is “Snow White.” In other words, we do not have traditional stories of “Snow White” or “Sleeping Beauty” where Snow White has an evil stepmother and is promoting a kind of envy and competition among girls and women for this Prince Charming who is going to come. No Sleeping Beauty lies passive, waiting for the Prince, however he is represented, to come and wake her up from her dream or inert life. The kids read these stories where the male character, the main character, is extremely handsome, highly skilled in swordsmanship, but the main female character is always as equal or better and always self-sufficient and knows how to do martial arts just as well as the other guy. And in fact, many of the martial arts styles were invented by women historically, so in that sense, the idea of the female being able to defend herself is very traditional in that culture in which I was raised. Then I came here and I saw the Bionic Woman. I really just saw the Bionic Woman as an American reincarnation of one of the female characters in one of these books. And so in many ways, the show functioned in helping me to learn English, because I loved watching it and listening to English—characters in the show speak English—but it also allows me a kind of harking back, a nostalgic sense, and I have never seen martial arts movies of that type. So, this is almost not just nostalgia, but also a visual representation of some of the books I read.

N: What sort of responses about *Monkey Bridge* have you had from those who remain in Vietnam?

C: I do not think that those who remain in Vietnam have access to the book. I do know that those who travel to Vietnam—Americans who travel to Vietnam or the Americans who live in Vietnam—buy the book, but I have only gotten reaction from Americans who move to Vietnam, who do business in Vietnam, who live there for two or three years. And they like the book. I have gotten good responses from them.

N: How has your Vietnamese culture's attitude toward women who express themselves vocally or in writing influenced your own voice?

C: The Vietnamese culture is in many ways traditional, but it is not traditional regarding women the way that people in the West may think of it. As I said, Vietnamese women have always been represented in a very independent way. They are not seen as needing male rescue. That is not part of the culture. They may be restrained in other ways, but the idea of one's identity deriving from completely from the husband or the father, I do not see it. For example, we do not have foot binding like the Chinese—the idea that the woman must be foot bound in order to enhance her dependence on the male or that she would have to be of a certain class to hire people to carry her around. That is not in the history of the country. There have always been women warriors in Vietnamese history so the idea of female weakness is not there.

N: Kind of like a strong female working alongside a man. More than when you have with a Chinese society where it might not be such a working community just because of the way the land is. The land makes Vietnam very different from other Asian cultures because it is fundamental.

C: Yeah, farming is very labor intensive, especially rice planting. And so both men and women are needed to do both. Men do the plowing and women do the transplanting of the rice, which is a very arduous and time-consuming process. Therefore, maybe just from an economic perspective alone, the society could not have afforded to bind the feet of women because they need women's labor. You can certainly look at that from an economic perspective. So, I never grew up with the sense of women being depicted as needing male protection. Now, the other Vietnamese culture, however, does place a premium on female sacrifice and often sacrifice for the husband. That is seen very much as a virtue. If she sacrificed her things in order to do things for herself that could be seen as selfish. But the idea sort of like the epitome of female virtue would be a woman who, even though she is very strong and could be alone and does not need male protection, nonetheless decides to sacrifice herself completely for her husband and the children. The idea of female sacrifice is the paragon of female virtue. So, it has its own version of what the appropriate female behavior would be. But, I think that it is important though that I never did grow up with a sense of the woman being somehow weak. And like you would not see a Vietnamese movie where the heroine is—you see this all of the time in Hollywood movies—the female is running. The male is that somebody bad pursuing her and at the last minute—she is wearing high heels so—

she always falls. It is like the standard thing—she always falls and then gets caught. That just would not be in the Vietnamese psyche to make that kind of a ridiculous theme. Because she would have taken her shoes off. She would not be wearing high heels and running. She just would not be. It is a male fantasy of a particular culture. To make that type of a movie and I do not think that the male, the Vietnamese male, fantasy would be seeing a woman vulnerable and falling. He may have his own fantasy. I am not saying that the Vietnamese male may not have his own very particular gendered fantasy but it would not be expressed that way.

N: Can you tell me about a significant memory somewhere around the time that you came to the U.S. and learned that American culture was not exactly what you envisioned it to be.

C: I do not have any. I cannot think of any. American culture. I had no particular preexisting expectation of American culture. I watched American shows because they were shown in Vietnam for the American GIs like "Mission Impossible" or "Combat." "Ironside" was shown there, "Beverly Hillbillies," too, but I did not understand the language, so, I just usually just watched it because it was just something different to watch. But, since, if you do not understand the language, then you would not be able to really understand what the show is really depicting anyway. So, I did not come really with a certain expectation of what American culture is. I loved American rock music as a kid, because that was played on the radios all the time, like the Beach Boys and Rolling Stones and the Beatles and Chuck Berry and those kinds of things. I loved the rhythm of that. And so that is universal, and you come here, you do the same thing. But, I did not have a preexisting idea and then find that it is different or did not meet my expectation.

N: You end *Monkey Bridge* with Mai's entrance into Mount Holyoke. She is still young. She has not undergone the transition of going to college or experienced a personal relationship with a significant other, so why did you choose to end the book without exploring her continuing development?

C: Because I only wanted to see the initial stage in which she made the decision to leave the Vietnamese community and I wanted to show her at the door as she is exiting, and it really almost does not matter what she ultimately decides after that. What is important is that she took the first step.

N: Are you working on another book?

C: Yes, I finished another book which is loosely based after a real event. I do not know if you have heard of a boat called *The Golden Venture*. It carried about 300 Chinese illegal immigrants. *Golden Venture* sank in Queens in 1993, and a lot of the people died there, but there is a whole phenomenon now of human smuggling. Whether it is in containers, in cargo containers or in trucks, or on ships, and they usually come from China, and they are basically brought by organized crime, and when they get here they have to work off their debt. It is a pretty bleak

phenomenon that is happening all over, mostly in the U.S. and Europe. But the book is about the two people who are on that boat and came to the U.S., so it's partially set in China and partially set in New York City, Chinatown and it is about their life here. I just finished it.

Pauline T. Newton's ambitious study, which includes interviews with six migrant writers, recognizes intersections between restrictive and limiting literary divisions in Caribbean, Asian-American, and ethnic-American narratives, and explores issues of migration and the crossing and (re-)crossing of cultural boundaries. U.S.-American-bound migrant writers, including Judith Ortiz Cofer, Julia Alvarez, Jamaica Kincaid, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Lan Cao, left their homelands between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, examining and expressing their migration experiences—namely, the evolution of their transcultural identities as they make the transition from their island or peninsular homelands to the United States—in diverse literary forms, such as the memoir, the personal narrative, and the novel or other fictional forms. Changes in U.S.-American immigration laws in the mid-1960s and socio-political disruptions on migrants' homelands precipitated these writers' migrations, thereby propelling the development of refracted identities. The construction of these constantly shifting and adapting identities demonstrates the struggles of non-European, non-Anglo female migrants of recent times to represent themselves as members of their island and peninsular homelands and of the U.S.-American mainland. Newton shows that, for these writers and for the characters in their fiction, adapting to life in the United States proves much more complicated than simply disengaging from one homeland or culture and blending into another. As they migrate and adapt, these migrants experience "islandness," which can signify not just isolation, but also unity. The book concludes with interviews with six migrant writers—Ortiz Cofer, Geok-lin Lim, Cao, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Le Ly Hayslip and Frances Esquibel Tywoniak—that provide additional texts for discussion and offer fresh perspectives on the analytical framework of Newton's study.

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Edited by Margaret Sönsler Breen and Warren J. Blumenfeld

Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics

The Vagaries of Literary Reception

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ASHGATE

Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House, Croft Road
Aldershot, Hampshire
GU11 3HR, England

www.ashgate.com

ISBN 0-7546-5212-2



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