Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18025

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL OF THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES IN LAN CAO'S *MONKEY BRIDGE* AND T*HE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9863-3636
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9261-3987

Half a century after its end, the Vietnam War still maintains its important place in political and cultural discussions around the world. These discussions generally revolve around the American experience of the war which resulted in great catastrophes. The impact of the war has a lasting effect not only on American collective memory but also on other Western nations for whom the word "Vietnam" brings to mind the memories of the war rather than Vietnam as a country. Hoa Hong Pham expresses that "'Vietnam' is used as a one-word descriptor in American discourse to refer to military interventions overseas. It is also associated with the failure of such interventions" (2). However, despite the fact that the US is widely considered as the defeated side in the war, the discussions and representations of the war are dominated not by the Vietnamese but by the Americans. In order to express the ironic position of the US as the defeated party in the war, whose narrative has dominated its representations, Renny Christopher states that it is a general assumption that history is written by the victors and "the losers live with it," but in the case of the Vietnam War, the Americans, who are thought to have lost the war, are "writing the history of the war" (2). The attitude of ignorance has also been displayed towards the narratives by South Vietnamese individuals who were considered Americans' allies and, thus, the natural losers in the war (2). In that respect, the United States has paid no attention to any records of the war other than its own.

However, although the narratives of the Vietnamese people migrating to the US have not been located in popular fictional or non-fictional American productions, their voice and trauma can be traced in the works written by Vietnamese American writers. As Hidle notes, Vietnam-

ese American literature can be considered a response to "inquiries about the identity stemming from US-centric, myopic, and racialized narratives about the US-Viet Nam War" that serves just to alleviate the remaining American guilt (2). In that respect, it revolves around the memories of a marginalized group whose experiences were ignored or left to be forgotten by mainstream American cultural productions. As a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American and a war survivor, Lan Cao also concentrates on the issues of trauma, identity, and refugee experiences of the Vietnamese people in the US in her literary works. In both *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014), the author focuses on the personal journeys of two different protagonists, both named Mai, while also highlighting the shared struggles of the Vietnamese community as they escape the war and try to adjust to the life in the United States.

This study examines the representations of Vietnam War trauma and the various paths taken by the Vietnamese Americans at the collective level to heal their wounds in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*. Through the analysis of these literary works, the study aims to contribute to the efforts in the field of trauma studies that lay emphasis on the experiences of war survivors who strive for safety in Western nations. In both of Cao's novels, although the trauma of the Vietnamese in the US is mostly related to their experiences of the war in their homeland, intolerance to the Vietnamese presence in the US, and thus, their marginalization by Americans, hinders the self-healing efforts of the Vietnamese. Despite the challenges they face in their homeland, on their journey to the US and in the US, the Vietnamese do not prefer a life of passivity; instead, they seek to heal their wounds in every possible way.

TRAUMA AS A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, collective trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness" (1). The social entity becomes traumatized in situations such as when a "leader dies, a regime falls or [...] when environment of an individual or collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen or unwelcome manner" (2). Neil J. Smelser cites "American slavery, Holocaust, nuclear explosions" as examples of collective traumas, the effects of which continue to reverberate in the present (42). Kai Erikson argues that trauma shared at a collective level has two contradictory consequences; on the one hand it "damages the bonds attaching people together

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (160); on the other, it "serves as an instrument to bring people together, [with their] shared experiences mak[ing] the bond among them stronger" (161). In this respect, the experiences of Holocaust survivors or other collectively experienced traumas of violence or natural disasters both damage the social unity and bring the victims together around these shared experiences. Thus, trauma becomes a common culture and a collective memory for the social entity which continues to influence not only the ones distressed by it, but also the future generations. Kellerman likens collective trauma to a radioactive explosion, the large-scale physical and psychical impact on the community of which persists in future generations. As he states,

> this is the essence of collective trauma. Its profound after-effects are manifold and far-reaching. Like a nuclear bomb that disperses its radioactive fallout in distant places even a long time after the actual explosion, any major psychological trauma continues to contaminate those who were exposed to it in one way or another in the first, second, and subsequent generations. (33–34)

Hence, the collectively experienced traumatic situations continue to "contaminate" the children of the victims as there will always remain "traces of the blast imprinted upon the molested space of human consciousness" (33). Similar to Kellerman, Arthur G. Neal also emphasizes the indelibility of collectively experienced trauma on multiple generations as national trauma. From this perspective, it can be said that it is similar to memories of individual trauma which refuse to be buried and continue to haunt the individual. Neal argues that "just as the rape victim becomes permanently changed as a result of the trauma, the nation becomes permanently changed as a result of a trauma in the social realm" (4). However, for an event to be remembered as traumatic collectively, it does not necessarily have to be inherently traumatic in the first place, which means the group does not have to experience the event as traumatizing. As Alexander explains, "trauma is not result of group experiencing pain"; it is "the result of acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity," which is sustained through the representation of the event (10). Thus, the representations of the past in the present are important because, through these representations, meanings are attached to traumas as collective experiences. In that respect, the meaning-making agents in the society, which Alexander calls "collective actors" or "carrier groups," (10–12) such as political leaders, religious groups, media and state institutions, and intellectuals have an important effect on the representation and transmission

of experiences as collective traumas. These groups have a central role in articulating and representing the desire or voice of the troubled people.

According to Eyerman et al., the "agents of memory selectively draw from a reservoir of images and stories in a process of remembering and forgetting [...] collective memory is thus an active process of meaning making in which various social forces compete" (14). Therefore, the arena of collective memory can become a site of both consensus and conflict (15). The example of selective memories conflicting or competing with one another can be traced in the representations of the Vietnam War from different lenses. Hence, "in the United States, former activists in the antiwar movement, as well as dissenting veterans, represent and thus remember the Vietnam conflict differently from those found in official representations" (15). Besides, Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspectives on the war differ from each other at the collective level. The national narratives and lessons of trauma are "objectified in monuments, museums and collective historical artifacts" (23), and displayed through ritual practices like holidays and commemorations (Eyerman et al. 15). These sites and cultural practices are aimed to bring the traumatized society together under a collective identity and are part of working-through processes. For example, Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veteran Memorial is part of this collective remembrance and working-through process. However, it does not mention the Vietnamese who fought in the war alongside the Americans, which also reinforces their invisibility in the official discourse. Therefore, the commemoration of collective experiences of the South Vietnamese population in the US is actualized through alternative rituals and discursive practices. For instance, in the Vietnamese Americans' narrative, April 30, 1975 is remembered as the day of the beginning of their exile to the US and loss of homeland, and it is "commemorated as Black April Day or the Day of Mourning" (Eyerman at al. 25) with ceremonies attended by Vietnamese Americans from all around the US. The collective experiences of Vietnamese Americans are also conveyed through their literature. From this vantage point, Vietnamese American intellectuals and writers can be conceived as carrier groups for the expression of collectively experienced trauma of the war and its continuous imprint on the multiple Vietnamese generations in the US. As a 1.5 generation writer, Lan Cao, like many other Vietnamese American writers, focuses on the trauma and expresses that "many Vietnamese friends continue to reel from the events of April 1975 [...] it seems to loom perpetually in our hearts as something forever defining. We are here, but also still there, improbable survivors mauled always by 1975" (Cao

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

and Cao 37). In that respect, her novels *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* do not represent trauma only as an individual experience but place it into a larger context with references to historical realities and collective experiences of the war. As the individual trauma is not disconnected from the collective experience and meanings attached by the community in both novels, individual healing struggles are not isolated from the collective actions.

REPRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN CAO'S NOVELS

Cao demonstrates the impacts of trauma on a collective level by fusing the experiences of the protagonists with those of other members of the community. According to Michelle Balaev, "the trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist may also function to represent an event that was experienced by a group of people" (17). As such, although the trauma is presented through individual sufferings, these experiences are connected to collective experiences. In order to express how trauma fiction can present the protagonist as an "everyperson" figure who represents the collective experiences, Balaev states that

> significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender have collectively experienced trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as slavery, war, torture, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. (17)

The historical event in both novels is the Vietnam War, and the individuals who go through the atrocities of the war are connected to each other through their private but similar stories. Similar to Kai Erikson's description of collective trauma which "damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (160), in both novels, the effects of the war on the collective level are portrayed as the disruption of the social bonds, dispersal of huge numbers of people, mass graves and deaths, while people are trying to save their lives.

Both novels give descriptions of the numbers of South Vietnamese people trying to escape the country of origin and their refugee experiences in the current country they have immigrated to where they expose stories about their traumas. The historical name for the survivors who escaped from Vietnam is "the boat people" which refers to the Vietnamese escaping in huge numbers by boats in the South

China Sea. In her book devoted to the subject, Sucheng Chan describes the chaotic situation of a huge number of people who were trying to escape by the American planes and boats for fear of being murdered by their enemies. During the day of the "fall of Saigon," "more than one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese managed to escape before North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. Over seventy-three thousands of them did so by sea" (63). The movement of people after the fall does not stop and continues in high numbers in later years. According to Linda Hitchcox, between 1976 and 1979 the journey of refugees became more dangerous as the people who fled by boat at those times "faced a hazardous crossing in small and under-equipped craft, which were liable to attacks by pirates [...] It is estimated that between 40,000 and 150,000 people lost their lives at sea during this period" (72). Chan describes the situation in the following words: "Some boats with broken engines drifted for weeks as people on board died of thirst and hunger. Most of the women faced the possibility of being raped by pirates. This was the price they had to pay for freedom" (201). Thus, the traumatic experiences of the individuals are parts of an event that affects the whole community collectively.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai and her father Minh are among the crowds that are being evacuated by helicopters before Saigon is captured. Her narrative chapter is named "Exodus," associating the number of escaping people with the historical and collective traumas of Jewish people. Similar to the Jewish departure from their homeland Egypt, the Vietnamese people are leaving their country, the loss of which will be felt through melancholic and nostalgic memories in "Little Saigon" in the US. Mai describes their final escape with emphasis on the loss of homeland. She states: "The country has fallen. Peace has come but Saigon lost" (245). Mai continues to describe the people leaving Vietnam during the period between 1975 and 1978 to reach other countries.

> They are called the boat people. It is because they flee from Vietnam's coast by boat. Their very essence is aptly distilled by two simple, sorrow-filled words. It is 1978. The world is taking note of these people who willingly set their bodies upon the wide-open sea in the hope of reaching some distant, kindly shore [...] The Chinese are fleeing, along with Vietnamese of all stripes, including former soldiers, farmers, peasants, and traders, carrying nothing with them but hope and grievances [...] By 1978, more than half a million people have fled. (258– 260)

Thus, the people leaving Vietnam are not one single class or ethnicity, as the war affects all the people collectively, and their experiences are connected to one another. Their conditions as immigrants trying

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

to save their lives bond them together regardless of their diverse backgrounds. When Mai watches the news and sees the pictures showing the journey of "the boat people," she is both concerned and hopeful as she thinks that her mother who stayed in Vietnam might be among these survivors. Similar to Mai, nearly all the people in the "Little Saigon" community in the US anticipate the news about their relatives and loved ones. Mai states "that is why we wait. It is our community ritual. It is 1978 and everyone in Virginia's Little Saigon waits or knows someone who is waiting" (292). The victims who manage to arrive in the US bring news about the other people left behind and the traumatic experiences during their journey. For instance, a woman tells the story about the attack by pirates who raped the women on the boat and murdered some of the people (276). Later in the novel, Mai learns that her mother was also raped and murdered like the other thousands of people who died on their journey. Hence, her trauma becomes connected to other people's traumas through their stories which include similar experiences.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai, having arrived in the US just before South Vietnam falls, watches the news about the people escaping the country in 1975 and emphasizes the number of people leaving the country in despair. She states that

> [a] newscaster reporting for ABC News had declared with eerie matter of factness that this was "the largest single movement of people in the history of America itself." There was the South China Sea on April 30, 1975. There was the exodus by air [...] There was the exodus by sea, a lurching protuberance of South Vietnamese Navy vessels, barges, thug boats, junks, sampans, fishing boats. (167)

The description of the people in the news indicates that people are caught unprepared and try to escape by whatever means they could find. In that sense, "the fall" creates a collective shock on people, and the fear of being murdered contributes to the number of people escaping. Mai also emphasizes that this escape does not always end happily as "at least two hundred thousand had died at sea" (214). Similar to *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai's narrative also includes a story of a person who narrates a tragic boat journey that resulted in the rape of his sister, his mother's death and father's loss at the South China Sea. Apparently, the similarity of the traumatic stories by different people in both novels is designed intentionally by Cao to highlight the nature of these events as parts of collective traumas experienced by South Vietnamese war survivors.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Cao also draws attention to the situation of the Vietnamese immigrants in the US who seem to be marginalized.

Although, for trauma scholars, it is important to voice the traumatic experiences in order to gain visibility and thus bind up the wounds (Herman 1), the Vietnamese refugees and their experiences are left to be forgotten. Mai wants to learn about similar experiences of the people and search for more information in the library in the US, but she does not find anything about these people. She feels that it is as if the world is trying to forget these unpleasant memories. She states that "it was only four years since the war ended, and there was nothing about Vietnam after April 30, 1975, and nothing about my current preoccupation, the boat people and their methods of escape" (216). Absence of information about the experiences of Vietnamese people demonstrates the policy of the US to erase historical events related to civilian sufferings in the war. Mai explains the ignorance by saying that "Americans hate losers, I wanted to say, they don't want to have anything to do with us. They are not trying to win the war; they're trying to forget it" (153). Besides, the historical facts and the novels indicate that the Vietnamese are not readily welcomed in the host country. According to Zia Rizvi, "[o]nce an individual, a human being, becomes a refugee, it is as though he had become a member of another race, some other sub-human group" (qtd. in Harrell-Bond and Kagan 193). Thus, refugees are not respected by the citizens of the host country and are faced with bad rumors stemming from the bias towards them.

In *Monkey Bridge* the demonization of the Vietnamese is demonstrated through tensions in a neighborhood and attacks on refugees as a result of the false news about "how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog" (88). Rather than being considered victims and survivors of a war who need help to heal their wounds, the Vietnamese are considered "a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, and awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (*Monkey Bridge* 15). For all these reasons, their war trauma does not find resolution when they arrive in the US because discrimination and marginalization contribute to their precarious situation.

HEALING THE WOUNDS COLLECTIVELY

Along with individual struggles to find solace after traumatic events and loss of homeland, both of Cao's novels have examples of recovery attempts through connecting with other Vietnamese survivors in the US. Besides harming the ties and dividing the people, it is possible to say that traumas experienced collectively also bring people together. In Kai Erikson's words "trauma can create a com-

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

munity"; "it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie" (185, 187). In that respect, bonding with the members of their communities and sharing their common experiences have the potential for a collective recovery from trauma. According to Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, gathering in a community helps people to overcome their trauma in three ways: first "by knowing of others' suffering, which provides reassurance that one is not alone," second "by actively developing an expressive sense and rituals of fellowship in anger, shame, helplessness, grief, and threat," and third "by emergence of collectively shared attribution of blame for the event" (864). As such, for traumatized individuals, community becomes an important coping mechanism.

Especially for refugees or immigrants who lose their homeland in a sudden way and have difficulties in adapting into their new lives in the host country, the communities they form enable them to eliminate their loneliness and to cope with traumas. In his work on immigrants, Dominique DeFreece states that "active social networks are often used as a tool to protect the migrants from thoughts of past violent experiences and bring them something to look forward to or have hope" (10). The social connections which are strengthened through rituals and festivals in the new country "bring happiness and nostalgia of the good old days into the lives of immigrants" (10). As such, for the above-mentioned reasons, the Vietnamese immigrants formed communities in different parts of the US in order to support members of the same ethnic background. Named Little Saigons, these areas became places where immigrants displayed solidarity with each other in the face of their collective traumas and helped one another. To underline the significance of these sites for the Vietnamese refugees, Karín Aguilar-San Juan states that

> Little Saigons across the United States served as racial safety zones, especially as anti-Asian hostility and violence peaked in the 1980s, being close to others provided needed comfort and validation. The need was heightened by the linguistic and cultural strangeness that the new Vietnamese population represented to "host" neighborhoods and regions. (xx)

Thus, yearning for the homeland, being a stranger to the culture of the host country, and vulnerable to attacks, Vietnamese immigrants construct their own neighborhoods to support each other. Naming these places after the ones in their homeland demonstrates a kind of nostalgic reconstruction of these sites where immigrants feel at home.

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* present examples of interpersonal bonding and solidarity in the Little Saigon community. In *Monkey Bridge*, the example of communal support is demonstrated through gatherings in different houses where Vietnamese people come together to share their life stories and converse about their future lives. Carried out by an important woman figure named Mrs. Bay, these gatherings have a therapeutic effect on Mai's mother Thanh's and other individuals' psychology. Mai observes the meetings in their house:

> So, for the past few weeks, our apartment had become a busy site for evening feasts and weekend hangouts. My mother would be able to claim graciousness of host, although Mrs. Bay and others would do all the preparatory and clean-up work. It was an act of devotion on their part. (139)

Thus, instead of leaving a member of their community in isolation, Vietnamese people demonstrate an act of solidarity with Thanh in her recovery. Mai relates the importance of these gatherings for her mother in these words: "I could say with a certain degree of certainty that she was truly recuperating" (139). Not only Thanh but also other members of the community try to find solace in these gatherings. Together, Vietnamese people talk about their similar experiences and carry out rituals around the family altars in the houses, which enable them to mourn for their deceased loved ones. Forgotten by the public ceremonies of both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the US, which revolve around their own war victories or defeats, the Vietnamese refugees carry out these commemorations and rituals at their houses to "establish a shared past and historically rooted collective memory which functions to create social solidarity in the present" (Eyerman 64). What is more, they also talk about the future from a more optimistic perspective which creates relief at the present time.

In these gatherings, the members of the Little Saigon community sometimes call fortune tellers to find out information about future events. These Vietnamese fortune tellers open a way for the refugees to feel optimistic as their predictions offer more positive scenarios for them. On one such occasion, the fortune teller states that "the communists will destroy each other soon enough, and in no more than two or three years we will be going back home" (*Monkey Bridge* 149). As these fortune tellers are believed to possess supernatural powers and are supported by the ancient Vietnamese saints, their prophecies have a therapeutic effect. Although Mai does not believe in these prophecies as she tries to adapt into modern American life, she cannot keep herself from thinking about their pleasing words,

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

either. She expresses: "I was not normally prone to astrological contemplations, but what harm could there be in a little bit of astrology? I could see why it might be comforting" (248). That is because through astrological predictions, fortune tellers convince them to believe that "if human enterprises could not alter the course of history, then humans could simply declare themselves free from brutishness of everyday endeavors" (248). Thus, fortune tellers provide them with what they desire, the desire to see the defeat of their enemies and the possibility to return to their homeland.

Although *The Lotus and the Storm* does not have as many examples of communal gatherings as *Monkey Bridge*, in which survivors come together to share their similar experiences and take part in ritualistic events, still the importance of Little Saigon is demonstrated through its soothing effect on the characters. It is a place where the Vietnamese people try to ease their pain and unburden themselves from the longing of the homeland. According to Ron Eyerman, "the way things are organized, whether the objects of routine, everyday experience, like the furniture in a room or the more consciously organized objects in a museum, evokes memory and a sense of the past, whether this is articulated through language or not" (68). Eyerman also states that cultural materials like food and music can evoke "strong emotional responses connected to the past and can be formative of individual and collective memory" (68). By reading the novel from that perspective, it can be said that Little Saigon is like an open-air museum for the Vietnamese where they can find objects evoking their prewar lives. Walking in the streets of Little Saigon Mai's father Minh refers to the healing effect of the place:

> Almost immediately I feel a sense of relief. Leaving behind the hooks and snares of life in this new country, we come here for the comfort of pho noodle soup and other aromas from home. I can almost feel its recuperative powers, the full-throated pleasures promised by the simulation of familiar sights and sounds [...] I hear Vietnamese music coming from the loudspeakers. A beguiling complexity of shops and restaurants lies before us, promising an abundance of nostalgia. Even the food in all its varieties of northern, central, and southern fares, is incidental. For it is nostalgia, the vehement singularity of nostalgia, more than anything else, that brings us here. (*The Lotus* 55)

His words demonstrate that the location built by the Vietnamese has a lot of objects reminding them of their homeland and these things have curative effects on the refugees.

In the novel, Little Saigon is also presented as a place where the Vietnamese come together to voice their problems as a community and take

political action against the human rights violations by the regime in Vietnam. Minh observes the solidarity among the Vietnamese with positive feelings and thinks that it will facilitate a more hopeful future. He expresses his feelings as follows:

> [They] have become unapologetically political. I do not know when this happened. It was not so when we arrived in 1975; we had worried more about how our children fared in school or whether we should relocate to warmer locales in California or Texas. The younger generation's interest in the political embattlements of Vietnam surprises me and sometimes fills me with hope. (57)

His observation demonstrates that besides evoking memories of the old days, Little Saigon functions as a place of political action and solidarity.

Like her father, Mai also observes and gives information about the Vietnamese community and the ways of their survival in the US. As Little Saigon grows, it is hinted that people who normally do not know each other, commemorate notable events in one another's houses and celebrate traditional Vietnamese festivals in groups. In her own words: "Weddings, births, Tet are all openings that the Vietnamese in America use to channel the ragged immensity of their longings for things past. It's all about reconstructing and reclaiming what is gone" (271–78). In that respect, unable to return to Vietnam, they create a replica of what they have lost to have the feeling of safety and familiarity.

Cao's novels also show people in Little Saigon forming associations in order to help the ones who are in a more disadvantaged situation and to bring their loved ones from Vietnam. The community supports its members by developing economic ties. One strategy the Vietnamese take to save money is to take part in the *hụi* practice. As the refugees are unable to take loans from American banks, they decide to form their own money-saving programs and give it to the ones in need in return for their monthly contribution. In that respect, *hụi* is "an informal rotating credit association" (60). The ones who take part in the *hụi* practice meet once a month and put some of their earnings in the pot; "everyone has a chance to draw from the *hui* pot once until the rotation is complete and a new hui rotation begins" (60, italics in the original). Through the money saved, people are able to navigate their way in the US. To emphasize its importance for the immigrants, Mai states that "it is the hui that allows people with no collateral or credit history to nurture their largest dreams and tenderest hopes, by leveraging the circuitry of friendship and social connections for financial purposes" (61). As such, the novel shows how the *hụi* practice becomes a Vietnamese refugee strategy in the host

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

nation to compensate for their disadvantaged position. Through this economic practice, the members of the community demonstrate an economic solidarity for a better life in the new country as they are well aware that, as an unwanted group that signifies the failures in the war to the Americans, the only way to recover is to strengthen their economic and social ties with one another.

CONCLUSION

Rather than portraying the Vietnamese as victims living in passivity and a continuous pathological state, through her novels, Lan Cao presents examples displaying the resilience and desire for recovery. In effect, the intentional use of the same name "Mai" for protagonists in both novels can be understood on two different levels; (1) difference and (2) similarity. First, though these characters have the same name, the fact that the two protagonists live through different kinds of traumatic experiences sheds light on the variety of emotional baggage of the war survivors since they come from different backgrounds, have different life stories, and go through different healing processes. Second, as a common female Vietnamese name, it can be an indicator of the sameness of the tragedy experienced by the Vietnamese people. By considering these every-person figures, it might be claimed that, though ways in which they deal with trauma are varied, the reason for their suffering is the same. Also, the meaning of the name, "a precious yellow flower that blooms during Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year," is suggestive of rebirth, "hope and renewal" (Cao, "Reader's Guide"). Therefore, the use of the same name might be a strong signal for the reader and the Vietnamese community that it reflects the tragedy and recovery at the same time.

Cao's novels demonstrate that the arrival to the US does not mean an ending to the sufferings of the Vietnamese as a group saved from the atrocities of war. They become an unwelcome group since they remind Americans of US war failures. Hence, as escaping refugees, the Vietnamese find themselves collectively in an insecure situation and become marginalized in the US which further contributes to their trauma. Consequently, the novels show how the Vietnamese community becomes a supportive mechanism for the victims of trauma who are dispersed from their homelands. As Americans do not readily welcome the refugees into their country, Vietnamese people form their own neighborhoods where they help one another to heal their wounds. In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai emphasizes the importance of communal gatherings in multiple houses for her mother's and other members'

psychology. The stories about past experiences shared in these gatherings have therapeutic effects on the participants since these similar stories connect people and eliminate their loneliness in a country foreign to their culture. The communal rituals and ceremonies around family altars also enable the Vietnamese to mourn for the loss of loved ones collectively.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Little Saigon is described as a place where the refugees gather in order to feel like they are in their homeland. The restaurants and markets are designed in a way to remind the refugees of Saigon. The sound of the Vietnamese music and the smell of the food bring forth the positive memories of pre-war Vietnam and have curative effects on Vietnamese individuals. Besides, the novel also depicts Little Saigon as a space of political and economic solidarity. We see Vietnamese refugees organizing protests and meetings in order to voice their problems and take action against the human right violations of the Vietnamese government. They also form informal credit associations in order to help the members of their community have a better life in the US. As a result, Little Saigon becomes a place of solidarity among refugees to deal with multiple traumas and to navigate their new lives in America.

Abstract: This study examines the representations of Vietnam War trauma and the paths taken by the Vietnamese immigrants in the US at the collective level to heal their wounds in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*. Through the analysis of these literary works, the study intends to contribute to the efforts in the field of trauma studies that lay emphasis on the experiences of war survivors who seek refuge in Western nations. In both of Cao's novels, although the trauma of the Vietnamese in the US is mostly related to their experiences of the war in their homeland, intolerance to the Vietnamese presence in the US, and thus, their marginalization by Americans, impedes the self-healing efforts of the Vietnamese. Despite the challenges they face in their homeland, on their journey to the US and in the US, the Vietnamese do not prefer a life of passivity; instead, they seek to heal their wounds in every possible way.

Keywords: Vietnam War, collective trauma, Lan Cao, Vietnamese refugees, survival

Bios: Özgür Atmaca is an English Language lecturer at Başkent University, Türkiye. He graduated from the Department of English Language and Literature at Hacettepe University, Türkiye and received his MA degree in American Culture and Literature at Başkent University. He is currently a PhD student in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Hacettepe University. He is interested in the representation of class, racial, and ethnic conflicts in cultural, historical, and literary texts from nineteenth century onward.

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

Defne Ersin Tutan earned her BA degree on English Language and Literature and her MA and PhD degrees on British Cultural Studies from Hacettepe University, Türkiye. She is Assistant Professor at the Department of American Culture and Literature and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Science and Letters at Başkent University, Türkiye. She has worked extensively on the intersection of postmodern and postcolonial discourses, with a special interest in their impact on the representation of alternative histories. Her recent research has focused on historical adaptations and on history as adaptation, as well as biopics and films that foreground these issues.

WORKS CITED

Aguilar San-Juan, Karín. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America.* University of Minnesota, 2009.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 1–30.

Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*. Northwestern UP, 2012.

Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. Penguin, 1997.

———. *The Lotus and the Storm*. Penguin, 2014.

———."The Lotus and The Storm Reader's Guide." Penguin Random House, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/315631/the-lotus-and-the-storm-by-lan-cao/9780698147492/readers-guide/#.

Cao, Lan, and Harlan Margaret Van Cao. *Family in Six Tones: A Refugee Mother and an American Daughter.* Viking, 2020.

Chan, Sucheng. *Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Temple UP, 2006.

Christopher, Renny. *The Vietnam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives.* U of Massachusetts P, 1995.

DeFreece, Dominique. "Dealing With Migratory Trauma: Mental Health Stressors and Coping Mechanisms Among Sub- Saharan Migrants in Rabat, Morocco." *SIT Digital Collections*, 2016, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2480. Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma Explorations in Memory,* edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 183–199.

Eyerman, Ron. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 60–111.

Eyerman, Ron, et al. "Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory and the Vietnam War." *Croatian Political Science Review*, vol. 54, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 11–31. https://www.academia.edu/33940251/Cultural_Trauma_Collective_Memory_and_the_Vietnam_War.

Harrell-Bond, Barbara and Mike Kagan. "Protecting the Rights of Refugees in Africa: Beginning with the UN Gatekeeper." *African Voices on Development and Social Justice*, edited by Patrick Burnett and Firoze Manji, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2004, pp. 193–214.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.* Basic Books, 1992.

Hidle, Jade Tiffany. *Bound by Water: Inquiry, Trauma, and Genre in Vietnamese American Literature.* 2014. U of California, PhD thesis. eScholarship, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07x414wf.

Hitchcox, Linda. *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps*. Macmillan, 1990.

Kellerman, Peter Felix. *Sociodrama and Collective Trauma*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.

Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century.* Routledge, 1998.

Pham, Hoa Hong. *Lingering Phantoms: Haunted Literature and Counter Memories from the Vietnam/American War.* 2016. U of Western Sydney, PhD thesis. ResearchDierctLibrary, https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:37331. Smelser, Neil J. "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 31–59.

Vertzberger, Yaacoov Y. I. "The Antinomies of Collective Political Trauma: A Pre-Theory." *Political Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 4, Dec. 1997, pp. 863–876. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792214.