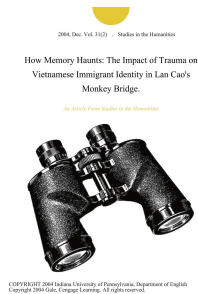


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## HOW MEMORY HAUNTS THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANT IDENTITY IN LAN CAO S MONKEY BRIDGE EBOOKS 2019



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The growing interest that surrounds representations of trauma and traumatic memory in literature appears to be fueled, in part, by the critical stance that traumatic experience precludes knowledge and language. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is defined by a literal reenactment of an event as well as by a temporal gap that makes the actual experience of trauma unknowable and unrepresentable. Yet literary representations of trauma, beginning with ancient poetry and continuing to the contemporary era, consistently refute Caruth's theory. Rather than turn to the vast literature and entrenched debate within psychology research regarding the causes and effects of traumatic experience and memory (a debate, incidentally, that ultimately reveals no therapist or theorist has a definitive answer to what trauma is or does), I let literature itself flesh out the alternative meanings ascribed to trauma. Fictional texts, such as Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), provide a theory of trauma that challenge the currently popular trend in literary criticism that celebrates the "unspeakable" quality of trauma by showing through innovative narrative strategies the varied ways trauma is represented in language and explores how traumatic events are experienced, remembered, retold, and rewritten. Trauma in Cao's novel alters how the female protagonists remember or forget the past which forces a rearticulation of identity, and, importantly, demonstrates the ways immigration and assimilation inform trauma's impact on memory, identity, and relation to place. Comparing the ways Cao's female protagonists experience traumatic events enhances current understandings of trauma and its relation to immigration and social assimilation theories by showing that trauma is not experienced in universally similar ways, but tied to specific historical periods and places. Thanh's journal writing that her daughter labels "gorgeous fictional remembering" further solidifies the novel's claim that trauma can be represented in language and that the remembering and reinvention of the past through a fictional narrative administers a type of healing that can be found nowhere else. Rather than glorifying the gap of dissociation or potential disintegration of meaning that may be produced by traumatic events, Cao's novel reveals the specific meaning that is newly created from trauma that emerges to reformulate subjectivity and perception of reality. One significant meaning that arises is a newly formed knowledge of self and society; rather than claiming that trauma shatters identity, the novel argues that trauma disrupts and causes a reformulation of previous conceptions of self and relations to the world. Moreover, the novel provides non-Western views of coping with trauma, such as found in the protagonist's belief in Karma or the national Betel Nut mythology, that enrich current Western psychological theories about trauma. (1)

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