

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE: LINDA LÊ AND KIM LEFÈVRE'S LITERARY HOMECOMING

Kate Averis

Much Vietnamese Francophone literature expresses the conflictual struggle of writers caught between two cultures: between the traditions and values of their native Vietnam, and the language and system left behind by the French colonial power. A distinguishing feature that recurs in many Vietnamese Francophone novels is the experience of exile and diaspora that came about as a direct result of the political upheaval experienced in Vietnam during the twentieth century, resulting in a humanitarian and economic crisis which led to the emigration of a significant portion of its population.

The principal concerns raised in Francophone novels of the Vietnamese diaspora generally focus on identity and self-image regarding cultural and linguistic origins and allegiances. Whilst exile may be experienced positively, it is often characterized by a sense of profound malaise in the displaced individual, which Jack Yeager identifies as ongoing and unresolvable: "[T]he Vietnamese Francophone novel ... goes beyond the mere expression of cultural divergence or the affirmation of a different identity to become the literary site of an irreconcilable and unresolvable cultural conflict" (Yeager 1987, 89).

The anguish and alienation resulting from this unresolvable cultural conflict are seen in the works of Linda Lê and Kim Lefèvre. Born in Vietnam and currently living in France, both writers address the experience of departure and alienation from the native country, albeit in very different ways. Lefèvre, from an earlier generation than Lê, left Vietnam as a young adult in 1960 to pursue doctoral studies in Paris, whilst Lê was part of the Vietnamese diaspora of the late 1970s instigated by the country's reunification under the socialist regime. Lê left Ho Chi Minh City at the age of fourteen with her mother and three sisters, whilst her father remained behind in Vietnam.

The difficulties and adjustments of displacement experienced by Lê and Lefèvre are translated into largely autobiographical novels where the theme of home and homecoming is a powerful and persistent one. It is also one which plays a significant role in the process of identity formation, and informs the cross-cultural negotiation of identity that preoccupies both authors, and that characterizes much diasporic writing. Inherent in their literary treatment of homecoming is a reflection both on origins and on each author's particular

notion of home (where ‘home’ means “the site of the familiar and a sense of belonging”) (Roberts 332).

If homecoming refers to the actual journey of return to the country of birth, the family and the native culture, it can also be considered a literary project whereby the author attempts to come to terms with his/her displacement, and address the anguish that typifies the experience of exile. As such, the return journey involves a return to a “home” that is envisaged “both as consciousness of secure locatedness *and* a material site,” (Brinker-Gabler and Smith 13, *my italics*) as portrayed in the works of Lê and Lefèvre, respectively. The journey of homecoming, as dealt with in the texts of these authors, highlights the space of “in-betweenness” that both the texts and the authors inhabit, a space between origins and destination, between cultures and languages, between fact and fiction, between fixed identities. The occupation of this liminal space is transcribed as a traumatic quest for identity in Lê and Lefèvre’s fiction, as they struggle to accommodate racial, cultural and psychological aspects of their identity into an authentic sense of self and belonging.

This study sets out to examine the role that the writing of home and homecoming plays in the construction of the exiled author’s sense of identity and self-image, by asking the two central questions of how two contemporary Vietnamese Francophone authors conceive of or construct an idea of home, and how they approach the notion of “returning home” in their writing. Particular attention will be paid to the autobiographical aspect of their texts in order to establish links between literary and actual homecoming.

Revisiting Origins

As they attempt to resolve their dilemmas of self-image, and reconcile their fragmented past and present selves, both writers delve into the past, reflecting on their origins and childhood in an endeavour to come to terms with the adults they have become. Lefèvre’s autobiographical first novel, *Métisse blanche* (1989), recounts the narrator’s troubled childhood and upbringing until she leaves Vietnam for France in early adulthood. Among the central preoccupations of this text is the narrator’s fundamental concern with her own *métissage* as the offspring of a Vietnamese mother and a French father who abandoned her before she was born, and an anxiety with racial purity and impurity, which will eventually cause her to leave her family and her homeland.¹

The opening line of the novel establishes the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding her origins that drive the desire to fix her past, her history and her identity: “Je suis née, paraît-il, à Hanoi un jour de printemps, peu avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, de l’union éphémère entre une jeune Annamite et un Français” (*Métisse* 13).

Where Lefèvre discursively reconstructs the past so as to anchor her story through its literary inscription, Lê’s narrators oscillate between the deconstruction of origins and the nostalgic remembrance of an idealized

childhood in a shifting process vastly removed from Lefèvre's quest for fixity. The exiled Asian narrator of *Calomnies* (1993) establishes contact with her similarly exiled uncle in order to investigate her paternal origins, after her mother's revelation that the narrator's father was not the Vietnamese father she was brought up with but an American officer with whom her mother had an affair. In the later novel, *Lettre morte* (1999), written after the death of the author's father, the narrator presents a nostalgic perspective of childhood in the family home, with positive, even idyllic overtones. The reflection on origins presented in these three novels raises the question of how these origins are constitutive of that which is perceived as home, and provides insight into the ties between the original birth home, and the new adult site of familiarity and belonging that is perceived as a homeland.²

Lefèvre's *Métisse blanche* is characterized by a sense of displacement within, and alienation from, the mother-culture, yet her crisis of displacement is not only cultural, but also, and perhaps more importantly, physically rooted in her *métissage*. The narrator's *métissage* constitutes a conflictual duality in the Vietnamese setting, and will only be resolved through the narrator's eventual spatial and temporal distantiation from Vietnam.³ Much of the narrator's malaise in *Métisse blanche* derives from the incongruity between her own self-image, and others' image of her. In Vietnam, she is perceived as French by the Vietnamese, and Vietnamese by the French, and thus is always identified by difference and otherness. She is never permitted to harmoniously inhabit her constitutive French and Vietnamese identities, but is always relegated to the degraded state of outsider, and even as traitor to her "own" culture, as she is alternatively rejected and appropriated by both the French and Vietnamese communities.

Biologically hybrid yet culturally Vietnamese up until her entry into French education, the narrator of *Métisse blanche* most often expresses a desire to be rid of her French blood, in order to fit into her social milieu, and as such escape the marginalization that her *métissage* imposes on her: "[J]e rêvais d'accidents providentiels qui me videraient de ce sang maudit, me laissant pure Vietnamiennne, réconciliée avec mon entourage et avec moi-même" (14). Rather than indicating any particular preference for one cultural identity over the other, this desire to resemble those around her communicates a profound longing simply to belong, and to be treated as "like" rather than "other," as confirmed later on in France when she will cut all ties with her Asian heritage to assume a French identity. In this sense, Lefèvre continues the assimilating gestures of previous Vietnamese Francophone writers, as illustrated in Yeager's observation that "Vietnamese writers of earlier generations who wrote in French implicitly expressed the hope of fitting in" (Yeager 1997, 262).

This persistently sought-after belonging contrasts with Lê's constant efforts to cultivate the margins, where she is free from what she perceives as a disabling sense of belonging. Yeager explains that Lê stands outside the assimilating tendency of other Vietnamese Francophone writers since she

prefers instead to remain in the instability of the margins. Lê's pursuit of ambiguity is reflected in her refusal to be categorized as a Vietnamese Francophone writer: she rejects any label pinned on her, instead keeping the way clear for her own constant reinvention and regeneration of the self. The ambiguity of the two fathers in *Calomnies* further captures the avoidance of determining features, as does the distancing gesture of leaving the narrator's birth country unnamed, and simply referring to it as "le Pays," much as she repeatedly refers to "le pays de mon enfance" in *Lettre morte* without ever actually naming it, and thus avoiding anchoring her protagonist in a specific spatial and temporal setting. If *Calomnies* "est aussi une interrogation sur les origines – qui suis-je? qui puis-je prétendre être?" (Loucif 885), it confounds, rather than answers these questions, vouching for the undesirability for Lê of a return to origins as a possible route to a monolithic identity.

The visible constituents of identity are a constant obsession for the narrator of *Métisse blanche*, as her marginalized body immediately differentiates her from those around her and represents the physical obstacle to her enjoyment of a monolithic identity. The hybrid body would appear to be at the heart of the narrator's identity crisis, as she feels that others' perception of her is incommensurate with her own sense of self, and therefore damaging in that she is perceived through the short-sighted filters of racial prejudice.

Physicality becomes increasingly significant for the narrator of *Métisse blanche* upon reaching adolescence, where her "otherness" is further consolidated by a growing consciousness of her gender as this comes to prominence alongside her racial origins as one of the sources of her marginalization. Her *métissage* begins to have additional implications for the adolescent narrator who becomes aware that her hybridity inspires sexual interest in her. Whilst she expresses delight at "l'avantage d'être considérée comme une jolie fille" and "le bonheur de plaire" (*Métisse* 187), she resents her objectification and fetishization as a Eurasian woman: "Comment pouvait-on désirer ce qu'on méprise? Leurs hommages, loin de me flatter, me glaçaient" (*Métisse* 120). The preservation of her virginity also becomes especially important to her at this stage at the instigation of the mother, who offers herself as an example of the consequences of its loss. Virginity and sexual purity are a means to compensate for her *métisse* "inferiority" by overturning the Vietnamese belief in the moral corruption of mixed-blood offspring. The arenas of both sexuality and education function as possible sites of recompense for her inferior status as firstly, *métisse*, and secondly, female, and whose potential the narrator immediately identifies and takes advantage of.

Lefèvre's texts, both *Métisse blanche* and *Retour à la saison des pluies* (1990), appear more gendered than those of Lê, due to the foregrounding of the sexual as well as the racial discrimination that the narrator suffers, and the specific interest in the plight of the female *métisse*. Lê's textual worlds, populated largely by male characters with an almost total absence of significant

relationships between women, and her androgynous, even asexual narrators and protagonists suggest a desire to transcend gender specificity, in a manner similar to that in which she attempts to transcend cultural and ethnic specificity. L  reinforces a sense of "in-betweenness" through the sexual ambiguity of her narrators.

L 's novels on the whole reveal a tendency on the part of the author to defer to an idealized past where she once occupied a relatively unproblematic space, only to be removed from it before her sense of identity and belonging could be consolidated. As a result, L  appears unable to disconnect herself psychologically from her childhood, and in particular her relationship with the father, and eschews a new, mature, adult self which would require a reconciliation with the past and the construction of an adult identity conceived through the resolution of her origins. L 's father, and her "father" characters, overwhelm both her and her narrators, and even the most optimistic conclusion of the works studied, that of *Lettre morte*, points to, at best, the cohabitation, rather than the harmonious unification of past and present.

Concerned with the interrogation of the past and the relationship to the father, *Calomnies* presents two narrators: an estranged uncle sent by his family to live in a mental asylum in Corr ze, and his niece, also residing in France, who establishes contact with him by letter. In dialogic counterpoint the two narrators present their stories in alternating chapters, but never at any point actually meet. Their communication is entirely suspended around the receipt of the niece's letter, the uncle's deliberation of his response, and the notebook that he finally writes and sends to her in the closing pages.

The niece's investigations initially appear to be an originary quest, but her decision at the conclusion of the novel not to read her uncle's response to her inquiries belies any attempt to discover the source of her personal history and true identity, and points to her wish to remain indefinable and indifferent. The uncle's deliberation over what to write to her by way of reply suggests that he does not feel he holds the answer(s) to her question, and both protagonists' actions ultimately imply that there is indeed no clear resolution to the originary quest suggested at the novel's outset. The novel's conclusion defeats the notion of a fixed family and ethnic identity that the notebook, by revealing the niece's true paternal lineage, may have provided. Her refusal to read it, and her sudden departure in the closing scene depict her literally and figuratively turning her back on her origins. The deconstruction of the reliability of her origins to account for her adult identity gives the narrator, and indeed L , the scope to depart from them, and reinvent herself within the space of exile and alienation. Writing is the means for the narrator, as for the author, to explore the displacement within which she inscribes herself.

L  and Lef vre's physical separation from their origins is signalled by the journey to France, and the prominence of the literary theme of origins hints at their enduring legacy as they both attempt to reconcile juxtaposed past and present selves. *M tisse blanche*, *Calomnies* and *Lettre morte* are works that

highlight the complexity of origins, and deny the possibility of seeing them as a monolithic, fixed point of departure that the authors can call upon for a coherent sense of present identity. Memory is fictionalized in Lefèvre, who often expresses an inability to recall events clearly despite incorporating precise detail in her narrative, whilst Lê purposefully presents her past as the product of reconfiguration and recreation, aiming to dampen its effect on her present identity rather than demonstrating a prescriptive function. The blurring of autobiography and fiction in both Lê and Lefèvre suggests that there is no single, originary identity, and no unitary autobiographical story. These writers differ, however, in that whilst Lefèvre attempts to bring together the strands of her multiplicity through a revisitation of the past in order to move towards a future with a united and coherent sense of identity, Lê celebrates the instability and disintegration of her identity in the present, resisting any present or projected unification of its disparate elements.

Writing Home

The concepts of diaspora and immigration foreground the notion of ‘home’ by virtue of the displacement of the diasporic subject from an original location and the consequent move to rediscover, or recreate, a new homeland driven by the allure of the apparently unavoidable “seductive pleasures of belonging” (George 199). In an analysis of the theoretical discourse of population movements and new transnational identity configurations, Avtar Brah refers to “a homing desire which is not the same thing as a desire for a ‘homeland,’” importantly designating home as a psychological as well as a geographical space (614-15). In light of this view, it becomes evident that not all displacement sustains an ideology of return, in that homecoming can be as much something discursively and imaginatively constituted as a return to an actual physical site of past locatedness.

For Lefèvre, the return to the homeland that is recounted in her second autobiographical novel, *Retour à la saison des pluies*, confirms the impossibility of conceiving of her childhood home as a present locus of belonging, and affirms her new rootedness in France. Lê’s corpus reveals a highly unconventional approach to the paradigm of belonging and locatedness of the diasporic subject, as seen particularly in her late 1990s trilogy of *Les Trois Parques* (1997), *Voix* (1998), and *Lettre morte*, where her exiled protagonists fail to attain any sense of belonging, as they live in the tension between the “here” and the “there” of displacement and occupy a succession of limbo states.

If *Métisse blanche* recounts Lefèvre’s gradual separation from Vietnam and the mother, *Retour à la saison des pluies* tells of the inverse journey she makes back to the scenes and people of her childhood after thirty years spent in France. Her return is progressively, almost hesitantly realized: divided into two parts, the first, “Le Passé resurge,” accounting for over half of the novel, is spent in anticipation of her return, before the actual journey and re-encounter with

Vietnam is recounted in the second, "Le Retour." The author scrutinizes the past and its effect on her present before making the journey, and in doing so effectively inscribes the biography of her mother into her own autobiographical account, indicating the great extent to which the mother is not only conflated with her country of origin but with the narrator herself. The genres of novel, autobiography and biography blur together in *Retour à la saison des pluies*, demonstrating the impossibility of the narrator's life story to stand alone, unsupported by that of her mother.

If the narrator's mother is a key subject of the life-writing in *Retour à la saison des pluies*, she is also its interlocutor and ideal reader. Similarly to *Métisse blanche*, the authorial voice emerges through the narrative to address the mother directly, an emergence which suggests that if her autobiographical writing is driven by a scriptotherapeutic impulse, then it is also driven by a desire to make peace with the mother in an endeavor to resolve the difficulties of their past relationship. A shift occurs, between *Métisse blanche* and *Retour à la saison des pluies*, in the tone of the author's injunctions to the mother, from the resentful, hurting child's voice of the former, to the comprehensive, forgiving adult narrator of the latter who is more able to understand the mother's apparently harsh behavior towards her during childhood. This evolution parallels the shift from the extreme instability and insecurity of the constant internal migration within Vietnam of the child in *Métisse blanche*, to the more secure locatedness of the adult of *Retour à la saison des pluies*. Significantly, her return to Vietnam is treated as a return to the mother, and whilst the narrator discovers that she feels *étrangère*, and no more at home in Vietnam as an adult than she did as a child, the homecoming journey reveals that her distantiation from mother and country are now the result of spatial and temporal separation, rather than the product of racial prejudice as had been the case in the past.

Lefèvre's conception of home illustrates the proposal made by Rosemary George in her study of immigrant writing that mother and country are often conflated and both are closely associated with the notion of home, making home an expansive site that not only condenses to become equated with the intimate and the personal (i.e., the mother), but also expands to accommodate the public sphere (i.e., the nation).⁴ Where Lefèvre concurs with George's observation, Lê disrupts the conventional association of the maternal with country and home, and associates the father with Vietnam. This identification is so strong in Lê that George's outward expansion of home to include the nation can be said to be overridden by Lê's fixation on the father, to the point that Vietnam *becomes* the father in Lê's eyes. The recurring image of the unattainable father in Lê's novels, be it the father who dies on the eve of his journey to visit his exiled daughters in *Les Trois Parques*, the inaccessible father of the narrator's visions in *Voix*, or the deceased father in *Lettre morte*, invokes the impossibility of return to either the birth country or the father. The impossible return and its consequent enforced limbo lie behind the need to find, or recreate, a new homeland in the present. In Lê's case, the resolution lies in embracing this state

of limbo as the new homeland in reaction to the hopelessness of attempting to fix any physical location as a site of belonging.

Where racial origins are the central cause of trauma in Lefèvre's narratives, for Lê it is the departure from Vietnam, and subsequent separation from the father, that haunt her narratives, and bring to them an overwhelming sense of guilt and torment. The non-fixity of Lefèvre's childhood landscape contrasts with the constancy of "la petite maison bleue" that is frequently cited in Lê's novels as the focal point of a sense of belonging during childhood. Lê's past is represented as a more positive, fixed environment than Lefèvre's, and certainly more so than her own present. Where Lefèvre makes the transition from childhood instability to relative fixity, of both locality and identity, in adulthood, Lê's transition moves in the opposite direction. The stable albeit dysfunctional family setting in childhood gives way, on her departure to France, to constant mobility and indeterminacy in the present. Lefèvre's search for the place where her identity can become rooted and feel at home is inversely mirrored in the quest for constant "un-belonging" in Lê.

Lê's characters are for the most part displaced and remain in marginal sites of permanent limbo, and, like Lê herself, seek to inscribe themselves in displacement rather than to attain a fixed designation. It is this very ambiguity that comes to characterize Lê's intended site of belonging, as highlighted in an interview with Catherine Argand, in which Lê emphasizes her repudiation of any sense of belonging, which she considers a disempowering appropriation of her identity, preferring to remain "étrangère au monde, au réel, à la vie, au pays dans lequel je vis, à mon propre pays." Such a lack of anchorage allows her the freedom to construct her own identity as well as to disenable its appropriation or imposition by others.

In the case both of Lê and Lefèvre, estrangement from the mother culture is in great part due to the authors' French education, and the culture acquired through this education. Education frees the narrator of *Métisse blanche* from her dejected state, and gives her a measure of self-esteem, as well as a gauge other than her *métissage* against which to measure herself. Her entry into education, and more specifically French education, is the beginning of a gradual cultural move towards the French side of her identity, which up until this point has only been manifested physically in her.

Whilst a large part of Lefèvre's narratives is dedicated to her experience of the French education system, almost no mention is made in Lê's texts of her schooling as a child in Vietnam, where memories of early childhood are overshadowed by the image of the father. Lê's formative years as an adolescent in France are equally absent in her largely autobiographical works, which prefer to focus on the state of the "métèque écrivain en français," as she has been known to refer to herself, rather than her initial encounter with the French language and education. Benefiting from her French education to enter into French culture and the French literary tradition, Lê nevertheless refuses to

submit to the authority of either. Her paradoxical relationship to French culture is manifested in her writing by, on the one hand, a distinct deference to the French language and literary canon, and, on the other hand, the explicit expression of her resistance to them. Disowning her first two books for the intimidation, respect and submission with which they approach French, she aspires to reclaim and reinvent the French language in order to create her own literary space and tradition. Jane Bradley Winston sums up the irony of Lê's disruptive yet aspiring position within the French literary canon: "[O]ne of the more unsettling aspects of her project is the fact that she sets out to further the novelistic challenge to the poetic word while, at the same time, writing herself into a community of poets, thus writing her place into what would seem to be the target of her own novelistic utterance's attack" (195).

Conclusion

Where Lefèvre writes in pursuit of expression and resolution, Lê has a more self-consciously literary project where writing becomes an end in itself. If Lefèvre comes to writing as a vehicle through which to exorcise the past and allay anxieties of belonging, Lê perceives the very codes and institution of literature, in particular French literature, as constituting a sense of belonging, however ephemeral. Moulding French to her own intents and purposes, Lê endeavors to challenge the limits of what it means to use French, and states her right to belonging within French language and culture. Significantly, she rejects being labelled a Vietnamese Francophone writer, but appears to solicit identification as a French writer, indicating less an outright rejection of belonging, and more a desire to choose her own site of belonging.

Home, then, for Lefèvre is the sense of feeling "at home" in the discursively constituted in-between space that she occupies as a Franco-Vietnamese woman in France. The adult Lefèvre shows herself to have overcome the trauma of *métissage* suffered in childhood, now seeing her bicultural identity as "enrichissante et pas du tout réductrice" (Nguyen). Her relationship to the French language appears unproblematic, and she displays none of the resistance to it that Lê does. Where Lê asserts her identity through the French language, Lefèvre takes advantage of its inclusivity to find a voice that was not available to her as a child in Vietnam (or Vietnamese). Whilst Lefèvre uses writing in French to negotiate her "homeland" in the bicultural identity that this permits, and of which her hyphenated Franco-Vietnamese identity is a sign, Lê writes in French in order to create for herself a multilocal, discursive homeland that attempts to free itself from the fixity of familial and national ties and in which she can fulfil the maxim, "Écrire, c'est s'exiler" (Argand). The act of writing itself becomes the means through which both authors attempt to reconcile their seemingly unresolvable cultural conflict by creating for themselves a new homeland conceived within the displacement of exile. For Lefèvre, this means to "write through" displacement towards a locus of secure locatedness, whereas for

Lê the writerly project itself constitutes her sense of identity and site of belonging.

King's College London

Notes

¹ As Françoise Lionnet points out in her Introduction to *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989), the French term *métis* has no equivalent in English, the nearest approximations being “half-breed” and “mixed blood,” both of which carry negative connotations which are not necessarily present in the French. For this reason the French *métis*, and its derivatives, *métisse* and *métissage*, will be used throughout the article.

² As established in the introduction, considerable attention will be given to the biographies of Lê and Lefèvre in the belief that their status as exiled, or displaced, Francophone writers strongly inflects the treatment of home and homecoming in their autobiographical texts. As such, whilst using “narrator” to refer strictly to the narrating character of their respective texts, the term will also be largely identified with the “author” in both cases, and the narrator’s perception of “home” will be considered indicative of the author’s.

³ Lefèvre further explores the colonial legacy of *métissage*, as well as the links between biography and autobiography, in her third and latest novel, *Moi, Marina la Malinche* (1994), in which she rewrites the life of Malintzin Tenepal, the indigenous Mexican woman and translator to Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Mexico. For the reader familiar with Lefèvre’s corpus, there are clear parallels between the life of Malintzin, and both her own life and that of her mother.

⁴ See in particular Chapter 6, “‘Traveling light’: home and the immigrant genre.”

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