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Leslie Barnes, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. viii +312 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$70 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-8032-4997-4.

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In her introduction to *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*, Leslie Barnes states that the departure point of her monograph, which grew out of her 2010 doctoral dissertation at UCLA, was the observation of the failure of the histories of French literature to “interrogate fully the potential influence of colonialism on shifts in hexagonal literary production” (p. 4). The goal of the book is to address this lacuna by showing the impact of French contact with the colonial Other on metropolitan literature, using as case studies the works of three writers who had lived in the former French colony of Vietnam: André Malraux who resided there from 1923 to 1925, Marguerite Duras (née Donnadiou) who was born and lived in Cochinchina from the 1910s to the early 1930s, and Linda Lê, a Vietnamese native who emigrated to France in 1977 at the age of fourteen. Barnes’s objective is to investigate “the specific relationship between these authors’ lived experience of colonial Indochina or postcolonial Vietnam and their subsequent literary production” (p. 2) through a study of the linguistic, metaphysical, and textual border crossings, and the negotiations with the experience of colonialism in their works.

More specifically, the book argues that “the formal innovations of the existentialist novel, the postwar experimental novel, and the contemporary immigrant narratives all have France’s colonial relationships to Vietnam as one of their essential historical conditions” (p. 3). What distinguishes Barnes’s project from previous studies on French and francophone literature and Vietnam [1] is that hers is informed by the ongoing debate, spearheaded mainly by francophone studies scholars in the Anglophone academia, on the need to deconstruct the center-margin dichotomy that underlies the metropolitan view of the relationship between French and francophone literatures.[2] It is within this broader critical framework that Barnes practices a reading of Malraux, Duras, and Lê that jettisons the Franco-centric approach by foregrounding what she calls the “colonial elements” in their works (p. 16).

The book comprises three sections, the first of which is devoted to Malraux. Barnes’s main task here is to demonstrate that the early manifestations of French literary existentialism had their “formal and sociopolitical roots” (p. 22) in Indochina via a discussion of the “exotic” traces in Malraux’s Asian novels. The first half of the chapter offers a textual analysis of Malraux’s stylistic exoticism in *La Tentation de l’Occident* (1926). The second part provides a narrative of Malraux’s stay in Indochina where he was arrested and tried for stealing Khmer statues, and his subsequent journalistic activities in Saigon as the co-founder of two French-language newspapers, *L’Indochine* and *L’Indochine enchaînée*. By thus linking *La Tentation de l’Occident* with its author’s Indochinese adventure, Barnes argues that “the notion of the absurd” in this first Asian work could be interpreted as “a more specific response” to the French colonial mission in Indochina (p. 53).

In chapter two, Barnes reads Malraux’s Asian novels— *Les Conquérants* (1928), *La Voie royale* (1930), and *La Condition humaine* (1933)—in juxtaposition with a number of Indochinese colonial works of the 1920s. The first part examines the evolution of Malraux’s stylistic and metaphysical concerns in the trilogy, followed by a comparison of the Malrucian heroes with their counterparts in the Indochinese colonial fiction. The second half of the chapter examines the common themes and tropes

found in both groups of works. From this “colonial-exotic intertextual” reading of Malraux’s Asian trilogy and the Indochinese fiction, Barnes concludes that the Indochinese fiction has provided “the foundation upon which Malraux’s existentialist interrogations are constructed” (p. 95).

While the significance of the exotic and colonial elements in Malraux’s Asian novels has been extensively studied previously,[3] Barnes goes a step further in her assertion that it was in Indochina that Malraux was exposed to the spiritual emptiness of the West, which in turn brought about the emergence of his existentialist vision. It is on the basis of this claim that she argues that “the historical, geographic, and... *formal* roots” of the “universalist and metaphysical aspects” of Malraux’s early novels lie in colonialism (p. 67). The aim of situating the genesis of Malraux’s existentialist writings in Indochina is to show how colonial contact had shaped the development of French existentialist novels, thereby challenging the Franco-centric view of French literary histories which hail Malraux as an exclusively metropolitan writer.

If the volume has convincingly established Malraux’s use of French colonial-exotic sources in his Asian writings, much stronger evidence would be needed to substantiate the claim that his existentialist ideas had their “roots” in his Indochinese experience. In her discussion of *La Tentation de l’Occident*, while conceding that one finds there “no trace of his actual experiences in Cambodia and Vietnam,” Barnes still asserts that Malraux’s critique of the West in the book “was undoubtedly informed by the ‘metallic realms of the absurd’ still thriving in Indochina at the end of 1925” (p. 58) without, however, giving textual or biographical support to this claim. For at the level of textual evidence, it seems quite clear that it was in Europe that most of Malraux’s Western characters experienced their existential crisis before their forays into the colony. A case in point is the main protagonist of *Les Conquérants*, Garine, who made his discovery of the absurd during his trial in Lausanne for financing illegal abortions before heading to Asia. The same could be said of the young Claude in *La Voie royale*, who embarked on his Cambodian adventure after deciding to opt out of the narrow and stifling life of the metropole.

Chapter three has as its focus the stylistic shifts in the autobiographical writings of Duras which, Barnes argues, “are shaped by an ongoing attempt to articulate the politics and poetics of métissage” (p.113). The chapter starts with a discussion of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) within the context of its author’s childhood in Indochina while the second half examines the linguistic métissage in *L’Eden Cinéma* (1977), *L’Amant* (1984), and *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991). The main thesis here is to show the influence of the Vietnamese language on Duras’s style through a study of the presence of Vietnamese morphology, syntax, and rhythm in her lexical and syntactic patterning. From her analysis, Barnes concludes that “Duras’s culturally hybrid and grammatically impure language,” like the crabs that destroy Ma’s seawall in *Un Barrage*, “eats holes in the homogenizing structures that seek to delimit legitimate uses of language...” (p. 161).

One of the premises of Barnes’s discussion of Duras’s politics and poetics of métissage is that her autobiographical writing “is mediated by [her] culturally and linguistically *métis* childhood” (p. 113). Barnes’s evocation of Duras’s métis childhood is based on Duras’s own accounts of her Indochinese years in which she portrayed her family as living in dire poverty among the Vietnamese, claiming that her mother, a teacher, “had over there a job... of the lowest sorts.”[4] Duras’s miserabilist narrative of her Indochinese childhood has led many a critic to describe her as a cultural métis. Métissage has different meanings depending on specific contexts. Within the contemporary discourse of Anglo-American postcolonial studies, métissage is often celebrated for its power to challenge the hegemonic power of the West. But during Duras’s childhood days, most of the métis had no wish to subvert the colonial establishment as they would identify themselves much more readily with their white progenitors than their disenfranchised native parents.[5]

More importantly, if one were to re-place Duras’s stories about her family and her mother Marie Donnadiou (née Legrand) within the historical context of the time, quite a different picture would emerge. For the Donnadiou, as Jean Vallier points out in his richly documented biography on Duras, did not, by any stretch of imagination, live in poverty.[6] Moving to Indochina in 1905 to join her first husband Flavien Obscur, Marie entered the colonial civil service as a French *institutrice*,

a job she kept till her retirement in 1935. Like all French colonial civil servants of the time, Marie enjoyed a great many financial perks such as the famous “supplément colonial” thanks to which she earned twice as much as her metropolitan counterparts of equal rank, free passages for her and her children to spend her paid long leave back in the metropole at the end of a three-year term of service, and a vast array of allowances that included, among other things, education and housing.

Another advantage Marie and her colleagues benefited from was rapid professional advancement. In less than fifteen years of actual service, she was promoted from *stagiaire* (intern) to being principal of several girls’ schools in the colony, and by 1928, she had reached the top rank of “professeur hors-classe.” During her long career, she served mainly in cities such as Saigon, Hanoi, Phnom-Penh, Vinhlong, and Sadec as French and Franco-native schools where French teachers were deployed were all located in urban areas. Upon her retirement, instead of returning to France, Marie started a private boarding school in Saigon whose success earned strong praise from the colonial administration.[7] Growing up in such an environment, it would be hard to imagine that the young Marguerite suffered from the exploitation and the social alienation that was the lot of the métis in Indochina.

The last section of the book is devoted to Linda Lê whose work is said to be “profoundly marked by the trauma of postcolonial exile” (p. 25). Taking the cue from Lê herself, who refuses to be pigeonholed as French or Vietnamese, Barnes approaches her writings from the double exclusion of being “neither French nor Vietnamese” (p. 166). Chapter four starts with a discussion of the aesthetic aspects of the connection between writing and sacrifice in Lê’s early novella “Vinh L.” in *Les Évangiles du crime* (1992). The second half of the chapter focuses on the narrative of trauma and ghosts in Lê’s trilogy—*Les Trois parques* (1997), *Voix: une crise* (1998), and *Lettre morte* (1999). Using as analytical tool the “plastic reading” elaborated by Catherine Malabou, Barnes shows how Lê articulates new connections and alternate modes of literary expression to form “a whole while articulating the immanent disruption of that whole” (p. 197).

Chapter five examines three collections of literary essays by Lê—*Tu écriras sur le bonheur* (1999), *Le Complexe de Caliban* (2005), and *Au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau* (2009). The focus here is on Lê’s poetics of exile, which she sees as the condition of her own writings. Barnes starts by exploring the connection between exile, intertextuality, and literary expression in Lê. One of the main issues addressed is the plight of the exiled writers who are led by historical circumstances to write in a language that is not their native tongue. In the remaining part of the chapter, Barnes turns to the capstone essay titled “Littérature déplacée” in *Tu écriras sur le bonheur*. Referred to as the “Lê manifesto,” the essay provides an outline of a “displaced” literature, which constitutes the author’s vision of a literature to come, a literature not only of exile, but also a literature that, in Lê’s own words, “would prefer to be out of place, improper even” (p. 214). The chapter ends with a discussion of the significance of the Roman god Janus in many of Lê’s essays as his two faces embody the doubleness, the duality, and the duplicity that characterize her work.

By establishing the colonial genealogy in the literary productions of Malraux, Duras, and Lê, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature* has no doubt answered the call to “decenter” French national literature through freeing French literary history from national boundaries and recasting it in terms of its interconnectedness with cultures and languages outside the hexagonal space. While Barnes’s close reading has shed interesting new light on the texts under study, there is hardly any attempt on her part to link up the three sections of the book which do share certain common issues. A case in point is the role of the Indochinese colonial-exotic fiction which, Barnes argues, had heavily influenced Malraux in his writing of the Asian trilogy. The same could certainly be said of the inter-racial romance plots in Duras’s *L’Amant* and *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* as one finds similar romance stories galore between white men and native women as well as white women and native men in Indochinese colonial-exotic novels.[8]

Given the fact that Duras grew up in Indochina, she must have been exposed to these works, probably more so than Malraux. It is indeed quite intriguing that no analysis is made of the impact of colonial-exotic literature on Duras’s writings. Similarly, one is equally surprised that the question

of métissage so central in the chapter on Duras has received scant attention in the section on Lê, whose ties to French and Vietnamese languages and cultures are surely as strong, if not stronger, than Duras's. It would definitely be worthwhile to articulate the different implications of métissage in the two writers and compare the duality that defines both of their works. Integrating these issues in the different sections of the book could certainly have strengthened the coherence of the study.

## NOTES

[1] For examples, see Jack Yeager, *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism* (Hanover, N.H.: New England University Press, 1987); and Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

[2] See Françoise Lionnet, "Universalisms and francophonies," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 12, nos 2-3 (2009): 203-221.

[3] Besides Norindr, see also Geoffrey T. Harris, *De l'Indochine au RPF, une continuité politique: les romans d'André Malraux* (Toronto: Paratexte, 1990).

[4] Marguerite Duras and Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 1977), p. 56.

[5] On the social and legal conditions of the métis in Indochina, see Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie : les métis de l'empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris : La Découverte, 2007).

[6] Jean Vallier, *C'était Marguerite Duras, 1914-1945*, vol.1 (Paris : Fayard, 1998).

[7] The information on Marie Donnadiou's professional career in Vietnam is available in her personal file in the Centre des archives d'outremer in Aix-en-Provence. On the history of French women in Indochina, see my *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[8] Examples of romance narratives between white women and native men are Albert de Teneuille and Truong-Dinh-Tri, *Bà-Dàm, roman franco-annamite* (Paris : Fasquelle, 1930); and Christiane Fournier, *Homme jaune et femme blanche* (Paris : Flammarion, 1933).

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