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A Place at the Table:

French Empire and Food in Contemporary Diasporic Vietnamese Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in French and Francophone Studies

by

Elizabeth Molly Collins

2020

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Place at the Table:

French Empire and Food in Contemporary Diasporic Vietnamese Literature

by

Elizabeth Molly Collins

Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Françoise Lionnet, Chair

In my dissertation, I examine the literature of the francophone Vietnamese diaspora in order to explore the interrelated issues of colonialism, racism, migration, culture, and aesthetics. This project operates on two theoretical planes. First, I examine a variety of historical and cultural sources to identify the ways in which food and racial hierarchies were used together to depict Vietnamese people in colonial France. I then move from historical to literary analysis in the remaining chapters by following these currents into the novels of three contemporary diasporic Vietnamese writers: Linda Lê, Kim Thúy, and Monique Truong. Tracing food from the colonial past through to the literary present, I suggest, on the one hand, that the legacy of the French Empire has historically overdetermined the relationship of the Vietnamese to the culinary, even in contexts of diaspora. On the other hand, I argue that writers of Vietnamese origin challenge the dominant paradigms of postcolonial studies. I suggest that their writing affords a means of negotiating the chasm between accommodation and resistance in order to see

what forms of subjectivity might be possible for the diasporic Vietnamese. To study these questions is to scrutinize the repercussions of French colonialism, as well as to consider processes of cultural assimilation, exchange, and creation within the contemporary Francosphere.

Even as discussions at the intersection of postcolonial literature and food studies currently preoccupy many scholars, my dissertation is the first to apply these questions to diasporic Vietnamese literatures in francophone contexts. I also demonstrate the importance of reading for creative formal innovations in literature, film, and the arts alongside historical materials from the archives. Vietnamese experiences with postcoloniality and migration are conditioned by the legacy of colonial racism that continues to be in effect today, thus a study of contemporary artistic production demands to be examined in light of this history. By approaching such issues from the vantage point of the diasporic Vietnamese, my project lends an alternative viewpoint to an enduring discussion on racism and aesthetics in France.

The dissertation of Elizabeth Molly Collins is approved.

Allison B. Carruth

Laure Murat

Lia N. Brozgal

Françoise Lionnet, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

Dedicated with love to my families.

Mom & Dad

Granny

Sam

et la famille Robert

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In the sixth grade, at a public middle school no less, I had the opportunity to study a foreign language: either French, Spanish, or Latin. I chose French, not because I dreamed of traveling to Paris and reading Hugo, but for the sole reason that the teacher seemed nice. Luckily for me, Mrs. Laurie Adams was not only charming and friendly, but a truly exceptional teacher who revealed to me a whole new world and taught me to imagine myself in it. I am so grateful to her and to my other teachers—in particular Mr. Björn Runquist, Mr. Ed Dunn, Mrs. Joan Beattie, and Mrs. Linda Perkins at Kent School—for guiding me through those early days of personal and academic discovery.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Molly Collins is a doctoral candidate in French and Francophone Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She graduated *Cum Laude* from Hamilton College with a Bachelor of Arts in 2010. A French major with a minor in History, she completed an Honors Thesis, entitled “Au-delà de la littérature beur: Faïza Guène et l’intégration littéraire des invisibles en France,” with Professor Roberta Krueger and was awarded the H. Samuel Slater Prize in 2008 as well as the John Lovell Watters Prize in 2010. From 2010 to 2011, Collins taught English in Saint Denis on the island of la Réunion as a part of the Teaching Assistant Program in France before continuing her career as a teacher of French at Greenhills School in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2011. At UCLA, she was awarded two Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowships in 2014 and 2015 to study Vietnamese: first at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) in Madison, Wisconsin and then at the Vietnamese Language Studies School in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The 2016 recipient of the Walter Jensen Fellowship of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and the Bourse Marandon of the Société des professeurs français et francophones d’Amérique, Collins spent the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years as a Visiting Doctoral Scholar at the École normale supérieure in Paris. She was inducted into the UCLA Collegium of University Teaching Fellows in 2018. Her research is forthcoming in the journal *Modern & Contemporary France* in 2021. In August 2020, she will start a position as Lecturer in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

## Introduction

“La nourriture est faite vraiment pour tout le monde.

Comme la vie, elle est faite vraiment pour tous. Pas la littérature...”

—Marguerite Duras<sup>1</sup>

Food, as Marguerite Duras makes clear, is as inseparable from human existence as life itself. Literature, she asserts as the converse of food and life—it is not “for everyone.” Duras’s recipes, recently collected in the volume *La Cuisine de Marguerite*, include Vietnamese classics from her childhood like “Thit-không,” as well as dishes learned from friends, restaurants, and travel, from “Curry à la réunionnaise” and “Spare ribs,” to “Nasi-goreng, plat indonésien d’Ingrid Therme,” and “Dublin Coddle.” Individually, these recipes might suggest that the diversity of ingredients and tastes in these dishes are particular to a place in the world, but their collection together proves exactly Duras’s point: that no matter the specificity of any one flavor, food is universal.

The simultaneous specificity and universality effused by food, as Duras insinuates, does not also exist for literature. What stands in the way of literature being made for everyone? It could be a matter of literacy or a shared language, of whom is permitted to write and read literature, and possesses the material conditions to do so—the luxuries of time, space, money, energy, and education, not to mention the social relations required to be published. These questions are the bedrock of postcolonial literary studies; for those who wield the tools of

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<sup>1</sup> “Le bon plaisir de Marguerite Duras,” 20 October 1984; qtd. in *La Cuisine de Marguerite* 7. Carol Murphy points out that this is a manipulation of the Comte de Lautréamont’s declaration: “La littérature est faite par tous, pas par un” (96).



literature have the power to shape perceptions of the world through the representations that they create. Marguerite Duras's celebrated, prix Goncourt-winning oeuvre, for example, features many depictions of colonial Indochina, such that her perspectives of her birthplace and childhood home become as canonical in France as her literary works. Meanwhile those who do not have comparable access—the colonized, the Othered, the Orientalized, and the subaltern—are often relegated to bit parts in the narratives of the dominant. These questions are also feminist ones; a subaltern woman is considerably more likely to be skilled with a kitchen knife than a pen or a keyboard. Though she may be the keeper of stories and recipes that prove her expertise in literary as well as culinary realms, the epistemic violence of the colonial project delegitimizes that knowledge, which, in turn, undermines her subjectivity.

But what of food *in* literature? Could food propel literature towards a greater universality by recognizing alternative forms of creativity and taste, genres of expression and subjectivity, measures of power and authority, that are accessible to all, especially those forcibly excluded by colonial hegemony in all of its gendered forms? Could food in literature also point to the ways that the universality of food and life have been damaged by colonial ventures, both historical and ongoing, depriving peoples all over the world of the basic need to eat? For men and, especially, women, whose identities have been shaped by colonialism both in its historical and contemporary forms, might food serve as the medium and cooking as the praxis of self-affirmation of the kind that literature can provide, enabling such individuals to exercise agency, express subjectivity, and practice creativity, albeit in possibly more restricted ways? For, as Duras explains, food and literature, cooking and writing, though seemingly contradictory, might have more in common than we might think: “Vous voulez savoir pourquoi je fais la cuisine? Parce que j’aime beaucoup ça... C’est l’endroit le plus antinomique de celui de l’écrit et pourtant

on est dans la même solitude, quand on fait la cuisine, la même inventivité... On est un auteur..." (*Cuisine* 16). If a cook can become an author through her culinary practice, what "texts" are not being "read," and how should we interpret them? How can such authors find a place at the "table" of literature?

Informed by these questions, this dissertation considers the parallels and divergences between food and cooking, on the one hand, and literature and writing, on the other, in contemporary diasporic Vietnamese fiction. I accomplish this through the study of four novels by diasporic Vietnamese women authors: Linda Lê's *Les Évangiles du crime* (1992) and *Les Trois Parques* (1997), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003), and Kim Thúy's *Mãn* (2013). In these texts, dynamics of eating and cooking intertwine with those of writing and creativity to contemplate the modes, forms, and genres of diasporic Vietnamese literary expression in the postcolonial world. I argue that, when analyzed together, these works concomitantly explore the aesthetic potential of food while interrogating issues of political and historical import relating to the legacy of French colonization of Indochina/Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> From a dual analysis of aesthetics and politics emerges a poetics steeped in the postcolonial,<sup>3</sup> but also dedicated to a self-conscious experimentation with the literary forms that grapple with that history in order to find alternative means for diasporic Vietnamese self-expression.

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<sup>2</sup> "Indochina" was what the French called their colonial possessions of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Before French domination, which lasted from 1858 to 1954, the country was generally referred to as "Viet-nam," but even this was a Chinese invention, rather than a Vietnamese one. The use of the condensed version of "Vietnam" began in 1945, when Ho Chi Minh and other nationalists declared independence (Goscha xi-xii). For simplicity's and specificity's sake, I will mostly use the term "Vietnam," unless it would be anachronistic or confusing to do so. Additionally, I have chosen to use the Americanized spelling of Vietnamese proper nouns—"Dien Bien Phu," for example, "rather than Điện Biên Phủ"—except in the case of a few personal names which included diacritical marks in the original source.

<sup>3</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of the study of aesthetics and politics in francophone postcolonial literature, see Crowley and Hiddleston.

## Poetics, Relations, and Diasporic Vietnamese Literature

By comparing works by Lê, Thúy, and Truong, this dissertation traverses national boundaries that have traditionally defined literary study, as neither nationality, nor language unites the texts under study here. Lê, who is French and lives in Paris, writes in French, as does Thúy, who resides in Montreal and is a citizen of Canada, while Truong is American, lives in Brooklyn, and writes in English. Nevertheless, all three authors weigh the legacy of French colonialism in Vietnam in their works, though not because they experienced it themselves, as Duras did. Born in the 1960s and raised in a newly decolonized Vietnam in the grips of American imperialism, Lê, Thúy, and Truong left their birthplace as children in the late 1970s, only to experience the aftereffects of colonial and imperial domination as migrants in Western countries that were reeling from defeat.

What is more, each of their adoptive nations played a historical role in their country of birth, whether directly or indirectly. Most obviously, France colonized Vietnam for almost a century, beginning in 1859 and ending in 1954. The United States picked up where France left off, engaging in military intervention in Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 in an attempt to stem the spread of communism. Though Canada did not officially engage in the U.S.-Vietnam War, participating only in indirect ways, the French language connects Quebec and France, especially as the dynamics of global capitalism take advantage of their shared language to forge cultural links to fuel economic growth. And, significantly, all three countries accepted thousands of refugees from Vietnam in the years following 1975, making citizens of a generation of diasporic Vietnamese.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the ways that their common experiences with political upheaval,

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<sup>4</sup> After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the United States initially evacuated approximately 125,000 Vietnamese and continued to sponsor refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By 1980, there was an estimated population of 231,000 Vietnamese in the country. As of 2017, an

migration, and cultural assimilation filter into their narratives make their works eminently postcolonial even as their own respective writing styles and political commitments diverge considerably.

Born in Dalat in 1963 to a wealthy family who sympathized with the French, Linda Lê fled to Saigon at the age of six after the Têt Offensive brought violence to the region in 1968. She attended the French *lycée* until 1977 when she departed for France with her mother, who was a naturalized French citizen, and her three sisters, but leaving her father behind. The family resettled in Le Havre, but Lê soon left for Paris to study French literature, first at Lycée Henri IV, then at the Sorbonne, before abandoning her studies to dedicate herself to writing. She published three novels in the late 1980s, but her first critical success came with *Les Évangiles du crime* (Juilliard) in 1992. Since then, she has published numerous essays and almost twenty novels (all with Christian Bourgois). She won the prix Wepler-Fondation La Poste in 2010 for her novel *Cronos*, the prix Renaudot-poche in 2011 for her essay *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* (Nil), and was a finalist of the prix Goncourt for *Lame de fond* in 2012. Her most recent novel, *Héroïnes*, was published in 2017.

Kim Thúy was born in 1968 in Saigon and was the child of an affluent family. They left their comfortable life behind, however, when they fled Saigon by boat in 1978. After a harrowing but ultimately safe passage, ten-year-old Thúy and her family spent a few months in a UN refugee camp in Malaysia before being relocated together to Granby, Quebec. They eventually moved to Montréal, where Thúy studied translation as well as law at the Université de

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estimated 1,343,000 people report Vietnamese origins (Alperin and Batalova). Canada welcomed 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1979-1980 and by 2016, 240,615 claimed Vietnamese heritage (Joy). After considerable intellectual and public debate, led by Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron, France admitted 128,531 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees in 1979 (Haski).

Montréal. She worked in a variety of fields before publishing *Ru* (Libre Expression) in 2009. This autobiographical novel garnered a number of prestigious honors, including the Governor General’s Literary Award for French-language fiction in 2010. She has since published *À toi* (2011, co-written with Pascal Janovjak), *Mãn* (2013), *Vi* (2016), and a narrative cookbook, *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* (2017). Thúy has been honored both domestically as well as internationally; she was conferred the status of “Knight of the National Order of Quebec” in 2015 and was a finalist for the New Academy Prize in Literature in 2018 (which ultimately went to fellow francophone author Maryse Condé).

Monique Truong was also born in Saigon in 1968 and left Vietnam as a refugee. Truong was six years old when she and her family migrated to the United States in 1975, living in North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. An undergraduate at Yale University, she also received a degree from Columbia Law School and has practiced intellectual property law. Her novel, *The Book of Salt* (Houghton Mifflin), was published in 2003 to great critical acclaim and was a national bestseller. She has since published two more novels—*Bitter in the Mouth* (Random House, 2010) and *The Sweetest Fruits* (Viking Books, 2019)—and was the co-editor of *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (1998).

Lê, Thúy, and Truong have been shaped by their respective national contexts, and these influences are evident in the content, form, and style of their works, as well as in their promotion and reception. For example, Thúy emphasizes the autobiographical aspects of her experience as a refugee and addresses the challenges of learning the French language, which serve as a reminder of Canada’s political commitment to multiculturalism. On the contrary, Lê’s novels allude to her autobiographical details only through oblique references. Her writing is difficult and erudite, proving her powerful mastery of the French language in a country concerned less with migrants’

multicultural past than with their commitment to a French future. Truong, for her part, might split the difference; while she does not write about her own personal story of migration in her novels, she takes inspiration from her own life to tell stories of individuals whom History and Literature have occluded in favor of the more powerful. By focusing on these narratives and the ways we come to know them, Truong brings greater visibility to marginalized groups in hopes of improving their chances for inclusion in society and culture—a politics of identity through poetics that might be considered particular to contemporary American fiction.

In spite of their different trajectories, however, all three authors address the ways that French Empire and its aftermath in the contemporary globalized world have simultaneously marginalized and valorized their literary contributions, suggesting that a comparison of their works along horizontal, rather than vertical, lines might be productive. I therefore look to Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s concept of “minor transnationalism,” which considers “the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” (“Introduction” 7), in order to examine how these authors, when read together, stimulate a heightened awareness of the ways contemporary relations continue to be shaped by (neo)colonial notions of power and influence. For, as Lionnet and Shih explain, “‘minor transnationalism’ is perhaps the mode in which the traumas of colonial, imperial, and global hegemonies as well as the affective dimensions of transcolonial solidarities—continue to work themselves out and produce new possibilities” (“Introduction” 21).

Accordingly, reading for a shared poetics in the works of Lê, Truong, and Thúy allows for such aesthetic and political “possibilities,” even those that might be conflictual, to illuminate a greater spectrum of postcolonial experience of the diasporic Vietnamese. As Lionnet writes, “Poetics entails reflection on language itself: it is a wrestling with the grammar and vocabulary

of representation, a *corps à corps avec la langue*. It demands a sense of theory, but also implies an understanding of the historicity of words, rules and usage and their affective connotations,” (“New World” 16). Yet, more than this, poetics can also account for the cultural connections that result from global encounters, such as colonialism, postcolonial diaspora, or global capitalism, which these authors have each experienced personally. Lionnet continues: “The work of poetic language matters in the public sphere of politics because it enables the emergence of webs of unsuspected connections, or ‘relation’, as Édouard Glissant might put it” (Lionnet, “New World” 16). A comparison of the works of diasporic authors like Lê, Thúy, and Truong makes Glissant’s relational approach especially apposite; his “poétique de la relation,” which takes inspiration from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “rhizome,” provides a conceptual framework for imagining the possible associations that might arise when worlds come into contact with one another, building networks that defy national boundaries and imperial interests.

### **Vietnamese Francophone Literature and Beyond**

The practice of examining the literary relations between France and Vietnam through a lens of encounter is not a new one, though until recently it has been framed as a two-sided “clash” (Yeager) between France and Vietnam, modernity and tradition, Occident and Orient. Jack Yeager inaugurated the study of novels written in French by Vietnamese authors in his *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism*. In this groundbreaking text, Yeager gives an in-depth overview of the field as well as a history of literary culture in Vietnam before and after colonialism to highlight the extent of French influence on literary production there (Barnes 6). Though Yeager gestures toward the possibility of making minor transnational connections to other francophone literatures, his primary goal is to draw attention to the dually

Vietnamese and French qualities, or hybridity, of a new genre: “Vietnamese Francophone literature.”

Subsequent studies by Karl Britto, Nathalie Nguyen, and Ching Selao follow in Yeager’s footsteps by further exploring the notion of hybridity as a literary repercussion of the colonial and postcolonial experience of Vietnamese francophone writers. In *Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality*, Britto, for example, employs textual and historical analysis to argue that French education instilled an intercultural identity in Vietnamese francophone writers, the contradictions of which they then expressed, with considerable ambivalence, in their works. In *Vietnamese Voices: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone Novel*, N. Nguyen also interprets the co-existence of Vietnamese and French styles and themes in Vietnamese francophone literature as conflictual, offering a gendered reading of novels by Vietnamese francophone women authors to parse typically postcolonial issues of identity and displacement (Barnes 6-7). Likewise, Selao, in *Le roman vietnamien francophone: Orientalisme, occidentalisme et hybridité*, understands the genre as an exploration of “le choc de la rencontre entre l’Orient et l’Occident” (2), which, she argues, produced hybridity in the ways that Vietnamese francophone authors themselves reproduced discourses not only of orientalism, but also occidentalism, posing Vietnam and France as binary opposites in their novels. In sum, through their shared investigation of dynamics of cultural and stylistic hybridity, the scholarship of Yeager, Britto, N. Nguyen, and Selao has been undoubtedly essential to the expansion of the field of Vietnamese francophone literature, as well as its inclusion of these works in discussions of francophone postcolonial literature more generally.

While the genre of Vietnamese francophone literature as inaugurated by Yeager considers representations of hybridity from the Vietnamese perspective, then postcolonial studies



by Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, and Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina*, explore the ways the French depicted Indochina. Through an analysis of many forms of French discourse, from literature and film to the *Exposition coloniale de Paris* in 1931, Norindr suggests that conceptions of Indochina in the French imaginary were “phantasmatic,” or based not on reality, but formed from projections of French desires (Barnes 7). In this way, the collective unconscious came to understand relations between the French and the Vietnamese as oppositional, with the former playing the role of colonizer, or subject, and the latter as colonized, or other, as Albert Memmi has theorized. Ha, like Norindr, also reads French discourse, principally fiction, for the ways that the notion of Indochina was constructed, thereby channeling Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Yet, she also considers the possibility of “dialogic relations” between France and Vietnam, with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogism,” to suggest that dynamics of influence between the two countries might have taken the form of a two-way dialogue, rather than one-way influence, as has been argued previously (Barnes 8).

Pushing these notions of multidirectional influence even further, Leslie Barnes’s *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature* argues for the possibility of *mutual* cultural exchange between the metropolitan center and the colonial periphery. She accomplishes this by examining the influence of the colonial experience in Indochina on so-called canonical French literature by André Malraux, Marguerite Duras, and Linda Lê. Barnes is the first to read the connections between French and Vietnamese literatures alongside Glissant’s notion that cultures and their attendant identities are inherently heterogeneous. Her explicit project is to fray a new path in the study and definition of the French literary canon, one that challenges its presupposed unicity and recognizes heretofore obfuscated flows of multidirectional influence engendered by

colonialism. Accordingly, she examines French works that exemplify formal shifts from one literary movement to another, and how these transitions were informed and influenced by the languages, cultures, and peoples of France's colonies, specifically Vietnam.

Following in Barnes's theoretical and methodological footsteps, this dissertation will continue to study cultural ties between France and Vietnam in terms of multiplicity and multidirectionality. Indeed, I seek to expand the conversation even further by reading outside of the boundaries of Vietnamese francophone literature. I therefore emulate Jane Winston and Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier's tactic in *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue* of placing scholarship and literature from the United States alongside contributions from France and Vietnam. By considering works by Lê, Thúy and Truong together and in light of scholarship from their respective countries of France, francophone Canada, and the United States, I allow for the emergence of decentered perspectives on the ways French colonialism continues to influence authors of Vietnamese origin, even in contexts of diaspora.

For the diasporic Vietnamese in France are not alone in bearing the brunt of colonial heritage; it is also borne by the francophone Vietnamese in Canada. The shared language of French between Quebec and France ties those two places together through global capitalism, which finds avenues for growth through cultural consumption. The works of Quebecois author Kim Thúy, for example, have sold well in France, even earning her the grand prix RTL-*Lire* at the Salon du livre in Paris in 2010 for *Ru*, as well as recognition from the venerable TV host and literary critic Bernard Pivot for *Mãn* in 2013 (Robitaille).<sup>5</sup> In spite of this positive press, however, francophone postcolonial authors from Quebec must nevertheless engage with French

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<sup>5</sup> For more on francophone works by authors of Asian origin in Canada, see Yeager, "Bach Mai and Ying Chen."

cultural assumptions rooted in colonial history as expressed by publishers and readerships. Describing the differences in reception of her novels in France and Quebec, Kim Thúy explains: “En France, il y a toute cette histoire coloniale. Alors qu’au Québec, on est deux nouveaux, *it’s our first date* ! Il n’y a pas d’histoire. Alors qu’ici [en France], c’est lourd ! On aime beaucoup le flan caramel, mais attend ! On a eu ça à combien de coups de matraque ? C’est très complexe cette histoire” (Personal Interview). Even though Thúy writes primarily for her fellow Quebecois, she must also be cognizant of the historical, cultural, and even emotional repercussions of colonialism for her French readers, as her works summon repressed memories both nostalgic and painful.

Drawing minor transnational connections among the diasporic Vietnamese in France, Canada, and the United States is not only compelling for literary comparison, it is also helpful from a theoretical perspective. Though studies on the literatures of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese diaspora in francophone contexts have expanded somewhat, there continues to be rather minimal scholarly attention devoted to the contemporary, postcolonial repercussions of France’s Asian empire. Indeed, this dissertation is one of the first major studies to consider food, French colonialism, and postcolonial francophone culture from the perspective of the diasporic Vietnamese. Meanwhile, in the United States, the field of “Asian American Studies” has existed since the late 1960s.<sup>6</sup> As a result, there is a profusion of studies focusing solely on food, race, and literature that fall into the purview of Asian American Studies, including Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Jennifer Ann

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<sup>6</sup> Similar initiatives have recently launched in Canada that model themselves off the American example, including the founding of academic programs and a national academic organization called “Asian Canadian Studies” as well as the publication of *Asian Canadian Studies Reader*. For a more nuanced critique of “Asian American Studies,” see the conclusion of this dissertation.

Ho's *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, Wenying Xu's *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, and the collection *Eating Asian America*, edited by Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur. It goes without saying that although the treatment of issues of race and immigration in the United States differs considerably from that of France or Canada, the perspectives of scholars of Asian American Studies will nevertheless prove to be productive.

### **Food and Vietnam, Race and Aesthetics**

That Lê, Thúy, and Truong each make frequent use of food, cooking, and eating in both metaphorical and literal senses in the works under study here speaks to the ability of food to account for experiences of the diasporic Vietnamese. Indeed, food has considerable historical significance for Vietnamese people in Vietnam and abroad; every political regime in Vietnam over the last century has altered the agricultural and culinary landscape, whether via the colonial exploitation of resources and introduction of Western foods by the French, famine caused by defoliation by the U.S. military during the Vietnam-American War, severe food rationing in the early years of communism, starvation among those who escaped by sea after the fall of Saigon, or the challenges of adapting their own culinary traditions to the foodways of their adopted countries as migrants. The writers whose works I examine grew up in Vietnam, often under circumstances such as these, so their childhood memories are often associated with food in sensory and symbolic ways. The significance of particular foods, tastes, and customs grew after these writers immigrated, as they began to negotiate the encounter of their own diverse culinary heritage with that of metropolitan France, Quebec, and the United States. Accordingly, the profusion of food-related tropes in the novels I have selected for this study reflects the historical

and cultural import of cuisine, as well as its potential for cross-cultural creativity, that is specific to the Vietnamese diaspora.

Reading for food in diasporic Vietnamese fiction enables us to reckon with legacies of French colonialism while also allowing for the creative possibilities for minor transnational relations. However, this focus does come with potential pitfalls. As Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur argue in *Eating Asian America*, it is important to recognize that the association of Asian identity with cooking and eating is not an intrinsic, nor a natural one; rather, "...social, political, economic, and historical forces, as well as power inequalities, including discriminatory immigration and land laws, have circumscribed Asians materially and symbolically in the alimentary realm, forcing them into indentured agricultural work and lifetimes spent in restaurants and other food service and processing industries" (1). Though the particular processes by which this occurs differ in the United States and France, the tendency of interpreting the identities of visibly racialized Asian individuals through the prism of food remains similar; to essentialize the targeted person or group in such a way creates "a slippage between personhood and food" (Ku et al. 2).

For instance, the popularity of Vietnamese cuisine has grown considerably in recent years—a fact which is often interpreted metonymically as proof of the successful assimilation of the Vietnamese themselves in the national body politic. After all, a list of "the best ten Vietnamese restaurants" can be found online for almost any major city around the world, where Vietnamese dishes such as pho, banh mi, and the noodle dish "bo bun" are all the rage.<sup>7</sup> In food trucks and sandwich shops, family restaurants and fine dining, Vietnamese chefs have cooked

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<sup>7</sup> See Saukam, "What's the Deal With All the Bo Bun in Paris?" for a description of the dish and its Parisian reception.

their way to the top of their adopted culinary cultures, whether American, French, or Canadian.<sup>8</sup> The James Beard Foundation has honored two Vietnamese-American chefs: Charles Phan with the award for “Best Chef—California” in 2004 for his restaurant *The Slanted Door* in San Francisco and Andrea Nguyen with the “Cookbook Award” in 2018 for *The Pho Cookbook*.<sup>9</sup> Chefs of Vietnamese origin have also been successful on televised cooking competitions: American Christine Hà won *MasterChef* in 2012, while Khanh-Ly Huynh and Nathalie Nguyen, who are French, were both finalists of *MasterChef France*, with Huynh winning the contest in 2015. Canadian chef Chi Li, for her part, was the runner-up on *MasterChef Vietnam* in 2014 and has since opened a successful Vietnamese restaurant in her hometown of Vancouver (Takeuchi).

Vietnamese food words have even entered both English-language as well as French-language dictionaries in the United States, Canada, and France in recent years. “Pho” from the Vietnamese original “*phở*”—the soup made with clear broth, rice noodles, and slices of beef or chicken—entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006 and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2014 (A. Nguyen, *The Pho Cookbook* 5). The American Heritage Dictionary admitted the word “banh mi”—from the name of the Vietnamese sandwich “*bánh mì*”—in 2014 (Peterson). Meanwhile, two official dictionaries in France and Quebec, the *Larousse* and the *Le grand dictionnaire terminologique*, respectively, both recognized “phô” as part of the French language in 2017, though they have yet to do the same for “*bánh mì*” (Vialo; “Soupe tonkinoise”).

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<sup>8</sup> In Australia, another home to many diasporic Vietnamese, celebrity chef and restaurateur Luke Nguyen has produced and starred in documentaries on Vietnamese cuisine that are broadcast both nationally and internationally.

<sup>9</sup> Phan and Nguyen were even both featured in a catalogue for the cooking supply store, Williams Sonoma, in March 2020: <https://www.williams-sonoma.com/pages/ecatalog-ws-2020-winter3.html>.

To be sure, this mainstream appreciation of Vietnamese cuisine around the world affirms the presence of the people who make it—an indicator of their success, whether economic, social, or cultural. However, as this dissertation will make clear, foreign foods seem to ingratiate themselves into mainstream culture in ways that are unthinkable, impossible, or prohibited for the foreign people who prepare those foods. For even the notion of “success” is weighted with a history of racism that has labelled Asian migrants as a “model minority”—a stereotype that praises the survival of groups understood racially as “Asian” in a cutthroat capitalistic environment (V. Nguyen 10). Although seemingly positive, the “model minority” is a myth that, on the one hand, limits the self-actualization of individuals of Asian heritage who do not live up to such standards and, on the other hand, denigrates other minority groups for their supposed failure to achieve similar same levels of economic prosperity (V. Nguyen 146-148).

Furthermore, that Asian migrants such as the Vietnamese turn to food as a means of cultural and social expression is not so much a choice of medium, but of economic survival. Wenying Xu explains, “There is nothing natural or culturally predetermined about Asian Americans’ vital relationship with food. Harsh circumstances made such work one of the few options available to them” (Xu 12). The same can be said of the Vietnamese in France and Canada, where servitude or restaurant-work provided a reliable income and food on the table. The protagonist in Truong’s *The Book of Salt* corroborates the felicitous yet circumscribed situation of a preparer of food such as himself: “A good cook is a great commodity in this city. Any city, really. Ask yourself, ‘Where do they not eat?’ and my point is made. Cooking is the answer to a universally placed classified ad. [...] A blessing that is also a curse” (189).

Accordingly, it is vitally important to trace the association of Vietnamese humanity and food to their source, prior to considering how these dynamics play out in contemporary literature

by diasporic Vietnamese authors. Xu allows that food does indeed inform the development of subjectivity for Asian Americans, as evidenced by the preponderance of food-related motifs and references in their literature (8). However, Xu argues, this could be due in part to the fact that Asian Americans have been characterized in racial terms through popular representations of their culinary culture (8). Before turning to the study of contemporary novels by Lê, Thúy, and Truong, I therefore begin by conducting a visual analysis of material culture—a piece of colonial ephemera dating 1930s France—in order to understand the ways that food and race have been deployed together to (de)humanize the Vietnamese in France and how this might affect diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity. Specifically, I show the extent to which humanity and commodity can be subsumed into one another through representational strategies that confuse the borders between foreign food items and foreign human beings. Even though such associations to food and eating might appear positive, I argue that they can nonetheless overdetermine racial and cultural attributes while also obscuring the system of oppression that launches them.

This line of questioning corresponds to the current debate in French letters on the legitimacy of “decolonization,” or the consideration of racial categories and the structures of colonial domination in intellectual discourse. Decried by some as “intellectual terrorism,” still others insist on the critical importance of reflecting on the role of racism in the arts, as posited by *Décolonisons les arts!*—a 2018 manifesto in which fifteen artists offer their thoughts on the subject (Bishop and Roth 1).<sup>10</sup> Yet, while many in the volume seek an end to structural racism through their artistic practice, Amandine Gay’s contribution reminds us that critics must also not overemphasize a work’s political message in place of its aesthetic significance (Bishop and Roth

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Finkielkraut and Élisabeth Badinter were among the eighty signatories of an open letter, published in *Le Point* in November 2018, decrying the practice of recognizing structures of racism in intellectual discourse and practice, or decolonialism (Bishop and Roth 1).



2). In hopes of remedying this lack of critical attention to discussions of both race and aesthetics in contemporary French scholarly discourse, Cécile Bishop and Zoë Roth coordinated a special issue of *L'Esprit Créateur*, “Race and the Aesthetic in Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures,” inaugurating a new wave of anti-colonial considerations of race and racism in France. For, as Bishop and Roth argue, to ignore the aesthetic is to underestimate how race is perceived through the senses and how this sensory perception can be instrumentalized, manipulated, and shaped by cultural representations (3). “Strengthening our understanding of the relationship between race and the aesthetic is therefore crucial, both to ensure that literary and visual studies do not simply reflect hegemonic racial discourses, and in order to clarify the workings of racism, and racialization more generally” (Bishop and Roth 3).

To understand how colonial ideologies of race and racism might impact the literary practice of diasporic Vietnamese writers in the Francosphere today, it is therefore important to follow such notions to their source by examining the ways that Vietnamese were racialized through aesthetics during the colonial period. Given the prevalence of multi-sensory media promoting racial thinking in France, I posit that this analysis should not only use textual and visual analytical approaches, but a culinary one as well. For food-related imagery, tropes, and themes were often deployed to communicate notions of race, particularly in depictions of the Vietnamese. That these currents can be traced from colonial past to the literary present in contemporary diasporic Vietnamese fiction suggests that the legacy of French Empire continues to propagate racial ideologies under cover of the symbolic power of food. While, as Gay points out, writers and artists may not intend for their work to be read in such political terms, I echo Bishop and Roth in arguing that interpreting works for the ways aesthetics and racial discourses work in tandem is of utmost importance. For reading against the grain in this way enables us to

consider how aesthetic depictions of food activate issues of race and racism, on the one hand, but also what alternative tools and perspectives the culinary might afford writers, on the other.

Indeed, studies of race and racism in France have become even more crucial as their consideration is increasingly delegitimized under the cover of French republican universalism. In 2018 France's Assemblée nationale altered the constitution so that it reads "l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction de sexe, d'origine ou de religion," instead of "sans distinction d'origine, *de race* ou de religion" (Haddad, my emphasis). The removal of the word "race" is not merely a semantic issue, but an attack on the efforts to promote racial equality in France.

### **Postcolonial Literature and Food Studies: Biting Back or Eating With?**

The instrumentalization of the potent symbolism of food to discuss cultural transactions has been an enduring feature of colonial, anti-colonial, and postcolonial writings in French. At the apotheosis of the French Empire in the 1930s, colonial administrators extended a rhetorical invitation to colonized subjects to join France's "table de famille" by adopting French culture and language. During decolonization, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon condemned this imposition as figurative acts of "starving" and "force-feeding" that required "regurgitation" for the colonized to regain a sense of self, while Suzanne Roussi Césaire saw Martinican writing as a form of literary cannibalism. In the 1980s and '90s, Édouard Glissant and Maryse Condé's postcolonial theorizations followed Suzanne Césaire in positing food as a potential literary vehicle for political resistance and cultural creation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more on these alimentary and culinary tropes in Caribbean literature, see Rosello, "De la révolte à la révulsion"; Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back*.

In 2010, the recognition of the *repas gastronomique des Français* by UNESCO as “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” signaled a return to alimentary symbolism to promulgate a vision of France as inclusive and attentive to difference. However, rather than promote food as a site of cultural multiplicity as Glissant and Condé proposed, the discourse surrounding the award enshrines the unicity of French tradition by propagating the universalist perspective that foreign ideas, cultures, and peoples should be subsumed into France through assimilation.<sup>12</sup> In light of this contradictory narrative, this dissertation offers a timely discussion of the continued deployment of food as a means of drawing attention to the violence of cultural disintegration and the persistent dynamics of exploitation in mainland France today, while also pointing to the opportunities for creative innovation that food expresses.

Scholarship in the humanities at the intersection of food, literature, and power has expanded tremendously since the turn of the millennium.<sup>13</sup> In American literature, for example, Doris Witt’s *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* and Kyla Tompkins’ *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* both interrogate how literary and material cultures have instrumentalized food to communicate notions of race in the United States, while Allison Carruth’s *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* examines depictions of agriculture and home cooking as buttressing American geopolitical power. Meanwhile, Parama Roy’s *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* and Anita Mannur’s *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* explore connections between food, diaspora, and the postcolonial in anglophone South Asian literature.

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of how Michel Houellebecq distorts the cliché that eating “ethnic cuisine” is a form multicultural engagement in his fiction, see Quartana, *Houellebecq aux fourneaux*; Loichot, “The Ethics of Eating Together.”

<sup>13</sup> For a broader overview of the intersection of studies on food and literature, see Tigner and Carruth.

From the francophone perspective, recent analyses on tropes of food in postcolonial literature demonstrate that explorations of the intersection of literary, postcolonial, and food studies can be particularly fruitful for finding new vantage points to reexamine a variety of pertinent topics ranging from issues of language and cultural creation, to structures of power and globalization. This is particularly true in recent studies such as Valérie Loichot's *The Tropics Bite Back*, Njeri Githire's *Cannibal Writes*, and Nicole Simek's *Eating Well, Reading Well and Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean*, in addition to two special issues in leading scholarly journals—*French Cultural Studies*' "Food and French Empire" and *Contemporary French Civilization*'s "Beyond Gastronomy."

In *The Tropics Bite Back*, Valérie Loichot's point of departure is the historical tendency in Western, and specifically French, discourse to associate Caribbean people and culture with demeaning images and metaphors relating to food. Whether it be cannibalism, gluttony, or not eating and anorexia, representations of the Caribbean as place of pathological eating date from the Europeans' discovery of the islands in 1492 and continue to permeate relations between these islands and the world today. Thus, when Caribbean authors, both men and women, from France's former colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti employ alimentary tropes in their writing, they can be read as politically charged examples of how these writers seek to "mordre en retour," or "bite back," as Maryse Condé famously stated (Loichot, *Tropics* x). In other words, references to food in these authors' texts moves from a simple recognition of food as a basic necessity for survival—which was and often continues to be denied—but also as a means of contesting chronic colonial-era power dynamics that persist today. In her book, Loichot demonstrates that the authors she studies, who are francophone as well as anglophone and creolophone, re-appropriate and rehabilitate the controlling and demeaning alimentary tropes employed by

colonial and neocolonial discourse into expressions of humanity, cultural creativity, political opposition. In short, Loichot posits that cooking and eating can be creative forms of cultural expression, not just legacies of colonial exploitation and slavery.

Njeri Githire adds another voice to the conversation that is situated at the intersection of food studies, postcolonial studies, and women's writing with her book *Cannibal Writes*. Rather than focus exclusively on Caribbean literatures, Githire adopts a minor transnational perspective to draw horizontal connections between the anglophone and francophone literatures of both the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Like many scholars in this domain, she examines alimentary tropes for their connections to relations of power and postcolonial self-expression. However, in contrast to her interlocutors, who mostly deal with these issues in terms of the material foods that feature in the texts, Githire explores the *act* of (non)eating through the lens of cannibalism, which she deems the "master trope" of colonial and postcolonial discourse (7). She argues that cannibalism functions as a symbolic (rather than actual or historical) act of eating as well as a metaphorical tool that authors appropriate from colonial discourse and employ themselves. In this way, metaphorical and symbolic cannibalism in literature has the capacity to spark both transformations and conversations in which authors "write back" or even "bite back" against previously unidirectional colonial power dynamics, corroborating Loichot's reasoning. In other words, by reusing the trope of cannibalism on their own terms, these postcolonial women writers are able to return the hungry gaze that consumed their lives, lands, and livelihoods. Githire emphasizes that by employing a language of cannibalism in their texts, these writers contest the end of colonial-style structures and point to contemporary instances in which the islands and peoples of the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean continue to be consumed, incorporated, or excreted as a result of global forces such as exploitation or immigration (7).

In this dissertation, I will emulate the illuminating work of Loichot and Githire by considering alimentary tropes in postcolonial works as symbolically and historically freighted as well as mechanisms for transformation. Where my study will differ, however, lies in how I interpret the culinary choices of postcolonial diasporic Vietnamese writers. Rather than yield to, as Jane Hiddleston describes it, the “pressure of postcolonial studies to offer some concrete form of anti-colonial resistance” (4) by systematically considering food-related tropes and motifs as counter-colonial resistance, I will explore how such examples in diasporic Vietnamese fiction negotiate between resistance and accommodation—suggesting a writing and eating *with* instead of a writing and biting *back*.

In this regard, I echo Viet Thanh Nguyen’s argument in *Race and Resistance* that Asian American literature cannot be analyzed only in terms of resistance to or accommodation of oppressive tendencies, with Asian American scholars, in particular, valorizing the former over the latter (3-4). Indeed, I agree with V. Nguyen that authors use these strategies in more flexible, less polarizing ways to negotiate complex situations (4). I do not suggest that the various techniques of “writing and eating *with*” are always successful at creating a space for diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity, or that the authors under study only depict utopian examples of successful post-postcolonial relations. Rather, by considering “writing and eating with” allows us to consider a wider range of dynamics, especially those that might not qualify as resistance. What is more, “writing and eating with” can still deliver an indictment of structures of domination reminiscent of the colonial era while also taking into account the accommodating acts taken by subjugated subjects whose agency can often be severely circumscribed.

The importance of reading for resistance, accommodation, and everything in between is particularly important regarding the diasporic Vietnamese in France. Colonized Vietnamese

subjects were subjugated and stereotyped in different ways than their counterparts from other colonies. It thus follows that how literary authors of Vietnamese heritage choose to address alimentary and culinary imagery, stereotypes, and dynamics differs as well. Namely, Vietnamese proximity to French food culture, limited as it was during the colonial period when they worked as servants and cooks, created the possibility of varying degrees of proximity to the beating heart of the French nation, the French family and home, even the French body. More than this, the Vietnamese played a central role in the sustenance of the modern—from modern domestic life, to modern aesthetics in France. It is therefore crucial to account for this constant presence, albeit largely invisible, of the Vietnamese, as it would have been difficult to write or eat *without* them. Accordingly, the analyses of literary works that follows shows how contemporary authors make visible, but also palpable, the influence of the Vietnamese to culinary as well as literary culture in France and the West. In other words, I will demonstrate that contemporary authors of Vietnamese origin use food and cooking to not only to resist (post)colonial domination, but to navigate complicated dynamics that are nonetheless laden with imperial baggage that is not immediately visible.

### **Framework of the Dissertation**

Chapter one, “‘*Le Riz d’Indochine*’ at the French Table: Representations of Food, Race, and the Vietnamese in a Colonial-Era Board Game,” provides a historical overview for the dissertation as well as situates the repercussions of that history within the contemporary moment. More specifically, I employ discursive and visual analysis in tandem to trace the symbolic power of French cuisine from the present to the colonial period to understand how food culture propagates colonial notions of race, particularly as regards the racialization of the Vietnamese in

France. I begin with an analysis of the discourse surround the recent addition of the *repas gastronomique des Français* to UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010. While the promotional materials for the UNESCO campaign give the impression that French food culture fosters diversity, I argue that they also show how culinary traditions in France remain rooted in legacies of colonialism that are invisible to many.

With this in mind, I turn to the principle object of study in the chapter: a piece of colonial ephemera in the form of a 1932 board game doubling as an advertisement for Indochinese Rice aimed at French consumers in the metropole. Through a visual study of the tropes and procedures of this source, I argue that just as French citizens and their children learned from the game to incorporate Indochinese Rice into their daily eating habits, they also learned how to integrate visibly racialized Vietnamese people into the national body politic—not as citizens deserving of equal treatment and opportunity, but as chefs and domestics in service to the production of modern French life. I therefore build on extant analyses of colonial ephemera to consider how notions about race and racism against the Vietnamese were learned by French citizens through food, and how that understanding would go on to shape the reception and assimilation of successive groups of Vietnamese people in France throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapter two, “Cooking for Others, Eating Together: Hospitality and Commensality in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*,” presents a mirror to the board game by turning to a novel that depicts domestic life in interwar France, precisely the time period when the game would have been circulated, but from the perspective of a Vietnamese chef. Based on references in the 1954 *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* to the Vietnamese domestics who cooked and served in the Parisian home of Toklas and Gertrude Stein, this novel counters the historical and literary



disregard of marginalized colonial subjects. Indeed, Truong posits cooking as a legitimate means of cultural expression—so much so that it appears that Stein’s literary inspiration could be, in part, thanks to her Vietnamese servant. I thus argue that the culinary creations of the chef-protagonist must be read as a poetics that explores the tensions that inhabit hospitality in its literal, aesthetic, and theoretical senses.

By examining scenes in the novel that take place both in colonial Indochina and in metropolitan France, I question the ability of the host-guest relationship to account for the multi-directionality of influences that occurred in the cross-cultural encounter that is colonialism. Commensality, I suggest, even in its most perverse forms, can better account for the full extent of social and cultural interactions that arise from colonial relations. Accordingly, I argue that the culinary poetics in Truong’s novel show the ways the colonizer and the colonized eat *with* one another, whether they admit it or not, to suggest that, similarly, the colonized wrote *with* the colonizers in ways that have yet to be recognized. In this way, Truong re-shapes the dominant narratives of literary history by identifying instances of cultural mixing that recall the processes of métissage and creolization as theorized by Édouard Glissant and Françoise Lionnet. Looking for the influences of colonized subjects, such as the Vietnamese, on Western cultural production in ways that have yet to be recognized reveals that accommodation, in the form of “eating with” and “writing with,” is not a sign of failed resistance to colonial dynamics of power, but a means of gaining precious access to the table in the first place.

While the previous chapter demonstrates that reading cuisine as a poetics makes perceptible colonial Vietnamese influence on Western culture, chapter three, “Cooks and Books: Vietnamese Femininity from Kitchen to Cookbook in Kim Thúy’s *Mãn* and Linda Lê’s *Les Trois Parques*,” explores the tensions between cooking and writing from a gendered perspective. I

therefore interpret the cookbook as a historical, literary, and aesthetic document that can provide important insights regarding the subjectivity of diasporic Vietnamese women who migrate to postcolonial francophone spaces. Through an analysis of novels by Thúy and Lê, I compare these authors' depictions of cookbooks written by diasporic Vietnamese woman protagonists to consider traditionally feminine forms of self-expression in light of "postfeminist" women's writing in French. With the help of Anne Cheng's theory of "ornamentalism"—which considers the ways diasporic Asian women have been objectified as commodities in Western aesthetic representations—I argue that self-expression through cooking and cookbook-writing simultaneously reinforce and weaken the subjective agency of diasporic Vietnamese women in the contemporary postcolonial Francosphere. As before, I suggest that such culinary-literary forms evade categorization as either accommodation of or resistance to (neo)colonial dynamics by splitting the difference to explore what lies between these two poles.

Chapter four, "Becoming Cannibal, Becoming Writer in Linda Lê's *Les Évangiles du crime*," re-considers identitarian difference in contemporary France from a more theoretical point of view. Specifically, I read cannibalism in Lê's novel, in both literal and literary senses, as a form of Deleuzian "becoming." I suggest that this concept affords a view of what might be found *in between* one identity and another: between self and other, writer and cannibal, French and Vietnamese. While literary cannibalism in the works of Caribbean authors Aimé Césaire and Maryse Condé has been understood by numerous scholars as a form of discursive revenge against French colonialism that originated in the Caribbean, Lê's version eschews such cultural specificity. Rather, I argue that Lê's literary cannibalism considers writing and cannibalism as similarly parallel processes that necessitate the incorporation of the other. Through mutual consumption, the postcolonial Vietnamese cannibal and the French author are forced to write

*with* one another in the novel, which leads to a transformation of both figures as they learn to accept the newfound otherness within. In short, Lê's literary cannibalism does not militate for resistance to French models of literature, language, or culture in favor of a particular group, but explores the creative possibilities of recognizing internalized forms of otherness beyond postcolonial discussions of identity.

While the first chapter focuses on the ways that the Vietnamese have been historically circumscribed by visual and textual discourses of food related to the French Empire, the following chapters explore how forms of creativity, agency, and subjectivity can nevertheless be fostered in alimentary and culinary ways. Cooking for others and eating together has never been easy even in the best of times, as these acts require that everyone at the table be *accommodating* of everyone else. (Neo)colonial forces disrupt these already precarious dynamics in myriad ways. Yet, as writers Lê, Thúy, and Truong show us, there is a form of authorial power to be found, not just in the resistance of structural racism, misogyny, and cultural hegemony, but in acts of accommodation that, like cooking, might initially seem subservient. Rather, these writers demonstrate that when resistance is not possible, when resources are scant, and when the most that can be achieved is putting food on the table, then there is power in accommodating the other.

# Chapter I

## “Le Riz d’Indochine” at the French Table:

### Representations of Food, Race, and the Vietnamese in a Colonial-Era Board Game

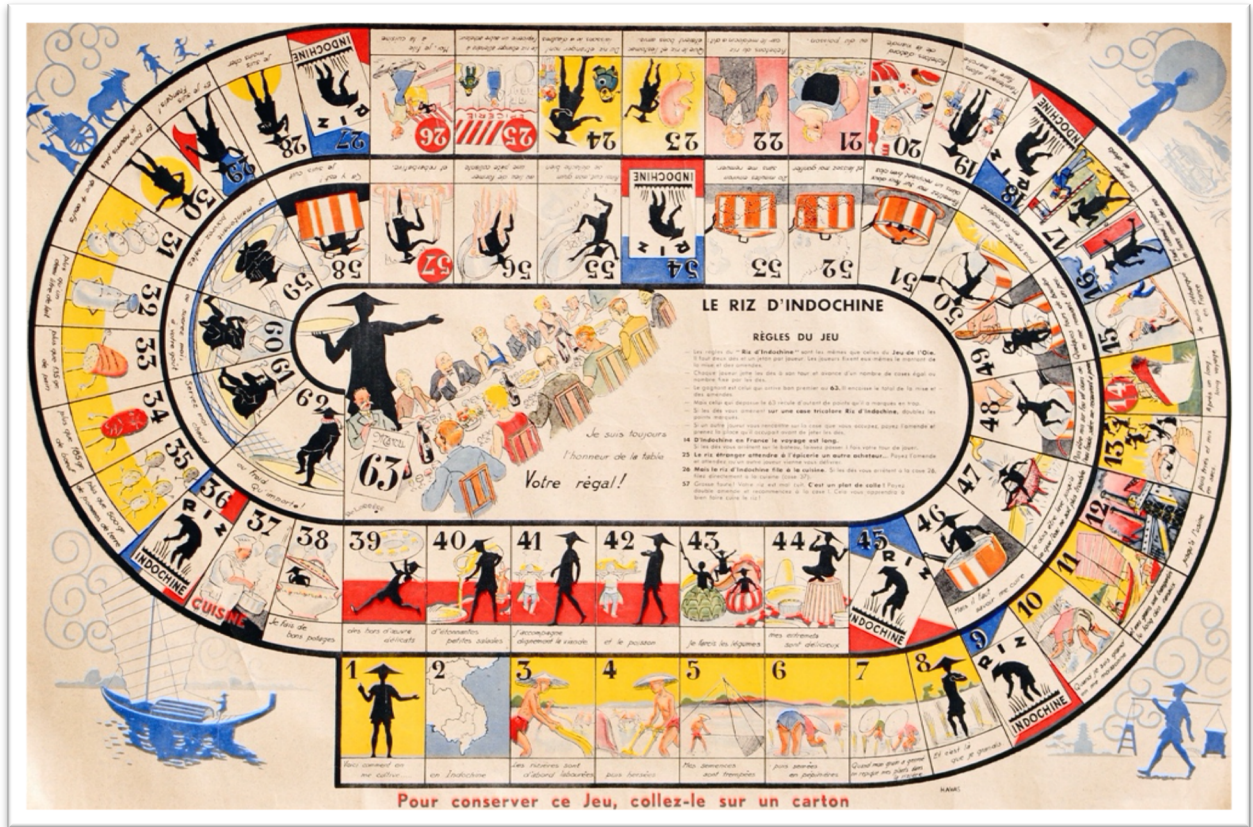


Figure 1. “Le Riz d’Indochine.” De Loddère, Havas Publicité, 1932. Board game, color lithograph on paper. Author’s collection.

### Introduction: Who is Welcome at the *repas gastronomique des Français*?

Take a look at this board game (figure 1), distributed in France in 1932. With its recognizable spiraling design and bright colors, it appears to be an ordinary *jeu de l’oie* for children, the French version of “Snakes and Ladders.” Now focus on winning square number 63 at the centre of the game (figure 2). The image here bears a striking resemblance to the *repas*

*gastronomique des Français* (*avant la lettre*, of course) as defined by UNESCO when it earned a spot on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.<sup>14</sup>

Judging from the array of platters and wine bottles on the table in the *jeu de l'oie*, the guests are enjoying “the art of good eating and drinking” (“Dossier de Candidature”) according to the contemporary tenets of this gastronomic tradition.<sup>15</sup> Its position at the end of the game’s long path to victory further consecrates this “*repas gastronomique des Français*” as the pinnacle of triumph for French families, an enviable model to which the young players of the game might aspire.

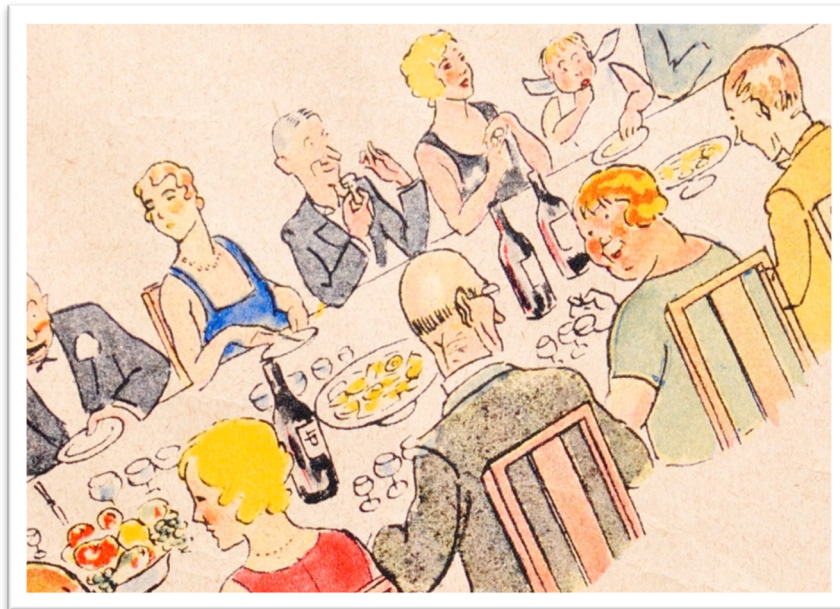


Figure 2. Detail of figure 1.

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<sup>14</sup> UNESCO initiated the Representative List in 2003 to safeguard intangible cultural heritage—“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith” (“Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage”)—as a means of inspiring mutual respect, exchange, and understanding.

<sup>15</sup> According to UNESCO’s definition, the *repas gastronomique des Français* is a celebratory meal comprised of four courses and accompanied by different wines, in addition to an *apéritif* and a *digestif*. Other practices concerning the quality of the meal and the presentation of the dinner table are also required, as is the transmission of the meal over generations (“Dossier de Candidature”).

Step away from this convivial meal in the *jeu de l'oie*, however, and the scene becomes strange: what is this black figure holding an empty tray and gesturing from behind the table toward the guests, all of whom are evidently well-to-do and white (figure 3)? Scaling back completely reveals that this shadowy figure has been working behind the scenes to facilitate every step of the meal's production.



Figure 3. Detail of figure 1. Square 63.

Adorned with a conical hat, this diminutive, vaguely masculine, black silhouette of a person is meant to personify “le riz d’Indochine.” The “Rice Man,” as I will call this figure, does not just represent rice, he actually *is* rice. On this winning square at the centre of the game, the Rice Man invites guests to enjoy a delicious meal, a *repas gastronomique des Français*—which involves eating, among other things, rice, the commodity he embodies. The Rice Man touts: “Je suis toujours l’honneur de la table: Votre régal!.” Setting the disturbing cannibalistic overtones aside for the moment—for he is actually pictured being cooked in a pot and served on plates—the *jeu de l'oie* shows the step-by-step process of the transformation of “Indochinese Rice,” as narrated

in the first person by the Rice Man: from the rice paddies in far-away colonial Indochina (“Quand je suis grand, on me moissonne,” square 10; figure 1), to the market in France (“Je suis moins cher,” square 28; figure 1), into a pot (“Mais il faut savoir me cuire,” square 46; figure 1), and finally onto the table (“Ça y est! Je suis cuit,” square 58; figure 1). Rice from Indochina, the *jeu de l’oie* implies, can become an integral part of French cuisine.

These images in the *jeu de l’oie* might seem like relics of a bygone past when compared with the rhetoric surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français*. Proponents of the campaign hailed UNESCO’s award as a triumph for “cultural diversity” rather than “an affirmation of superiority,” arguing that the *repas* enshrines the immaterial yet codified traditions surrounding the meal, but not necessarily the actual dishes served (Iverson).<sup>16</sup> According to this logic, while specific foods might be indelibly French, the French *method* of preparing and eating a Gastronomic Meal is culturally inclusive because it can “assimilate” foreign foods. “Every country in the world has dishes of quality and identity that people gather around and share,” explains Jean-Robert Pitte, scholar of geography and gastronomy as well as president of *La Mission française du patrimoine et des cultures alimentaires* (MFPCA), the organization that spearheaded the effort, “But there is a French way to prepare a Gastronomic Meal, with a succession of dishes and association of food and wines, that is specifically French” (qtd. in Iverson).

However, a cursory review of the promotional video for the UNESCO campaign alongside the *jeu de l’oie* indicates that these two visual representations of French gastronomy—or “the art and science of eating well” (Tigner and Carruth 137)—are more similar than we might

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the politics surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français* campaign, see Abramson; Cruickshank.

think.<sup>17</sup> Much like the *jeu de l'oie*, the 2010 video for the *repas* posits French cuisine as a mechanism of cultural assimilation, proclaiming: “The French Gastronomic Meal also *welcomes* ingredients from foreign cultures. It leads to new *discoveries*, helps in *accepting* other cultures, and encourages the appreciation of diversity” (“Video clip: Le repas gastronomique des Français” 00:01:45, my emphases). Here, in a curious reversal, it is the *repas gastronomique des Français*—instead of the human beings actually cooking the meal—that has attained sufficient human agency to “welcome” and incite cross-cultural exchange, with the former “lead[ing],” “help[ing],” and “encourage[ing]” the latter through a lesson in tolerance for diversity. Indeed, it seems as though the purportedly universal application of the *repas gastronomique des Français* is intended as an allegory for French politics of universalism that have dictated national policies regarding the assimilation of foreigners. Yet, to be clear, while the *repas* “welcomes” foreign “ingredients” to the table, the same invitation is not explicitly extended to foreign *people* in the video, in spite of the rather mawkish mentions of “togetherness” and “strengthen[ing] social ties” (“Dossier de Candidature”).

The visual language of the promotional video amplifies these contradictions in racial terms. The people who prepare and enjoy the *repas* are almost exclusively white, whereas those of different racial backgrounds who do appear are vendors of olives and couscous. In these scenes, the words “foreign cultures” or “other cultures” are intoned while the camera alternates between the vendors’ faces and their alimentary wares—the olives and couscous, which are

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<sup>17</sup> “Gastronomy,” curiously enough, was largely the invention of *writers* interested in food in nineteenth-century Paris, such as Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière and Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. For an overview of the connections between cuisine and writing, see Tigner and Carruth, chapter 6. For a more in-depth history that parses the differences between cuisine and gastronomy, see Ferguson. For a discussion of the role of restaurants in the formation of gastronomy, see Spang, chapter 6.



meant to connote foreignness to a putatively universal “us.” Though, to be sure, couscous is hardly a “new discovery” for French citizens of North African descent, nor, for that matter, is it one for so-called *français de souche*.<sup>18</sup> Again, the voice-over explains that it is the *ingredients* that are foreign, but the combination of text and image here labels the vendors as “foreign” and “other” as well, subsuming their humanity into the commodities they sell. By extension, when the voice-over says that the *repas* “welcomes” foreign foods—and their metonymically linked vendors—into mainstream French society, it reifies the links between racialized people and foreignness, thus contradicting its own ethic of national acceptance. The notion that the acceptance of other cultures can be achieved by consuming foreign foods is made particularly clear when the white preparers of the *repas* finally sit down at the table together. These images show that the principal source of cultural diversity lies in the dishes to be eaten, not among the guests pictured in attendance. The viewer is left with the impression that cultural acceptance and assimilation is a distinctly unilateral process, with its adjudication the exclusive prerogative of the white French citizen.

Furthermore, the invitation to foreign cuisines to become acculturated into the *repas gastronomique des Français* comes with numerous caveats, such that the rhetoric of the campaign foregrounds an openness to cultural diversity while still maintaining a latent belief in French superiority. For example, the UNESCO promotional materials state that a variety of dishes may be selected “from a growing repertoire of recipes” (“Dossier de Candidature”). This

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<sup>18</sup> Contrary to UNESCO’s claims of acceptance of foreign ingredients, a photograph posted on Twitter of politicians from the Front National at a restaurant in Strasbourg sparked outrage online in September 2017 among right-wing supporters because the politicians were eating couscous, which was seen as anti-French, rather than a putatively more patriotic choice of *choucroute garnie* (Janes, “#CouscousGate?”). For a biography of couscous in French cuisine and history, see Durmelat, “Tasting Displacement.”

statement suggests that, for instance, a Moroccan-origin *couscous aux merguez* or a Vietnamese-inspired *bò bún* might easily replace a more traditionally French *blanquette de veau* and still conform to the expectations of the *repas gastronomique des Français*. Yet still other parameters restrict access of such foreign dishes to the hallowed French table: the imperative of purchasing “good, preferably *local products* whose flavors go well together” and the required “respect [for] a *fixed structure*, commencing with an apéritif (drinks before the meal) and ending with liqueurs, containing in between at least four successive courses, namely a starter, fish and/or meat with vegetables, cheese and dessert” (“Dossier de Candidature”). Such conditions effectively bar foreign-origin dishes from being included in the *repas gastronomique des Français*. More than this, they also prohibit people with foreign heritage from adapting to French culinary traditions; for a practicing Muslim of Moroccan descent would likely take issue with all the aperitifs and liqueurs with her couscous, and it is doubtful that locally made rice noodles for *bò bún* can be found in France. What is more, “gastronomes who possess deep knowledge of the tradition and preserve its memory watch over the living practice of the rites” (“Dossier de Candidature”) are posited as sentries guarding entry, insinuating a conservative, traditionalist outlook. If the *repas gastronomique des Français* is meant to be read as an allegory of French republican universalism, it succeeds, but only if interpreted cynically. For the promotional materials convey a false sense of inclusivity through a rhetoric of welcome that barely hides the realities of inequality perpetuated by the *repas gastronomique des Français*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Proponents of the campaign for the *repas gastronomique des Français* have also argued that its newfound status will protect the tradition from disappearing in today’s fast-paced modern world. Though it would not be difficult to imagine that for some, the award might serve as a bulwark against the rising popularity of ethnic cuisine that could be considered a threat.

## Advertising Food, Race, and the Vietnamese in France

In this chapter, I interrogate the ways in which the symbolic power of French cuisine has been harnessed to communicate notions of (post)colonial inclusivity through visual representations that, in fact, belie the very impression of cultural acceptance that they claim to offer. Both the 1932 *jeu de l'oie* and the 2010 promotional materials for the *repas gastronomique des Français* show that then, and now, racialized foreigners are not to be eaten *with* at the table, but may find a place either *on* it, as a consumable product, or *behind* it, as someone who serves, or both, as is the case in the *jeu de l'oie*. When reexamined in light of studies of (post)colonial relations, gender, and race, these depictions show how humanity and commodity can be subsumed into one another through representational strategies that confuse the borders between foreign food items and foreign human beings. Even though such associations to food might appear positive, they can nonetheless overdetermine racial and cultural attributes while also obscuring the system of oppression that launches them.

For the *jeu de l'oie* is more than a board game. It is also an advertisement—one of the many archival traces of the decade-long campaign marketing rice and other food products from French colonial possessions in metropolitan France during the interwar period. Printed in 1932, over 1 million of the *jeu de l'oie* for Indochinese Rice were mass-produced using inexpensive paper and color lithography (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 292). The image of the Rice Man appeared not just on the *jeu de l'oie*, but on many other advertisements, as a kind of brand or mark of authenticity: in full-page advertisements in popular magazines such as *L'Illustration* (figures 4-6) and *L'Animateur des temps nouveaux*, on huge billboards in prominent intersections in Paris, in brochures and cookbooks (figures 15-16), even on radio broadcasts and at kiosks offering samples at the 1931 *Exposition coloniale de Paris* (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 288-

289).<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to know how exactly the *jeu de l'oie*, in particular, was distributed—similar documents are known to have been circulated by mail, handed out at the *Exposition coloniale*, or given away for free with the purchase of the product. We can nevertheless be sure that the *jeu de l'oie* was intended for families across metropolitan France in hopes of encouraging French consumers to both literally and figuratively “buy into” the colonial project.



Figure 4. “Le Riz d’Indochine: nourrissant... savoureux... économique...!” Hervé Baille, Bureau de Propagande, 31 December 1932. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L’Illustration*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>20</sup> See Tran for a discussion of food at the *Expositions universelles de Paris* of 1889 and 1900.



Figure 5. “Le Riz d’Indochine: nourrissant... savoureux... économique...!” Hervé Baille, Bureau de Propagande, 7 January 1933. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L'Illustration*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 6. “Le Riz d’Indochine: nourrissant... savoureux... économique...!” Hervé Baille, Bureau de Propagande, 25 February 1933. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L'Illustration*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

I therefore seek to understand the ways in which such representations in advertising employed food to teach metropolitan citizens how to assimilate visibly racialized and colonized subjects into French society. “Commodity racism”—Anne McClintock’s concept for how imperial commodities are understood and informed by race and racism, and vice versa—will be helpful here. For just as the *jeu de l’oie* taught consumers to incorporate rice into their everyday lives, it also instructed them on how to negotiate encounters with the Vietnamese in the metropole through the hyper-embodied figure of the Rice Man. Whereas other colonial foods like chocolate and bananas easily transcended their foreignness to find a secure place in the diets of French consumers, rice lacked the same visual and gustatory appeal (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 289).<sup>21</sup> Intended to replicate the success of the infamous campaign for *Banania*—which employed the smiling face of a *tirailleur sénégalais* affixed to a body composed of bananas to sell a chocolate drink powder (figure 7)—the promotional materials for rice adopted a mascot with a similarly amiable and appealing demeanor: the Rice Man.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Peters, *Appetites* for an analysis of French eating habits in colonial Indochina.

<sup>22</sup> For more on *Banania*, see Rosello, *Declining*; Ezra; Donadey; Durmelat, “Introduction.”



Figure 7. “Banania: Exquis déjeuner sucré à la farine de banane.” R. L. Dupuy, 28 April 1932. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L’Illustration*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

I will argue here that the Rice Man’s human-like silhouette of an “Annamite” person sold not only the commodity that he embodied, but also an impression of Vietnamese people based on degrading stereotypes rooted in racist colonial ideologies.<sup>23</sup> The Rice Man neatly commodified the supposed racial inferiority of the Vietnamese and a corresponding sense of superiority of the French to fuel dueling narratives of racial difference and national solidarity in metropolitan France at the time. In light of this paradox, we must interrogate how the symbolic power of French food culture obscures problems of inclusion and exclusion that exist in plain sight, by

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<sup>23</sup> Vann explains that the term “Annamite” was originally a derogatory Chinese term for “pacified South.” The French then appropriated the term to describe the population of Vietnam, further dividing them into three regional groups: “Cochinchinois,” “Annamite,” and “Tonkinois” (188-189). Rather than use colonial terminology, I will use the terms “Vietnam” and “Vietnamese” except when historically inaccurate.

simultaneously showcasing and hiding the racist ideologies that prevent real access to a seat at the “table” of French society. For the symbols and practices surrounding the table persist in enabling the ignorance of the toll of French food culture on visibly racialized human beings regardless of their citizenship, as we saw in the promotional video for the *repas gastronomique des Français*.<sup>24</sup> Given the endurance of colonial-era notions of race long past decolonization, it is of the utmost importance to understand how these racist perceptions would shape the reception and assimilation of successive groups of Vietnamese people in France throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The goal of this chapter is to analyze how colonial advertisements such as the *jeu de l’oie* instilled unconscious practices of racism in universalist, republican France where “race” is considered to be a harmful categorization that itself reifies social exclusion and impedes the republican ideal that every French citizen should benefit from the same universal rights.<sup>25</sup> For regardless of whether “race” is officially recognized or not,<sup>26</sup> it remains that social discourse and practices are inflected with racializing tendencies that are not merely a function of skin color and

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<sup>24</sup> See Cruickshank on the “whitewashing of cultural diversity” through the *repas gastronomique des Français* (97).

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of racism and blackness in France see P. Ndiaye; Boittin; Blanchard, *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales*; Blanchard et al., *La France noire*; Knox. For analyses of the connections between race, science, and popular representations, see Bancel et al., *The Invention of Race*.

<sup>26</sup> Unlike in the United States and other Western European countries, “race conscious” policies and legal recognition of race are prohibited in France in accordance with a 1978 law that banned the collection of race-based data. This is largely for historical reasons. First, as Gérard Noiriel writes in “Français et Étrangers,” “...en France, la Déclaration des droits de l’homme marque le triomphe (au moins juridique) du refus de toute ségrégation fondé sur la race, la religion, l’origine ethnique” (278). Second, even the use of the word “race” remains taboo in many circles, academic and otherwise, because of the term’s association with the racial policies of Vichy France that led to the deportation of Jews to concentration camps. Though “racism” is openly recognized and condemned through a number of anti-racist laws and policies, race is nevertheless taken as a given and has been discussed and analyzed implicitly through debates on “immigration.” For more on this history, see Frader, “Race in France: Introduction.”



physical attributes, as critical race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant have shown.<sup>27</sup> Or, to quote Stuart Hall, “The question is not whether men-in-general make perceptual distinctions between groups with different racial or ethnic characteristics, but rather, what are the specific conditions which make this form of distinction socially pertinent, historically active? What gives this abstract human potentiality its effectivity, as a concrete material force?” (57). Furthermore, as Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper argue, this “grammar of difference” was not necessarily stable and consistent, but “continuously and vigilantly crafted” in order to maintain European superiority and control over colonized peoples (3-4).

I am cognizant of the ethical dilemma that by discussing a piece of propaganda I risk repeating demeaning stereotypes that trigger the mechanisms of colonial nostalgia—what Mireille Rosello calls the “double-bind” of critique (*Declining* 38). However, I believe that Anne Donadey’s argument still stands: because these images are already in circulation without sufficient critical attention, it remains vitally important to continue challenging the epistemic violence that they propagate (10-11).<sup>28</sup> The work of combatting racist stereotypes is all the more relevant for the Vietnamese, and for Asians more generally, because such groups have often been left out of studies on commodity racism in French colonial advertising, which have focused primarily on representations of blackness in *Banania* and other related imagery.<sup>29</sup> I therefore intend to broaden the conversation on the enduring racism against the Vietnamese and other individuals of Asian heritage that is perniciously unrecognizable to many. This is particularly true as regards the Vietnamese in France today, where the historical specificities of French

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Omi and Winant, “Racial Formation.”

<sup>28</sup> See Diallo and Gay for discussions of such questions in the contemporary moment.

<sup>29</sup> Studies on race and blackness in French colonial advertising include: Garrigues, Bachollet; Nederveen-Pieterse; Bancel, Blanchard, and Delabarre; Bancel, Blanchard, and Gerneau; Archer Straw.

colonial involvement in Vietnam collapse under the weight of generalized anti-Asian racism and even violence that remain grossly unchecked.<sup>30</sup> So much so that contemporary public discourse persistently reiterates the racist view that individuals of Asian descent are undesirable, suspicious, and threatening to the well-being of the French body politic by drawing from colonial-era rhetoric describing the presence of “sujets indigènes” from Vietnam in the metropole as “le péril jaune” (Blanchard and Deroo)<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the reflexivity, and even permissibility, of racist remarks against Asians in contemporary France draws attention to the ugly contradictions of living as a visibly racialized member of a postcolonial society that claims to be “colorblind.”<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, I propose to analyze the procedures and tropes of the *jeu de l’oie* as a means of exposing the internal mechanisms of advertisements for colonial foods such as this one, which were meant to appeal in different ways to metropolitan men, women, and children on an emotional, unconscious level. As Kyla Tompkins explains, understanding what makes racist representations in material culture visually “legible” to their targeted audiences offers important perspectives on how eating and racial identity are mutually constructed, particularly for those whose bodies are inescapably associated with food and race (*Racial Indigestion* 1). Tompkins’ concept of “eating culture”—which explores how “the social and symbolic practices [of] eating and food cultures inform the production of racial difference and other forms of political

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<sup>30</sup> After the death of Chaolin Zhang, a Chinese man who was killed in Aubervilliers in August 2016, many Asians in France began to mobilize and speak out against anti-Asian racism and violence. This has taken the form of protests in Paris and online through the hashtag #AsiatiquesDeFrance.

<sup>31</sup> A recent example occurred in January 2020 when a regional French newspaper, *Le Courrier picard*, described the threat of the “Coronavirus” epidemic as an “Alerte jaune” alongside a photograph of an Asian woman wearing a face mask.

<sup>32</sup> For discussions of colorblindness in France, see Bleich, “Anti-Racism”; Lieberman; Calvès; Brozgal, “Seeing Race.”

inequality” (*Racial Indigestion* 1)—will also aid my analysis. For not only is eating “a trope and technology of racial formation” (*Racial Indigestion* 2), as she describes, it is also “understood as a privileged site for the representation of, and fascination with, those bodies that carry the burdens of difference and materiality, that are understood as less social, less intellectual, and, at times, less sentient” (*Racial Indigestion* 8).

Colonial ephemera such as the *jeu de l’oie* stand at precisely this confluence of currents. By bringing together in a single visual plane such seemingly contradictory notions as French cuisine and colonial exotic, the close-knit family and the foreign interloper, social inclusion and racial otherness, the *jeu de l’oie* defines Indochinese Rice and Vietnamese people in the same racialized terms, both as necessary participants in the creation of an imaginary of ideal French life. In consequence, attempts at self-definition by Vietnamese people in France would be strongly channeled toward these culinary grooves traced by aesthetic representations of race and constructed by the specific historical conditions of French colonialism.<sup>33</sup>

### **Historical Context: Benevolence and Dependence**

During and after World War I, the presence of the empire began to permeate everyday life in France, especially in Paris; colonial subjects filled the ranks on the battlefield and labored on the assembly line at factories, while foods like rice and bananas appeared regularly in markets (Lemaire and Blanchard 96).<sup>34</sup> In spite of general pre-war disagreement regarding the ethics, legality, and utility of conquest, the idea that the resources of the colonies could be useful to the cause of the nation began to gain traction during World War I, notably when France quickly

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<sup>33</sup> Recent artistic and critical perspective have explored the significance of aesthetics to the social construction of race. See Cukierman et al.; Bishop and Roth, “Introduction.”

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed history of interwar France, see Weber, *The Hollow Years*.

expended its usually prodigious resources and faced severe material shortages.<sup>35</sup> Finding itself no longer able to satiate the hunger of its troops or its citizens from agricultural products grown in mainland France—not only a grave material concern, but also a symbolic blow to national pride—the state began requisitioning raw materials, staple crops, and livestock from the colonies.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, colonial manpower was recruited for the war effort to work in the agricultural fields, factories, and battlefields.<sup>37</sup>

Though this reconceptualization of the purpose of the colonies was deemed a rational choice, it was discordant with discourse of the so-called “mission civilisatrice,” which had heretofore explained the colonial relationship. Under this paradigm, France posited itself as a benevolent provider for an ensemble of weak and backwards peoples around the world, who were considered bottomless receptacles for civilizing efforts. In his speech “Le Devoir de civiliser” delivered at the *Assemblée nationale* in July 1885, Jules Ferry argued that as long as European imperial nations acquitted themselves well and in what they saw as the best interests of

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<sup>35</sup> At the start of the Third Republic, the colonies hardly figured in French public imagination. Even at the moment of France’s further expansion into Southeast Asia in the 1880s, which began with a decision by Napoléon III in 1857 to invade Vietnam, politicians were divided on the issue. This disagreement is evident in a speech delivered in 1885 by Jules Ferry entitled “Le Devoir de civiliser” in which he argues for the economic and political benefits, as well as the “côté humanitaire et civilisateur de la question,” thus setting the groundwork for the racist and paternalist doctrine of the *mission civilisatrice*. The left, led by Georges Clemenceau, saw this as antithetical to French republican values (“Les fondements de la politique coloniale”; Manceron, 1885).

<sup>36</sup> Even though the so-called recruitment of colonized subjects to fight on the battlefield and work in fields and factories in the metropole was important to the survival of France, mismanagement and insufficient shipping technology undercut colonial “contributions.” Janes writes that the French state most often demanded more than they could effectively transport, causing shipments of food to rot on the docks and sparking famine in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1917-1921 and North Africa in 1920 (*Colonial Food* 14).

<sup>37</sup> Eight-hundred thousand colonized men played some role in the war, whether on the battlefield, in the fields, or in factories. Of these, 43,430 were Indochinese, while thousands more were recruited without being mobilized. In addition, over one million tons of food and materials were imported from the colonies (Hale 86).

their colonized subjects—peoples he described as “les races inférieures”—there could be no wrongdoing: “Mais, de nos jours, je soutiens que les nations européennes s’acquittent avec largeur, avec grandeur et honnêteté, de ce devoir supérieur de civilisation” (“Les fondements de la politique coloniale”). The evangelical drive of the duty to civilize racially inferior peoples by propagating French culture, in Ferry’s eyes, made conquest a virtuous and noble endeavor because of its altruistic intentions. From this point forward, France’s self-perceived ability to share its material wealth, coded as civilization, wedded progress and superiority, benevolence and the exercise of power.

A number of scholars have observed that World War I changed how France conceived of its relationship to its colonies, as well as how this rapport was depicted in the metropole, and how it was enforced.<sup>38</sup> Colonial administrator Albert Sarraut would ascribe the colonies’ participation in the war as a sign of their loyalty and gratitude to France,<sup>39</sup> while Ho Chi Minh and many others would argue that French recruitment of colonial subjects for World War I was anything but voluntary.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, colonial administrators and public officials were thus faced with a narrative problem; how could this newfound interpenetration between the metropole and its colonies—or, rather, France’s growing dependence on and exploitation of the colonies’

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<sup>38</sup> For example, see Janes, *Colonial Food*; Hale; Wilder.

<sup>39</sup> A two-time governor-general of Indochina (1911-1914, 1917-1919) and Minister of the Colonies (1920-1924), Sarraut was one of the master architects of French colonialism after World War I. His two published works on the subject of colonialism and empire, *La Mise en valeur des colonies françaises* in 1923 and *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* in 1931, were widely read and made him one of the most influential thinkers on the subject (Cooper vii-viii).

<sup>40</sup> Ho Chi Minh writes in *Le Procès de la colonisation française*, “Si les Annamites étaient tellement enchantés d’être soldats, pourquoi les uns étaient-ils emmenés au chef-lieu enchaînés, tandis que d’autres étaient, en attendant l’embarquement, enfermés dans un collège de Saïgon, sous l’œil des sentinelles françaises, baïonnette au canon, fusil chargé ? Les manifestations sanglantes du Cambodge, les émeutes de Saïgon, de Bien-Hoa et d’ailleurs, étaient-elles donc les manifestations de cet empressement à s’engager « en foule » et « sans hésitation » ?” (36).

resources—be made coherent with French perception of itself as a self-contained great power, one that *provides for* itself and the world? What explanation could France provide for a situation so apparently antithetical to its *raison d'être*?

Sarraut's *La Mise en valeur*, published in 1923, does just this. To accommodate the uncomfortable reality that France largely owed its survival of the war to the colonies, he shifted the rhetoric away from that of the *mission civilisatrice*, in which the colonies were eternal recipients of French influence, toward an unstable form of exchange. In return for France's commitment to benevolence in the form of care and protection, it was understood from the French perspective that the exploitation of the seemingly inexhaustible, untapped resources, notably agricultural ones, in these faraway lands was fair compensation for its trouble. Sarraut thereby mitigated latent concerns regarding the end of the material self-sufficiency of the metropole by folding France's newfound dependence on ostensibly foreign products into a new narrative of colonial relations that incorporates the colonies into an expanded national space, namely "la plus grande France." Indeed, as Eugen Weber explains, "Cette « plus grande France » qui avait rehaussé l'image du pays a contribué à en préserver l'existence" ("L'hexagone" 1185). For example, Sarraut writes:

[La Patrie] trouve aujourd'hui, pour l'aider dans son effort, affectueusement pressées autour d'elle, toutes ses colonies jeunes et vivantes que la République a fondées sur toutes les mers du globe et qui, après lui avoir donné pendant la paix les moissons de gloire et la foi ardente dans son destin, lui ont fourni aux heures tragiques où la fortune semblait la trahir, des hommes, de l'argent, des richesses, jusqu'à l'extrême limite de leurs forces. Il faut maintenant mettre ces colonies à même de fournir au redressement de

la Patrie les ressources considérables de tout ordre dont elles peuvent disposer. (*La Mise en valeur* 28-29)

Here, Sarraut praises the colonies for their filial devotion, portraying them as young, fecund, and self-sacrificing. Moreover by citing the superior values of France—“son génie bienfaisant,” “l’effet des hautes et généreuses disciplines morales,” and “sa tradition d’altruisme” (19)—as reasons for “la confiance et la gratitude des populations indigènes” (19), Sarraut posits their contribution to the protection of the liberty of the nation as validation of the value of France’s colonial project.

However, as Gary Wilder argues, this concept of a *la plus grande France* was intended to clarify the already obscure juridical and political relationship between the metropole and the colonies, such that non-European (and nonwhite) peoples could be assimilated into the Republic and yet still be legally denied the equal rights that nationals enjoyed as citizens (25). Sarraut achieves this by depicting *la plus grande France* as a family through metaphors of domesticity. While such metaphors might suggest, at least hypothetically, a modicum of parity, they consistently cast France in the more powerful role of parent while the colonies were relegated to the subordinate position of child (Hale; Cooper). Wilder further explains that a national family effectively represented the increased interdependence between France and the colonies and bestowed upon colonized subjects a sense of belonging, all while maintaining their inequality by denying them citizenship. This rhetorical technique, according to Wilder, distinguished between nationality and citizenship, and thereby “mediated unity and diversity, interiority and exteriority, membership and inequality” (39) of the colonial relationship. Again, it is important to note that even though the notion of *la plus grande France* effectively incorporated diverse colonies into a unified French body that offered national belonging and inclusivity, at least conceptually, this

newfound membership would not promise citizenship to colonized peoples (Wilder 33).<sup>41</sup> As Stoler and Cooper note, citizenship was not an automatic right, but a privilege to be acquired (3).

Drawing from Sarraut's campaign to valorize, or *mettre en valeur*, the colonies in both material and symbolic senses, Lauren Janes explains how "The role of the empire in feeding France became a key aspect of a new narrative of Greater France, one which portrayed the colonies as necessary to sustaining life in the metropole" (*Colonial Food* 1). Indeed, in light of France's increased dependence on the colonies brought about in part by the importation of colonial agricultural products and peoples, food was instrumentalized to explain the change in narrative of the relationship between the Hexagon and its empire, symbolized by *la plus grande France*.<sup>42</sup> Though Janes, for her part, focuses on the minimal success of integrating colonial foods into daily French life, it is important to note that Sarraut would continue to use alimentary metaphors to contend with France's loss of self-reliance until as late as 1931. In *Grandeur et servitude coloniales*, Sarraut laments: "L'Europe, réduite à ses seules ressources, ne saurait plus se nourrir. Les produits des terres d'outre-mer sont devenus l'aliment de première nécessité de sa table, de son industrie, de son commerce. L'estomac de l'Européen et sa machine ont un besoin également impérieux des denrées et des matières qui viennent des contrées colonisées" (145).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the history of the French nationality, see Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un français?*.

<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that the use of the term "Hexagon" to describe mainland France likely began in the 1960s in the wake of decolonization, as Eugen Weber argues. Weber suggests that, on the one hand, the moniker gave the impression of a nation bereft of its colonies, yet on the other, it hinted at its geometrical irreducibility ("L'hexagone" 1185).

<sup>43</sup> *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* was published in 1931, the same year as the opening of the Exposition coloniale de Vincennes in Paris, considered to be the apotheosis of French Empire. By the start of the Exposition, the book was widely read and already being reprinted for the tenth time (Cooper viii). A more sober view of the state of colonial affairs than the optimistic *La Mise en valeur*, this later book takes stock of the French colonial project at a time of global instability, resulting from the Wall Street Crash of 1929 as well as the rise of anticolonial nationalisms across the empires of Europe (Cooper xiv). In the face of this insecurity, Sarraut depicts not only



Indeed, Sarraut goes so far as to describe the colonies as unquestioningly fulfilling the “necessities” and “needs” of France, not just its delights or fancies. The following section will examine how Sarraut’s political rhetoric was transmitted to the metropolitan public through advertisements for colonial food products.

### **“Mangez Colonial”: Selling Indochinese Rice in France**

In 1932, the year the *jeu de l’oie* marketing Indochinese Rice to metropolitan French citizens was produced, Sarraut complained that his compatriots seemed to gravely misunderstand the great responsibility of colonialism. He grumbled that they only seem interested in the “quelques amoncellements de denrées précieuses” (*Grandeur* 13) brought from overseas for consumption at the French table. Contrary to his criticisms, however, it is hardly surprising that French citizens primarily associated the colonies with exotic foods, as one of their primary contacts with the colonies occurred through advertising for food products. After World War I, major pro-colonial publicity campaigns began to advertise imported colonial foods such as tea, cacao, and bananas to French citizens in the metropole.<sup>44</sup>

Never before had the idea of colonialism been promoted so extensively and so self-consciously among French citizens, as the ubiquity of this colonial ephemera indicates (Blanchard et al., *Colonial Culture* 3-9). The *jeu de l’oie* was part of a multi-pronged, if somewhat disjointed, promotional strategy coordinated by an assemblage of pro-colonial public

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France, but all of colonizing Europe as tragic heroes, victims of their own good will and benevolence in the colonies.

<sup>44</sup> Though colonial foods were available before World War I, they became increasingly more available and varied in the 1920s and ’30s, especially in Paris (Janes, *Colonial Food* 7-8). For example, between 1932 and 1937 production of French colonial bananas increased by 500% (Janes, *Colonial Food* 9).

and private groups (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 286; Janes, *Colonial Food* 10).<sup>45</sup> Seeking to transform “the colonial idea” into a concrete, everyday reality, this “colonial lobby” impressed upon French citizens-*cum*-consumers the importance of the colonies to France’s national interests through a publicity campaign that was tantamount to propaganda, infiltrating seemingly every facet of metropolitan life with pro-colonial rhetoric (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 285). As a spokesperson for the colonial lobby explained on the occasion of the Colonial exposition in 1931, “Produire n’est pas tout, il faut encore faire connaître ce que l’on a produit... Pour cela la publicité en faveur des produits coloniaux s’impose” (qtd. in Lemaire, “Manipulation” 285).

The goal was to make colonial products indispensable to modern French life in order to increase profits and justify the colonial enterprise, which they achieved by selling consumer goods with a hefty side of pro-colonial ideology meant to seduce unsuspecting citizens, particularly women and children. Advertisements for Indochinese Rice, for example, often enlisted the help of “experts” like doctors and chefs, including the renowned chef Auguste Escoffier and *Le Cordon bleu*, to tout that rice could solve almost any problem, whether personal, domestic, or geopolitical: from ameliorating digestion to helping women lose weight, boosting health and stamina in children to spending less money on groceries, improving the national economy to promoting international solidarity (figures 8-9). In sum, the many calls to

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<sup>45</sup> Groups such as the *Union coloniale française* took shape in the 1880s to facilitate early military expansion and private investment in the newly acquired French territories. When war broke out in 1914, these disparate associations solidified into more unified colonial lobby, or *le parti colonial*, representing both private and public interest groups (Janes, *Colonial Food* 10). On the promotional front, the *Agence générale des colonies* was created in 1919 by consolidating a number of separate agencies to coordinate all advertising and propaganda efforts (Lemaire, “Spreading the Word” 162). The campaign to promote rice, in particular, began in October 1931 with the formation of a “Rice Committee,” which included the office of the Governor-General of Indochina, the *Agence économique de l’Indochine*, the *Union coloniale française*, the *Syndicat de la rizière française*, the *Société d’acclimatation*, as well as various scientists, rice refiners, exporters, and importers (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 286; Janes, *Colonial Food* 69).

“eat colonial” (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 285) in multiform advertisements became a coherent system of symbols that signified good health and personal success, as well as pride in French bounty and confidence in national power.

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## NOTRE INDO-CHINE, GRENIER A RIZ

### Le riz est la fortune essentielle de notre Indo-Chine

On a dit : on reconnaît un Français à deux faits, « il mange beaucoup de pain, et ne sait pas la géographie ».

On peut ajouter : « Il ignore ce que produisent ses colonies ! »

L'Indo-Chine fait, en riz, presque 7 % de la production mondiale. Elle vient, pour la quantité de riz, en quatrième place, après l'énorme Chine, après l'Inde immense et le Japon.

En 1924, sa production a été de 5 millions 677.000 tonnes (1). Un joli gâteau de riz !

L'Indo-Chine a exporté, en 1925, 1.519.000 tonnes de riz ; valeur en chiffres ronds : un milliard et demi. La plus grosse quantité de ce commerce extérieur du riz, et de beaucoup, vient de la Cochinchine.

Mais les clients qui achètent notre riz d'Indo-Chine sont presque tous étrangers. La France n'en consomme que la moindre partie. Les importations de riz ne se sont élevées (1925), en France, qu'à 265.000 tonnes, dont 210.000 tonnes, en provenance de l'Indo-Chine.

Notre grande colonie nous fournit donc

à peine 4 % de sa production et 14 % de son exportation.

C'est ridiculement peu.

Comme à Madagascar, la présence, en Indo-Chine, de Français actifs, colonisateurs, protecteurs, a été une formidable source de prospérité pour les indigènes.

La superficie des surfaces cultivées en riz, dans la seule Cochinchine, a passé de 215.000 hectares (1868) à presque deux millions d'hectares en 1924.

L'exportation de Cochinchine a passé de 56.950 tonnes en 1860, à 1.440.000 en 1924.

Le Gouvernement de la Cochinchine et ses services agricoles ont fait de grands efforts pour améliorer la qualité du riz local. De grands progrès ont été accomplis. Ils eussent été plus grands encore, sans l'intermédiaire peu compréhensif du riz, le marchand chinois.

Malgré cet obstacle, les progrès sont évidents. Et, en Indo-Chine, la richesse par le riz est assurée.

On conçoit, devant tous ces faits puissants, l'intérêt national qu'il y a à consommer en France plus de riz, à étudier une « politique

du

(1) Il est bien entendu qu'il est toujours question, ici, de la tonne de 1.000 kgs.

Que nos lecteurs veuillent bien se rappeler que

### UN MILLION CINQ CENT MILLE TONNES

représentent :

**Cent cinquante mille wagons de dix tonnes ;**  
un wagon a environ huit mètres de longueur.

Un chargement de un million cinq cent mille tonnes occuperait donc un train dont la longueur totale couvrirait douze cents kilomètres soit la distance entre Dunkerque et Nice !!

Figure 8. “Notre Indo-Chine, grenier à riz.” 3 February 1928. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L'Animateur des Temps Nouveaux*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

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## UN REMÈDE DE LUXE CONTRE LA VIE CHÈRE

**Avis et Conseils des AS de la Cuisine française**

Le riz est un remède contre la vie chère, mais il est, par bonheur, quoique bon marché, un remède riche, un remède de luxe.

On a la chance, inespérée, exceptionnelle que, bien préparé, cet aliment soit considéré par les gourmets comme un des plus précieux de la table fine.

**CHEZ  
LES TOQUES  
BLANCHES**

**L'avis d'Escoffier**

La France a produit les plus célèbres cuisiniers du monde, et cela depuis des siècles.

La renommée de ses « chefs », de ses « toques blanches », a conquis l'univers.

Encore aujourd'hui, malgré des concurrences internationales qui ont vainement essayé de nous enlever cette gloire, le cuisinier français est recherché, partout où l'on exige une cuisine parfaite, et raffinée.

Parmi ces célébrités de la casserole, du four et de la broche, il en est un qui est reconnu partout comme le Maître des Maîtres. C'est Escoffier.

Escoffier a dirigé les fourneaux les plus soignés de notre temps. Après avoir exercé son art pour des princes, des rois et des empereurs, dans les Palais les plus somptueux, il a dirigé les cuisines des Palaces les plus célèbres de France et d'Angleterre...

Escoffier a été le premier cuisinier

décoré de la Légion d'honneur, comme cuisinier. Il est aujourd'hui officier de la Légion d'honneur.

**Eh bien, Escoffier, ce grand connaisseur, a toujours considéré le riz comme un aliment des tables riches.**

Il est donc singulier que tant de gens qui pourraient consommer, à bon marché, un aliment de cette qualité, en consomment si peu !

Cette anomalie ne peut s'expliquer que par l'ignorance, mène des erreurs.

**On peut  
manger du riz  
365 jours de l'année**

« Le riz s'accommode de si nombreuses façons que l'on pourrait varier son menu pendant les 365 jours de l'année, sans en éprouver aucune fatigue. »

A. ESCOFFIER (1)

\* \* \*

Après Escoffier, Prosper Montagné est considéré comme une grande étoile de la culinairité française.

Lui aussi sert largement le riz à sa clientèle raffinée ; il considère que cet aliment facilite la digestion des mets très rehaussés.

Le riz est pour lui un accompagnement non seulement agréable, mais digestif.

(1) Le Riz, l'aliment le meilleur, le plus nutritif. — 120 recettes pour l'accommoder. — Chez Ernest FLAMMARION, Éditeur, 26, rue Racine, Paris.

Ce petit manuel est, en effet, clair, simple, parlant. Nous le recommandons à toutes les cuisinières qui voudront devenir maîtresses de riz.



M. ESCOFFIER  
portrait peint par Kaplan

Figure 9. “Un remède de luxe contre la vie chère.” 3 February 1928. Black and white magazine advertisement, *L'Animateur des Temps Nouveaux*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

More than this, however, these campaigns seized on quotidian household consumption as a means of naturalizing the new conception of France as *la plus grande France*—an imperial nation that extended beyond its hexagonal borders (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 293). According to the logic of this new narrative of colonial relations, just as the colonies became an inherent part of an expanded national space, ostensibly foreign products could be recast as domestic. In other words, with every bunch of bananas from the Antilles, every bar of chocolate from Africa, and every sack of rice from Indochina came an onslaught of colonial rhetoric explaining that in spite of the foreign and faraway origins of these foods, they nonetheless came from *la plus grande France* and were thus undeniably “French.” If colonial foods could be successfully assimilated

into the bodies of French citizens, this line of reasoning seems to suggest that this process could be replicated allegorically at even greater scales: bananas, chocolate, and rice could become integral parts of French cuisine in the same way that the colonies could be considered an integral part of France.

Much of the discussion surrounding colonial ephemera revolves around the reception of these promotional campaigns and the extent to which they made ordinary people into active supporters of empire. On the one hand, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire argue that the omnipresence of these promotional materials must have so impregnated the lives of the metropolitan French that they became de-facto supporters of the colonial project, even if they could not themselves articulate as much, creating a sense of national unity in the face of political instability (Blanchard et al., *Colonial Culture* 18-20). On the other hand, Lauren Janes questions the efficacy of promotional propaganda. She argues that while public discourse suggests that food played a principal role in explaining the importance of the empire to the French nation, and was central to how this was understood by the public during the interwar period, the daily practices of metropolitan French citizens suggest a more limited acceptance of colonial foods into household cuisine.

From this marginal assimilation of colonial foods into cooking, Janes reasons that there must have been a deep-seated apprehension regarding the incorporation of overseas colonies into the idea of France after World War I: “Whether French cuisine and the French body could incorporate these new foods, and the anxiety over these questions, reflected a broader national discomfort with the incorporation of the French colonies into Greater France” (Janes, *Colonial Food* 2). Countering Blanchard and Lemaire’s argument that new products and the discourses surrounding them created a unifying “colonial idea,” Janes suggests that the metropolitan French

did not necessarily “buy into” the argument by offering an analysis of the practices of consumers and the polemics caused by colonial foods. In other words, Janes posits that the general public remained largely skeptical and even fearful of the potential for “bodily penetration” represented by the literal incorporation of colonial products through eating.

In the case of the campaign for Indochinese Rice, Lemaire interprets the multitude of promotional materials advertising the product, from billboards and brochures to press advertisements to cookbooks, as a measure of the extent to which the discourse of “eat colonial” shaped French society. According to Lemaire, that these discursive promotional efforts called upon such diverse actors as politicians and chefs, nutritionists and the organizers of the 1931 *Exposition coloniale de Paris* is testament to how France was steeped in colonial ideology (“Manipulation” 286). However, while Lemaire explains that the rice campaign was among the longest and largest, Janes argues that it was one of the least successful (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 289; Janes, *Colonial Food* 100). Through her study of archival records dealing with the importation and use of rice in the metropole, Janes demonstrates that in spite of a ten-year onslaught of publicity, French households never consumed as much rice as the colonial lobby had projected. From this, Janes concludes that the assimilation of colonial ideology was similarly limited as well (Janes, *Colonial Food* 100).

For example, the colonial lobby envisioned Indochinese Rice as a cure-all for problems facing French households following World War I, such as food shortages, limited income, and poor diets. In this way, this pseudo-lobby reasoned, Indochinese Rice would become a permanent fixture in metropolitan life, thereby ensuring a steady market for business interests as well as the political will to maintain colonial ties (Janes, *Colonial Food* 100). Lobbyists therefore began in the 1920s to build a coordinated effort to encourage the consumption of rice at the

French table.<sup>46</sup> Trying first to offer *pain de riz*—bread made from rice flour—as a replacement for rationed wheat, the campaign faced an uphill battle from the start, but not because of the taste or the appearance of the loaves; competing economic interests from the wheat industry, cultural stereotypes related to food, and an enduring French obsession with bread would ultimately stymie the concept (Janes, *Colonial Food* 72-82).<sup>47</sup> Therefore, in the late 1920s lobbyists turned to the kitchen to try to put actual rice on the table, rather than disguise it in bread. This second phase of the campaign for Indochinese Rice advertised directly to consumers with the help of diverse actors such as nutritionists and chefs. Though their messages were not always coordinated, together they targeted public misperception of rice and the supposed irrationality and inferior cooking skills of French housewives (Janes, *Colonial Food* 83-94).<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, Janes argues, the assimilation of rice into French cuisine and into everyday French meals would be marginal, and the increased importation of rice to the metropole can be attributed to the use of rice in feed for animals (Janes, *Colonial Food* 70).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Given that most colonial French in Indochina strictly avoided Vietnamese dishes (aside from tropical fruits), imported the means to make bread, and ate large quantities of expensive tinned foods from the metropole, the attempt to make the metropolitan French eat rice seems highly ironic, as Peters writes in chapter 6 of *Appetites* and “Indigestible Indochina.” Nonetheless, Marguerite Duras and her family are well known exceptions to this general trend, as a recently published collection of her recipes, *La Cuisine de Marguerite*, demonstrates.

<sup>47</sup> Kaplan argues that bread has structured life in France since the *Ancien Régime*: “It was at the core of both the material and symbolic organization of everyday existence. France was not merely ‘panivore,’ following the picturesque contemporary idiom; it was obsessed with bread. Bread was its primary means of survival, its paramount vector of sacrality, and its most comforting trope” (23; qtd. in Janes, *Colonial Food* 22).

<sup>48</sup> As Stoler and Cooper note, colonial policies—both large- nor small-scale—were hardly coherent, in spite of the quantity of discourse produced that would suggest otherwise (20).

<sup>49</sup> Rice exports from Indochina to France increased from 216 thousand metric tons in 1913 to 223 thousand metric tons in 1929, to 523 thousand metric tons in 1933, to 544 thousand metric tons in 1938. In the 1930s, table rice only accounted for 9 to 21 percent of French rice imports (Janes, *Colonial Food* 70). For a study on how the economic success of colonies was largely overblown, see Coquery-Vidrovitch.

How Lemaire and Janes analyze the advertising campaign for Indochinese Rice demonstrates the differences in their approaches, which are likewise distinct from my own. While both Lemaire and Janes refer to the *jeu de l'oie* as one part of a greater publicity campaign, neither examines the document, nor any of the other racializing advertisements for rice, in great detail. Indeed, Lemaire only briefly mentions the attempt by the colonial lobby to change the negative connotations of rice in interwar French society by adopting a mascot with an amiable and appealing demeanor, much like the smiling face of the *tirailleur sénégalais* in *Banania* (figure 7). She further suggests that perhaps the human-like silhouette of an “Annamite” person was chosen to embody rice because actual grains of rice do not photograph well for posters without fully analyzing the stereotypes and racializing potential of the choice of imagery (Lemaire, “Manipulation” 289). Janes refers briefly to the *jeu de l'oie* as part of the many ways the colonial lobby bombarded the metropolitan French consumers with publicity, focusing principally on whether the campaign was actually as successful in making rice French, as the sheer quantity of advertisements leads us to believe. Relying on concepts such as “national culinary identity” (Ferguson), “dangers of incorporation” (Fischler), and “risky intimacy of eating” (Korsmeyer), Janes analyzes the parallel between national borders and the borders of the self, suggesting that “negative views,” “cultural barriers,” and “racial resistance” were partly responsible for the limited success of Indochinese Rice in the metropole. For example, she surmises that, “The alterity of colonized peoples and their culinary cultures, repeatedly emphasized in gastronomic writing in these magazines, set boundaries of French identity that did not include the colonial subjects of the empire” (*Colonial Food* 17). However, her conclusions do not fully elucidate the connections between embodied anxieties, identity construction, and race.



For my part, rather than continue to debate the enthusiasm of the French public for the colonial project, I seek to move the discussion away from the commodities themselves to re-focus on the human beings depicted as commodities in colonial ephemera. I therefore analyze the *jeu de l'oie* as encouraging the adoption of a nationalist colonial ideology of which colonial racism and the denial of Vietnamese subjectivity and self-definition were part and parcel. For not only are consumers “buying into” such an ideology with the help of this piece of publicity, the *jeu de l'oie* actively teaches racist colonial ideologies. Just as metropolitan French learn from the game to incorporate rice into their everyday lives, they also learn about how to negotiate encounters with colonial and racialized people in the metropole, or, in this case, how to use and consume them. Indeed, what I am interested in here is not so much the extent to which French people learned to understand colonial products such as rice, but how the depiction of a Vietnamese food product on a board game taught them about colonized people through a racializing lens.

### **Child’s Play: Interacting with Race through a Board Game**

The *jeu de l'oie* uses visual representations of French food culture to teach racist colonial ideologies and practices with the express purpose of indoctrinating children, the future generation of colonial adherents. Children were particularly targeted with colonial propaganda disguised as pedagogy both at home and at school, through textbooks, games, and toys, in hopes of instilling the patriotic enthusiasm and the specialized knowledge necessary to carry out the colonial project themselves (Lemaire, “Spreading the Word” 165-167). The form of the board game, however, deserves particular attention as a visual as well as interactive source. While a page in a magazine or a billboard in the street might reach a viewer’s awareness only in passing,

the effects of a board game could be more intense and last longer, effectively and rather insidiously capitalizing on the impressionability of young children. Focusing the attention of its players for the duration of play, a board game encourages active, repetitive engagement with its ideologies. Specifically, it encourages children to imagine themselves playing a role in the French Empire, combining fantasy and practicality to lead them to discover the excitement and implementation of French colonialism (Heath 69; Bancel, “The Colonial Bath” 201). Furthermore, instructions at the bottom of the *jeu de l’oie* suggest a means of mitigating the ephemerality of the game: “Pour conserver ce Jeu, collez-le sur un carton.” Creating the possibility for a lifetime of repetition and reification of its colonial stereotypes as the child grows older, the game has the potential to facilitate the unconscious indoctrination of metropolitan children at various ages and stages of maturity, which has the effect of further dulling the players’ attention to its subtly didactic racist mechanisms.

The *jeu de l’oie* for Indochinese Rice was one of many French board games centering on the colonies, yet it is also distinct from these others in terms of its messaging. Games such as *Jeu de l’empire français* (1941), *Course de l’empire français* (1941), and *Jeu des échanges France-Colonies* (1941), for example, feature maps of the world and exciting images from multiple colonies in order to whet the child’s sense of adventure and encourage travel outside of France with the goal of training young boys, in particular, in the mechanics of colonial expansion (Bancel, “The Colonial Bath” 201; Thomas, “African Cartographies” 303). On the contrary, the *jeu de l’oie* for Indochinese Rice reduces the geographical scope by depicting the arrival of a colonial product into the domestic spaces of the market, the kitchen, and the family table, thereby suggesting to young girls that patriotic enthusiasm for the colonial project can be exercised not only in the adventures of conquest, but also in the home.

The procedure of the *jeu de l'oie* also emphasizes typically feminine, family-oriented household activities; from start to finish, each square of the game explains in consecutive fashion the origins of Indochinese Rice, where to purchase it in France, its nutritional value, what other dishes it can accompany, and how to cook it according to the recipe. Rather than emphasize values important for success in colonial, capitalistic, and traditionally masculine, ventures—such as profit and wealth, patience and risk, adventure and conquest—as the rules of the other games do, the “Règles du jeu” of the *jeu de l'oie* rewards the duties of a wife and mother—following directions and recipes, attention to detail when grocery shopping, and the management of family nutrition and finances—by rewarding efficient cooking and penalizing the purchase of foreign rice or not following the recipe correctly.<sup>50</sup> Though it is the Rice Man, the embodiment of Indochinese Rice, who is portrayed as traveling from colony to metropole, agency does not lie with him, but with the players of the game, young boys and especially girls, who learn to dominate and control him. Through its form and procedures, the *jeu de l'oie* trivializes the lives of Vietnamese people by turning colonialism into child’s play. What is more, the gendered aspects of the *jeu de l'oie* will become increasingly salient with further analysis of the figure of the Rice Man himself.

### **Commodifying Humanity or Humanizing Commodity?**

In the *jeu de l'oie*, the figure of the Rice Man consolidates both the commodity of Indochinese Rice and the humanity of Vietnamese people to convey a double message to French consumers in the metropole. For not only is the food product of Indochinese Rice endowed with

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<sup>50</sup> The inferior cooking skills of French housewives were often blamed for the limited assimilation of Indochinese Rice into French cooking, which explains why recipes and tips for cooking the product were included in many advertisements (Janes, *Colonial Food* 89)

a body, the visual depiction of this body deploys racial stereotypes of Vietnamese people. Through the Rice Man, the *jeu de l'oie* characterizes, humanizes, and even racializes the commodity of rice in particular ways—so much so that the *jeu de l'oie* conflates the tropes developed to categorize Vietnamese *people* with those to describe the *alimentary product* of rice. In light of the duality of the Rice Man as both food and human being as represented in the *jeu de l'oie*, it is important that we consider these two perspectives when discussing his assimilation into France. By de-linking the histories of Indochinese foods from Vietnamese persons, I hope to properly and ethically restore the humanity of the latter, at least as much as is possible. Though the two have been consolidated into one figure, this doubling will not prove to be similarly durable for the human being and the alimentary product.



Figure 10. Detail of figure 1. Squares 41-45.

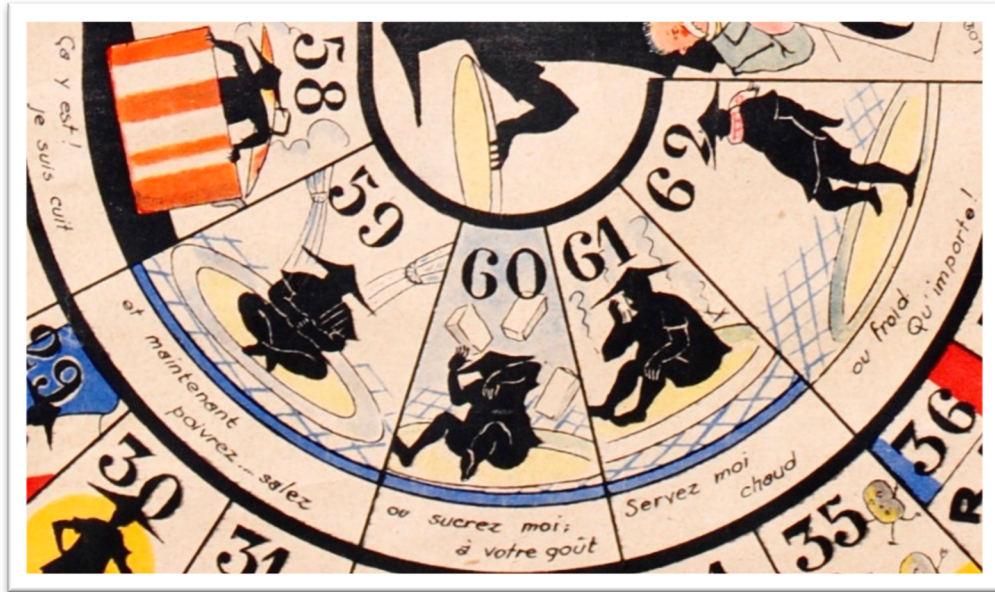


Figure 11. Detail of figure 1. Squares 58-62.

After the Rice Man is depicted as arriving in France, he begins immediately to cater to the demands of metropolitan French consumers, which he achieves with alacrity. Adaptable, the Rice Man changes size to accommodate any situation: shrinking to fit inside a dish, a stuffed tomato, or a pot (squares 38, 43, and 46, to name just a few; figure 10) and growing taller to hold the hands of the children (square 19; figure 13). Versatile, he can accommodate any dish, whether soup or salad, meat or fish, vegetable or dessert (squares 38-44; figure 10). Acquiescent, he can take abuse without complaint, so he does not mind being doused with water (square 47; figure 1), hit over the head with sugar cubes (square 60; figure 11), nor served cold—he'll just wear a scarf (square 62; figure 11). This alarming series of images reveals the anthropomorphic reactions of the Rice Man while he is in the process of being cooked. Yet, in spite of his mistreatment, he is always willing to do his utmost to contribute to the enjoyment of his superiors and appears pleased to be the favorite of the table. The Rice Man is meant to be a compliant, friendly, and familiar presence, a protector of children, and a reminder of the innocent servility of colonized peoples.

Evidently, the human qualities used to characterize rice in the *jeu de l'oie* might not necessarily seem negative. Rather, there are elements of the representation of the Rice Man that would translate as “positive,” or even “respectful,” in the eyes of a metropolitan French viewer at the time of the production of the *jeu de l'oie*, and perhaps even today. This is how the advertisement works; “positive” stereotypes associated with Vietnamese *people* are used here to depict the Vietnamese commodity of *rice* in a positive light as well. Indeed, the *jeu de l'oie* emphasizes these positive traits in order to advertise the potential utility of Indochina to French whites, whether in alimentary and human form. This seemingly favorable portrayal is central to the problem of advertisements such as this one. For even “positive” stereotypes are violent, because they propagate the notion of “a racist French imaginary that is figured as benevolent” (Donadey 18). When viewed in this light, the depiction of the Rice Man is certainly negative, in that the racialized identity he is made to perform is demeaning, reductive, and entirely in service to the white French family.

Whether positive or negative, racial stereotypes limit Vietnamese capacity for self-definition by imposing what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “controlling image”—a depiction based on racial categorizations that misconstrues reality and objectifies the captured subject (Collins 67-70; qtd. in Donadey 15). Or, as Michelle Cliff explains in her description of Black women artists that bears an unsettling resemblance to the depiction of the Rice Man: “through objectification—the process by which people are dehumanized, made *ghostlike*, given the status of Other—an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and overarching all this, denied selfhood” (Cliff 272; qtd. in Donadey 15; my emphasis). As symbolized by the effacement of the Rice

Man's facial features by the black shadow that envelops his body, his identity is narrowly articulated for him by the ideological workings behind the *jeu de l'oie*.

The decision to make the Rice Man black is a curious one, especially given that the food he symbolizes is white and yellow is the color most typically associated with racialized Asian bodies.<sup>51</sup> The most straightforward explanation might be that advertisers sought to minimize his human qualities to make clear that he is *not* a human being, but a food product meant to be eaten. Yet, this dehumanization of the Rice Man contradicts the personification of Indochinese Rice in the *jeu de l'oie* in the first place. Crucially, by drawing from purportedly *positive* racial stereotypes of Vietnamese people to explain the benefits of rice as food, the figure of the Rice Man also inevitably, if accidentally provokes attendant *negative* racial thinking—in all likelihood dooming the assimilation of Indochinese Rice into French cuisine. Furthermore, that the Rice Man is not white like the food he personifies hints that advertisers were hesitant to equate the Rice Man with whiteness in racial terms. The Rice Man's blackness is an aesthetic device, however crude, that materializes his racial difference by making obvious precisely what makes him invisible in French society. Anonymous and inscrutable, the *jeu de l'oie* insinuates through the blackness of the Rice Man that Vietnamese people can be easily multiplied and just as easily replaced (square 13; figure 1).<sup>52</sup> The Rice Man thus inhabits a position of “invisible visibility” (Bishop 59), as his racialized body makes him appear everywhere and nowhere at once (Bishop 62). He is a “silent shadow,” to use Edward Said's formulation, “to be animated by the

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<sup>51</sup> Given that the French also had a strong preference for white bread over dark bread, which was considered too German, coloring the Rice Man white might have been a more profitable choice (Janes, *Colonial Food* 76-78).

<sup>52</sup> This is a trope that was used widely in colonial imagery in the form of masses of innumerable nonwhite people, often shown from behind, manifestly submitting to a single white French colonial officer. Such an image can be found in the first pages of Sarraut's *Grandeur*, serving as a kind of visual epigraph for the work.

Orientalist” (208), and, in this case, upon which French consumers could project their colonial fantasies. Most importantly, the Rice Man’s blackness activates a Fanonian “schéma épidermique racial” (90), albeit a misplaced one, in order to communicate that the Vietnamese are more similar to other supposedly inferior races than to whites, thus providing a form of racial uplift for French whites while concomitantly emphasizing the “natural” subservience of the Vietnamese (Vann 187).

It is not only the Rice Man’s blackness that gives the impression of the servile inferiority in the *jeu de l’oie*, however. Specific characteristics in the depiction of the Rice Man evoke racial “types” formulated by the French in colonial Indochina to categorize the Vietnamese, thus making him consistently recognizable as “Indochinese” to a French public.<sup>53</sup> However, the body of the Rice Man thus does not contain only one stereotype, but an amalgamation of a multi-layered system of racialization that was developed over the span of decades. While I concur with Michael Vann that French categorization of their colonial subjects in Indochina was not a Manichean dichotomy of colonized black versus colonizing white (as Frantz Fanon argued), but a hierarchical spectrum that privileged whiteness above all else (as Arthur de Gobineau outlined), I suggest that the *jeu de l’oie* illustrates how that spectrum of racial stereotypes was condensed into one body when that body traveled from the colonies to mainland France (Vann 187).

First, the Rice Man’s *nón lá* (conical hat)—which appears permanently affixed to his body—likens him to the Vietnamese farmers, or *nha-quê*, who also feature in the *jeu de l’oie* wearing similar hats while laboring by hand in the rice paddies in unflattering, bent-over

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<sup>53</sup> Vann argues that the French created these prejudices partly from notions formulated initially in France before ever encountering the “indigènes” and from racialized impressions generated after limited contact (187).



postures (squares 3-10, figure 12). Through the association with these peasants, the viewer is meant to regard the Rice Man as a “noble savage”: full of superstition, wisdom, and inner peace whose simple naiveté must be protected from the corruption and impurity of the world beyond his fields (Vann 191-192; Hale 141). This representation of the Rice Man—silhouetted in profile, bowed over an imaginary rice harvest, emulating the subservient and diligent Vietnamese peasant farmer—was the most prevalent and was stamped on almost every piece of advertising for Indochinese Rice, and is included several times within the frame of the *jeu de l’oie* itself; it can be found six times at regular intervals, surrounded by the blue, white, and red of the *tricolore* (squares 9, 18, 27, 36, 45, and 54; figure 1). Landing on one of these squares wins the player double the points, validating twice over the incorporation of Indochinese Rice into French cuisine. Second, the sprightly demeanor of the Rice Man’s slender, androgynous figure emulates the “boy” or domestic and/or cook.<sup>54</sup> Clever, childlike, and eager to please, a “boy” lacks comprehension of French ways but is skilled at imitation (Vann 190).



Figure 12. Detail of figure 1. Squares 1-4.

<sup>54</sup> For a sociological and historical study of the representation of Indochinese servants in the colonies, see Granier, especially chapter 1.

These supposedly positive depictions reinforce the notion of a racial hierarchy in which the Vietnamese enjoyed a privileged place in the pecking order in comparison to their African and Arab counterparts (Hale 4-5). As Dana Hale demonstrates, the Vietnamese were initially considered “gentle subjects” in the early years of colonization and later as the “gifted sons” of the Republic after World War I (4-5). The depiction of the Rice Man makes visible this simultaneous respect and debasement; on the one hand, the Rice Man is humanized and elements of his culture are depicted in an apparently positive light through decorative elements on the corners of the *jeu de l’oie*, reflecting a measure of respect for his origins and his ancient civilization. Yet, on the other hand, he is effaced, rendered inferior, and forcibly dependent on French guidance (Hale 141).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, however gifted the Rice Man may be, he cannot rise to the same level as the French.

For instance, the Rice Man is born from the work of agricultural laborers in Indochina who plant and harvest rice over the space of eight squares (squares 3 through 10; figure 12). They appear to toil with docility and diligence and without any supervision by a white European overseer, contrary to images of black African laborers who are portrayed under surveillance (Hale 75).<sup>56</sup> That they work by hand (squares 6, 7, 10; figure 1) and use non-mechanical methods such as hand plows, oxen, systems of nets, and small sailboats for transport (squares 3, 4, 5, and 11; figure 12) emphasizes their mild-mannered naiveté, skillfulness, and respect for the traditions

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<sup>55</sup> As Lionnet writes in “Immigration, Poster Art and Transgressive Citizenship,” this visually represented paternalistic attitude toward racialized minorities would persist long after decolonization (203).

<sup>56</sup> In addition, this depiction of Vietnamese laborers working hard in the field could be communicating to a metropolitan French public that the *mission civilisatrice* was a success in the colonies. As Stoler and Cooper suggest, this view betrays the contradictory nature of the *mission civilisatrice* itself; it was intended to impose discipline and obedience by making farmers and workers out of supposedly unruly “natives,” but what to do with colonized subjects once they became civilized remained a thorny question (7).

of their ancient civilization (Hale 74).<sup>57</sup> While these qualities might initially seem complimentary, the next series of images depicting the processing of the rice in a factory (square 12; figure 1) and its shipment to France aboard an enormous ocean liner (square 14; figure 1) changes the tone considerably. By highlighting the supposed differences between Indochina and France, the *jeu de l'oie* creates a dichotomy between the former as “backwards” and “technologically deficient” and the latter as “modernized” and “advanced.”<sup>58</sup> These racially ascribed characteristics all serve to explain to the metropolitan French public the potential for the Indochinese to be civilized, the technological superiority of France, and the low risk of complicating factors such as revolt or sedition (Hale 13, 75).

Similarly, the Rice Man’s language in the *jeu de l'oie* seems commendatory, at least initially, especially if we compare the linguistic representation of the Indochinese with that of black African subjects in advertisements of the same ilk. In ads for *Banania*, for example, the ability of the *tirailleur sénégalais* to speak and express himself is reduced to a single racist slogan that is meant to be spoken in pidgin French: “Y’a bon Banania.” In the *jeu de l'oie*, the Rice Man, contrary to his popular African counterpart, has been permitted to speak in the first person throughout the entire game about his personal and cultural origins and using “correct” grammar and vocabulary, almost as though he were a properly respected and educated subject.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Another source of French respect for the Indochinese that I will not discuss here is for their ancient culture, represented by Angkor Wat. That a people could neglect such a majestic site was proof for the French that the Indochinese were not capable of caring for their own glorious past, thereby justifying and even ennobling metropolitan intervention (Hale 142). For more on the representation of Angkor Wat at the *Exposition coloniale de Paris* in 1931, see Norindr; Morton.

<sup>58</sup> See Cooper for an analysis of propagandistic schoolbooks used to educate Indochinese children that praised French infrastructural works in the colony.

<sup>59</sup> Parodied language does exist in other advertisements featuring Vietnamese people, as in figure 5. Nonetheless, my argument stands, because these speech acts are not only in the first person, but they also feature tropes of sophistication, such as a literary reference to “Ésope,” poetry (albeit very contrived), and a signature at the end, suggesting literacy. This is hardly proof that

However, while the Rice Man, as the embodiment of Indochinese Rice, might appear to have the liberty to speak, the Vietnamese laborers—the only Vietnamese figures depicted as human beings in the game—do not. Rather, their actions are narrated in the passive voice, which emphasizes their supposed passivity: “Les rizières sont d’abord labourées,” “puis hersées,” “Mes semences sont trempées,” “puis semées en pépinières” (squares 3-6 ; figure 12). It is the alimentary product of rice, through the proxy of the Rice Man, that is granted the ability and agency to speak, while the laborers are represented as silent, docile, and without complaint. The Rice Man is himself an agent of the colonial lobby; he is not sharing his own knowledge of the cultivation and preparation of rice, but that which has been translated and interpreted by French colonial administrators and their allies in advertising. The Vietnamese subject is thus silenced in a more insidious way; he is given lines to say, but they are merely dictated to him, thereby falsely mitigating ideologies of epistemic violence.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, that the Vietnamese might themselves wield the knowledge necessary to produce successful rice harvests is even called into question in colonial propaganda. For instance, the 1939 propaganda film *La France est un empire*, directed by Jean d’Agraives Emmanuel Bourcier for the *Agence générale des colonies*, like the *jeu de l’oie*, shows that the Vietnamese are intimately connected to rice but require French intervention to best exploit their own natural resources.<sup>61</sup> The narrator of the film describes the eating habits of Vietnamese “natives” by

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epistemic violence is not being perpetrated, but rather that Vietnamese people were meant to appear as superior to their African and Arab counterparts, yet still inferior to the French.

<sup>60</sup> For analyses of soliloquy and colonialism, see Garaway.

<sup>61</sup> Jean d’Agraives was a politically minded adventure novelist, and the film is one of many so-called colonial documentaries from the late 1930s that sought to educate citizens about the existence and merits of empire in an explicit and self-conscious manner (Levine 74). For more details on the director and the politics of the genre of colonial documentary film between the Third Republic and Vichy, see Levine.

explaining, “Les indigènes se nourrissent principalement de riz mais faute de pouvoir consacrer de nouvelles terres à la culture, la récolte ne suffisait plus. Le problème du riz devenait de plus en plus angoissant, l’administration l’a résolu à la satisfaction de tous” (*La France est un empire* 01:07:35).<sup>62</sup> Here, the film reduces the regional variety of dishes, the complexity of taste and textures, and the symbolic importance of Vietnamese cuisines to a generalizing conclusion that, on the one hand, suggests the inferiority of Vietnamese agricultural acumen, and, on the other hand, conveniently showcases the putative technological and bureaucratic superiority, as well as the moral probity, of the French administration.

Moreover, this claim is largely untrue, as Erica Peters argues in *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*; the French failure to recognize the variety of diets, their refusal to store rice in case of famine, and their selective improvement of agricultural techniques and technologies limited their efforts in solving problems of hunger in many rural regions, resulting in rebellions (13).<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the French in colonial Indochina generally believed that the Vietnamese had a particular talent for cooking and often employed male Vietnamese chefs in their homes, even though they tended to avoid local foods for fear of being racially “contaminated” by such products (Peters, *Appetites* 150, 166-170).<sup>64</sup> Indeed, they preferred eating expensive canned

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<sup>62</sup> This claim that the Vietnamese only require rice to survive is remarkably similar to the assertion that enslaved people in the Antilles did not require any food. See Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back* xvi.

<sup>63</sup> Freidberg makes a similar point about French colonial administration in Africa: “The modern history of famine makes brutally clear that colonial subjects did not enjoy the same basic food rights as citizens... France, so proud of its own food abundance, tolerated repeated incidents of famine in its African empire. The right not to starve, which European governments were able to assure their own citizens by the early nineteenth century, did not extend to the dark-skinned colonies” (56-57).

<sup>64</sup> Some cookbooks that were written and published in Vietnam that date from the 1920s and '40s, such as *Sách nấu ăn Tây, Annam và Tàu* (“Book on How to Cook Western, Annamite, and Chinese Dishes,” 1940) by Nguyễn Đình Lâm, offer French recipes with Vietnamese translations, likely intended for Vietnamese cooks for French families.

foods imported from the metropole to consuming dishes their own servants might eat (Peters, *Appetites* 153-155). Stoler corroborates this point and accentuates it with regard to the role of white European women in the colonies; these women were responsible for protecting the morality of their families, and especially of their susceptible husbands, by preventing “contamination” of any kind through rigorous standards of cleanliness, hygiene, and diet (71).

Nonetheless, the overdetermined connection between the Vietnamese as a “race,” the foods they eat, and their culinary aptitude, traveled with Vietnamese workers from the colonies to the metropole, not only in the eyes of public opinion, but even for official purposes, such as immigration. Ho Chi Minh, for example, explains in *Le Procès de la colonisation française* how the alimentary culture of Vietnamese people was politicized and degraded in the eyes of the Republic. He recounts how, in a questionnaire for French naturalization, Indochinese subjects were interrogated about their eating habits: “E.—Mangez-vous à table ou sur la natte ? F.—Que mangez-vous ? G.—Mangez-vous du riz ou du pain ?” (115). In other words, according to this reasoning the act of eating bread at a table, on the one hand, is an indication as well as a catalyst of civilization, humanity, and ultimately the suitability for naturalization. On the other hand, if a Vietnamese person eats rice on a mat on the floor, this constitutes savagery, cultural backwardness, and an insurmountable incompatibility with France.<sup>65</sup> What a colonized person, or a colonizing person for that matter, eats thus symbolizes the potential for inner transformation

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<sup>65</sup> In “Starch Wars,” Smith argues that in the late eighteenth century, differences in diet between European colonizers and Indian colonized were instrumentalized by doctors, journalists, and politicians to explain and justify racial and sexual hierarchies. Rice, it was understood, was easier to digest and grow, so it followed that its consumption made one lazy, weak, and susceptible to being conquered. Bread, on the other hand, was believed to be harder to digest and wheat was more difficult to grow, thus fortifying eaters with strength and masculine vigor.

and the possibility of advancing or retreating on the ladder of civilization.<sup>66</sup> As Ho Chi Minh's anecdote demonstrates, French notions of food and race were deeply connected with regards to the perception of the Vietnamese, so much so that the racialized characteristics that were established in the colony would be transported to the metropole. By charting this trajectory, the *jeu de l'oie* provides the opportunity to examine the assimilation of the *idea* of both Indochinese Rice and Vietnamese people into French society.

### **Assimilating the Rice Man at the Table, in the Home, in the Nation**

What is so remarkable about the *jeu de l'oie* is how it depicts for the French consumer the journey of Indochinese Rice from a little-known commodity grown in a foreign, faraway place, across international waters and borders, and into the most intimate and sacred of spaces: the nation, the home, the family table, and, finally, the body of the citizen. Though other advertisements might identify the origins of products or show portions of this journey from colonies to metropole, I have yet to find another that covers the same literal and symbolic distance, breaking down the complicated abstraction of Indochinese-Rice-as-French into a spiraling narrative recounting the transformation of Indochinese Rice into the domestic savior of the French household. Shown on a map as originating in Indochina (square 2; figure 12), transported by a small sampan to be processed (squares 11 and 12; figure 1), then packed and shipped on an ocean liner (squares 13 and 14; figure 1), the Rice Man is depicted as walking through an open door into the country of France, recognizable from its eastern Atlantic coast

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<sup>66</sup> The notion that a person, in this case a Vietnamese subject, can be classified based on her eating habits—an idea Ho Chi Minh denigrates—is reminiscent of the maxims of Brillat-Savarin in his early nineteenth-century work, *Physiologie du goût*, such as “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es” (19) and “La destinée des nations dépend de la manière dont elles se nourrissent” (18).

(square 16; figure 13). The Rice Man narrates, “Étant colonial, j’entre en France comme chez moi” (square 16; figure 13), even receiving a salute from a border patrol agent along the way. At this point, the colors change, from sticky, hot yellow in Indochina to the cool blue, white, red of the French *tricolore*, which bedecks every French citizen, from laborer to child, butcher to fish monger.

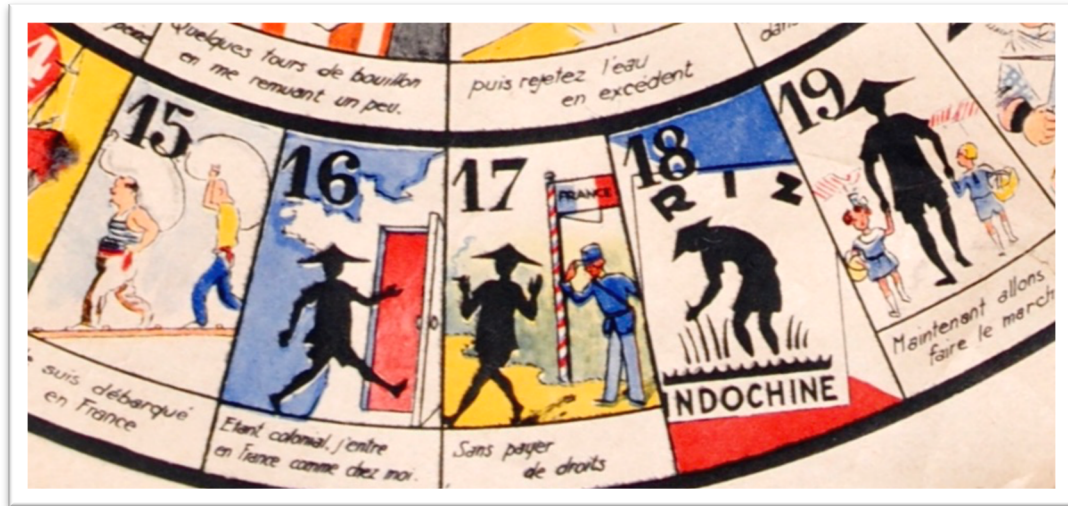


Figure 13. Detail of figure 1. Squares 15-19.

Though this explanation of the Rice Man’s entry into France is meant to exemplify ease and simplicity, that it is depicted at all demonstrates its conceptual complexity for metropolitan French citizens. This is especially valid for food products, as French written and visual discourse linked the mythic superiority of French gastronomy to the abundant agricultural diversity of the contiguous nation, starting in the nineteenth century. For example, the “Carte Gastronomique de la France,” (figure 14) which dates from 1809, is the first known map of France to represent each region by its agricultural products; corks pop out of champagne bottles in Reims, rounds of cheese of all shapes and sizes feature in Coulommiers and Neufchâtel, while schools of fish swim in Dieppe and in Nice, and fresh produce grows abundantly across the map. Through the image of the totalizing geography of the nation, this map suggests how a variety of regional



products can transcend unicity and specificity to contribute to the collective creation of French gastronomy. As Priscilla Ferguson argues, this conception of food, geography, and nation would connect the family table to the expression of French culture and national identity, even in spite of the significant social, political, and economic upheavals of the period (9, 5).<sup>67</sup>



Figure 14. “Carte gastronomique de la France.” 1809. Black and white printed poster included with book, *Cours gastronomique, ou les diners de M. de Manant-Ville; Deuxième édition*, by Charles Louis Cadet de Gassicourt. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>67</sup> In *Accounting for Taste*, Ferguson analyzes “French cuisine” as a modern myth created, maintained, and propagated thanks in large part to its discursive authority, not necessarily because of its intrinsic value. She suggests: “The importance and significance to cuisine of language, texts, and representations can hardly be overstated. As much as the foodways by which it is shaped or the actual foods consumed, words sustain cuisine. These words, the narratives and the texts shaped by them, are what translate cooking and food into cuisine. They redefine the individual act of eating into the collective act of dining” (9-10).

The potent combination of the nation and its gastronomy was not only posited as typically French, but also as better than the rest, as a matter of course. Ferguson writes, “Cuisine supplied one building block—a crucial one—for a national identity in the making, for it encouraged the French to see themselves through this distinctive lens as both different and superior” (5). To give an example, Marie-Antonin Carême, a cultural icon who is still hailed as France’s greatest chef and founder of French *haute cuisine*, extends the potential power of French gastronomy into an international, verging on geopolitical, realm. In 1833, he wrote: “La France est la mère-patrie des Amphitryons ; sa cuisine et ses vins font le triomphe de la gastronomie. C’est le seul pays du monde pour la bonne chère ; les étrangers ont la conviction de ces vérités” (Carême, *L’Art de la cuisine française* i). Here, France’s culinary prowess, in Carême’s terms, is not just superior, but unique, unparalleled, and confirmed by outside sources. He therefore concludes that the ability to grow, produce, and serve quality food is the reason why France is an excellent *host* to foreigners, linking gastronomy to nationality, conviviality, *and* hospitality.

Auguste Escoffier would demonstrate the durability of this concept of regional abundance and diversity as a national treasure that proves the superiority of French cuisine in the early twentieth century. The renowned chef and restaurateur responsible for popularizing traditional French cuisine, who would go on to extol the benefits of Indochinese Rice in 1927, essentially describes the “Carte Gastronomique de la France” of 1809 as a means of explaining the excellence of French cuisine:

Le sol français a le privilège de produire naturellement et en abondance les meilleurs légumes, les meilleurs fruits et les meilleurs vins qui soient au monde. La France possède aussi les plus fines volailles, les viandes les plus tendres, les gibiers les plus variés et les

plus délicats. Sa situation maritime lui fournit les plus beaux poissons et crustacés. C'est donc tout naturellement que le Français devient à la fois gourmand et bon cuisinier.

(Escoffier, *Souvenirs inédits* 191)

Indeed, this notion of agricultural self-sufficiency and ability to produce a surfeit “proved” the “natural” superiority of French cuisine, according to French gastronomes, and contributed considerably to a sense of self-worth and national pride. In addition, these nationalistic culinary beliefs would help to justify France’s hegemony in the world in a more polyvalent sense, be it in terms of cultural greatness or economic and military strength, because French power was seen as stemming from its role as an inexhaustible provider of “civilization.”

That the *jeu de l'oie* would attempt to reconfigure the visual geography of France to introduce Indochinese Rice, an extra-Hexagonal product that is nonetheless presented as “French,” is therefore not so surprising given the longstanding links between food and the contiguous nation. Indeed, this was the case for the advertising of many alimentary products of colonial provenance. For instance, in an article commemorating “Colonial Week” published in *Le Monde colonial illustré* in 1933, a journalist writes:

La France a pour limites: le fleuve Congo au sud et l’océan Pacifique à l’est. *Le faire savoir aux Français qui l’ignorent*, voilà ce qu’est la propagande coloniale; tout le reste découle de cette idée. Nous mangeons du riz, notre Indochine en produit; nous buvons du chocolat, notre Côte d’Ivoire fournit le cacao nécessaire; le café, les oléagineux se trouvent dans nos colonies. Quand chaque Français sera bien pénétré de toutes ces connaissances fort simples, la grande unité nationale, celle de l’Empire de cent millions d’habitants, sera réalisé. (“La semaine coloniale de 1933,” my emphasis)

Using written words, the author paints a picture of an expanded nation and its riches that employs the same logic that the “Carte Gastronomique de la France” presents in 1809 to demonstrate that French gastronomy is the sum of its regional and colonial parts and their respective agricultural products. However, with the phrase “Le faire savoir aux Français qui l’ignorent” the journalist admits openly that this concept might be a difficult one for French citizens to accept, because what was considered “French” was dramatically destabilized, that is made considerably more inclusive, as the boundaries of “home” stretched around the world.<sup>68</sup>

Many advertisements and other propaganda for colonial foodstuffs imported to France show that this newfound non-contiguous nation was not entirely evident to metropolitan French consumers. For example, in a pamphlet dating from 1928 exhorting citizens to buy colonial products, the author explains that the rice imported from the colonies is in fact French: “La France doit consumer plus de riz. Elle doit acheter son riz en France, c’est-à-dire en Indochine” (Cordemoy 10). The unequivocal language of this document attempts to explain the recent abstraction of the geography of “France” by creating an equivalency between France and Indochina, thereby instilling a new reality for French citizens: France *is* Indochina and vice versa. Furthermore, these advertisements take great pains to distinguish Indochinese Rice as French and emphatically not foreign. On the back cover of a 1930s brochure full of recipes entitled, “Du potage au dessert: un petit voyage parmi 40 recettes choisies entre tant d’autres pour préparer un bon riz d’Indochine” (figures 15-16), the Rice Man appears, warning the uninformed consumer to be wary of “foreign rice”: “...et vous iriez me préférer des riz

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<sup>68</sup> Wilder cites the 1931 *Exposition coloniale de Paris* as another compelling example of how displays simultaneously particularized colonial peoples by pointing out their racial differences and their inassimilable cultures and included the colonies as an integral part of France’s national vision.

étrangers?,” he asks with ingratiating servility. Similarly, the *jeu de l’oie* takes great pains to distinguish the Rice Man as specifically Indochinese, but emphatically not foreign. When the Rice Man goes to the market in France, he encounters “foreign rice,” a short, squat, cross-looking figure from whom the Rice Man valiantly protects two frightened French children (square 24 and 25; figure 1). The captions reads: “Du riz étranger non! laissons le à d’autres” (square 24; figure 1) and “Le riz étranger attendra à l’épicerie un autre acheteur” (square 25; figure 1).<sup>69</sup>



Figure 15-16. “Du potage au dessert: un petit voyage parmi 40 recettes choisies entre tant d’autres pour préparer un bon riz d’Indochine.” Havas Publicité, Bureau de Propagande, circa 1931-1935. Front and back covers of recipe book, color lithograph. Author’s collection.

<sup>69</sup> The figure of “foreign rice” is likely meant to be read as Chinese because flagrant French racism against China contributed significantly to the perception of the Vietnamese as innocent and weak since it was understood that Vietnamese people were easily manipulated by Chinese merchants in Indochina. Thus, France could be posited as saving and protecting the Vietnamese from the Chinese, thereby simultaneously attempting to justify the French presence in Vietnam and underscoring the importance of buying Indochinese Rice in France (Vann 192). Furthermore, by labeling the Chinese as “troublesome Asians,” the Indochinese were meant to be seen as model subjects in comparison (Hale 69).

Even though the Rice Man is initially shown as welcome in France, the extent to which he is assimilated as a food product is ambiguous in the *jeu de l'oie*. Though the Rice Man has no problem passing into France, his stay in the metropole is not without conflict. Personified versions of eggs, milk, bread, meat, and potatoes—each equipped with faces, legs, and arms but remaining in their original, recognizable form (unlike the Rice Man's human-shaped silhouette)—are also not impressed with the Rice Man, who boasts of his low price, superior nutritional value, and seal of approval from a doctor (squares 28-35; figure 1).<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, a corpulent, red-faced chef, exuding professionalism in a white apron and chef's toque, has no trouble making the foreign into something palatable for the French, thereby transforming the Rice Man into a variety of dishes worthy of French cuisine, in the company of recognizable products like tomatoes and artichokes (which seem to lose their humanizing features once they are transformed from raw ingredients into consumable meals) (squares 37-44; figure 10). Contrary to the claims made by the promotional materials for the *repas gastronomique des Français*, the incorporation of foreign ingredients is not so easily managed; as Janes notes, in interwar France, foreign foods such as rice required mediation by the normalizing forces of French gastronomy in order to be made palatable for "le gout français" (*Colonial Food* 111), which was considered the international standard of gastronomy.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Brochures and articles such as Escoffier's *Le Riz* and Cordemoy's "L'alimentation nationale et les produits coloniaux : Le Riz" extolled the health benefits of rice in comparison to common household food products such as tomatoes and meat. For a discussion of the opposition of wheat farmers to the introduction of rice flour after World War I, see chapter 3 in Janes, *Colonial Food*.

<sup>71</sup> Attempts at making rice more palatable through mediation occurred in tasting tents and an Indochinese restaurant at the *Exposition coloniale de Paris* in 1931, as well as discursively through cookbooks published by the *Cordon bleu* and the *Pot-au-feu* (Janes, *Colonial Food* 120).

Indeed, the practice of transforming the foreign into the French was perfected by Carême, whose translation of foreign recipes into the French culinary idiom was considered a hallmark of the success of his “universalizing” method. In defense of the foreign names assigned to his dishes in his masterwork book of recipes, Carême explains: “...nous pouvons dire, sans craindre d’être taxés de vanité, que ces sauces étrangères sont tellement changées dans leurs préparations, qu’elles sont depuis long-temps [sic] toutes françaises” (*Le Cuisinier parisien* 27). Scaling from the scope of the nation, to the collective “we” and “our,” to the individual “each French person,” the colonial lobby sought to fill every table, indeed every stomach in France, with colonial bounty. Such policies, however, failed to encourage French citizen-consumers to decipher and accommodate foreignness; rather, colonial foods and their related cultures first required translation in order to be made palatable and stamped as French before their consumption. This was a kind of culinary transubstantiation that permitted the bourgeois table to remain an expression of French patriotism in spite of the increasing number of foreign-origin ingredients.

### A Place in the Home: the Vietnamese as Domestic Servants



Figure 17. Detail of figure 1. Squares 37-40.

While the Rice Man as food product becomes French, thus enabling its access to the French table in spite of his ostensible foreignness, the same cannot be said of the Rice Man as human being. According to these depictions, the Rice Man's welcome in France is predicated on his status as colonized: "Étant colonial, j'entre en France comme chez moi" (square 16; figure 13). Even though advertisements often touted "Être colonial, c'est être français!" in an attempt to encourage national unity, the designation of the Rice Man as "colonial" simultaneously emphasizes his privileged entry into the Hexagon and his unmistakable difference, thus paradoxically drawing more attention to his ambiguous positionality in France.<sup>72</sup>

This is made particularly clear in the final squares of the *jeu de l'oie*. As the Rice Man undergoes the final stages of preparation before reaching the table, he is cooked according to the precise instructions of the recipe, but his silhouetted body remains indissoluble (squares 58-63; figure 1). The Rice Man emerges from this saga somehow intact, working as a servant behind the scenes of the dinner, tray in hand, having escaped from being eaten like a magician in a disappearing act. In spite of the literalness of the previous images, alarming as they are, that show the Rice Man being cooked, the *jeu de l'oie* does not represent the Rice Man actually being cannibalized by the *convives* at the table, stopping short of showing, for instance, the Rice Man skewered by a fork or poking out of a hungry mouth. Instead, the act of consumption becomes

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<sup>72</sup> Lebovics suggests provocatively that this kind of double identity was purposely cultivated during the Third Republic, not only in colonized subjects in the colonies, but in metropolitan citizens too. He explains that metropolitan French citizens were encouraged to think of themselves as both French as well as originating from a particular region, while colonized subjects were meant to think of themselves as "indigènes" of their particular colonies as well as "protégés" of the empire. In the case of colonized peoples, this resulted in a colonial education policy that paradoxically taught them that "by becoming more native they could become more French" (189). In this way, conservatives hoped that they could maintain order and hierarchy among the colonized by encouraging an essentialized primitive cultural identity rather than allowing them to become "bad imitations of Frenchmen" through assimilation (133).



abstract as the duality of the Rice Man as both Vietnamese person and Indochinese food product is reinforced; while the rice successfully dissolves by blending into the meal, the Rice Man remains intact and recognizable for his distinguishable otherness. This contrast suggests implicitly that the Rice Man's racial difference precludes him from taking a seat at the table, an allegory of the French nation, as an equal.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, this exclusion solidifies both the racial and national unity of the seated white French family. While the colonial ingredient of rice is represented as incorporated, first, into French cuisine and, then, into the French body, colonized people seemingly cannot be assimilated as easily into the French body politic, as was also the case in the promotional video for the *repas gastronomique des Français*.

The Rice Man is only able to transcend his foreign origins and find his place at the center of French life if he permits himself to be stripped of his specificity—save for his hat, a piece of “exotic flavor”—and if he not only surrenders himself to consumption but also to servitude.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it seems he is obliged to keep his hat, as a permanent reminder of his foreignness. As novelty cookbooks from this period demonstrate, such as Raphaël de Noter's *La Bonne cuisine aux colonies: Asie, Afrique Amérique. 400 recettes exquises ou pittoresques* and Charlotte Rabette's *La Cuisine exotique chez soi*, both published in 1931, the notion of culinary exoticism was interesting to the metropolitan French public, at least in theory.<sup>75</sup>

However, public opinion was not so welcoming towards the arrival of “sujets indigènes” in France, as tens of thousands of workers and students arrived from the colonies, in addition to those who fought and labored for the Republic during World War I and managed to avoid

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<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of French cuisine as an allegory for the French nation, see Ferguson.

<sup>74</sup> For historical accounts of exoticism in French cuisine, see d'Almeida-Topor; Régnier.

<sup>75</sup> Janes explains that although exotic dishes were available at the *Exposition coloniale de Paris* in 1931 for visitors to try, most avoided these dishes and preferred dining in the French way (*Colonial Food* 153). Peters draws a similar conclusion in “Indigestible Indo-China.”

repatriation at the end of the war (Blanchard and Deroo, *Le Paris Asie* 113-115).<sup>76</sup> While Vietnamese migrants were helping to establish what would become the first Asian Quarter in Paris near the Gare de Lyon and the Montagne Sainte Geneviève, the press expressed public unease at the sight of the city becoming “trop exotique” and full of “indésirables” (Blanchard and Deroo, *Le Paris Asie* 115).<sup>77</sup> In particular, Indochinese subjects were considered problematic because of their perceived communist political leanings and were described racially as “masses jaunes” and “envahisseurs” (Blanchard and Deroo, *Le Paris Asie* 116).<sup>78</sup> Indeed, associations and groups formed by the Indochinese in France, such as *L’association des cuisiniers annamites et domestiques de maisons bourgeoises*, were viewed with suspicion and were targets of surveillance (Granier 128).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> About five thousand Indochinese workers and soldiers remained in France after World War I. Still more Indochinese soldiers and workers would arrive in France to fight in World War II (Ha 255). In addition to university degrees, many young Vietnamese students would receive a political education that would later serve them in the eventual struggle for Vietnamese independence (Hémery, “Du patriotisme au marxisme”). Also, starting in 1897 colonial public servants were permitted to bring their Indochinese servants with them to the metropole (Granier 14).

<sup>77</sup> Even the legal status of Indochinese servants in the metropole was unclear, as they were subjects of the empire and thus eligible for a certain protection, but were also victims of repression, such as state surveillance (Granier 16, 119).

<sup>78</sup> The Yen Bai uprising, in which Vietnamese soldiers in the French colonial army joined with civilian supporters to mutiny against the French in February 1930, was a first expression of anticolonial nationalist fervor by the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDDĐ). The French colonial government brutally quashed the rebellion, effectively destroying the VNQDDĐ, but many members would join the budding Vietnamese Nationalist Party, founded in 1927. This event shocked the French public, who had heretofore generally believed that relations with colonial subjects were unproblematic. Consequently, many investigative journalists traveled to the colonies in the 1930s to write accounts that examined the “reality” of French colonialism in the colonies (Cooper 93-95).

<sup>79</sup> For a socio-political analysis of Paris as a cosmopolitan center of worldwide anticolonial movements during the interwar period, see Goebel. Peters, “Resistance, Rivalries, Restaurants” also examines the political life of Vietnamese workers and students in Paris during the interwar period.

Returning to the *jeu de l'oie*, it appears that the Rice Man's racial difference and attendant supposition of his inferiority prevents him from joining in the meal, but he is nonetheless accorded a measure of access, albeit limited. The *jeu de l'oie* assigns the Rice Man a place that is in close proximity to the table; as his position behind the table and the tray he holds suggests, he is permitted to serve the family as a domestic servant (squares 39-42, 63; figure 1). Unlike the *tirailleur sénégalais* in *Banania* advertisements who is never depicted as actually interacting with white French citizens or entering the home himself, the Rice Man is pictured as gaining entry to the intimacy of the domestic sphere, cooking the meal, approaching the family table, and interacting with children. This corresponds to the supposedly meritorious notion of the Vietnamese as the "most civilized" of all the colonized peoples and therefore deserving of a higher status (Hale 141). In other words, the *jeu de l'oie* teaches the French public that although the Vietnamese were not considered the racial equal of the white French citizen, they *could* be assimilated into society: as cooks and servants.

As such, the *jeu de l'oie* shows the Rice Man heading immediately off to the market upon his arrival in France (square 19; figure 13). Indeed, this is the only time when the Rice Man is accorded a measure of inclusion, not as "je" but as part of a "nous" : "Maintenant allons faire le marché" and "Achetez d'abord de la viande" (squares 19 and 20; figure 13), he says as he holds the hands of two young French children. After being purchased at the market, the Rice Man obediently dashes straight to the kitchen: "Moi, je file à la cuisine" (square 26; figure 1), he exclaims, as if this were his natural place. Nevertheless, the delineation between the Rice Man as food product and as human being is constantly destabilized. In the kitchen, for instance, he is depicted as preparing and serving various dishes, explaining just as a servant would during an interview: "Je fais de bons potages," "des hors-d'œuvre délicats," and "d'étonnantes petites

salades” (squares 38-40 ; figure 17). Yet, he is also featured sitting on the platters themselves: “j’accompagne dignement la viande,” “et le poisson,” “je farcis les légumes,” and “mes entremets sont délicieux” (squares 41-44; figure 17), he exclaims with enthusiasm, but not without ambiguity.

Since the French attributed Vietnamese skill in cooking and serving to their “race” in the colonies (Peters, *Appetites* 166-170), it follows that this same role could be assigned to them in the metropole. Solicitations for domestics in Parisian newspapers suggest that Vietnamese people were hired specifically because of their racial background, such as this one from *Le Figaro* (1922): “On demande serviteur annamite, connaissant bien service table français, parlant français, pour service valet chambre-maître d’hôtel-argentier, hôtel particulier, bonne place. Se présenter, avec références, 27 rue Raffet (16<sup>e</sup>)” (qtd. in Granier 105). This preference for Vietnamese servants by French homemakers again corroborates notions of racial hierarchy among colonized peoples that are meant to be commendatory: “S’il n’est pas sûr que les Noires fassent d’excellents domestiques, les Annamites sont justement réputés pour leur goût, pour la grâce et l’élégance de leurs manières, la facilité avec laquelle ils apprennent toutes choses” (Gide 41; qtd. in Granier 104). The qualities assigned to the Vietnamese are, on their face, full of praise. But they also perpetuate a subjugating vision of a people that narrows their economic and social possibilities to positions of servitude and the production of food.

To the mothers playing the *jeu de l’oie* with their children, the game communicates an implicit, but direct message: buying Indochinese Rice is equivalent to hiring a servant who will work tirelessly in the background to improve her life, but without the expenditure.<sup>80</sup> Such a

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<sup>80</sup> In her landmark work, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Stoler analyzes the dynamics and management of race, gender, and the intimate in the colonies to reevaluate categories such as “colonizer” and “colonized.”

“servant” will not only help her successfully navigate an array of typically bourgeois concerns in pursuit of the cult of domesticity, such as losing weight and radiating elegance, or preparing her sons to be top-notch boy scouts, as other advertisements for Indochinese Rice suggest. This “servant” will also offer her an elevated social status and luxurious lifestyle of the kind enjoyed by the French in the colonies because of French imposition of a strict racial hierarchy there: “On est servi comme il est impensable de l’être en métropole. Chacun se sent à sa manière ‘petit roi,’ même le plus humble des commis de bureau” (Conte 353; qtd. in Granier 44). The *jeu de l’oie* thus insinuates that by buying Indochinese Rice, the working or middle-class housewife can benefit from the “advantages” of the colonial dominance without leaving home. For, as Anne McClintock writes, “race, gender, and class...come into existence *in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways” (5). In addition to the Rice Man’s racial inferiority, his childlike demeanor effectively neuters his sexuality according to French standards of masculinity, thereby offering a temporary form of empowerment to white French women. “As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire,” as McClintock writes, “but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (6).

As for the Vietnamese, they occupied an uncomfortably liminal position in interwar France because of their simultaneously complimentary and demeaning assignment. Permitted to access intimate spaces of home and table, but only to serve it or be consumed on it, they were imprisoned by an empty, teleological promise that they may eventually become sufficiently “civilized” to join, according to the *mission civilisatrice*. The inclusion of these racialized bodies depends not on the pleasure of their company, their nuanced and diverse culinary traditions, or their differing cultural perspectives, but on their culinary skills, alimentary products, and

supposed willingness to serve. Thus obliged to configure their existence to suit French ideals, the Vietnamese in France would be condemned to toil in the kitchen for the production of French cuisine and would become inevitably associated with the assembly and serving of food.<sup>81</sup> This would therefore make the political and social inequalities that are lodged in their racialized bodies invisible to most, as the glossy appeal of the table and its attendant tropes of taste and sophistication, sharing and benevolence shield these often insidious realities. As Đặng Văn Thư, a member of *L'association des cuisiniers annamites et domestiques de maisons bourgeoises*, pronounced in Vietnamese during a celebration in 1928, “Frères, nous sommes heureux ce soir, mais ce n’est pas chez nous, c’est à l’autre bout du monde, dans un pays où l’on nous traite de Chinois ou de perdus, sans cesse on nous embête parce que nous sommes d’une autre race” (Granier 118). In this way, the table symbolizes French national success *and* white solidarity undergirded by colonized others, thus revealing the variegated legacy of colonial othering in the metropole.

## Conclusion

With my examination of the *jeu de l’oie* for Indochinese Rice, I have added a new dimension to existing analyses of colonial ephemera—one that considers the historical specificity of the Vietnamese in France in order to understand how notions about Asian race and

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<sup>81</sup> As H. K. Lê and Granier note, Vietnamese people of many different backgrounds came to France for a variety reasons. Furthermore, their reception also varied; Granier writes that some Vietnamese domestics had warm relations with their French employers, while others were never paid, or were poorly treated (96-101). Peters notes in “Resistance, Rivalries, Restaurants” that Vietnamese domestics often dreamed of owning their own restaurants to liberate themselves from servitude to French families (121). H. K. Lê explains in *Les Vietnamiens en France* that Vietnamese migrants who arrived in France after the end of French colonization in 1954 and before the fall of Saigon in 1975 tended to open restaurants for social, economic, and alimentary security and freedom, even though they were not restaurateurs in Vietnam (58-61).

anti-Asian racism were learned and incorporated through French food culture. By re-evaluating this potent symbolism of French gastronomy in terms of colonial power dynamics, I demonstrate that while the *repas gastronomique des Français* can be a place of welcoming, sharing, and universality, it is also one of servitude and exploitation, of exclusion and inferiority, in particular for people of Vietnamese descent. It is therefore crucial that we as scholars continue the valuable work of, on the one hand, recognizing the ways contemporary discourse continues to propagate racist colonial ideologies. Yet, on the other hand, we must also search out the many perspectives of the Vietnamese and other Asian diasporas in France who, through literature, film, and other art forms, shift our attention away from the hegemony of the French gastronomy and the dominance of colonial stereotypes by directing it toward stories from the fields and kitchens, of immigration and exile, of economic exploitation and navigation of global tastes, but especially of cultural creation.

## Chapter II

### Cooking for Others, Eating Together:

#### Hospitality and Commensality in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

“On ne mange jamais tout seul, voilà la règle du « il faut bien manger ». C’est une loi d’hospitalité infinie.”

– Jacques Derrida<sup>82</sup>

“It is disingenuous to pretend that food is not one of the media of social exclusion.”

– Mary Douglas<sup>83</sup>

### Introduction

In January 1937 in Saigon, Jules Brévié gave his inaugural speech as the Governor-General of Indochina. Recently appointed by Léon Blum and his Popular Front government, Brévié was a progressive-minded reformer, and in his address he called for the establishment of a “social and economic equilibrium in the Colony,” asking for the goodwill of everyone in Indochina to accomplish this mission.<sup>84</sup> In particular, Brévié exhorted his French compatriots to remember their duty to their colonial subjects, pronouncing, “Que [les Français] n’oublient pas que nous avons accueilli [les Indochinois] en France à notre table de famille et que nous avons partagé avec eux le pain de notre pensée” (Brévié 10, quotation modified for clarity).

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<sup>82</sup> “« Il faut bien manger » ou le calcul du sujet” in *Points de suspensions: Entretiens* 297.

<sup>83</sup> *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* 36.

<sup>84</sup> Brévié had previously served as Governor-General of Afrique occidentale française (AOF) from 1930 to 1936. He would work as Governor-General in Indochina until 1939.



To be clear, when Brévié states that the French have welcomed the Indochinese in France, he is not referring to those colonial subjects who migrated from Indochina to the metropole. Rather, he means to say that French dominance has radiated from metropolitan France into the world, extending the French nation, and in this example, the French table, into the colonized space. Though it is Brévié and his compatriots who have traveled to a country that is foreign to them, it is they who play the role of host, as he explains unironically, to the resident Vietnamese, who thus become eternally beholden guests without ever leaving home. Indeed, Brévié's evocation of the ancient traditions of hospitality—"we have welcomed"—with commensality—"[we have] shared with them the bread of our ideas"—effectively reduces the political system that is colonialism to an understandable domestic metaphor, one that is doubly charged with symbolic power to remind the French of their obligations to the Vietnamese in their colonial endeavor. By representing the French as generous "hosts" to their Vietnamese "guests," Brévié rallies the positive connotations of providing food and hospitality to others to reinforce French power and prestige in the world, but also the righteousness of their generosity.

For Brévié seems to suggest that if the French hope to be worthy of the virtuousness that providing hospitality entails, they must continue to be generous hosts to the guests in their charge, the Vietnamese. For, as the 1765 entry for "Hospitalité" in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *L'Encyclopédie* states: "*l'hospitalité est la vertu d'une grande âme, qui tient à tout l'univers par les liens de l'humanité*" (314). Yet Diderot and d'Alembert specify that the virtue of hospitality comes from receiving *foreigners* in one's *own home*: "Je définis cette vertu, une libéralité exercée envers les étrangers, sur-tout [*sic*] si on les reçoit dans sa maison" (314). In short, Brévié's metaphorical gesture of hospitality not only distorts its scale—positing the home as the nation—it also obscures the fact that it is the French who have left *their* homes and

traveled overseas to incorporate another country and its people into their own.<sup>85</sup> With a wave of a rhetorical wand, the dark magic of colonization transformed an entire population, in this case the heterogeneous residents of Vietnam, into guests who had likely never crossed their country's borders.

The irony of such a possibility—that a resident population of a country could be forced to become the guests of an invading nation—would not be lost on Immanuel Kant. In his 1795 essay *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, he categorizes “universal hospitality” as one of the three central principles for the establishment and maintenance of peace among states whose natural inclination is to wage war, essentially escalating hospitality from a domestic issue to one of international significance.<sup>86</sup> “Hospitality,” Kant writes, “means the right of an alien not to be treated as an enemy upon his arrival in another’s country” (15). Furthermore, Kant clarifies that the guest’s welcome is a right, not just a charitable act on the part of the host, that is contingent on two factors: that he comport himself peacefully during his stay and that his visit must be a temporary one, unless he is granted a special agreement by the host.<sup>87</sup>

The conquest of Vietnam by France hardly meets these criteria, of course; following the orders of Napoleon III, the French military used brute military force to conquer Vietnam—taking first Da Nang in 1858, then Saigon in 1859, the neighboring regions by 1861 to form the colony

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<sup>85</sup> Indeed, this territorial expansion would even require a new name: “la plus grande France,” or “greater France.” For a detailed study of “la plus grande France,” see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>86</sup> Or, more precisely, Kant’s third tenet states: “The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality.” The other two tenets include “The Civil Constitution of Every State Should Be Republican” and “The Law of Nations Shall Be Founded on a Federation of Free States.” For more on Kant’s principles of hospitality and how these influenced Hannah Arendt’s writings on the subject, see Schott, “Kant and Arendt on Hospitality.”

<sup>87</sup> The “Union indochinoise” merged Cochinchina (a colony) with Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia, and Laos (protectorates). For a discussion of the act of naming as a form of colonial mastery, see Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality* 35-36.

of Cochinchina before eventually consolidating its conquests into the “Union indochinoise” in 1887 (Goscha 87).<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the French would long overstay their welcome, finally departing upon their defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh nationalist forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, almost one hundred years after their hostile arrival. Indeed, fifty years before French incursions into Vietnam, Kant excoriated purportedly civilized European nations for their inhospitable acts of colonization: “The injustice that they display towards foreign lands and peoples (which is the same as conquering them), is terrifying. When discovered, America, the lands inhabited by the blacks, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were regarded as lands belonging to no one because their inhabitants were counted for nothing” (16).<sup>89</sup>

“Counted for nothing” by the colonizing French for reasons of supposedly inferior culture and race, the Vietnamese thus lost the right to be hosts in their own territory, only to be considered dependent guests of their colonizers. As Brévié’s illustration of colonizer and colonized breaking bread together suggests, the French seem willing to accord the Vietnamese a place at the “table de famille,” but that welcome is evidently contingent on French perceptions of their own superiority. For even as commensality gives the impression of inclusivity and equality, it can also attest to exclusivity through the reinforcement of hierarchy (Fischler 533). While Brévié might be willing to let the Vietnamese partake of his bread, he seems less interested in a more reciprocal exchange, which might involve, for example, sharing a bowl of rice as well.

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<sup>88</sup> Ben Jelloun discusses the conquest of Algeria in 1830 as a similar breach of hospitality in *Hospitalité française* 6.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Still writes: “Diderot too was exercised by the fact that Europeans were welcomed in the New World when, he argues, they should have been turned away swiftly before they destroyed their hosts. Now the heirs of Diderot’s anti-colonialism may be more exercised by the tendency of former colonial powers to use ‘guest’ status, whether literally or metaphorically, as a means of making immigrants from former colonies feel insecure” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 14). See also the entry for “Les Hottentots” in Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*.

In spite of the picture of commensality that Brévié envisages, it is difficult to imagine the French sharing a meal with the Vietnamese for a number of reasons, as historian Erica Peters points out in *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*. For one, while a subset of Vietnamese urbanites enjoyed sampling French foods and combining French and Vietnamese recipes, the French practiced a form of “culinary xenophobia,” to use Peters’ term, by abstaining from any so-called “native” foods (with the exception of tropical fruits), for fear of damage to their health and racial contamination (Peters, *Appetites* 16). Even if we interpret Brévié’s claim of Franco-Vietnamese commensality more broadly—in terms of French colonial management of agriculture in Vietnam—his assertion that the French have hospitably provided for the needs of the Vietnamese through the sharing of food does not hold up to historical scrutiny. According to Peters, French attempts to improve infrastructure, technologies, and distribution of food did not alleviate hunger in rural Vietnam, but often exacerbated it through mismanagement, political conflict, and a general lack of appreciation for the diversity of diets across the country (*Appetites* 13). What is more, the “bread” to which Brévié refers represents the *cultural* sustenance that the French believed the Vietnamese lacked, thus encapsulating in concrete form everything the so-called *mission civilisatrice* purported to offer—from Western science and medicine, to the French language, education, and religion.<sup>90</sup>

My point here is not necessarily to prove Brévié’s statement wrong, but to show how the metaphor of hospitality conveys a simplicity that belies the complexity of the cultural, social, and political interactions among the French and the Vietnamese during the colonial period and after. Through an interrogation of this form of hospitality in reverse, in which French colonizers

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<sup>90</sup> For an analysis of the racializing discourse surrounding bread and rice deriving from French Enlightenment science of diet, see Blake Smith, “Starch Wars.” Also, for a detailed analysis of the *mission civilisatrice*, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

believe themselves to be generous hosts to their Vietnamese subjects *in Vietnam*, I will show how this initial corruption of the ethics of hospitality in the colonies would lead to the subsequent degradation of hospitable relations in the metropole as well. For colonial hospitality instrumentalizes the host-guest relationship to manipulate the power dynamics between colonizer and colonizer in ways that would influence the reception of the Vietnamese in France, both during the colonial period and later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when metaphors of hospitality would be reprised to characterize immigration.

The ways in which immigration and hospitality have come to be inextricably linked, especially between nations bound together by a shared colonial history, has been scrutinized, in particular by Mireille Rosello. In *Postcolonial Hospitality*, she examines the deployment of the host-guest metaphor in contemporary France to explore how immigrants came to be understood as guests while the nation invariably became the host. Borrowing from Rosello's critique of the hegemonic pairing of host and guest with nation and immigrant, I seek to further interrogate France's assumption of its role as host by examining issues of hospitality in the colonies as well as in the metropole. Specifically, how might France have taken advantage of the hospitality of its colonies to become host, not just within its hexagonal borders, but in Vietnam, a foreign country, through the subjugation of its people, the Vietnamese? Rather than acquiesce to representations of the Vietnamese as less-powerful guests, I will analyze hospitality with an eye for the subversion and counter-manipulation of its tenets by the Vietnamese themselves. To do so, I cannot rely on historical documentation, as textual traces of the perspectives of Vietnamese chefs and domestics, for instance, are not readily accessible. Instead, I turn to Monique Truong's 2003 novel *The Book of Salt*, which lets us into the most intimate spaces of colonial hospitality by imagining the lives of the Vietnamese both in the colonies and in the metropolitan capital—

either on the threshold between host and guest, or as merely adjacent to the host-guest relationship as a servant, but never entirely excluded.

For Truong's inspiration for *The Book of Salt* came while reading *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, in which Toklas mentions two Indochinese cooks who served them at the Parisian home she shared with Gertrude Stein. Truong explains:

When I got to the pages about these cooks, I was, to say the least, surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence—and such an intimate one at that—in the lives of these two women. These cooks must have seen everything, I thought. But in the official history of the Lost Generation, the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, these Indochinese cooks were just a minor footnote. There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote, I thought. (“Interview”)

Truong's resulting novel thus “create[s] presence where absence has existed” (Fung 96); through literature, she fills the gaps that history has ignored, providing visibility for the colonized Vietnamese for whom invisibility was the rule.<sup>91</sup>

Yet, in *The Book of Salt*, Truong not only re-creates the life of a Vietnamese cook for the literary icons Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, but also follows that story back to colonial Vietnam to imagine who exactly would have set the table and baked the bread for the family meal that Brévié envisaged. Indeed, Truong's novel tells the story of Binh, a young, gay, Vietnamese chef, who starts his career as a kitchen boy in the mansion of the Governor-General himself in colonial Saigon. Summarily fired when his amorous relationship with the French *chef de cuisine* is discovered by his employers, Binh takes to the seas, bound for nowhere in

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<sup>91</sup> For more on questions of invisibility in *The Book of Salt*, see Fung, “A History of Absences”; Cruz “Love is Not a Bowl of Quinces.”

particular, on an ocean freighter where he is employed as the sous-chef. He eventually ends up in Paris, working as a cook for a string of French households, before ultimately ending up in the Stein-Toklas household at 27, rue de Fleurus. The reader meets Binh just as his employment with the famed lesbian couple is about to come to an end, on the eve of their departure from France for Stein's publicity tour around the United States in 1935.

Just as Binh crisscrosses the world, Truong's narrative is similarly peripatetic; it follows Binh's wandering stream of consciousness, regularly plunging back in time whenever an event in his present situation in France triggers his memories of his former lives in Saigon and at sea. Binh's life story thus provides the unique perspective of the French colonial world, both as a colonized subject in his native Vietnam, serving his colonial hosts in their own home, and at the heart of the metropole as a racialized foreigner in France, providing the material means for the renowned hospitality of Stein and Toklas. Rather than depict these two contexts as distinct, Truong links them together through the novel's non-linear narrative structure to emphasize the continuities between colony and metropole. For instance, when Binh is mistreated in Paris on the basis of the putative inferiority of his race, he is reminded of similar experiences in Vietnam, leading him to realize that the dictates of the colonial hierarchy are not restricted to the colonized space, but are active in the metropole as well. Through Binh's stream-of-consciousness narrative, Truong actively counters such prevailing racist discourses by drawing the reader into Binh's interiority: the depths of his subconscious, the complexity of his thoughts, and the impact of trauma on his psyche.<sup>92</sup> Endowed with a full range of emotional expression, Binh emerges humanized, at least in part.

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<sup>92</sup> For a detailed analysis of these racialized stereotypes of Vietnamese people, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

More than this, however, Truong's use of stream-of-consciousness narrative from Binh's first-person perspective calls into question received ideas on flows of influence between colony and metropole. For it is no coincidence that Truong employs stream of consciousness—a paradigmatic technique of modernist writing—to describe Binh's fragmented life as a displaced colonized subject who cooks for Gertrude Stein, the "prophet of modernism" (Ozick). As this collision of the historical and the fictive suggests, Truong makes use of an assortment of postmodern literary tools, from intertextuality and historiographic metafiction to irony and absurdity, to re-write literary history from below—a provocation that links modernism with imperialism to reveal the multiplicity of potential influences on Stein's originality and on Western culture more broadly. Who exactly is "nourishing" Stein's literary genius? Truong queries implicitly. How have the Vietnamese—not to mention other colonized peoples rendered invisible by historical, literary, and social exclusion—influenced Western culture and society in ways that have been occluded by the imperialist rhetorics of power?

It is with these questions in mind that I propose to search for instances of cross-cultural influence in Truong's novel that show the limits of hospitality and critique its ability to register the full extent of social and cultural interactions between the French and the Vietnamese. For all of the literature on hospitality, its tenets remain a matter of perspective, not to mention that hospitality conjugates into different practices for diverse cultures all over the globe. I would therefore like to buttress my discussion of hospitality with the notion of commensality, or the practice of eating together. As Brévié's statement indicates, hospitality and commensality can operate on multiple scales simultaneously to index issues of ethical and political import at the level of the colonial, national, and international, as well as at the diminutive scale of the domestic. More than this, both are affective, relational practices in which food is central,



especially for the ways it measures inclusion as well as exclusion. If, as David Goldstein argues, “[...] commensality describes the range of relationships that emerge and are reified through act of eating” (41), then an analysis of commensality in Truong’s novel draws conspicuous attention to the fact that not everyone gets a seat at the table. In short, hospitality and commensality thus offer parallel means of interrogating who is welcome and who is not.

Yet, commensality differs from hospitality in that the collective consumption of food reveals cultural influences in ways that social relations outside of commensality do not. While hospitality creates the appearance of top-down power dynamics, since it is often the host dictating the conditions of the guest’s presence, reading for commensality unmasks the reality of multidimensional cross-cultural interactions, such that it becomes increasingly clear that “on ne mange jamais tout seul” (Derrida, “« Il faut bien manger »” 297). By emphasizing what is eaten, how, with whom, and prepared by whom, Truong accounts for the labor, knowledge, and creativity of the Vietnamese and their role in social and cultural relations in the French colonial world, both in Vietnam and in France. Through the analysis of scenes of hospitality and commensality in Truong’s novel, I will argue that food can be read as a language without words—a poetics of hospitality that is capable of registering the cross-cultural transformations brought about by the often-violent encounters colonialism engenders.

Accordingly, I will begin with a brief exploration of the tenets of hospitality and a critique of the ways that theorists and philosophers have attempted to reconcile hospitality within colonial and postcolonial paradigms, leading to the breakdown of the host-guest relationship. I will then turn to four examples from *The Book of Salt* that illustrate the varying degrees of hospitality, commensality, and cross-cultural influence in both colonial Vietnam and the French metropole. More specifically, I will analyze Bình’s role as the preparer of food for others—an

inherently intimate activity for its physical proximity, affective potential, and symbolic significance. What is the nature of the exchange between Binh, a colonial subject who yearns for love and belonging, and his employers, who claim the dishes their cook provides as tokens of their own hospitality, but do not always extend that sense of inclusion to the cook himself? How does servitude refract relationships based on hospitality and commensality, and are such relations even possible between an employee and an employer? Could Binh's proximity to, but ultimate exclusion from, hospitality and commensality be the best he can hope for as a colonized subject in a colonial world premised on his labor and subjugation? By infusing his dishes with emotions and memories, is Binh ever able to escape the logic of exchange value, which persistently alienates his affective labor? Or is there hope for truly hospitable, commensal relations that might allow for full expression of cross-cultural creativity by the Vietnamese?

### **Colonial Hospitality: Deconstructing the Host-Guest Metaphor**

The concept of hospitality has become inextricable from topics of immigration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. So much so that the understanding that nations serve as "hosts" who welcome immigrants as "guests" is so ubiquitous as to be imperceptible in contemporary discourse. How did hospitality, an ancient classical tradition of ethical relations among travelers seeking shelter in foreign lands, become not just a discourse, but a framework for regulating interactions between modern nation-states and citizens?

We can trace this to Kant, who transformed hospitality from an ethical code practiced among individuals within the domestic realm into a legal and political right meant to maintain peaceable relations on an international scale. Indeed, Kant's ideas on hospitality have shaped contemporary politics of immigration, especially as regards the treatment of foreigners fleeing

violence and war. For instance, Kant asserts that a nation has a duty to welcome and host imperiled foreigners in extreme circumstances, but only temporarily, thus barring them from becoming members of the nation that shelters them (Schott 186). Kant thus narrowed the purview of hospitality by limiting it to the preservation of a person's right to survival, which, as Seyla Benhabib notes, provided an example for the 1951 Refugee Convention: "not to forcibly return refugees and asylum seekers to their countries of origin if doing so would pose a clear danger to their lives and freedom" (*The Rights of Others* 35).

The deployment of Kantian hospitality in this context—in this case, in Europe by imperial states seeking to limit a potential influx of (post)colonial migrants—has drawn considerable criticism, especially from an ethical perspective. The paradox here is that while the refugee gains the right not to be expelled thanks to the translation of Kant's principle into international law, she is barred from the right to stay on a permanent basis. Such a realist and limited form of hospitality enables nations to control their borders while giving the impression of generosity and largesse, but ultimately maintain only a vestige of the ethical tradition upon which it was based. For these policies of immigration that codify hospitality in legal and political terms ignore the fact it is often an original betrayal by a Western nation of the ethics of hospitality through the colonial incursion that causes migration in the first place—the "'push' and 'pull' factors" of migration, as Benhabib calls them. "'We are here,' say migrants, 'because in effect you were there.' 'We did not cross the border, the border crossed us,'" ("The Morality of Migration") Benhabib writes.

In France, in particular, the issue of immigration came to a head in the 1970s, '80s and '90s for precisely these reasons.<sup>93</sup> It was during this time that resentment for migrants grew, as long-term postcolonial residents and their families became increasingly less likely to return to their birthplaces in former French colonies.<sup>94</sup> Even though, in many cases, such postcolonial migrants had in fact been recruited to work in French factories after World War II, fueling the economic expansion of *les trente glorieuses*, public and political opinion sidestepped the hypocrisy of their anti-immigrant hostility through a discourse of limited hospitality, positing that the offer of welcome was only a temporary one. Indeed, the growing perception at the time was that the French nation had exhausted its role as host. As Michel Rocard, prime minister during François Mitterrand's second mandate, infamously declared on national television in 1989: "La France ne peut pas *accueillir* toute la misère du monde..." (qtd. in Deltombe, my emphasis).<sup>95</sup>

The language of hospitality in Rocard's statement—that the French nation "welcomes" migrants who might be in desperate situations—turns the ethics of the host-guest relationship into an oppositional dichotomy between receiving state and arriving foreign individual, signifying us versus them, as well as a question of resources, generosity versus self-preservation. Amidst growing xenophobia and nationalism—fueled in part by the extreme-right politics and

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<sup>93</sup> Economic downturns in the 1970s, and the oil crisis of 1973, in particular, caused a decreased demand for foreign labor and an increase in unemployment (Guiraudon).

<sup>94</sup> Around this time, French-born-and/or-raised children of workers such as these from North Africa began writing and publishing novels reflecting on the inhospitality they faced in what became known as *Beur* literature. See Hargreaves, *Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France*.

<sup>95</sup> Rocard refutes this version of his statement, claiming that it was taken out of context. He maintains that he said: "La France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde, mais elle doit en prendre fidèlement sa part" (qtd. in Deltombe). For a full explanation, see Deltombe, "Michel Rocard, martyr ou mystificateur ?" For a video of Rocard making a similar statement, see <https://www.ina.fr/video/CAC90043039/extrait-7-7-michel-rocard-video.html>.

rhetoric of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s political party, Le Front national—yet in spite of decreasing numbers of immigrant arrivals, Mitterrand’s government (in “cohabitation” with Édouard Balladur, his conservative prime minister) passed a number of increasingly repressive reforms targeting recent and long-term migrants alike in pursuit of a policy of “immigration zéro” favored by politicians across the spectrum at the time (Guiraudon).<sup>96</sup> The “Pasqua Laws” of 1993 were the most infamous of these legislative efforts, which revoked a number of rights that had been entitled to asylum-seekers since the French Revolution of 1789, effectively putting an end to the “myth of French hospitality” (Rosello 3).<sup>97</sup>

As immigration grew increasingly polarized in France, the concept of hospitality became steadily more dissociated from its ethical origins. Many from the scholarly, literary, and philosophical arenas entered the fray to offer ardent critiques of the contradictions of French hospitality, such as Moroccan author and winner of the Prix Goncourt Tahar Ben Jelloun in his *Hospitalité française* and social scientists Didier Fassin, Alain Morice, and Catherine Quiminal, with their *Les lois d’inhospitalité*. Most prominent among these, however, was Jacques Derrida,

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<sup>96</sup> The “Pasqua law” of 1993 was meant to limit legal immigration and naturalization through a number of measures, such as banning the hiring of foreign graduates by French employers, prolonging the family reunification process, and preventing undocumented residents from marrying French nationals. This law, as well as others, have resulted in a paradoxical situation for a number of undocumented residents who can neither become citizens, nor be expelled according to the law (Guiraudon). The “Debré bill” of 1996 would have made these immigration laws even more restrictive and repressive. However, public protest prevented the bill from passing, largely because of the “affaire des-sans papiers de Saint Bernard,” when hundreds of undocumented men and women from Africa occupied the Saint Bernard church for months to show the serious flaws of the “Pasqua law” (Rosello, “Fortress Europe and its Metaphors” 2). The “affaire Deltombe” followed soon afterward, in which a French national named Jacqueline Deltombe was convicted for hosting an undocumented migrant from Zaire in her home. The news coverage prompted a group of film directors to write and read a manifesto on television in protest. This resulted in the amendment of the “Pasqua law” but Deltombe nonetheless lost her appeal (Rosello, “Fortress Europe and its Metaphors” 3).

<sup>97</sup> As the myth goes, the French nation offered asylum to any foreigner who desired it during the 1789 Revolution. For a critique of this myth, see Walnich, *L'impossible citoyen*.

who endeavored to parse the ancient classical traditions of hospitality and its ethical imperatives alongside the practical, contemporary concerns. Derrida presents his deconstruction of hospitality over the course of several published texts and lectures, ultimately boiling it down to two seemingly contradictory modes: conditional and unconditional.<sup>98</sup>

According to Derrida's schema, Kant's understanding of hospitality would be conditional in that it imposes legal *conditions*, or laws, on its practice in pursuit of peaceful relations between nation-states and arriving foreigners.<sup>99</sup> While Derrida considers such "laws" of hospitality as necessary to the carrying out of hospitality in a practical sense, he does not see this approach as just or ethical (Carroll 919). Indeed, the conditions placed on hospitality can be corrupted beyond recognition, as the "Pasqua law" of 1993 in France demonstrates. Rather than allow politics to govern ethics, Derrida posits that the reverse should be true; an unconditional form of hospitality must be the driving force behind its conditional counterpart. To this end, Derrida's unconditional hospitality is absolute and infinite in that there should be neither burden, nor expectation of reciprocity placed on the guest (*De l'hospitalité* 29). Channeling a Levinasian conception of an ethical welcoming of the other and her needs—a situation that occurs not just in extreme situations, but every day—Derrida thus scales down hospitality from the international to the singular encounter between two individuals (Attridge 282). Nevertheless, Derrida concedes that for hospitality to be made practical, the primordial *Law* of hospitality must be conjugated

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<sup>98</sup> The evolution of Derrida's ideas on the theme of hospitality can be found in the following publications: *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (1997); "Question d'étranger : Venue de l'étranger" and "Pas d'hospitalité" in *De l'hospitalité* (1997) with Anne Dufourmantelle; "Une hospitalité à l'infini," "Responsabilité et hospitalité," and "Une hospitalité sans condition" in *Autour de Jacques Derrida. De l'hospitalité : Manifeste* (2001); and "Hostipitality" in *Acts of Religion* (2002).

<sup>99</sup> Derrida discusses Kant's hospitality in particular in "Une hospitalité à l'infini" in *Autour de Jacques Derrida*, edited by Seffahi.

into various *laws*, or conditions, thus corrupting the Law's immutable tenets (*De l'hospitalité* 73, 75). Antithetical yet indissociable, hospitality in its unconditional and conditional forms represent for Derrida an irresolvable aporia. More than this, however, Derrida explains that they are nonetheless mutually necessary to one another: "L'une appelle, implique ou prescrit l'autre" (*De l'hospitalité* 131). In other words, unconditional hospitality must somehow be translated into practice, involving conditional rules that render it possible, but no longer purely unconditional (Attridge 287).

However, Derrida argues that hospitality is not without risk; "L'hospitalité pure, l'accueil de l'autre sans condition et sans question, comporte une menace intrinsèque de perversion" ("Une hospitalité à l'infini" 119). While conditional hospitality attempts to mitigate potential violence or loss of control through laws, unconditional hospitality might be said to "welcome" that risk of a loss of power; without conditions to regulate the behavior of the guest, the host is essentially at the mercy of the guest, creating the potential for a significant reversal of power (Attridge 285). Recalling Levinas's homonymic connection between "hôte" and "otage," Derrida explains that the "hôte"—which in French can simultaneously mean "host" as well as "guest"—is always the hostage of the guest (*De l'hospitalité* 111, *Of Hospitality* 125). Indeed, Derrida seems to suggest that the practice as well as the language of hospitality could even be instrumentalized in a kind of power play:

Pour oser dire la bienvenue, peut-être insinue-t-on qu'on est chez soi, qu'on sait ce que cela veut dire, être chez soi, et que chez soi l'on reçoit, invite ou offre l'hospitalité, s'appropriant ainsi un lieu pour *accueillir* l'autre ou, pire, y *accueillant* l'autre pour s'approprier un lieu et parler alors le langage d'hospitalité—et bien sûr je n'y prétends

pas plus que quiconque, mais le souci d'une telle usurpation déjà me préoccupe. (*Adieu* 39-40, original emphases)

In this light, the roles of host and guest are easily destabilized because of the power dynamics involved. Without conditions, a host can become vulnerable to a guest, resulting in a “*hosti-pet-*s,” or “guest-master,” as Derrida explains, citing the Latin derivations formulated by structural linguist Émile Benveniste. For “hospitality” in its modern sense comes from the Latin “*hospes*,” which is a compound of “*hostis*”—“guest” or “host”—and “*pet*”—“master” (McNulty ix).<sup>100</sup> Indeed, given the etymological connections between “hospitality” and “hostility,” Derrida conceived of both concepts together by creating a portmanteau term, “hostipitality” to encapsulate both (*De l'hospitalité* 45; *Acts of Religion* 356-420).

If we read Derrida’s texts with the preconception that France is the host and the migrant-foreigner is the guest, as has been the predominant mode of thinking, the risks of unconditional hospitality and the potential loss of power might seem grave indeed.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, such paranoid fantasies of France being held hostage by invading migrants have been propounded by far-right

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<sup>100</sup> For a more detailed exploration of Benveniste’s analysis of “Hospitality” in etymological terms, see Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess*, particularly the introduction.

<sup>101</sup> To be sure, there remains important political and ethical work to be done regarding the welcome of migrants in France and other Western countries and applying the host-guest framework might be a means of addressing that politico-ethical divide. To give just one example from recent scholarship, David Carroll proposes that Derrida’s emphasis on unconditional hospitality be renewed in light of the contemporary situation in “‘Remains’ of Algeria”: “The risk of losing all relation to unconditional hospitality is perhaps one of the greatest risks of the present historical moment. Derrida’s writings on hospitality powerfully reveal why this relation to the unconditional must be preserved. They articulate his unrelenting demand for hospitality and justice for those who continue to be excluded, interned, deported, all the ‘aliens,’ immigrants, and refugees who continue to be denied citizenship and basic human rights because according to local, national, or international laws, they are not legally ‘*chez eux*.’ They are rather ‘*chez nous*.’ The problem in fact has less to do with ‘them’ than with ‘us’ and our own sense of ourselves, our home, and our homeland, with our own inhospitable sense of our own ‘natural’ right to sovereignty” (923).



politicians, as well as by writer-provocateur Michel Houellebecq in his 2015 novel *Soumission*.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, what if we consider Derrida's description of the precarity of the host-guest relationship, in which the host can become the hostage of a guest, in a context of imperialism, with France playing the role of the usurping "guest-master" over the colonized "host"? When thought of in light of colonial dynamics, hospitality becomes increasingly imbalanced in both its conditional and unconditional forms, for while the French state was able to usurp foreign lands and thus convert from guest into host, the same cannot be said for the subsequent (post)colonial migrants who were only conditionally welcomed in France, contrary to the hysterical, dystopian fabulations represented in Houellebecq's novel.<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, Derrida argues that the destabilization of power dynamics between host and guest elicited by unconditional hospitality can also bring about extensive cultural changes, as the host strives to accommodate the guest in every way:

Il n'y a hospitalité pure que là où j'accueille, non pas l'invité, mais le visiteur inattendu, celui qui m'envahit, d'une certaine manière, qui vient chez moi alors que je n'y étais pas préparé. Et je dois faire tout ce qu'il faut pour m'adapter à lui, transformer mon chez moi,

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<sup>102</sup> Mixing fiction with real political figures, such as Marine Le Pen and François Hollande, Houellebecq's novel uses the tropes of a dystopia to imagine a France in the near future in which a Muslim party wins the presidential election, bringing Islamist and patriarchal values into the mainstream. The book was a bestseller, in part because of the strange coincidence that the Charlie Hebdo shooting happened on the day of its release.

<sup>103</sup> In his *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, Abdelmalek Sayad cites a conversation with a North African worker residing in a state-owned residence, or "foyer," in Paris who explains that his situation as a postcolonial immigrant has disabled his authority to host: "Je voudrais bien t'inviter dans ma chambre, te préparer un café, un « pot » de thé ; nous le prendrions ensemble, mais cela est interdit. Tu viens me voir ici, chez moi—je t'ai donné mon adresse je t'ai dit que j'habite à tel endroit—, tu es venu, mais je ne suis pas chez moi. Ce n'est pas chez toi, quand quelqu'un arrive à ta porte et tu lui dis : « Viens, nous sortons pour bavarder, pour prendre un café, pour manger ». C'est une chose que je ne comprends pas ; cela fait cinq ans que je suis ici, (dans le foyer), je n'ai pas encore compris. [...] Ici, tu habites mais tu n'es pas chez toi, personne n'est chez lui, ici ; nous ne sommes pas chez nous" (107).

laisser mon chez moi se transformer pour que ce visiteur inattendu puisse s’y installer, si menaçant que cela paraisse. (“Une hospitalité à l’infini” 124)

Here again, it is difficult to detach such a statement from its postcolonial French context, and, as such, it seems ill-adapted to the conundrums of colonial hospitality as we have been exploring. It is as though Derrida is reminding his French compatriots that they cannot expect to remain unchanged by the practice of hosting others *in France*, because it will necessarily alter the composition of the nation, its culture, and its language. What is more, at the time when Derrida wrote this text, the “unexpected visitors” who were perceived as “invading” France were often doing so essentially *in response to* France’s colonial incursions in the countries of these “invading” others, creating a *quid pro quo* that undermines the universality of Derrida’s concept. While the act of welcoming postcolonial migrants into contemporary France without reservation might be ethical, how can we not consider this welcoming as penitence for France’s history of colonial domination?

In short, we need to ask new questions of hospitality within the paradigm of colonialism. While Derrida begins to consider colonial relations in terms of hospitality, his analysis falls short with regard to the situation of the colonized. How can we thus understand pure hospitality in light of colonial domination? Reading such expectations for pure hospitality from the perspective of the colonized in their native land renders the proposition that “l’hospitalité [...] est l’éthicité même” (*Adieu* 94), as Derrida posits following Levinas, absurd. If pure hospitality thus permits invasion and subsequent adaptation to the desires of the unexpected visitor, could the forced capitulation of colonized peoples to invading foreign nations be considered pure hospitality on the part of the colonized? Indeed, what happens when the invading nation abuses the premise of

hospitality by *demanding* the total transformation of the host country's society and culture, as was the case with French colonialism?

Derrida's acknowledgement that hospitality is not a matter of invitation—but invasion and even violation—does not adequately account for the power differential between, for instance, France and Vietnam, and the extent to which a powerful colonizing guest can exploit the ethics of unconditional hospitality of the host on an international scale through political and legal means. Indeed, in this light, hospitality appears as an ethical cover for political violence and cultural erasure. While Derrida states that “Toute culture est originairement coloniale” (*Monolinguisme* 68), insinuating that French culture is not as homogeneous or monolithic as one might think, his position is resolutely centered on France as powerful host both in the metropole and in the colonies. How can we better account for the cultural changes that occur for both host and guest, colonizer and colonized as a result of colonial hospitality?<sup>104</sup>

### **“As if in France”: Adapting French Hospitality to Colonial Saigon**

In *The Book of Salt*, Truong's depiction of the interactions between the Vietnamese kitchen staff and their French employers draws out the absurdity of colonial hospitality to

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<sup>104</sup> Derrida does allude obliquely to the destabilization of who is host and who is guest within the context of French colonialism across several of his texts, but it is most often through curiously hesitant references to his experience as a Jewish-Algerian citizen of France. Derrida's hesitation likely stems from being Jewish-Algerian himself, which fueled his desire, once he left Algeria for France in 1949, to eliminate any sign of his identity for fear that his writing might not be taken seriously (Carroll 905). Yet, Derrida began to discuss his Algerian-Jewish identity through the political opinions he expresses in his later works, especially those concerning migrants who are *sans patrie* because of the convolutions of French colonial laws. Indeed, it is thus through the lens of personal experience with the instability of citizenship of Algerian Jews during French colonization that Derrida interrogates the ethical and political conundrum of being legally considered a foreigner in one's own home and birthplace because a genuinely foreign nation took your land as their own. For more on Derrida's personal experience and how this affected his ideas of hospitality, see Carroll, “‘Remains’ of Algeria.”

comical effect through Bình, a wry and ironic observer of the inner workings of the Governor-General's mansion, to provide a counter-example to the real-life Governor-General Brévié's heartwarming, but fallacious image of hospitable commensality between the French and Vietnamese. In this instance, the importation of French foods into Vietnam does not produce the bánh mì sandwich, that famous multicultural culinary creation. Rather, it reveals the tenuous attempts by foreigners to re-create their own culture in a place where they clearly do not feel at home, which, when faced with local realities and culture, succeed only thanks to the knowledge and labor of the native population. By portraying the culinary adaptations that the French begrudgingly make to execute their practices of hospitality and therefore maintain their role as hosts in Saigon, Truong reveals the ways Vietnam invaded and transformed French culture. Indeed, Truong's depictions of French hospitality in Vietnam turn Derrida's concept on its head by considering the cultural repercussions of hospitality in a colonial context.

To give an example, Bình recalls a scene from his adolescence in colonial Saigon in which the kitchen staff in the Governor-General's mansion prepares a dinner to celebrate the birthday of the Governor-General's wife (who, like all of Bình's female employers, is referred to generically as "Madame").<sup>105</sup> The dessert that Madame has requested is *œufs à la neige*, or "eggs in snow," a classic of French cuisine that likely dates from late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which calls for *crème anglaise* to be poured over *meringue*. A delight to be sure, *œufs à la neige* is loaded with delicious irony; not only must the cooks prepare a French dessert halfway around the world from the metropole, they must also conjure snow in the tropics. Nevertheless, conscious of the example she sets for her compatriots, Madame proclaims to her staff: "The Governor-General's

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<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of the importance of names and language in hospitality that is beyond the scope of this chapter, see Derrida, "Question d'étranger : Venue de l'étranger" in *De l'hospitalité*.

household has the duty to maintain itself with dignity and distinction. Everything here should be *as if in France!*” (46) while Binh notes sardonically that she “fail[ed] to note that in France she would have only three instead of fifteen to serve her household needs” (46). Indeed, the recipe presents distinct, unavoidable problems for the kitchen staff, which is composed of Vietnamese kitchen porters, like Binh, and headed up by Binh’s older brother, Anh Minh, who is sous-chef and has (unrequited) ambitions to one day replace the French chef de cuisine, named Chaboux.

The first problem with preparing Madame’s desired dessert is a practical, climactic one: how can egg whites be whipped into meringue—a delicate task even in the best conditions—in the Saigon heat? Well versed in adapting French fantasies to Vietnamese realities, Anh Minh thinks of a clever work-around. He proposes to escape the brutal heat of the kitchens by preparing the meringue outside, in the middle of the night.

If they had stayed inside, the egg whites, my brother knew, would have cooked solid. He had seen it happen to French chefs, newly arrived, who had no idea what can happen in the kitchens of Vietnam. The eggs whites hit the side of the bowl, the wire whisk plunges in, and before the steady stream of sugar can be added, the whites are heavy and scrambled, a calf’s brain shattered into useless lumps. In comparison, the garden was an oasis but still far from the ideal temperature for beating air into the whites until they expanded, pillowed, and became unrecognizable. (45)

Using “buckets of egg whites and shovels of white sugar” (45), the kitchen staff whisks the ingredients in huge copper bowls set in trays of ice—“a fortune disappearing before our eyes” (45)—to make 124 perfect meringues for the 62 guests in attendance. In this scene, it is Anh Minh who has so adapted his knowledge to the culinary demands of his employers that he is capable of producing a classic French recipe better than the French themselves. And it is Anh

Minh, the colonized host, who produces the material means for French hospitality to be offered by colonizing guests hosting yet other colonizing guests, in spite of the obvious fact that these colonizing host and guests are clearly not at home.

Without Vietnamese knowledge and labor, re-creating French life in Vietnam would be impossible—a fact that Truong emphasizes by recognizing Anh Minh’s culinary contributions. Describing the sight of the men laboring over Madame’s eventual dessert, Binh explains, “Sweat beads descended from necks, arms, and hands and collected in the bowls. Their salt, like the copper and the ice, would help the mixture take its shape” (46). Here, the adulteration of the dessert with the salty perspiration from the disembodied workers is not accidental, but structural to the dessert’s production; the sweat of Vietnamese labor is just as necessary as the other ingredients. In this way, Binh shows that Madame and her guests are consumers not just of eggs and sugar, but also the bodily secretions of her colonized employees, whether they care to consider that risk of contamination or not.<sup>106</sup> As Binh explains,

Most messieurs and mesdames do not want to think about it. They would prefer to believe that their cooks have no bodily needs, secretions, not to mention excitement, but we all do. We are not clean and properly sterile from head to toe. We come into their homes with our skills and our bodies, the latter a host for all the vermin and parasites that we have encountered along the way. (64)

Historian Erica Peters corroborates Binh’s intimation that while the French believed that the Vietnamese had a special aptitude for cooking and thus employed them as household cooks, they also harbored considerable fears that their close physical proximity with the Vietnamese might result in racial and cultural contamination through culinary means (166-170). More than this,

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<sup>106</sup> See Rosello, *Infiltrating Culture* for more on issues of contamination, penetration, and power.

however, Bình posits the hypocrisy of his employers who, like the Vietnamese, have also been invaded by the Other, in ways that they can fathom, but care not to admit to themselves.

The threat of contamination leads to the second problem for the Governor-General's kitchen staff: how can *crème anglaise*—a mixture of egg yolks, sugar, and milk—be made without milk? For milk in Vietnam elicits in Madame a number of phantasms, suggesting that she does fear for her physical integrity. She has heard rumors that ““In this tropical heat [...] it is not unheard of for the milk to spoil as it is leaving the beast's sweaty udder”” (47), that ““Before we arrived [...] what the Indochinese called ‘milk’ was only water poured over crushed dried soybeans!”” (47), and finally ““[...] that the Nationalists have been feeding the cows here a weed so noxious that the milk, if consumed in sufficient amounts, would turn a perfectly healthy woman barren”” (47). Bình explains:

The “woman” that Madame and old Chaboux had in their minds was, of course, French. Madame added this piece of unsolicited horror and bodily affront to Mother France just in case old Chaboux dared to balk at his task. It was all up to him. He was the intrepid explorer dispatched to honor and to preserve the sanctity of Madame and all the Mesdames who would receive the embossed dinner invitations. In a country hovering at the edge of the equator, in a kitchen dried of the milk of his beloved bovine, this beleaguered chef had to do the impossible. Old Chaboux had to find new snow. (47)

Chaboux's answer? To replace the milk with dry white wine (imported from France of course), turning the *crème anglaise* into a *sauce Sabayon*—an unorthodox departure from the traditional recipe but good enough to pass for *œufs à la neige* in the tropics.<sup>107</sup> Madame thus believes that

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<sup>107</sup> In *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*, Peters confirms French refusal to consume the foods of colonized people (150). She writes that French residents of Vietnam wanted to affirm their national pride and identity by eating imported, often canned French foods (150-152).

by adapting the recipe, she has evaded the possibility of contamination and ensured the sanctity of the French, feminine body against unwanted contact with the other. Yet, as Bình revealed when describing the Vietnamese sweat that is, quite literally, baked into the meringue, this proximity is impossible to avoid.

Furthermore, the preparation of *œufs à la neige* by Vietnamese cooks in the Governor-General's home in colonial Saigon offers an example of the doubling, and therefore unraveling, of the host-guest dynamic. "Absolute hospitality is [...] offered by a no longer sovereign *hôte* (host) to a not yet sovereign *hôte* (guest)" (921), writes Carroll, summarizing Derrida. On the one hand, the Vietnamese as original hosts have certainly lost agency to their French guests, as their tireless efforts to fulfill French demands demonstrate. On the other hand, the integrity of the French is also undermined by the Vietnamese thanks to the latter's ability to infiltrate the bodies of their employers through food. Madame's fear of being poisoned by the Nationalists by drinking Vietnamese milk betrays her lack of control, not only over her language and culture, but of her own body, for her control is based on an illusion of superiority and separation that must be painstakingly maintained. For, as Rosello writes, "the host can always devour the guest, the guest can always devour the host" (175).<sup>108</sup> However, the exercise by the Vietnamese cooks like Bình and Anh Minh of that power over their French employers is on a much smaller scale and considerably more precarious, as it is contingent on their employment and their ability to turn French fantasies into realities. Truong's text thus demonstrates that this mutual undermining of sovereignty is not an equivalent exchange of one for one.

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<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of hospitality as transgressive or perverse, see Baudrillard, *La Transparence du mal*. Jordan discusses this perversion in relation to commensality in Marie NDiaye's novels in *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*.



In addition, by scaling from the domestic to the national, Madame suggests that her ability to provide French hospitality in her home in Saigon symbolizes French *control* over its colony, not a sense of inclusion of its inhabitants. Indeed, we can safely assume, following Binh's example, that there will be no Vietnamese women among the "Mesdames" invited to the birthday party. However, Truong demonstrates through the preparation of *œufs à la neige* that Madame's pretensions to control through separation are unfounded, because she has been "contaminated"—effectively *eating with* her Vietnamese servants—all along, whether she cares to think of it or not. As Françoise Lionnet writes, "[D]enial has never prevented symbiotic transcultural exchanges among groups interacting in systematically creative states of tension. Racial and cultural "mixing" has always been a fact of reality, however fearfully unacknowledged, especially by the proponents of 'racial purity'" (*Autobiographical Voices* 9). Madame's attempts at segregating French bodies and culinary culture from Vietnamese interference with her "as if in France" refrain indicates that she is unwilling to allow for any form of exchange that might arise from cross-cultural encounters, whether hospitable or otherwise, even as the human elements of her cooks adulterate her food and her body and the circumstances of her new home force the adaptation of her recipes. Truong thus shows that such physical, social, and cultural boundaries are more porous than Madame would allow.

Could Truong's depictions of food map dynamics of cultural transformation in ways that colonial politics actively obscure? For Madame's colonialist notions of physical and cultural purity are undone in two ways that echo Édouard Glissant's theories of relation as he outlines in his *Poétique de la relation*. First, Truong's portrayal of the preparation of *œufs à la neige* posits that human beings and their cultures have already been "contaminated" through contact with others and, as a result, are always impure and heterogeneous, thus countering mythic conceptions

of the nation, its culture and language, and its body-politic as monolithic. Second, this episode suggests that the culture of the colonizing “host” is just as impacted by colonization as the colonized “guest,” which opposes understandings of the transmission of culture along vertical lines from the putatively superior metropolitan center to the lesser colonial periphery. In spite of such hierarchical assumptions, Truong demonstrates that dynamics of influence are multidirectional, such that the “contamination” of Madame’s body by Vietnamese elements becomes an allegory for the ways colonialism transformed not just of Vietnamese culture, as is typically argued, but of French culture as well.

Indeed, Truong further explores the French colonial invasion of Vietnam by re-evaluating colonial fears of culinary “contamination” as a potential site of cross-cultural creativity, thus bringing to light the relational possibilities between French and Vietnamese cultures that have long been occluded. For instance, Anh Minh recounts to Binh a story to teach him the importance of respecting the rigidity of French culinary tradition:

[...] the *chef de cuisine* at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon—a man who claimed to be from Provence but who was rumored to be the illegitimate son of a high-ranking French official and his Vietnamese seamstress—had to be dismissed because he was serving dishes obscured by lemongrass and straw mushrooms. He also slipped pieces of rambutan and jackfruit into the sorbets. ‘The clientele was outraged, demanded that the natives in the kitchen be immediately dismissed if not jailed, shocked that the culprit was a harmless-looking ‘Provençal,’ incensed enough to threaten closure of the most fashionable hotel in all of Indochina, and, yes, the Continental sent the man packing!’ said Anh Minh [...]. (42-43)

Here, the *chef de cuisine* explores the potential for gustatory relations between French and Vietnamese cultures by adding Vietnamese ingredients to French dishes, only to be fired for carrying out what was considered a grave culinary transgression. Meanwhile, Anh Minh—a stalwart acolyte of French culture, language, and especially cuisine—frames this anecdote of cultural mixing as an example of colonial impropriety, perhaps even as taboo as amorous relations between French officials and Vietnamese women, not to mention the mixed-race children such unions produced.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, that the chef is rumored to himself be *métis*, or mixed-race, and passing for a Provençal, suggests that the plurality of his biological and cultural identity serves as inspiration for the *métissage* in his cooking. *Métissage*—a term that links the term “*métis*,” or mixed-race, with the metaphor of weaving (*tisser*)—as Glissant and Lionnet have theorized, is a practice of reading for the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic mixing that occurs as a result of violent encounters such as colonialism in order to explore the expression of multicultural plurality. According to Lionnet, a language that is *métis* is one that “weaves” together different “strands” of culture into a single cloth, such that the heterogeneity of the whole is visible through the various woven strands (*Autobiographical Voices* 213). By adding pieces of rambutan and jackfruit into sorbets destined for French diners, the chef incorporates Vietnamese ingredients into a French dessert to reveal the potential compatibility, and indeed gustatory harmony, of two supposedly

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<sup>109</sup> In Europe in the nineteenth century, scientific racism propagated the notion that miscegenation would lead to degeneracy, thus fostering an obsessive desire to maintain the putative purity of the white race, as well as a negative view of hybridization (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 9-10). For more on the history of racism in France, see *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, edited by Peabody and Stovall and *The Invention of Race: Scientific and Popular Representations*, edited by Bancel, David, and Thomas. See also Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* for a critical discussion of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* in light of colonialism and the history of race.

incommensurable cultures, but these elements nonetheless remain distinct.<sup>110</sup> Unlike his indignant compatriots who spuriously believe in their own biological and cultural purity, the chef does not subscribe to notions of cultural legitimacy and its authentic expression. Rather, following Glissant, he seems to welcome the relationality, and thus the instability, of his *métis* identity through a practice of culinary *métissage*, despite general French inhospitality to Vietnamese culture and people. Though the chef is ultimately fired, this anecdote nonetheless suggests that the barriers between colonizer and colonized were, in reality, never so rigid in Vietnam, even though such intermixing was not openly permissible.

Through this example of culinary *métissage*, Truong's novel shows how food allows for relations across national, cultural, and racial borders. Yet the hidden culinary harmonies that the chef discovers also throw into relief the glaring human disharmonies that persist; it is as if food is capable of acting out hospitable relations in ways that human beings are not. The *métis* chef, compelled to reconcile his own cultural and racial heterogeneity, is an exception. He demonstrates the ways that the French and the Vietnamese might be equally relational by welcoming Vietnamese ingredients to the French table through a gesture of culinary hospitality. As Derek Attridge writes, "[...] hospitality doesn't issue from a sovereign, self-assured subject, but from a subject already divided; and it's this self-division that makes hospitality possible" (300). Indeed, it appears as though the chef's willingness to include Vietnamese ingredients into a French meal is linked to his composite selfhood. By the same measure, could one's acceptance of Vietnamese *ingredients* into a French meal indicate a potential for hospitality toward Vietnamese *people*? In other words, does what we allow inside our bodies influence what we

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<sup>110</sup> For another perspective on French-Vietnamese *métissage*, in particular in the writings of Marguerite Duras, see Barnes, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition*.

accept on the outside? How might multicultural cuisine, commensality, and hospitality be mutually influential, such that one's receptivity to culinary otherness might indicate the degree of commensality that might be embraced by those at the table? I am suggesting here that while reading for *métissage* might reveal dynamics of mutual cultural transformation obscured by colonial paradigms, politics of racial and cultural exclusion nevertheless continue to prevent social inclusion of the very agents of *métissage*. Reading for commensality, or for who is welcome to join the table, alongside *métissage*, might prove helpful in calling attention to the gap between modern society's acceptance of cultural otherness and its rejection of human others.

### **Racial Exclusion and Commensal Cannibalism in Paris**

In Binh's recollections of his life in Saigon, there are no scenes of cross-cultural dining to suggest any sense of welcoming from any side. Rather, the Vietnamese are expected to accommodate French expectations in their totality when this is clearly not possible, nor even desirable. This is expressed not only in who eats with whom, but also what exactly is eaten, indicating that the separation of French from Vietnamese in terms of commensal relations is replicated in the segregation of ingredients within the actual dishes themselves.<sup>111</sup> However, when Binh moves to the metropole, he witnesses the ways that these relationships shift when colonial paradigms of racial superiority are transposed from colonial Vietnam to metropolitan France. On the one hand, Binh experiences for the first time the dehumanizing feeling of

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<sup>111</sup> Though the French did not care to try Vietnamese foods or mix French and Vietnamese ingredients, Erica Peters argues that a new class of Vietnamese urbanites experimented extensively in culinary ways by trying newly arrived European foods and creating new dishes that combined ingredients and flavors from multiple sources. Peters suggests that this could be seen as a challenge to French cultural rigidity and hierarchies, or as an expression of personal prestige (16). For more on cross-cultural culinary creation by the Vietnamese in colonial Indochina, see chapter 7 of Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*.

dislocation in Paris, which is exacerbated by his status as a racialized minority.<sup>112</sup> Through Binh's first-person, stream-of-consciousness narration, the reader follows his experiences with discrimination and exclusion in Paris back to his memories of similar incidents in Saigon. This narrative mode highlights the continuities between colony and metropole, while also emphasizing the corruption of the tenets of hospitality in both spaces and the asymmetries of power, such that the colonized Vietnamese subject feels neither at home, nor welcome in either place. On the other hand, he discovers that the corresponding segregation of humanity and cuisine from cross-cultural influence is no longer as airtight as in Vietnam.<sup>113</sup>

If anything, Binh's experience of colonial racial hierarchy is worse in the metropole than in Vietnam. Whereas in Vietnam he was at the very least in the racial majority, in Paris he is reduced to a generalization, based on racial myths and inferences from his physical appearance, which marks him as indisputably foreign, colonized, and inferior. Binh laments:

[My body] marks me, announces my weaknesses, displays it as yellow skin. It flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passersby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. It stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of whom I could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*, and, this being Mother France, I must be Indochinese. They do not care to discern any further, ignoring the question of whether I hail from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. Indochina, indeed. We all belong to the same owner, the

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<sup>112</sup> For an analysis of race in *The Book of Salt* in the context of liberal humanism and European modernity, see Eng, "The End(s) of Race."

<sup>113</sup> Binh leaves Vietnam for France because the Governor-General wife catches wind of his sexual relationship with the young French Chef Blériot (hired to replace Chaboux, who dies). Because of this, he is fired from his job and banished from his childhood home by his violent, drunkard father. This is yet another example of the taboo of *métissage* in colonial Vietnam; Binh explains that he is not fired for being gay, but because of the inter-racial nature of his relationship with Blériot.

same Monsieur et Madame [...] To them, my body offers an exacting, predetermined life story. [...] Every day when I walked the streets of this city, [...] I am an Indochinese laborer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same. [...] But in Vietnam, I tell myself, I was above all just a man. (152)

So identified and categorized, Binh struggles throughout his time in Paris to restore his lost sense of personhood and to find a place he can call home, but is rebuffed at almost every turn.

For Binh soon finds that his racial identity is a barrier not only to his social inclusion, but to his ability to find work. There are plenty of want ads in the newspaper soliciting cooks, but when Binh knocks on the doors of one home after another to offer his services, he is shown little to no welcome. Either the door is slammed in his face at the mere sight of him, meaning that he is rejected because of his racial identity, or he is submitted to a round of questioning about his life story, “as if they have been authorized by the French government to ferret out and to document exactly how it is that I have come to inhabit their hallowed shores” (16), as Binh explains sarcastically.<sup>114</sup> Binh’s experience in Paris shows that he is very far indeed from hospitality of any kind, let alone the pure variety, which would prohibit these potential hosts from denying entry to the guest on their doorstep on the basis of his identity. As Derrida writes, “Du point de vue de l’éthique pure, il n’est pas demandé à l’arrivant, au visiteur inattendu, de répondre de lui” (“Responsabilité et hospitalité” 132).

Knowing that his chance at being hired and admitted to the household is very much conditional, Binh submits to the interrogation, which he compares to serving himself up on the

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<sup>114</sup> Jordan writes in *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*: “...doorstep encounters keep us uncomfortably alert to the ways in which interpersonal practices of hospitality are harnessed in political discourse to allude (often disingenuously) to practices at a national level, as well as prodding us to consider whether the apparently benign homeliness of domestic doorsteps may be belied by much that goes on there” (22).

dinner table: “All those questions, I deceive myself each time, all those questions must mean that I have a chance. And so I stay on, eventually serving myself forth like a scrawny roast pig, only to be told, ‘Thank you, but no thank you’” (17). Here, Bìn̄h metaphorically links servitude with cannibalism by hinting that he could be both behind the dinner table as a cook and servant, as well as the dinner’s main course, unappetizing though he may be.<sup>115</sup> That Bìn̄h must debase himself by offering his flesh for consumption in order to satisfy his needs for shelter, sustenance, and emotional proximity reflects the painful irony of his situation; to restore his humanity he must first sacrifice it to his potential employers.

Indeed, Bìn̄h’s willingness to cannibalize himself in this way indicates just how affectively undernourished he is, because these potential employers deny him entry to their kitchens, but also to their hearts. On the rare occasion that Bìn̄h is hired without incident or interrogation, he is able to exercise his *métier*, which acts like a balm that reinforces his sense of self and security: “Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite, where I am the village elder, sage and revered. Every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender” (19). A place where he can mix the flavors of his past with those of his present, the kitchen is where Bìn̄h tells his story from his past through the dishes he cooks, where he feels at home, and where we can exercise a modicum of power: “Three times a day, I orchestrate, and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced. Mouths preoccupied with the taste of foods so familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of palates detects redolent notes of something that they have no words to describe. They are, by the end, overwhelmed by an emotion they have never felt, a nostalgia for places they have never been” (19). Endowing his

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<sup>115</sup> Bìn̄h’s offer to cannibalize himself echoes the willingness of the “Rice Man” to do the same, as discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation.



recipes with his memories and emotions, Binh transmits his own affective unfulfillment to his employers through the foods he cooks, thereby covertly infiltrating their physical *and* emotional selves. Though his limited ability to speak French and his colonized status prevent him from expressing himself through language, he compensates by communicating through his cooking until his dishes are overflowing with his suppressed emotions.

Yet, Binh soon learns that the nature of the exchange between himself and his employers, whom he calls “collectors” of colonial subjects, is even more inequitable than it might appear, for they take from him a good deal more than his meals. Whatever affective recompense Binh receives from being a part of a household must be repaid in kind:

I do not willingly depart these havens. [...] But collectors are never satiated by my cooking. They are ravenous. The honey that they covet lies inside my scars. [...] They have no true interest in where I have been or what I have seen. They crave the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts. They yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes. And I am but one within a long line of others. The Algerian orphaned by a famine, the Moroccan violated by his uncle, the Madagascan driven out of his village because his shriveled left hand was a sign of his mother’s misdeeds, these are the wounded trophies who have preceded me. (19)

Perhaps because honey and sea salt are naturally occurring by-products, which do no damage when harvested, Binh’s employers believe they can gorge on his stories without doing him any harm. Yet from Binh’s perspective, his Monsieur and Madame are like parasites craving sustenance, requiring him to nourish not only their stomachs with food, but also their cannibalistic appetites for the affective stores of his sense of humanity, expressed through his narrative. Ultimately, while living in the homes of these families, Binh’s only sense of inclusion

comes from his participation in the legacy of colonized subjects who were forced to exile themselves to France and sell their labor to live, to their own detriment. In spite of their different stories, ethnicities, and nationalities, their shared experience of domination and exploitation under the weight of the French Empire links them through their unbelonging.

Bình's riposte to his employers' consumption of his humanity in this way is to actualize their cannibalistic proclivities. In oblique terms, he explains his "habit" of engaging in self-harm while cooking for his employers, effectively draining the blood from his cutting into the dishes he prepares: "Saucing the meat, fortifying the soup, enriching a batch of blood orange sorbet, the possible uses are endless, undetectable. But that is an afterthought. I never do it for them, I would never waste myself in such a way. [...] I want to say it brings me happiness or satisfaction, but it does not, I gives me proof that I am alive, and sometimes that is enough" (64-65). On the one hand, Bình's acts of self-harm reminds him that he is human when his humanity is at its lowest ebb as a result of the lack of consideration he experiences daily in metropolitan France. On the other, his "habit" enables him to penetrate his employers without them knowing, because not only does he cut himself, he purposely incorporates his blood into their food.

Bình's contamination of the dishes he prepares could be read as a form of revenge against his employers who have been so indoctrinated by colonial paradigms of racial hierarchy that they cannot recognize the humanity of the person in front of them. By turning the metaphorical cannibal acts committed by all of these Messieurs and Mesdames—who symbolically suck Bình dry by treating his life as fodder for their increasingly exotic tastes—into literal cannibal acts, Bình thereby demonstrates that their sovereignty over their selves is just as tenuous and the purity of their bodies is just as compromised in France as in Vietnam. Addressing the proverbial Madame directly, Bình issues a rather threatening reminder: "Dare I say it is your ignorance,

Madame, that [...] allows my touch to enter you in the most intimate ways. Madame, please do not forget that every morsel that slides down your dewy white throat has first rested in my two hands, cuddled in the warmth of my ten fingers. What clings to them clings to you” (153-154).<sup>116</sup> With the mention of Madame’s “white throat,” Binh comments on the physical infiltration of the white female body that his cooking facilitates, while also stoking fears of its “racial contamination.” Indeed, by adding his blood to their food, Binh makes his employers into the very *métis*, or “mixed blood,” that they fear so much, again calling into question their putative purity, whether physical, racial, or cultural.

However, Binh also explains that harming himself lets him know that he is alive and that he is a human being, even if he is routinely not treated like one. Could the act of introducing his own blood into the bodies of his employers be a desperate attempt at gaining affective access, and thus a sense of inclusion, in the family through a perverted form of commensality? Indeed, his description of culinary exchange between Toklas and Stein reminds us that the intimacy of this “contaminating” touch can also be a loving one. Binh explains that on his day off on Sundays, it is Toklas who prepares dinner for Stein, which becomes an affection, and even erotic, affair through culinary means. On the one hand, “Miss Toklas believes that with every meal she serves a part of herself, an exquisite metaphor garnishing every plate” (155), while on the other, “Gertrude Stein thinks it is unfathomably erotic that the food she is about to eat has been washed, pared, kneaded, touched, by the hands of her lover” (27). Here, both Stein and

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<sup>116</sup> Binh only bleeds into the food of Stein and Toklas one time before they catch him. “Bin, I know what goes in my mouth” (70), Toklas declares, so he is forced to give up the habit. Binh later explains that his self-harm reminds him of his long-suffering mother whom he misses dearly.

Toklas recognize the literal and symbolic penetration of the eating body by the cook, thus revealing the affective dimensions of preparing food for another.

When viewed this way, Binh's acts of self-harm appear less as acts of defiant resistance and more as attempts to be included, appreciated, and loved. Binh pines for inclusion, and the only way he can get his employers to eat *with* him is to force them to eat *him*. Cooking for others as a racialized, colonized subject is a one-sided affair; even though Stein and Toklas demonstrate that culinary asymmetry can in fact *feel* like a mutual exchange, it is because the eater, Stein, matches the affective labor of the preparer, Toklas, with reciprocal appreciation. On the contrary, what Binh receives in exchange for his culinary labor—the dishes in which he invests his emotions and memories of home—is less affective and more economic: payment for his services and room and board—material compensation that Binh does in fact require—in addition to the mere illusion of feeling like one of the family. To quench his anguished thirst for affection, Binh must therefore pick up the scraps wherever he can, from whatever is left.

### **The Invisibility of Servitude: Who Feeds Whom at 27, rue de Fleurus?**

The relationship between hospitality and servitude adds yet another wrinkle to this discussion. What does it mean when a servant provides hospitality in the place of the host? A host who offers hospitality through a proxy effectively sidesteps the humbling experience that is the hospitable act. For hosts must become the servants of their guests, albeit temporarily, by providing for their every need. In consequence, hosts are obliged to accommodate the difference of their guests by modifying their behavior accordingly, creating a transformative experience for

the host.<sup>117</sup> Yet, when the host delegates this role of temporary subservience to a servant, this results in what Mireille Rosello calls “a system of hierarchical redoubling” for the servant, “who finds herself transformed into an excluded third by the hospitable pact” (*Postcolonial Hospitality* 123).<sup>118</sup> So excluded, the servant’s many contributions to the creation, provision, and fulfillment of hospitality are made equally invisible while the host takes the credit and reaps the rewards.

Perspectives on women’s roles in the provision of hospitality provide some additional insight in how a third figure might alter hospitable relations between host and guest, particularly as regards power dynamics. Still writes, for instance, that even though a woman may be a hostess, she does not gain the power of the male host: “[...] the hostess implies hospitality offered by the master of the house, the true host, *by means of* his woman, the hostess. Her authority is thus only a delegated one, and she is an intermediary, her body (and mental and emotional faculties) a means for two or more men to communicate and bond” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 21).<sup>119</sup> Shirley Jordan corroborates this statement, remarking that since Levinas, the literature on hospitality has regarded it as a particularly male domain since women, their roles, and their agency are largely absent from the discussion (8). “Women are considered neither as hosts nor guests,” Jordan writes, “although they may clearly be adjuncts required to furnish special kinds of openness and receptivity to others and to provide the labour of hospitality,

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<sup>117</sup> As Still explains, drawing from Luce Irigaray’s *Sharing the World*: “[...] you can offer something to somebody because you are richer and more generous than the other, without having the sense that you must be changed by the other” (“Sharing the World” 49).

<sup>118</sup> Valérie Loichot notes that the complication of the host-guest relationship extends as far back as Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the host’s slaves end up playing the role of host and providing hospitality to the guests, thus confusing the power dynamics of the master-slave relationship (“The Ethics of Eating Together” 176). See Loichot, “The Ethics of Eating Together” for an analysis of Suzanne Roussi Césaire’s poetry as a cannibalistic “symposium.”

<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, Still explains that the female body is fundamentally hospitable for its capacity to mother (21). For a discussion of hospitality offered by women in the literature of Marie NDiaye, refer to Jordan, *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*; McNulty, *The Hostess*.

including at its most intimate” (8). The lack of consideration for how women make hospitality possible for male hosts and guests without being able to access those roles themselves is, of course, strikingly similar to the situation of servants, especially those who are both colonized and racialized, such as Truong’s Binh.<sup>120</sup>

Nevertheless, how a servant might skew the host-guest relationship is occasionally disregarded on the grounds that hospitality exists beyond notions of debt and economy (Attridge 299). For pure hospitality, at least according to Derrida, must be offered without an expectation for reciprocity; it is “un don sans retour, sans calcul de retour” (“Une hospitalité sans condition” 176). Following this logic, Still argues, for example, that “the relation between employer and employee is not to be judged by the laws of hospitality [...] in so far as each keeps strictly to the terms of their contract” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 12). While Still allows that an “employee paid to live in” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 11) might be an exception to this rule, her argument nonetheless posits that the abidance by a legal contract disqualifies the servant-employer relationship for consideration within the paradigm of hospitality.<sup>121</sup>

This argument strikes me as extraordinarily trusting of legal systems and the ability of servants to access them, especially given the likely power imbalance caused by differences in class, gender, race, or all three. If the servant in question is already doubly subjugated by colonialism and racialization, she likely will not have the wherewithal—whether financial,

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<sup>120</sup> In some cases, the powerlessness of the feminine role is displaced on the colonized subject. For example, see Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.

<sup>121</sup> The situation of the live-in servant is particularly troublesome, as Rosello writes, “And one aspect of the servant’s identity or function is particularly disturbing, especially when he or she is required to live under the same roof as the master: although servants share with guests the right to enter the master’s house, they are precisely not placed in the position of guests. Instead, servants find themselves expected to act as if they were hosts-owners whose responsibility is to attend to the guests’ needs, to take care of them, humbly” (*Postcolonial Hospitality* 123).

social, cultural, or linguistic—to escape a situation that, in many cases, may be exploitative in ways that do not breach the terms of her contract with her employer. Indeed, those who enter into servitude often do so because they are bereft of any choice in the matter; their vulnerability can be multifaceted. Subservient to both host and guest, a servant might be further excluded by her status as colonized, racialized, migrant, or all three at once. Indeed, it might be the servants themselves who are in dire need of a warm welcome, as hospitality would demand. As Luis Buñuel’s *Le Journal d’une femme de chambre* (1964), Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de...* (1966), Claude Chabrol’s *La Cérémonie* (1995), Leila Slimani’s *Chanson douce* (2016), Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* (2018), and most recently Bong Joon-ho’s *The Parasite* (2019) attest (to name just a few), servants need to be welcomed as human beings, accorded the respect of a guest, and be allowed to feel sense of inclusion, even if the premise of their relationship with the employer is primarily transactional and economic.<sup>122</sup> As Still herself notes, “Hospitality is a material structure but overlaid with crucial affective elements: the emotional relations associated with hospitality such as heartfelt generosity or sincere gratitude” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 12). How can we exclude servants from the host-guest dynamic given their proximity, and even central role in, such an emotional exchange? Indeed, what I am suggesting here is that the provision of hospitality may be the only way for colonized, racialized, and migrant servants to gain a measure of hospitality for themselves, such that the fulfillment of their material and affective needs depends on their contribution to the very structures that exclude and dehumanize them.

In the Parisian home of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas at 27, rue de Fleurus—an address well remembered for being a haven to avant-garde writers and artists starting just after

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<sup>122</sup> For an analysis of gendered hospitality in Sembène’s *La Noire de...*, see chapter 5 of Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality*.

the turn of the century and lasting thirty-five years—the heteronormativity of the couple’s homosexual relationship make the gender dynamics of hospitality both more visible and less so: Stein occupied the masculine role of the host to their innumerable (mostly male) guests, while Toklas oversaw the management of these occasions, as well as their own private domesticity. Indeed, Toklas’s handling of quotidian life is recognized as having provided Stein with the time and material conditions necessary to become a celebrated writer: “The division of household labor between the two women, with one doing *everything* and the other nothing, was [a] precondition for the flowering of Stein’s genius” (40, my emphasis), Janet Malcolm writes. More than just her labor, however, Toklas’s encouragement of her partner’s genius is believed to have given Stein the confidence to make her mark on the world. Malcolm continues: “It is generally agreed that without Alice Toklas, Stein might not have had the will to go on writing what for many years almost no one had any interest in reading” (40).

Yet, while Toklas’s domestic and affective contributions to Stein’s establishment as a literary icon of the twentieth century have been duly acknowledged, the participation of their colonized servants in Stein’s legacy has been somewhat less documented.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, Toklas was hardly responsible for “everything,” as her own references to their servants in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* make clear. Though she details how she hosted their many guests and occasionally cooked for them—as the recipe “Bass for Picasso” suggests, she would generally take over the kitchen only once a week. Toklas explains: “Before coming to Paris I was interested in food but not in doing any cooking. When in 1908 I went to live with Gertrude Stein at the rue de Fleurus she said we would have American food for Sunday-evening supper [...]; the servant would be out and I should have the kitchen to myself” (Toklas 29). Though her recipes

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<sup>123</sup> Stein is remembered as saying “I have been the creative literary mind of the century” (Ozick).



were initially rudimentary, Toklas tells that with practice and exposure, her cooking became increasingly “experimental and adventurous” (Toklas 29).<sup>124</sup>

Indeed, Toklas makes a point in her *Cook Book* of highlighting the originality of her palate, particularly as a way of distinguishing the Stein-Toklas household from bourgeois French families. She asserts: “The best foreign cooking is in the homes of the French who have been forced for one reason or another to live in their colonies. [...] [A]fter two or three years in Indo-China or Africa they return not only with the recipes of the local cooking but with the materials unobtainable in France and a knowledge of how to prepare them” (21). She even condemns bourgeois French cooking as boring: “These Colonial dishes add variety to what are frequently in middle-class French families well-cooked by monotonous menus” (3). Rather remarkably, Toklas attributes some of her inspiration to their servants, citing, in particular, recipes by her Vietnamese cooks; after a favorite French servant left their employ, Toklas recounts that “It was then that we commenced our insecure, unstable, unreliable but thoroughly enjoyable experiences with the Indo-Chinese” (Toklas 186).<sup>125</sup> Truong’s novel, of course, picks up on this loose strand of documented history to imagine the lives of these oblique Vietnamese figures in Toklas’s *Cook Book*, rendering visible not only the centrality of their labor in the provision of the material basis for the hospitality offered by the Stein-Toklas household, but also the contribution of their knowledge and creativity to that endeavor.

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<sup>124</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the role of colonized servants in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, see Linzie, *The True Story of Alice B. Toklas*.

<sup>125</sup> Toklas seems to suggest that she and Stein found the simultaneous proximity and anonymity of servants vis-à-vis their employers to be very strange: “Gertrude Stein used to say nothing seemed more unnatural to her than the way a servant, a complete stranger, entered your home one day and very soon after your life and then left you and went out of your life” (Toklas 186).

In short, while the domestic work and affective attention by Toklas and servants such as the fictional Binh are understood to have provided Stein the freedom and time to devote to her writing, I would like to further consider the invisible contributions that these servants make to Stein's *creative* output by analyzing the cuisine Binh prepares and serves in Truong's novel. If, as Stein's fellow modernist writer Virginia Woolf proclaims in *A Room of One's Own*: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" (18), then how might the process of eating good food nourish the imagination and produce creative expression (Goldstein 51)?<sup>126</sup> How does Truong's novel demonstrate the ways that the foods prepared for Stein and Toklas by their colonized servants were particularly influential? For Stein and Toklas do not only benefit from Binh's labor, but also from his experimental approach to cooking. Could Toklas's search for gustatory exoticism in colonial cooking be akin to the avant-garde's push for the new in modernist art and writing? Does Stein and Toklas's openness to the new make them more welcoming of Binh, a racialized, colonized Other?

For Binh does come to feel at home at 27, rue de Fleurus as the cook for Stein and Toklas, suggesting at the outset that this pair of lesbian, expatriated Jewish-American literary eccentrics might be practicing a form of hospitality towards a fellow gay immigrant, even if he is an errant colonial subject rather than an intellectual émigré. Welcomed over the threshold by Toklas herself without the usual rejection or interrogation to which he had grown accustomed, Binh discovers a measure of kinship and refuge in the Stein-Toklas household in spite of the expected subservience of his role and of his colonial caste. Indeed, he would stay for many years serving his "*Mesdames*," as he calls Stein and Toklas, who prove to be atypical employers at the

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<sup>126</sup> For more on the invisibility of Toklas's labor, see Troeung, "A Gift or a Theft." For more on the invisibility of Binh's labor, see Wesling, "The Erotics of a Livable Life."

outset, especially when compared to the previous iterations of “*Monsieur and Madame*” whom he previously served.

For one, unlike their French peers, Stein and Toklas do not subscribe to cultural segregation in their cuisine, preferring to mix foreign flavors into their home-cooked American favorites. Binh explains:

On Sundays my Madame and Madam are safely settled in their dining room with their memories of their America heaped onto large plates. Of course, Miss Toklas can reach far beyond the foods of their childhood. She is a cook who puts absinthe in her salad dressing and rose petals in her vinegar. Her menus can map the world. [...] Neither of them seems to notice that Miss Toklas’s ‘apple pie’ is now filled with an applesauce-flavored custard and frosted with buttercream or that her ‘meat loaf’ harbors the zest of an orange and is bathed in white wine. (27)

Similar to the *métis* chef at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon, Toklas and Stein are culinary deviants who cultivate cross-cultural creativity, or *métissage*, in their food by welcoming French influences, such as absinthe, buttercream, and white wine, into classic American recipes like apple pie and meatloaf.

What is more, Stein and Toklas’s acceptance of cultural mixing in their food seems to correspond to their openness to similar cross-cultural, and even inter-racial relations in their social life. Indeed, Stein and Toklas were renowned for their hospitality. Ensnored in their Parisian salon on Saturday evenings from 1903 to 1938, the pair received innumerable visitors—from modernist writers Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce, to artists of the avant-garde Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Juan Gris, to American performers Richard Wright, Josephine Baker, and Charlie Chaplin. Could such acceptance extend to Binh as well, in

spite of his cultural and racial identity? Bìn, for his part, clearly seems to think so, for he interprets his role in their household as one of mutual sustenance, albeit within certain conditions: “My Madame and Madame sustain me. They pay my wage, house my body, and I feed them” (209). Indeed, he describes his sense of inclusion in their home in terms of the meals that they share together:

Every day, my Mesdames and I dine, if not together, then back-to-back. Of course, there is always a wall between us, but when they dine on *filet de boeuf Adrienne*, I dine on *filet de boeuf Adrienne*. When they partake of *salade cancalaise*, I partake of *salade cancalaise*. When they conclude with *Crème renversée à la cevenole*, I conclude on the same sweet note. [...] These two, unlike all the others whom I have had the misfortune to call my Monsieur and Madame, extend to me the right to eat what they eat, a right that, as you know, is really more of a privilege when it is I who am doing the cooking. (209)<sup>127</sup>

Here, Bìn takes pride in the place he has at Stein and Toklas’s table, even if it is a segregated one. From Bìn’s perspective, the quasi commensality that Stein, Toklas, and Bìn share evinces an almost convivial simultaneity; all three of them regularly share the pleasures and surprises of the meal that Bìn has prepared in synchronized fashion, uniting them in their experience of eating.<sup>128</sup> For Bìn, this sense of affinity, established through their pseudo-mutual sustenance and nourishment, albeit in adjacent locations, is crucial; it mitigates the influence of colonial politics, as well as the attendant myths of cultural superiority and racial hierarchy, on their relationship, at least in part. Moreover, the fruits of Bìn’s labor are tinged with *saveurs* from his

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<sup>127</sup> “*Filet de boeuf Adrienne*” could perhaps be a reference to Adrienne Monnier, an influential figure in the modernist writing scene in Paris and contemporary of Stein. For an analysis of Monnier’s passion for literature and food, see chapter 1 of Murat, *Passage de l’Odéon*.

<sup>128</sup> As Claude Grignon argues in “Commensality and Social Morphology,” commensality and conviviality are not always the same thing.

own experiences—remember, his elaborate and meticulously prepared dishes are steeped in flavors derived from his own life—such that he feels that he is able to share parts of himself with Stein and Toklas, who are an appreciative audience. It seems as though Stein and Toklas permit Binh to eat the same meals at the same time as they do in realization, or even gratitude, of this emotional proximity, as a kind of token of their recognition of Binh’s humanity.

But is this really the best that Binh can hope for? A segregated seat at the family table and stomachs hungry for the foreign dishes he prepares? As David Goldstein argues, “Food brings people together in a shared experience of humanity. But every meal privileges some of those particular humans over others” (47). Indeed, in many ways, Stein and Toklas, as open as Binh makes them out to be, are far from paragons of multicultural acceptance. Stein, for instance, makes no attempt at properly pronouncing his name, instead calling him “Thin Bin” (32), thereby deforming it with a rhyme that suits her own tongue.<sup>129</sup> Binh must acquiesce to Toklas’s tongue as well by, as he describes it, cutting out his own entirely:

Miss Toklas is a Madame who uses her palate to set the standard of perfection. In order to please her, her cook has to adopt her tongue, make room for it, which can only mean the removal of his own. That is what she demands from all of her cooks. Impossible, of course, and so eventually they have all had to go. I have stayed this long because I am experienced, qualified in such matters. (211)

Binh’s description of his accommodation of Toklas’s palate through the symbolic removal and replacement of his own tongue echoes a similar metaphor from his time in Saigon. He explains that while working for the Governor-General and his wife, he became acculturated to the

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<sup>129</sup> For a discussion of the importance of names and language in hospitality that is beyond the scope of this chapter, see Derrida, “Question d’étranger: Venue de l’étranger” in *De l’hospitalité*.

foreignness of French customs, demands, and language, which he likens to swallowing: “[...] the vocabulary of servitude is not built upon my knowledge of foreign words but rather on my ability to swallow them. Not my own of course, but Monsieur et Madame’s” (13).<sup>130</sup> From swallowing to amputation, this metaphor is amplified as it moves from Saigon to Paris, suggesting that invisibility of servitude as a racialized colonial subject is magnified for Binh in the metropole.

Toklas might have exacting tastes, but they are attuned to the novelty and exoticism of the flavors of the colonized world where Binh was born, such that he can accommodate her desires while also indulging in his own gustatory memories. Indeed, as Binh explains, he has been “expertly trained, [...] if not bred” (117) to understand the fine line between exotic pleasure and foreign disgust from the perspective of his Western employers, and he derives considerable gratification from his ability to manipulate this distinction. For example, Binh narrates Stein and Toklas’s experience of eating the Singapore ice cream he has prepared for them in all of its sensory detail:

They both could taste the vanilla and the crystallized ginger, but only Miss Toklas could detect that there was something deeper, something that emerged as a lingering lace of a feeling on the tongue. Peppercorns, Miss Toklas. Steep the milk from morning till night with ten coarsely crushed peppercorns. Strain and proceed as usual. The ‘bite’ that the peppercorns leave behind will make the eater take notice, examine this dish of sweet anew. Think of it as an unexpected hint of irony in a familiar lover’s voice. (186)

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<sup>130</sup> Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire also refer to the acquisition of French language and culture as an act of swallowing. For a detailed analysis see Rosello, “De la révolte à la révulsion”; Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back*. See also Githire, *Cannibal Writes* for a discussion of the connections between metaphors of eating and language in the context of the Indian Ocean.

Delighted to have outwitted his Mesdames who cannot place the flavors he concocts for them, Binh tempts them with the opacity of his culinary creativity. While his silent conversation with Toklas highlights the limits of his linguistic ability, he nonetheless expresses surprising, complex sentiments through food. So much so that Truong seems to be positing Binh's cuisine as an aesthetic rival to high-culture forms, such as literature (August 310).<sup>131</sup>

And yet, even though Binh's dishes expresses a modern inventiveness that might rival the young men who flock to the famous Saturday teas at which Stein and Toklas hold court, Binh remains shackled by the "imposed invisibility of servitude" (37): "My presence, just inside the entrance to my Mesdames's kitchen, ensures that all the cups are steaming and that the tea table stays covered with marzipan and buttercream-frosted cakes. Always discreet, almost invisible, I imagine that when the guests look my way they see, well, they see a floor lamp or a footstool. I have become just that" (149). More than this, however, Stein and Toklas's legendary hospitality to young artists and writers relies on Binh's invisible labor to feed their hungry guests. Though he is an essential member of the household by doing the material work necessary for Stein and Toklas to act as hosts, he is not welcome to join the party: "My days, after all, now belong to two American ladies, and they keep me busy with the culinary bustle that is the foundation of a continually entertaining household. Rectangular folds of puff pastry dough, [...] fresh fruit purées, fondant flowers and chocolate leaves, these are the basic components of sweetness that fill my days and someone else's mouth" (86). Binh explains with dismay that for the most part, his Mesdames' guests would not have even known that his existence undergirded the whole

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<sup>131</sup> For a discussion of linguistic creativity in French stemming from global encounters that defy high literary taste, see Lionnet, "Critical Conventions."

affair: ““The Steins have a cook?”” (150), Bình imagines them asking doubtfully.<sup>132</sup> In sum, Bình appreciates Stein and Toklas because, unlike their French counterparts in the metropole and in the colonies, they appreciate his experimental cooking and accord him a measure of inclusion at their table, but ultimately he is barred from enjoying the welcome that he provides for their many guests.

However, Stein does not only benefit from Bình’s labor, but also from his capacity for creative experimentation, as Truong’s depictions of their interactions insinuate. On the one hand, Bình’s use of peppercorns in his recipe for Singapore ice cream demonstrates the profundity of his culinary imagination, and, on the other hand, the way he speaks French reveals a similar inventiveness in his language. Namely, his lack of proper training and confidence compels him to adjust what he wants to say to the limited vocabulary he has, resulting in creative adaptations which are of particular interest to Stein. For instance, just after his arrival in the Stein-Toklas household, Binh notes, “GertrudeStein has, in turn, taken an interest in my, well, interpretation of the French language. She is affirmed by my use of negatives and repetitions. She is inspired by witnessing such an elemental, bare-knuckled breakdown of a language” (34). Indeed, the first time Stein takes notice of Bình’s forced linguistic creativity occurs when he attempts to explain a dessert he plans to prepare which will require the purchase of a pineapple. Suddenly unable to remember the word for “pineapple,” he instead blurts out: ““Madame, I want to buy a pear...not

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<sup>132</sup> For a scene in the novel in which he almost gains full inclusion within Stein and Toklas’s inner circle, but is ultimately banished, see Truong, *The Book of Salt* 101. Bình also has a love affair with one of the Stein and Toklas’s guests: a young black man named Lattimore who passes as white. While an analysis of this relationship would certainly be pertinent to my argument, it is beyond the scope of this chapter. For analyses on queer desire, intimacies, and belonging in *The Book of Salt*, see Xu, *Eating Identities*; Peek, “A Subject of Sea and Salty Sediment”; Cruz, ““Love is Not a Bowl of Quinces””; Wesling, “The Erotics of a Livable Life”; Coffman, “The Migrating Look.”



a pear” (35). Embarrassed at his failure, Binh realizes that his approximations intrigue his employer: “I remember seeing Gertrude Stein smile. Already, my Madame was amusing herself with my French. She was wrapping my words around her tongue, saving them for a later, more careful study of their mutations” (35). Now it is Stein’s tongue that continues the extended metaphor; by consuming Binh’s language for her own satisfaction, she appropriates his expedient creativity.

So pleased with Binh’s resourceful formulations, Stein would ask Binh into the sitting room for a postprandial interrogation, in which he would name the various objects in the room in his own creative way—an exercise he would submit to daily for the several years he would serve them. Yet, the game goes too far when Binh discovers Stein has written a story about him, or more accurately about “Bin” as she erroneously calls him. For Binh, this betrayal of trust completes the metaphor of cannibalistic consumption, rendering Stein just as guilty as his other former employers of raiding his affective stores for the exotic narrative they might contain. In a silent, imagined conversation with Stein, Binh castigates her in a second-person critique of her presumption: “I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder. [...] You pay me only for my time. My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish, or to withhold” (215). By continuing the metaphor of cannibalism to describe Binh’s exploitation at the hands of his employers, Truong highlights the continuities of dehumanizing racial hierarchies not only from colony to metropole, but also to the heart of the modernist literary circle. Despite the drive of the avant-garde to break with the tradition in pursuit of novelty and progress, Stein’s treatment of Binh reveals that her outlook is not new at all, but more of the same. By providing a narrative voice to Binh, Truong enables him to defend his right to tell his own story, thus provocatively drawing attention to the

ways that colonial influences made their way into canonical texts through consumption and appropriation, rather than true inclusion.

What is more, Binh further criticizes Stein for the lack of depth in her perception. When Binh learns that Stein has called his story “The Book of Salt” (he must ask the concierge to read him the title because he cannot decipher it himself), he asks Stein, again in silent conversation: “Salt, I thought. GertrudeStein, what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same, Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine. Do you know, GertrudeStein, which ones I have tasted on my tongue?” (260-261). In the same way that Stein was unable to detect the taste of peppercorns in the Singapore ice cream Binh prepared for her, Stein demonstrates her weakness; clever though she may be with language, she cannot comprehend Binh’s opacity, or the imperceptible and unknowable difference that he possesses and to which he has a fundamental right, as Glissant argues (*Poétique* 203).

Under Truong’s pen, Stein is less an icon of literary modernism than a bundle of contradictions. Apparently ignorant of and indifferent to Binh’s irreducible singularity, Stein is nonetheless famous for her attention to otherness. Famed for the uniqueness of her formal and stylistic innovations, Truong insinuates that Stein merely appropriated her ideas from less powerful cultural agents like Binh.<sup>133</sup> Even her reputation as a host to the artistic and literary world is blemished, for as Derrida writes: “La décision de l’hospitalité me demande d’inventer ma propre règle. Dans ce sens, le langage de l’hospitalité doit être poétique : il faut que je parle ou que j’écoute l’autre là où, d’une certaine manière, le langage se réinvente” (“Responsabilité et hospitalité” 133). Stein is certainly famed for reinventing language and creating her own rules.

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<sup>133</sup> For an analysis of Truong’s novel as an example of “co-writing” in postcolonial contexts, see Troeung, “A Gift or a Theft.”

However, if “To be hospitable, then, is to be *inventive*, in one’s relation to the Other” (Attridge 299), then Truong’s novel posits that it is Binh, rather than Stein, who is inventive and therefore hospitable—under pressure, as he is, to take care of the singular needs of his employers to the best of his ability. That Stein can easily use the superiority of her social and cultural status to appropriate this new, reinvented language of hospitality that arises from her encounter with Binh and pass it off as her own creation betrays the vulnerability of Derrida’s model of hospitable invention to corruption. How could a more ethical, more commensal form of hospitality be expressed? For even Derrida expressed doubts on the ability of language to be hospitable: “Je me demande souvent si l’hospitalité est du côté du silence ou de la parole. Dès que je parle, je demande à mon hôte de comprendre ma langue et les sous-langues qu’elle contient, formes de politesse, langue du droit... Il y a violence dès que je parle à l’autre. Aussi la question est de savoir si l’hospitalité exige une parole ou, au contraire, un certain silence” (“Une hospitalité à l’infini” 120). Could Derrida’s “parole poétique” of hospitality, or the language that is born from the singular act of providing for the particular needs of the person who walks over the threshold, take a form other than words?

### **Creolization in the Kitchen: Cooking Up a Poetics of Hospitality**

Throughout Truong’s novel, the only time Binh experiences inclusion on truly equal terms is with a mysterious character he meets on a bridge in Paris. Between jobs and over two years away from being hired by Stein and Toklas, Binh is contemplating ending his life when is approached by a Vietnamese man who speaks to him in Vietnamese and calls him *bạn*, or friend. Like Binh, the reader does not learn the man’s name until much later in the narrative, but from the few tantalizing details Binh uncovers in the course of their conversation, it becomes

increasingly clear that the man is Nguyen Ai Quoc, who would later be known to the world as Ho Chi Minh, or “he who enlightens.”<sup>134</sup> It is Ho Chi Minh who shows Binh the infinite, creative possibilities of true hospitality—one that allows for social, cultural, and political participation on equal terms—over the course of a meal they eat together. From their shared experience of inclusive commensality emerges a poetics of hospitality in culinary form that is inclusive and truly new.

After losing a friendly bet during their conversation on the bridge, Ho Chi Minh offers to invite Binh to dinner in recompense, at a restaurant on rue Descartes run by a chef he knows. When Ho Chi Minh mentions that he met the chef in an American city, Binh presumes the food will be American, imagining that they will eat “bargelike slabs of beef and very tall glasses of cow’s milk” (94). Yet when they arrive, the red lantern hanging outside suggests to Binh that the restaurant is Chinese, so Binh then assumes with disappointment that their meal will be full of cheap ingredients and “drowned in a cornstarch-thickened slurry” (94). Once inside, Binh realizes he is wrong again, as the décor has none of the attributes typical of Chinese restaurants in Paris. Thoroughly confused, Binh misreads the situation one more time by assuming the hostess at the door is French, when in fact she understands Ho Chi Minh’s expression of thanks in Vietnamese, indicating that she is likely *métis*. The chef—whom Ho Chi Minh clarifies is neither American, nor Chinese—is willing to accommodate off-menu requests, the hostess explains, so Ho Chi Minh orders two platters of “salt-and-pepper shrimp with the shells still on” (96), a classic of Sichuan cuisine. Though Binh knows from experience that stereotypes

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<sup>134</sup> For example, Binh describes him as handsome with a full smile, wearing an outdated black suit on his slight frame, a maker of pies for a five-star English hotel run by Chef Auguste Escoffier, a traveler of the world, a doer of many odd jobs, who speaks in poetic, philosophical language and criticizes the premise of capitalism (Truong 86-90).

propagate misconceptions, he learns that even he is susceptible to making assumptions along national lines. Breaking down his expectations one by one, Ho Chi Minh reveals to Binh a world where mutual influence is not just permissible, but desirable.

Of course, the feast that arrives at their shared table is anything but classic, once more countering Binh's expectations based on national stereotypes. Binh describes:

The tray, believe me, was impressive. Most of it was taken up by a pink mound of shrimp, all with their shells and their heads still attached. A red sash at the base of their heads, their coral shining through, identified them as females, prized and very dear when available in the markets of this city. There was also a plate on either side. *Haricots verts* sautéed with garlic and ginger were in one, and watercress wilted by a flash of heat were in the other. A compote dish towered above them all, holding white rice, steam rising at topmast. A bottle balanced out the tray, its cork announcing that it was a decisive step up from the decanted bottles of house wine. (96)

From the shrimp to the green beans, the watercress to the rice, and topped off with the bottle of wine, the components of the meal that Ho Chi Minh and Binh enjoy together is a rich transnational blend that incorporates the best of Chinese, French, and Vietnamese cuisines. The meal thus hints at the potential for creative cross-cultural exchange among these three nations, which is reinforced by the fact of colonial history; China and France both colonized Vietnam, the former for almost one thousand years and the latter for nearly a century (Xu 147).<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Chinese domination of Vietnam began around the first century B.C.E. The Vietnamese briefly regained independence around 980 A.D., but lost control again in the fifteenth century. French colonization began in 1862 with the Treaty of Saigon and ended at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 (Goscha 1-2, 74, 265).

Furthermore, the preparation of the dishes themselves also reveals cross-cultural experimentation. Binh wonders aloud about the ingredients in the dishes to Ho Chi Minh who confirms his fellow compatriot's curious queries:

'Morels?' Yes, he nodded. 'Morels,' I repeated. An unexpected addition, I thought. Rich with the must of forest decay, these mushrooms were hidden below the *haricots verts* until their aroma gave them away and we began searching for them with the tines of our forks. 'Butter?' Yes, he nodded. Salt-and-pepper shrimp finished in a glaze of browned butter! I marveled. [...] 'Watercress?' He stopped in midbite and stared at me. Startled, I thought. My previous inquiries—they were more like requests for confirmation—may have been simply worded, but they indicated a palate that had spent time in a professional kitchen. This question, however, could have been asked by a simple kitchen boy. Watercress is unmistakable, bitter in the mouth, cooling in the body, greens that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed. I know this dish well. That was not the question. [...] 'The salt?' I asked, moving closer to the crux of my question. Yes, he nodded. 'The chef here,' he said, "uses *fleur de sel* to make this dish.' (97-98)

Here, Binh is awed by this chef who fearlessly uses favorites of French cuisine like morel mushrooms, *haricots verts*, browned butter, and fleur de sel to complement Chinese and Vietnamese staples of ginger and garlic, shrimp, watercress, and rice. Unlike the *métis* chef at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon, the chef on rue Descartes playfully combines the cuisines of major and minor cultures without fear of rebuke. Not only does the chef mix ingredients and flavors in his restaurant, but cooking techniques and serving practices as well. Preparing watercress requires skills particular to Vietnam while browned butter, or *beurre noisette*, involves French methods. The meal is served all at once as it would be in China or Vietnam,

rather than in stages as has been done in France since the nineteenth century, and they are given forks and knives, instead of chopsticks, in addition to Chinese-style porcelain soup spoons.<sup>136</sup> Finally, for dessert: an apple pie arrives at the table. With that final American note, the meal completes the transnational circle of foreign involvement Vietnam, albeit decades before the United States would first land there.

In this example, the chef at the restaurant on rue Descartes is a model of Derridean pure hospitality. Though he is not expecting Binh and Ho Chi Minh, the chef receives them in a space, language, and style that does not enforce any particular national or cultural belonging. Without asking for the identities of his guests, the chef responds to their needs by accommodating their request for a dish that is not on the menu. Remaining unnamed and anonymous, at least to Binh, he does not seek recognition, nor expects payment for the meal he provides—offering them the meal “compliments of the chef” (99). More than this, however, the chef responds to the arrival of his guests by inventing a meal that is unique and individually tailored to his guests—a poetic creation that accepts the transformation of his own culture wrought by imperial violence.

“L’hospitalité doit être tellement inventive,” Derrida writes, “réglée sur l’autre et sur l’accueil de l’autre, que chaque expérience d’hospitalité doit inventer un nouveau langage” (“Une hospitalité à l’infini” 116-117). Though Derrida intended for this creativity to be expressed through the reinvention of language, the meal the chef prepared is a truly singular, original, poetic creation, demonstrating that when faced with the “turbulence” of imperialism, to use Derrida’s term, the

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<sup>136</sup> Curiously, the practice of serving the dishes of a meal all at once in a single, impressive array is called “service à la française.” Yet this tradition was largely abandoned in gourmet settings in favor of “service à la russe,” a custom which was brought to Paris in nineteenth century by a Russian ambassador (Ferguson 89).

chef continues to welcome the transformation of his own cultural practices.<sup>137</sup> Could the chef's culinary creations express a poetics of hospitality, not in language, but in culinary form?

For the chef's dishes are so new and creative that they do not fit into any single category or even have a name. Flabbergasted by the cultural *mélange* that flouted his expectations for both American and Chinese food, Binh queries, "What *do* you call it then?" and Ho Chi Minh replies, "First of all, friend, the chef here is Vietnamese. He, like me, thought that he would be a writer or a scholar someday, but after he traveled the world, life gave him something more practical to do. He now cooks here on the rue Descartes, but he will always be a traveler. He will always cook from all the places where he has been. It is his way of remembering the world" (99). Declining to give the chef's culinary creations a name, Ho Chi Minh suggests that the only identifying marker is the national origin of its maker, the chef, who is Vietnamese. Interestingly, the chef had indeed hoped to become a writer or a scholar, such that he could have expressed his cross-cultural creativity through language, as Derrida intended. That he became a chef instead, on the one hand, confirms the racial, cultural, and societal hierarchies that have limited the Vietnamese in the Western world.<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, his ability to nonetheless express the poetry of cross-cultural encounter through food effectively legitimates cuisine as a poetics of hospitality, especially for those who are systematically barred from accessing the higher elevations of cultural expression, such as language, writing, and literature.

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<sup>137</sup> As Derrida writes in "Responsabilité et hospitalité": "Il ne s'agit pas simplement—même s'il peut s'agir aussi—d'invention individuelle concernant la grâce d'un jour, d'un repas, mais il s'agit d'accepter la transformation, qui peut être profonde et durable, de cette langue, de cette culture, de ce style, de ces lois...avec le moins de violence possible" (135-136).

<sup>138</sup> Lê H. K., in his comprehensive sociological study, *Les Vietnamiens en France*, explains that Vietnamese migrants who arrived in France after the end of French colonization in 1954 and before the fall of Saigon in 1975 tended to open restaurants for social, economic, and alimentary security and freedom, even though they were not restaurateurs in Vietnam (58-61).



Combining influences from many different times and spaces, languages and cultures, the chef registers in his multicultural cooking the ultimate relationality of cultures, even if their encounter is predicated on violence or invasion. The meal that the chef prepares reveals the ways that ingredients and techniques cross borders, but also how they influence one another in mutually transformative ways; though we may try to decipher the various national cultures invoked by the chef in his dishes, what the end result is something entirely new, undefinable, and completely relational. In this way, this example of culinary cross-cultural creation is not just one of *métissage*, as the cooking by the *métis* chef at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon exemplified, but also of creolization. As Glissant puts it: “La créolisation est la mise en contact de plusieurs cultures ou au moins de plusieurs éléments de cultures distinctes, dans un endroit du monde, avec pour résultante une donnée nouvelle, totalement imprévisible par rapport à la somme ou à la simple synthèse de ces éléments” (*Traité* 37).<sup>139</sup> Reading for creolization in this scene enables us to consider how, in spite of the violence of their shared histories, French, Chinese, American, and Vietnamese elements come together, with each being permitted a degree of cultural influence, to form something new and unpredictable.

Furthermore, that Bình’s first experience with true commensality is with Ho Chi Minh is particularly significant for the ways that this creolized meal they share is not merely the sum or the synthesis of its various cultural components, as Glissant suggests. Namely, the co-existence of ingredients from different cultures in the meal is mimicked by the sense of equality and respect among the people involved in the meal. By eating together, Bình and Ho Chi Minh are fulfilled; they are literally “full” from having eaten a well prepared, delicious meal, but also

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<sup>139</sup> See Shih and Lionnet, “Introduction: The Creolization of Theory,” for a theoretical and historical overview of the topic.

symbolically satiated by their shared recognition of each other's humanity. For Bình, in particular, the experience provides him with both material and affective sustenance that enables him to, in turn, express affection toward himself. It is thus through commensality that Bình discovers that the source of his humanity lies in self-affection, not self-harm. "Self-affection is not secondary nor unnecessary. Self-affection [...] is as much necessary for the being human as is bread. Self-affection is the basis and the first condition of human dignity. There is no culture, no democracy, without the preservation of self-affection for each one" ("The Return" 230, quoted in Still, "Sharing the World" 43), as Luce Irigaray writes.

By removing hierarchical imperial paradigms from his culinary imaginary, the chef transforms his cooking into political discourse that envisions the possibility of universal equality in a new society—one that acknowledges the cultural influence of its invaders, but is ultimately free from colonial rule. Unlike the *métis* chef at the Continental Palace Hotel who was fired for his culinary experimentation, or Bình who adapts the flavors of his cooking to suit his employers' palates, the chef on the rue Descartes exercises a degree of self-determination, which permits him the freedom of creative expression to imagine a more equal future. Indeed, the chef's restaurant symbolizes an ethical, if utopian, post-colonial world; one in which his compatriots can dine well—by eating together, by eating enough, and by eating creatively—without concern for money or the dehumanizing power dynamics of servitude. In short, this creolized post-colonial world presages the one Ho Chi Minh would eventually try to make into a reality by declaring Vietnam's independence from France in 1945, eighteen years after his fictive meal with Bình.

Given its political overtones and the reader's knowledge of Vietnam's long decolonial struggle, this episode of culinary creolization could be interpreted as one of resistance to colonial

structures and influences. As Valérie Loichot explains in “The Ethics of Eating Together,” culinary expression in French postcolonial literature is “the stronghold of customary resistance” to colonialism and its politics, with commensality in particular providing the “the privileged site of ethical resistance” (170). The way that Truong depicts Binh, Ho Chi Minh, the hostess, and the chef as knitted together through a poignant, relational experience of commensality and unconditional hospitality certainly qualifies as an exemplary ethical encounter meant to remedy the colonial grievances experiences lived by each of them. However, I would argue that the way that the chef, in particular, accommodates the culinary influences of colonial powers alongside Vietnamese techniques and ingredients, rather than resists them in favor of a monadic, monolithic version of Vietnamese cuisine, indicates a dynamic other than resistance.

“Colonial politics disturbs and ultimately threatens this good, ethical way of being together as a community” (179), Loichot explains. Through depictions of eating together in French postcolonial texts, Loichot argues that these scenes evoke a time *before* “[...] good relations, ethical relations in a group [became] interrupted, skewed or invaded by the political” (171). While this certainly may be true for (post)colonial Caribbean and African contexts in which there was a remembered time before the arrival of the conqueror, the long history of invasion in Vietnam makes such a nostalgia for past community before colonial disruption effectively impossible. Truong’s *The Book of Salt* does not present a nostalgic remembrance of good, ethical relations in a pre-colonial *past*—which, incidentally, might reify colonial stereotypes of colonized peoples as simple or naïve—but imagines a more egalitarian, more communal post-colonial *future* free from the conditions of unequal reciprocity required by exchanges premised on capitalism and colonialism. Predicated on a basis of egalitarian inclusion, this experience of commensality spins an affective web around each of them, providing them

with a network of support in their endeavor of realizing a truly new and modern model of relations—one that would be ushered in by none other than Ho Chi Minh himself.

## Conclusion

Through culinary means, Truong’s novel thus posits the possibility that (post)colonial “accommodation” is not the opposite of “resistance,” but a gesture of hospitality that attempts to build on a turbulent past to imagine a future that is more collective and collaborative. Truong’s conception of what is new and what is modern echoes Glissant, who insists that modernity occurs when “les cultures des hommes s’identifient l’une à l’autre, désormais, pour se transformer mutuellement” (*Poétique* 36, my emphasis). In this sense, Truong recognizes the multi-directionality and plurality of influences on the modern, thereby offering a more inclusive vision of modernity through the acknowledgement of the diversity of agents involved. Through her own literary practice, Truong suggests that Stein’s literary innovations might in fact be creative appropriations from Binh, or her real-life colonized servants more generally, such that the inclusion of these invisible colonial subjects stems from her “consumption” of them for her own literary output. In this way, Truong highlights the inability of Stein’s modernism to acknowledge the influence of colonized others by re-writing the narrative herself; she *writes with* Stein and Toklas to imagine the ways that Stein *wrote with* Binh without ever acknowledging his influence on her genius. Truong thus accounts for Binh’s oblique presence in historical and literary records, while also re-valorizing marginalized methods of expression such as cooking as legitimate, especially for those who did not have access to writing, literature, and other aesthetic pursuits. For it was not only Binh’s labor in the kitchen that contributed to Stein’s status as an icon of literary experimentation, but also his culinary creativity drawn from an openness to the

foreign and ability to adapt across cross-cultural lines—skills forged by a life under the yoke of colonialism.

## Chapter III

### Cooks and Books: Vietnamese Femininity

from Kitchen to Cookbook in Kim Thúy's *Mãn* and Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques*

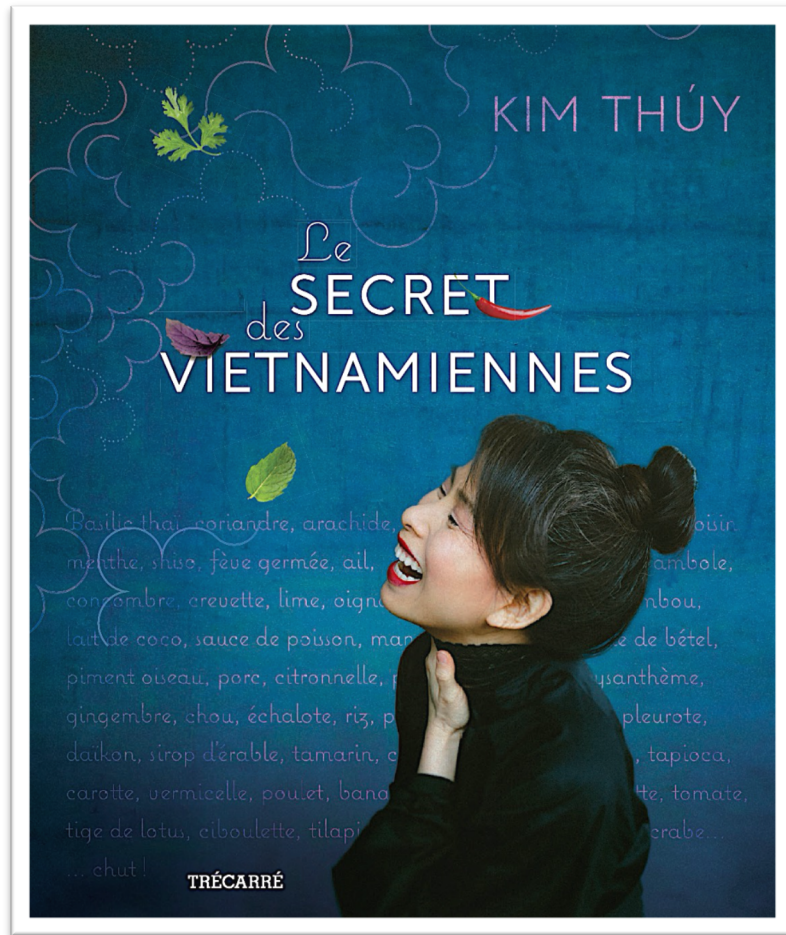


Figure 58. “Cover page.” *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* by Kim Thúy, 2017. Trécarré, Montreal, Canada. Image reproduced here with the kind authorization of the editor. Reproduction of images strictly prohibited.

### Introduction

In 2017, Kim Thúy, acclaimed Quebecois author of several novels, published a cookbook entitled *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* (figure 18). However, it is not immediately evident, neither from the title, nor from the foregrounded elements on the cover, that this is a book of recipes.

Rather, the paratextual details create a teasing visual puzzle for the reader to decipher: what could the secret of Vietnamese women be? Thúy, whose photographic portrait graces the cover, appears to find the question hilarious, as she is featured in profile, laughing wholeheartedly with closed eyes and rather coquettishly touching the collar of her high-necked silk blouse. Indeed, there are only a few foregrounded indications of anything relating to food: a few stylized branches of aromatic herbs and a red chili pepper, which, notably, accents the word “secret” in the title, possibly hinting at transgression but with a rather obvious wink.

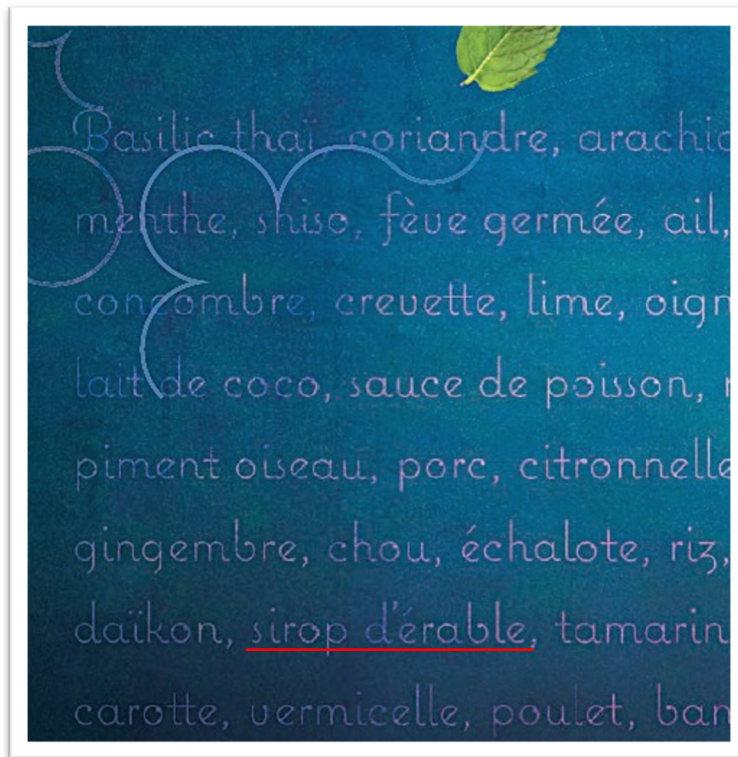


Figure 19. “Sirop d’érable.” *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* by Kim Thúy, 2017. Trécarré, Montreal, Canada. Image reproduced here with the kind authorization of the editor. Reproduction of images strictly prohibited. My emphasis.

It is with closer examination that the culinary intention of the book becomes more clear. Inscribed in the background of the cover (figure 19) are a list of ingredients: “arachide” and “crevette” followed by “sauce de poisson,” “citronnelle,” “gingembre,” and “riz.” Yet, between

“daikon” and “tamarin” is “sirop d’érable.” Maple syrup? The mention of Canada’s national product among a series of foods that align with conventional conceptions of the foregrounded elements of the cover—first, the culture of Vietnam which is conveyed by the title, seconded by the author’s portrait which communicates her ethnicity, and third, that this is a gendered enterprise which is confirmed by both title and portrait—seems meant to surprise the reader. As Thúy’s joyously laughing face suggests, this play on the reader’s expectations of culture, ethnicity, and gender is meant in jest and not to ridicule. Whatever it is we presumed “the secret of Vietnamese women” to be, Thúy seems to warn, we should expect the unexpected. In the same way that the cookbook promises surprising and unprecedented culinary harmonies unique to the shared and overlapping culture spaces of diasporic Vietnam and French Canada, Thúy demonstrates that diasporic Vietnamese women are similarly multifaceted and unpredictable, in addition to being agents of cultural creation.

Nonetheless, the undertones of the word “secret” and the explicit gendering of “Vietnamiennes” in the title of the cookbook are redolent of Orientalist fantasies of Vietnam and the women there as emphatically different, inaccessible, and wielding a seductive aura of opacity. And yet, having initially piqued the curiosity of the viewer with the ruse of the cover, Thúy then defuses the power of her suggestive references in the contents of the book. Within the cookbook, Thúy offers individual portraits and the personal stories of her mother and aunts who contributed recipes to the collection. By shedding light on the stories of the Vietnamese women in question, Thúy transforms the formerly mysterious objects of (neo)colonial desire into subjects. The “secret” of Vietnamese women, the reader comes to learn, is that they are, of course, capable of much more than preparing a delicious bowl of phở; the author’s mother, for example, is not just an accomplished home cook, but has also earned a degree in aeronautical



engineering after migrating to Canada. By playing on the reader's expectations while also focusing on individual Vietnamese women, Thúy actually attenuates the dehumanizing Western proclivity to generalize while challenging the patriarchal conceptions of Vietnamese women as only being knowledgeable about cooking.

Furthermore, Thúy recovers the distinctly Vietnamese and feminine connotation of the word "secret," as the back cover of the cookbook explains:

Les recettes étaient chuchotées entre les femmes d'une famille comme s'il s'agissait de secrets hautement sensibles et jalousement précieux. Elles se transmettaient d'une génération à l'autre au rythme d'un temps lent et dans la discrétion d'un espace intime. Dans ce livre, je vous murmure quelques-uns de ces bijoux dont ma mère et mes tantes m'ont confié la garde afin que l'histoire continue. (Back cover, *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes*)

Here, Thúy alludes to the first Vietnamese "cookbooks" as they developed over centuries and before exile; works of oral and embodied languages and of deep personal and familial significance, collected and honed over generations by women authors. Indeed, for the most part, recipes for Vietnamese cuisine were not traditionally written down; rather, mothers would pass recipes and techniques to their daughters, such that women held the keys not only to the kitchen, but to the safe of Vietnamese culinary heritage.

However, the reunification of Vietnam under communism at the end of the U.S.-Vietnam war in 1975, and the subsequent flight of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese people aboard fishing boats and ships, disrupted this seamless transmission of culinary culture. It thus follows that the genre of the written and published cookbook is largely a post-diasporic adaptation to a contemporary, globalized reality shaped by migration and separation,

transnational cultural and linguistic encounters, and opportunities for women beyond marriage and the home.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, Thúy’s conception of the written Vietnamese cookbook is more than a mere repository of traditional culture or an attempt to slow the amalgamating forces of globalization. Rather, as the photograph featuring the author with her family members all smiling conspiratorially at the reader from the first page of the introduction insinuates, Thúy’s cookbook is a gesture of welcoming, of sharing, and of connection across ancestral boundaries, political persuasions, and historical enemy lines, from her family to the reader’s.



Figure 20. “Back Cover.” 2017. *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* by Kim Thúy, Trécarré, Montreal, Canada. Image reproduced here with the kind authorization of the editor. Reproduction of images strictly prohibited.

<sup>140</sup> A few exceptions to this trend include cookbooks by women authors, such as Bà Trương Đăng Thị Bích’s *Thực Phẩm Bách Thiên* (“One Hundred Good Dishes,” 1915) and Vân Đài’s (also known as Đào Thị Nguyệt Minh) *Làm Bánh* (“Making Pastries,” 1958) and *Mùa hái quả* (“The Fruit-Picking Season,” 1964). Some cookbooks written and published in Vietnam that date from the 1920s and ’40s, such as *Sách nấu ăn Tây, Annam và Tàu* (“Book on How to Cook Western, Annamite, and Chinese Dishes,” 1940) by Nguyễn Đình Lâm, offer French recipes with Vietnamese translations, likely intended for Vietnamese cooks for French families.

The corresponding image (figure 20) corroborates this sentiment of transfer; it features Thúy—recognizable by her bright smile and her lipstick though the photo has also quite literally effaced her by cropping out the upper half of her face—in a dress patterned with flowers carrying a precariously high stack of over a dozen beautiful enamel bowls. Each painted differently, the bowls hint at the uniqueness of each recipe, which Thúy describes as “jewels.” That Thúy seems to be having trouble balancing them all serves as an invitation to the reader to share in the work of transmitting the history of Vietnamese women; by divulging the secrets of Vietnamese cuisine in a cookbook that will likely be published around the world, Thúy deems her readers worthy to partake in the cherished history of Vietnamese food and to join the networks of people who have cooked and enjoyed it.

The complexity of the paratextual details of *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* demonstrates just how thorny and potentially divisive the analysis of a cookbook can be. From the literary perspective of contemporary women’s writing in French, the red-herring combination of Vietnamese women and cuisine in the cover’s language and imagery seems to diverge from contemporary “postfeminist” sensibilities.<sup>141</sup> How should we interpret this apparent move to consider cooking as an essential part of a Vietnamese woman’s identity in light of poststructuralist, postmodern, and post-1970s feminist disintegration of the subject,

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<sup>141</sup> Damlé explains that “the term ‘postfeminist’ might be deployed as a means of thinking through the particular climate of contemporary women’s writing, as being informed by [a] rather anxious relationship with the work of feminism” (12). This term has been used by several recent scholars of women’s writing in France to describe the post-1970s climate (10). In addition, the term “women writers” does not necessarily indicate a particular political agenda, nor seek to draw attention to a marginalized status, nor discuss a specific set of issues related to women. Rather, as Damlé writes in *The Becoming of the Body*, “The use of the term ‘women’s writing’ to describe contemporary female authors writing in French is...riddled with complexity, and requires sustained critical attention in order to avoid generalisations [sic] and facile groupings” (12).

fragmentation of feminine specificity, and blurring of boundaries of gender and sexuality? Have we not “moved beyond” the notion that cooking is a woman’s unique responsibility? Are we meant to believe that women are naturally endowed with culinary talents? Indeed, in the cookbook, for all of the attention paid to the many talents and accomplishments of individual Vietnamese women, we are still left with the fact that cooking remains an intrinsically feminine activity for Vietnamese women. Though Vietnamese men do cook, the preparation of food is stereotypically viewed as women’s work according to traditional gender expectations that largely continue today in diasporic contexts. When, in an interview, I asked Thúy if the women in her family enjoyed cooking, she responded: “Elles sont obligées. Si tu es femme, tu cuisines.”

Using a literary perspective, this chapter will discuss the relationship between cooking and femininity for diasporic Vietnamese women in contemporary francophone spaces. While Thúy’s cookbook briefly described above includes narratives and histories in addition to recipes, Thúy’s and Linda Lê’s novels include significant references to cooking and, most importantly for this study, refer to cookbooks. I will therefore analyze the cookbook as it exists in fictional forms in two works of fiction that address how female protagonists write and use cookbooks in their migrant trajectories from Vietnam to Montreal in the case of Kim Thúy’s *Mãn* and France in Linda Lê’s *Les Trois Parques*.<sup>142</sup> In examining how cookbooks are written and used both literally and fictionally—in an off-kilter *mise-en-abyme* of novelists writing, among other things, about the writing of cookbooks—I will consider these works as collectively composed

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<sup>142</sup> There is considerable scholarship on Linda Lê’s prodigious oeuvre, but because this chapter focuses on largely unexplored aspects of her work, I will not be discussing that body of work in this chapter. See chapter 4 of this dissertation for a more in-depth exploration of other scholars’ perspectives. As for scholarship on Kim Thúy, see Edwards, “Linguistic *Rencontres*” for a discussion on multilingualism in Thúy’s oeuvre; Lambert-Perreault for a study of food, language, and the senses. For comparative studies with other authors see Kurmann, “*Aller-retour-détour*”; Sing.

palimpsests of Vietnamese women's experience and knowledge that span generations, time, and space in order to study how such intrinsically feminine and Vietnamese work plays out in with the postfeminine space of contemporary women's writing in French. Can cooking be a legitimate form of creative self-expression for women? Or, are culinary endeavors too indelibly linked to traditional femininity and the patriarchal belief in the subservience of women? How must these questions change when considering the subjecthood of Vietnamese women, especially in light of the potential reinvigoration of iterations of Orientalism and colonialism through food? How does cooking and writing about cooking factor into a theory of feminism for and by Asian women; or, put another way, to what degree can Vietnamese women achieve subjecthood, political agency, social agency, cultural creation through cooking and cookbooks?

To answer these questions, I will first outline the contours of debates surrounding the kitchen as a place of imprisonment or empowerment for women, and in particular for racialized migrant women, and specifically how these debates filter through Thúy's and Lê's novels. I will then turn to the cookbook—as simultaneously a historical, literary, and aesthetic document—to examine the various ways and the degree to which cookbooks may enable an escape in temporal, social, and physical ways for their writers and readers, as well as to consider how such a form should be interpreted in light of scholarship on postcolonial francophone literature and contemporary women's writing in French. In this way, I explore alternative means of reading for the agency and subjectivity of racialized women in postcolonial and postfeminist fiction in order to avoid two theoretical pitfalls common to the study of these literatures: first, the pervasive tendency to give a positive valence to an author's *resistance* to, as opposed to *accommodation* of, (neo)colonial power structures; and second, the assumption that racialized women in postcolonial contexts are capable and desirous of realizing the same states of being, autonomy,

and freedom as modern-day white Europeans. In particular, I examine the literary aesthetics of cuisine to demonstrate how the novels' heroines must both objectify and humanize themselves in response to the demands of global capitalism, patriarchal cultures, and colonial-era racial and gender stereotypes in ways that simultaneously reinforce and weaken their own senses of subjective agency. My analyses of Thúy's *Mãn* and Lê's *Les Trois Parques* thus posit that reading for aesthetics *and* humanity can afford a means of negotiating the theoretical chasm between accommodation and resistance in order to see what forms of freedom might be possible for, in this case, diasporic Vietnamese women residing in contexts marked by French colonialism. Finally, I will discuss how the form of the cookbook, which privileges transparency, might signal the weakening of Édouard Glissant's opacity as a means of combatting intrusions of Western dominance in light of an apparent shift from *understanding* to *consumption* of cultural difference.

It is important to note at the outset that the respective writing styles of Kim Thúy and Linda Lê, as well as their personas, could not be more different. As Ching Selaio frankly states, "Bien que les deux auteures soient d'origine vietnamienne, il y a peu de caractéristiques communes entre l'écriture en fragments, poétique, douce, optimiste et cocasse de Kim Thúy et la verve « logorrhéique », calomnieuse, acérée, morbide et cinglante de Linda Lê" ("Oiseaux migrants" 149). Indeed, a cursory examination of their works seems to reveal that their only points of commonality are their Vietnamese heritage, their relative age (Thúy was born in Saigon in 1968, Lê in Dalat in 1963), and their use of the French language. Even their trajectories from Vietnam were quite different. Lê spoke French as a student at the *lycée français* in Saigon and was able to relocate to Le Havre in France as the daughter of a naturalized French citizen in 1977. Meanwhile, Thúy fled the country by boat with her family in 1978 and spent time in a

refugee camp in Malaysia before being granted asylum in Quebec, where she learned French for the first time at the age of ten. Nevertheless, I believe that significant thematic similarities between these two works make this a worthy comparison; perhaps, when considered together, the striking differences in their approaches to writing in French could be interpreted as two ways of addressing the same issues relating to the identity and ways of being of diasporic Vietnamese women in francophone cultures.

Let us also not forget that cookbooks are not just fodder for literary study, but serve important “real-world” purposes for both historical and contemporary reasons. On the historical level, for instance, we must be cognizant of the longstanding tendency to overlook women’s culinary writings as legitimate historical and literary resources, which persisted even in spite of a rise in interest in women’s history and experience during the Euro-American women’s liberation movement in the 1960s. When university programs in women’s studies, particularly in the United States, began to examine women’s participation in history, scholars did not seek to valorize women’s activities in traditionally feminine spheres. “Instead, women’s studies specialists were more immediately intent on bringing visibility to the public activities of women and downplaying their kitchen duties, which seemed to symbolize women’s subordination and oppression by the patriarchy” (4), writes Barbara Haber, the former Curator of Books at Harvard’s Schlesinger Library, where she developed a vast culinary collection with stalwart dedication.<sup>143</sup>

However, this privileging of historically masculine spheres over feminine ones would erode as historians of women’s history would come to value women’s cookbooks as a means of

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<sup>143</sup> For more on the history of cookbooks, see Notaker. For cookbooks and femininity, see Bower; Avakai and Haber.

filling the gender gaps of public archives. As H el ene Le Dantec-Lowry posits in her survey of a profusion of studies published in the early 2000s on the history of women and cuisine in the United States, women’s cookbooks give voice to what Michelle Perrot calls “les silences de l’histoire” with regards to the history of women and their ostensible absence from the archives (101).<sup>144</sup> Kyla Tompkins also points out in her pithy “Consider the Recipe” that recipes merit increased historical as well as literary attention because of their formal conventions and temporal complexities. Rather than consider the “doingness,” as she calls it, of the recipe as a defect as academia has been inclined to do, Tompkins interprets this as a mark of recipes’ textual originality. She writes, “We might argue that recipes, so often considered marginal to the literary archive and historical record, consistently reference what we might call micro-theories and micro-performances of time, exhibiting a now-ness that might explain the vogue for recipes in twentieth-century literature, a century in which the sense of time has been under constant assault” (“Consider the Recipe” 443).

Indeed, this is not only true for Western societies in the face of the two World Wars, but also for the Vietnamese who certainly experienced the wearying temporal effects of wartime and trauma in the second half of the twentieth century and could perhaps partially explain the penchant for the writing and publication of cookbooks by Vietnamese men and women across the globe. A number of chefs of Vietnamese origin have been able to gain national and even international recognition through cooking and its various promotional platforms. Luke Nguyen is

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<sup>144</sup> An example of the contemporary reevaluation of this dismissive attitude is the recent publication of the recipes of Marguerite Duras in a volume entitled *La Cuisine de Marguerite*. First published by her son in 1999, the book was immediately retracted amidst a scandal between her heir and her executor, before being released again in 2014. Another example would be the release in 2010 of a third edition of the eponymous *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, which was originally published in 1954 and reedited in 1984.



a celebrity chef and restaurateur in Sydney who has produced and starred in documentaries on Vietnamese cuisine that are broadcast in Australia. Khanh-Ly Huynh and Nathalie Nguyen were both finalists of the televised cooking competition *MasterChef France*, with Huynh winning the contest in 2015. Van Tran and Anh Vu quit their high-earning office jobs in London to open a popular food stall selling banh mi sandwiches, while Charles Phan and Jacqueline and Helene An run celebrated and award-winning Vietnamese restaurants in California. All of these chefs have written and published cookbooks, many of which offer considerably more than delicious recipes.<sup>145</sup> This is especially true in Luke Nguyen's *My Vietnam: Stories and Recipes* and Jacqueline and Helene An's *Ăn: To Eat: Recipes and Stories from a Vietnamese Family Kitchen*, which offer intimate family narratives of exile to Australia and the United States, respectively, as well as overviews of culinary and political history of Vietnam. These works present themselves as forms of personal and cultural expression; in addition to sharing recipes and explaining traditional culinary techniques, they recount histories and tell personal stories.<sup>146</sup>

The narrativizing of cookbooks as well as the aestheticizing of cooking in literary texts in present-day writing by Vietnamese women, in particular, speaks to a contemporary need to

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<sup>145</sup> Such cookbooks include: Luke Nguyen's *My Vietnam: Stories and Recipes* (2011), *Baguettes and Bánh Mì: Finding France in Vietnam* (2011), and *The Food of Vietnam* (2013); Khanh-Ly Huynh's *Je deviens chef!* (2016); Nathalie Nguyen's *Easy Vietnam: Toutes le bases de la cuisine vietnamienne* (2016); Van Tran and Anh Vu's *Vietnamese Market Cookbook* (2014); Charles Phan's *Vietnamese Home Cooking* (2012) and *The Slanted Door* (2014); Andrea Nguyen's *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors* (2006), *The Banh Mi Handbook* (2014), and *The Pho Cookbook: Easy to Adventurous Recipes For Vietnam's Favorite Soup and Noodles* (2017); Jacqueline and Helene An's *Ăn: To Eat: Recipes and Stories from a Vietnamese Family Kitchen* (2016).

<sup>146</sup> Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, Nathalie Nguyen and Khanh-Ly Huynh do not emphasize their cultural heritage, nor share stories of their flight from Vietnam to France in their cookbooks, electing instead to highlight the seriousness of their culinary training and the ease of preparation and healthfulness of Vietnamese dishes.

rehabilitate the study of these texts for literary and historical purposes, because they offer the unparalleled opportunity to witness women's lives in texts written by their own hand, thereby valorizing Vietnamese women's self-expression through an intrinsically feminine medium. Nonetheless, scholars and writers in many academic domains continue to debate the role of women in the kitchen, as, on the one hand, a place of isolation and subjugation of the female sex, or, on the other hand, as a site of collectivity, creativity, and agency for women that fosters the development of her own subjectivity.

### **Women in the Kitchen: Imprisoned or Empowered?**

Can cooking be a legitimate form of creative self-expression for women? Or, are culinary endeavors too indelibly linked to femininity and the patriarchal belief in the subservience of women? Two perspectives, both published in 1983, elucidate the debate on the place of women in the kitchen as, on the one hand, responsible for the isolation and subjugation of the female sex, or, on the other hand, a site of collectivity, creativity, and agency for women that fosters the development of her own subjectivity. Angela Davis argues the former in "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework," in which she categorically dismisses the possibility of the kitchen as a place of empowerment for women. Equating cooking with other tasks like cleaning the house or doing the laundry, Davis describes all housework done by women as monotonous, arduous, uncreative, and unappreciated regardless of whether the women are remunerated for their work or the chores are shared with male partners (222-223).<sup>147</sup> Citing American feminist

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<sup>147</sup> Indeed, rather than attempt to revalue women's work as creative and empowering, A. Davis argues in favor of the industrialization of housework and the socialization of childcare and meal-preparation as a means of liberating women from the drudgery and degradation of these tasks (232).

writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Davis likens the home to a prison for women and thus a sphere of limited expression (229-230), asserting that for real change in the status of women to occur, women must leave the home to work (240). Though she is skeptical that work outside of the home is any less degrading or brutal than housework, she ultimately decides that leaving the home at least enables women to interact with others, thereby discovering camaraderie and solidarity with other similarly oppressed women, which might eventually engender substantive political change (240).

Unlike Davis who sees the kitchen as a place of isolation for modern women, American writer of Barbadian origin Paule Marshall insists, in her article "From Poets in the Kitchen," that the kitchen is an important site of collectivity and even of literary value. Marshall recounts that as a child, she would listen to her mother and her friends who would congregate together in the kitchen to tell stories, manipulating language in such a way that attuned the young Marshall to the creativity and figurative quality of these oral exchanges (630-632). These black migrant women, whose labor was exploited daily by white housewives seeking inexpensive, temporary housecleaners, would gossip, rant, and philosophize together in the kitchen at the end of every day before going home to cook for their families (628). "But given the kind of women they were, they couldn't tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon on their command: the spoken word" (630). Marshall explains that she draws her primary inspiration, not so much from the greats of literary history, but from the women in her mother's kitchen, contending that her literary oeuvre "...stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen" (633). Here, Marshall demonstrates that even though the kitchen can propagate gender inequality and invisible labor, it can also provide a training ground in the art of narrative, a

privileged gathering place for feminist self-expression among migrant women, and a vehicle for the inter-generational transfer of cultural heritage.

Although Davis and Marshall dispute the kitchen as a place of imprisonment or empowerment for women, both of their arguments hinge on two shared points. First, they share a belief in the kitchen as an intrinsically feminine space, and, second, they highlight the importance of collectivity for women to be creative, express themselves, and effect change, albeit in measured ways.<sup>148</sup> Davis's analysis sees feminine specificity as a hindrance to socio-political liberation, and, although she considers differences of race, her understanding of the kitchen as isolating rests on the modern conception of the housewife, a status that is particular to affluent white families.<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, Marshall's position centers on the intersectional situation of racialized migrant women for whom the intrinsically feminine status of the kitchen renders it a place of safety and community, as well as a potential incubator for self-expression, creativity, risk-taking in a controlled environment.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Another dimension that A. Davis and Marshall do not consider is that of the relative safety of an intrinsically feminine space such as the kitchen from male violence. For example, in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, the protagonist's mother cherishes the solitude and femininity because it provides her an escape from her abusive husband: "...soon it became clear that [her husband] would never go inside the kitchen, that that was hers. The dirt floor, the clay pots, the tin plates, the ladles made from coconut, the earthenware cistern kept out back for collecting the rain, she loved it all as she loved her child. At first, she was afraid that she loved it more because it belonged solely to her..." (Truong 169).

<sup>149</sup> A. Davis writes that the industrial revolution diminished the value of women's work compared to men's work: "Since housework does not generate profit, domestic labor was naturally defined as an inferior form of work as compared to capitalist wage labor" (228). When women did work outside of the home their work was still undervalued and underpaid. Meanwhile the social value of the role of a "housewife" among the affluent rose since these families did not depend on the income of women (229). Black women, A. Davis writes, did not experience the same divisions between work inside and outside the home and accordingly enjoyed a small measure of "equality" with their male counterparts, however minimal (230-231).

<sup>150</sup> In this way, Marshall considers gender alongside race and class, thus making connections that seem to hint toward "intersectionality," a concept Kimberlee Crenshaw would coin in 1991.

Curiously, however, neither Davis nor Marshall expressly addresses the actual act of cooking for its potential as a source of creativity, self-expression, and collectivity in any great detail. Cooking food remains particularly tethered to the feminine specificity of migrant women, particularly to diasporic Vietnamese women, yet this does not only lead to their subjugation, as Angela Davis is wont to argue. These albeit quotidian and undervalued tasks can also ascribe to migrant women who cook the unique role of shaping culture, mediating tastes, and determining which stories are told and how. Following Marshall's recuperation of the kitchen, Valérie Loichot argues that in the novels of Caribbean authors, the narratives created in that space enable migrant women to claim agency through storytelling in such a way that transforms their domestic labor into amplified acts of political resistance and cultural creation. These "kitchen narratives," as Loichot calls them, draw out the connections between cooking and writing to give voice to historically silenced women, as well as to create links both among diasporic subjects and to the land of origin, thereby inspiring a long-distance, cross-generational collectivity that transcends the kitchen. Wielding this innovative power of narrative reconstruction, the migrant women in these fictional works gesture towards a gendered form of Glissantian creolization through creatively adaptive and proliferating cooking methods. Thus, Loichot explains, "Cooking and eating therefore act as vessels of creolization in a situation of exile. The situation of exile, paradoxically, facilitates modes of turning private gestures into political acts that gain resonance outside the walls of the kitchen and the walls of the island of origin" (*Tropics* 97).

### **From Kitchen to Community through Cooking in Kim Thúy's *Mãn***

Loichot's argument is particularly relevant in Kim Thúy's *Mãn*. In this novel (her third of four, published in 2013), the eponymous heroine is herself a newcomer to Montreal and a recent

bride, having recently moved there from Saigon to join her Vietnamese husband, who was a refugee, and to work in his restaurant. Although Mãn spends significant time toiling in her kitchen, essentially to the point of imprisonment, the intrinsically feminine status of this space gives her a degree of agency that permits her to slowly refashion herself to suit her newfound situation as a Vietnamese woman in the West. Indeed, she seizes the culinary opportunities that are available to her to develop her nascent sense of self through creative choices in the kitchen that, as Loichot suggests, resonate with others beyond and accelerate her transformation.

Though Mãn's sense of duty and deference to patriarchal tradition obliges her to work long hours in the restaurant, she does at first find solace in the isolation from the intimidating foreign world beyond. In a section entitled "*bép • cuisine*," Mãn explains that while her mother always knew how to shelter her from the crush of life, "J'ai retrouvé cet espace [calme] à Montréal, dans la cuisine du restaurant de mon mari. Les mouvements de la vie extérieure étaient mis à l'écart par le bruit constant de la hotte. Le temps était marqué par le nombre de commandes insérées dans la fente de la barre de métal et non par les minutes ni par les heures" (36). This purposeful limitation of Mãn's access, time, and space, ostensibly by her husband, certainly sounds analogous to an inmate in a prison cell, but the text suggests these barriers serve more as protection. Cocooned in the kitchen, she experiences the external world of Montreal through "le petit carré par lequel je déposais les plats" (37) and never has to leave her isolated space: "Je ne faisais que monter et descendre les marches qui reliaient mon four à mon lit. Mon mari a construit cette cage d'escalier pour me protéger du froid de l'hiver et des aléas de la vie extérieure en tout temps" (37). Raised by her mother to be silent and self-effacing, Mãn never supposed her life would be otherwise.

Yet, when the occasion to explore the world beyond her kitchen presents itself, Mãn seizes it, albeit through the proxy of her imaginative cooking. When her husband falls ill, she temporarily takes a greater role in running the restaurant and begins to gradually modify the taste of the daily soup that Vietnamese diners would eat for breakfast every morning, taking inspiration from her gustatory memories of home: “Je leur servais le même petit-déjeuner à tous mais le changeais chaque matin au rythme de ma visite virtuelle des rues du Vietnam” (41). By improvising recipes that evoke the flavors of home, Mãn elicits powerful memories for her fellow Vietnamese in Montreal. In one instance, she describes one of her customers who was particularly moved by his breakfast:

[Il] était originaire de Rạch Giá, une ville côtière où l’on a inventé une soupe-repas au poisson poché avec des vermicelles, rehaussée de porc et de crevettes caramélisés dans les œufs de crevettes. Des larmes ont coulé sur sa joue lorsque j’ai arrosé son bol d’un petite cuillerée d’ail mariné au vinaigre. En mangeant cette soupe, il m’a susurré qu’il avait goûté sa terre, la terre où il avait grandi, où il était aimé. (42)

Here, Mãn reopens a world that had been closed for the man from Rạch Giá, but in a new context. Through the convergence of myriad tastes in the bowl of soup, the man is able to access a past life that had been occluded by his present experience as a migrant, thereby bringing to the fore the possibility of experiencing more than one temporality at once and on more equal terms. In other words, the past need not always cede to the present, and food can serve as a window to those poignant memories of a past life in Vietnam. Thanks to her gift for orchestrating such culinary impressions, Mãn creates a new role for herself through her cooking and, in the process weaves a fabric of connections among her fellow Vietnamese migrants and Quebecois locals, even though she herself is a newly arrived migrant to Montreal.

Indeed, within a few months, the restaurant gains a degree of renown, but at the expense of Mãn's willingness to provide, her capacity to toil for long hours in the kitchen, and her ability to revisit her past in Vietnam through food:

Plus les gens attendaient dans l'entrée, puis à l'extérieur, sur le trottoir, plus je passais mes nuits dans la cuisine. Assez vite, les clients ont délaissé la soupe tonkinoise, préférant le plat du jour même s'ils ne savaient pas ce qui était au menu avant d'arriver au restaurant et de lire le tableau noir accroché dans la vitrine. Un seul choix par jour. Un souvenir à la fois, car il me fallait beaucoup d'efforts pour ne pas laisser les émotions déborder des limites de l'assiette. (43)

Though Mãn revels in her newfound therapeutic power to induce memories through taste, as well as the growing popularity of her dishes, she remains an invisible prisoner of the kitchen while her gastronomic fluency calms the hunger pangs of diners in Montreal. Indeed, the growing demand and insatiable appetites of her clientele further anchor her to the stove. In short, the kitchen is both prison and cocoon for Mãn. On the one hand, it is a place where she toils for the pleasure and benefit of others under the weight of patriarchal expectations and capitalistic pressures. However, it is in this same kitchen that Mãn is able to exercise her creativity through dishes whose empathetic resonance begin to echo well beyond the walls of her husband's restaurant. Indeed, it will be this excess of memories evoked by Mãn's culinary creations and her subsequent ability to make significant interpersonal connections that will provide the material for her eventual cookbook, thereby further facilitating her transcendence of the kitchen.



## Culinary Imprisonment to the Past and the Future in Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques*

Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques* could perhaps also be considered a “kitchen narrative” in line with Thúy's *Mãn* in that both works feature women who have migrated from Vietnam to French-speaking countries in the West and subsequently devote themselves to cooking. In Lê's novel (published in 1997, her fourth of almost two dozen), it is clear that the kitchen is a similarly significant space for the protagonists because of its perceived transformative potential for Vietnamese women seeking to remake themselves after exile.<sup>151</sup> However, in this text, the capacity for food to access the past impedes, rather than facilitates, their success in this endeavor, effectively thwarting any possibility for creative self-making. Interestingly, however, it is not for lack of collectivity or the inability to escape the insularity of the kitchen that they do not succeed; rather, it is because the act of cooking links them inexorably to a past that they would rather forget, to ancestors they have disrespected, and to a time and place they no longer wish to visit. Here, cooking emphatically does not provide a means of adapting Vietnamese culture with French culture through Glissantian creolization, but an all-or-nothing choice between the two.

In the novel, there are three heroines—two sisters and their cousin—who have migrated from Vietnam to France as children with their grandmother. The central preoccupation of the three women throughout the book is the imminent arrival of the father of the two sisters, who lives alone in Saigon and is referred to in the text as “King Lear,” for a short visit.<sup>152</sup> Their reasons for inviting him are hardly motivated by sincere sentiments of filial piety, which is considered a pillar of traditional Vietnamese culture; rather, their ostensible purpose is to flaunt

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<sup>151</sup> Lê published two novels and a collection of short stories from 1986 to 1988. However, the author has herself since excluded these three titles from the official list of her works, thus making *Les Évangiles du crime*, published in 1992, her first novel.

<sup>152</sup> For explanations of Lê's intertextual references, see Barnes, *Vietnam*, chapters 4 and 5; Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving*.

their material achievement and successful assimilation into Western consumer society (14). This is particularly true for “l’aînée” or the Eldest Sister who has married a Swiss expatriate and is expecting their first child. The Eldest Sister takes special pride in the modern kitchen in her brand-new house, a place where she mostly cooks alone but also congregates with her sister and cousin. As her sardonic cousin describes: “Nous étions chez l’aînée de mes cousines, dans sa maison flambant neuve. La cuisine, récemment livrée en pièces détachées et diligemment montée, rutilait, renvoyant comme dans un miroir le ventre rond de l’aînée... Si le roi Lear avait été là, il aurait pu admirer lui aussi la cuisine rutilante [et] le ventre rond de la propriétaire” (10). In this example, the Eldest Sister and her gleaming, newly installed kitchen are bound together on multiple levels: first, poetically via the quasi homonymous linking of “cousine” and “cuisine” and, second, visually through the reflection of her pregnant silhouette in the shiny appliances.

It is as though the new kitchen is the final piece required to complete the Eldest Sister’s reinvention of herself, and she is satisfied with the image that she now projects; it is one that dissociates her completely from her Vietnamese past in favor of a modernized present in France. Indeed, the doubled newness of the Eldest Sister’s kitchen and the house, combined with her rounded stomach—which are all elements that are repeated twice in the space of two sentences—seem to be intended as temporal counterweights of present and future against the past, represented by the impending visit of her Vietnamese father. This rejection of Vietnam as past and valorization of France as present is further accentuated in the text by a description of the father’s kitchen that is juxtaposed with that of the Eldest Sister’s. In Saigon, King Lear prepares meals in an outdoor courtyard of his house that was belatedly “transformée en cuisine sur un

coup de tête” (79).<sup>153</sup> When compared to his daughter’s, which was the result of careful planning and investment in modern appliances, King Lear’s kitchen, where “il cuisinait au charbon” (79), seems especially rudimentary and primitive.<sup>154</sup>

Linking the drive for modernization with conceptions of temporality, Kristin Ross argues in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* that the modernization of everyday life in postwar France, signified by the arrival of new consumer products in the home along with the repeated quotidian practices these products induced, interrupted time, thereby relegating the recent war-torn history to the past and replacing it with a “modern” present (10-11). Though Lê’s novel likely takes place in the 1990s, well after the post-war period in France, the Eldest Sister seems to imitate this desire for modernization and consumption in an attempt to interrupt the continuity of her own post-war temporality. Her modern lifestyle serves as a means of separating her present from her past; the daily and repetitive focus on cooking occludes the traumatic eventfulness of their past as exiled refugees by busying herself with the various tasks required to maintain a certain standard of living in the present. In addition, her sterile kitchen appliances become metonymical extensions of herself to create a new self, one that dually conforms with the modern requirements of France and repudiates the old-fashioned colonial past in Vietnam.

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<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, as Do notes, “Contrairement à sa fille pour qui manger et cuisiner est le remède à l’ennui et à la solitude, cuisiner, chez Lear, est un don de soi, un signe d’amitié et une communication” (154). Whereas the Eldest Sister gluttonously consumes what she prepares, her father shares his meals with his friend, “Le Couineur,” a disillusioned priest who was tortured at the hands of the Communist regime.

<sup>154</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the comparison of the two kitchens in *Les Trois Parques* in terms of their inhabitants respective eating habits, see Do, “Entre salut et damnation.” While Do contends that the preparation and consumption of Vietnamese cuisine by the Eldest Sister in the text serves as “le culte de la mémoire de la guerre” (152) because the carnivorous dishes are reminiscent of the blood and gore of the Vietnamese-American war, I focus on the transmission of the recipes from grandmother to granddaughter through the written cookbook and the significance of cooking to Vietnamese women specifically.

Yet, although the Eldest Sister seems proud of her apparent material achievements, she is dogged by a melancholy that seems to be simultaneously assuaged and exacerbated by her domesticity.<sup>155</sup> For example, alone in her kitchen, she busies herself by cooking in preparation for her father's visit, testing possible dishes to serve him and subsequently stuffing herself with what she makes. The kitchen, which formerly brought her satisfaction, now imprisons her:

...la prisonnière mangeait, cuisinait puis mangeait, mangeait puis cuisinait, en tête à tête avec la petite boîte qui radiotait, quand elle ne crachait pas des tchac-boum près de la hotte ultraperformante qui aspirait les odeurs de friture mais ne sniffait pas les relents de spleen. Il n'y avait rien à faire, ma cousine ne pensait qu'à ça. Cuisiner et manger.

Manger et cuisiner. (78)

Communing with her whirring kitchen appliances, the Eldest Sister strictly avoids indulging in any olfactory and gustatory links to her past, until she can no longer resist cooking foods that are redolent of her childhood in Vietnam. Unlike Thúy's Mãn who manages to limit her own "consumption" of her food memories when cooking for others, the Eldest Sister attends to her repressed memories by binge-eating Vietnamese dishes alone in a bulimic relationship with her past:

Des odeurs de cuisine qui revenaient chatouiller les narines. Des odeurs de patates douces fumantes, coupées en deux dans le sens de la longueur et saupoudrées de sucre. Des odeurs de fruits verts à la croque-au-sel et au piment rouge. Des odeurs de mots chuchotés à l'heure de la sieste. Le fumet de l'idiome abjuré revenait titiller les papilles

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<sup>155</sup> For an examination of how identification with one's race in processes of assimilation can cause grief for Asian Americans and African Americans, see A. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*.

de la mémoire. Celle de ma cousine était ventilée. Dès que la fumée nostalgique piquait les yeux, un soupirail s'ouvrait, chassait les odeurs âcres. (115)

Narrated by the Eldest Sister's cousin, this passage demonstrates with its repeated, anaphoric phrases the intoxicating quality of tastes and aromas that can lead down the slippery slope of memory; smells lead to tastes, leading to words, leading to a forgotten language, a disavowed culture, an abandoned family. This is a descent that the Eldest Sister wishes to avoid at all costs by installing "la hotte ultraperformante" in the kitchen, as though consumer products are a panacea for the memory of past traumatic events. Even though managing her kitchen fulfills her attempt at transforming herself into a modern, future-oriented Western woman, it also reinforces a past that she is trying to eradicate, because the act of cooking induces memories that transport her to her previous life in Saigon rather than anchor her more firmly in the present in France.

Furthermore, the Eldest Sister's status as a formerly colonized subject in France further complicates the modernization of her self. As Ross cautions, that the swift adoption of consumerism and modernization occurred at the same time as widespread decolonization is not anodyne. She writes: "I want to suggest that in the roughly ten-year period of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s in France...the colonies are in some sense 'replaced,' and the effort that once went into maintaining and disciplining a colonial people and situation becomes instead concentrated on a particular 'level' of metropolitan existence: everyday life..." (77). In this way, as Ross suggests, the post-war obsession with the "modern"—and its corollaries efficiency and hygiene—as opposed to the traditional—thus contrarily associated with the "unmodern" traits of negligence and uncleanliness, became racialized euphemisms to delineate France from the colonies, thereby fueling a more subtle but no less insidious form of racism that has its foundations in colonial-era racial schemas (9). What is more, these distinctions would be

managed and exacted by women, as guardians of domestic affairs from consumption to social reproduction (Ross 78).

What I am suggesting here is that the Eldest Sister, in aspiring to remake herself from Vietnamese migrant into a French housewife, believes she will find solace and success in the kitchen, according to the expectations for women in post-war bourgeois France. However, the break with her past that the Eldest Sister fervently desires does not come without repercussions. Even though she occupies herself with the efficient and hygienic management of her modernized kitchen—learning to make *rösti* for her Swiss husband in the event he gets homesick (12), keeping her dishes immaculately clean (19-20), and obsessively taking stock of her provision of frozen foods (20)—in preparation for her present and future in France, these same culinary activities that demonstrate her allegiance to French modernity simultaneously recall her Vietnamese heritage by activating memories that force her to reckon with her abandoned past. Through her quotidian cooking routine, the Eldest Sister repeatedly engages in a behavior that bolsters as well as undermines the establishment of her desired self-image, one that, in either case, traps her between the cultural expectations of two cultures.

For example, the Eldest Sister's manic pursuit of modernization does not coincide well with the important Vietnamese tradition of ancestor worship that demands respect, and even sustenance, for the dead from the living. The three heroines initiated this rupture with their past and their culture as children when, rather than attend to their grandmother on her deathbed, they left her alone to gorge themselves at a restaurant. Adding insult to injury, the girls gleefully order their grandmother's favorite Vietnamese dishes as a mortal slight intending to scorn their relative who dies alone and hungry at home. As Do explains, "Dans le contexte de la coutume et de la moralité vietnamiennes, cet abandon est l'acte suprême de révolte et de sacrilège contre les

ancêtres : à la mort des parents, la piété filiale oblige les enfants à observer tous les règlements du deuil selon les rites traditionnels” (153). Moreover, Do continues, providing food to ancestors is a central means of showing respect: “Or, l’offre de nourriture est extrêmement importante : sans offrande alimentaire, le défunt est condamné à devenir un spectre errant et affamé” (153). In retribution for their alimentary neglect, the grandmother’s hungry ghost haunts the three women throughout their lives, demanding to be fed the Vietnamese dishes that her granddaughters deprived her of enjoying before her death.

Even though cooking could serve as a possible medium for cultural adaptation and creation, as Thúy’s Mãn demonstrates, Lê’s Eldest Sister is not capable of such innovation. Her obsessive focus on conforming to the demands of two cultures obviates her ability to improvise new practices that access both cultural traditions in productive ways. Indeed, the Eldest Sister’s dissatisfaction with her life combined with her inability to reshape her Vietnamese heritage to mesh with her recently acquired French identity underlines by its absence in Lê’s novel the transformative power of cultural creation for migrant women. The importance of collectivity is similarly noticeable for its nonexistence in *Les Trois Parques*. While Thúy’s Mãn is able to form generative relations and create networks through cooking, the Eldest Sister cannot breach the isolation of her kitchen, except to access her past. As a “prisonnière” of her own existence, the Eldest Sister communes with her oven—“en tête à tête avec la petite boîte qui radiotait” (78)—and seems to take little pleasure in the company of her sister and cousin. Unable to escape to establish satisfying relations in her present, she reluctantly turns to a collection of written Vietnamese recipes to find solace in the collectivity of her ancestors.

### **(Asian) Women's Writing in French: Feminism and the Culinary for Vietnamese Women**

What can we make of the connections Thúy and Lê draw in their novels between cooking and the tensions of between French and Vietnamese femininity in light of recent scholarship on women's writing in French? Indeed, these culinary interventions on behalf of Vietnamese women seems to diverge from the current critical climate in French letters that, following a brief tendency to ascribe essentialized feminine characteristics to women's written expression in the 1970s, has moved to consider women's writing for its complexity, discordance, and multiplicity of experience that extends beyond what might be considered essentially "feminine" (Rye and Worton 8). For example, two consecutive anthologies of essays examining "women's writing in French,"—Gill Rye and Michael Worton's *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, published in 2002 and surveying the 1990s and Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye's *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France*, published in 2013 and investigating the first decade after the turn of the millennium—generally speak of the genre as a "successful" one since its inception in the 1970s. Rye and Worton assert in 2002 that "Importantly, women as writers (and artists and filmmakers) are now firmly part of French culture as *subjects* of writing rather than simply as objects of representation (of male desire, fantasy or fear)" (8).

In 2013, Damlé and Rye even feel the need to justify their continued categorization of "women's writing" in their volume against potential charges of anachronism: "It might be thought no longer necessary in the third millennium to privilege the work of female writers. The point of much feminist literary analysis may well have been achieved and women authors are now arguably an integral part of the mainstream" (3). Furthermore, Damlé writes in *The Becoming of the Body*, that women writers in French have an ambivalent relationship with feminism, because of its perceived militancy, defensive position, teleological bent, and expected



privileging of “women’s issues”: “while feminism might conceptually be embraced by [women] authors, and while much of their work is concerned with articulating women’s experiences it is also characterised by an engagement with less sex-specific concerns wherein ‘feminism’ itself might not exert an overarching influence as a pure politics” (12). In short, from these scholars’ perspectives, women’s writing can be understood as a genre that continues to be on the vanguard of French literature, such that it is simultaneously accepted by the literary establishment and in tune with contemporary stances on feminine identity that de-essentialize heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.

Even though the anthologies of women’s writing in France by Worton, Rye, and Damlé consider the Hexagon in all of its diversity by including studies on authors of many backgrounds, as well as posits the genre as necessarily heterogeneous, their views on feminism and writing seem to me to presuppose that women who write in France are on a shared trajectory of women’s rights, representation, and subjectivity that benefits all women in relatively equal ways and at a more or less uniform pace.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, these generalized conclusions overemphasize a kind of universal womanhood without sufficient consideration of other intersecting identities, which might preclude some women writers from escaping from objecthood and achieving recognized subjectivity, as Worton and Rye suggest, especially in universalist republican France where alternative identity formations are subject to a regime of assimilation.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Maryse Condé makes this particularly salient in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*. In this novel, Condé links her own creativity as a novelist to that of her grandmother, who was an illiterate but talented house cook for a white family in Guadeloupe, to suggest the continued need for literature to address the stories that History overlooks. For more on Condé’s *Victoire*, see Simek, *Hunger and Irony*, chapter 6; Mosher; Odintz.

<sup>157</sup> Perhaps, in defense of Worton, Rye, and Damlé, I should note that they chose to narrow their study by only including works by authors from mainland France. Nonetheless, while I understand their need to limit the field, presumably most literary works published in French in other francophone countries are also marketed and sold in France, thus making such a distinction

Countering the notion that women (whether they be writers, or not) have comparable access to subjecthood, Anne Anlin Cheng urges us to depart from the assumption that racialized women, particularly Asian women, are even capable of realizing the same state of being, autonomy, and freedoms as modern white Europeans (“Ornamentalism” 430). In “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman,” Cheng dissects aesthetic representations of Asian women in European and American visual cultures to theorize the ontological and political implications of what she calls the “bifurcated condition of being human and nonhuman” (“Ornamentalism” 444) of Asian women whose bodies are often featured as ornamented and stylized with decorative elements. In her analysis of such images, Cheng points out that the body of the Asian woman does not end with her biological flesh, but is also constituted by the synthetic, inorganic material objects that adorn and decorate her and make up her style—objects that in turn reinforce her personhood, as well as her race and femininity (“Ornamentalism” 415-416). In the face of this commodification and objectification of Asian femininity, Cheng builds on Said’s concept of Orientalism to not only recognize the signs of these processes, but to legitimately consider what it might mean to *be* at this intersection of human and object (“Ornamentalism” 432): “How do we take seriously the life of a subject who lives as an object, and how do we do so without either resigning that figure to the annals of commodity fetishism or assigning it to the sinecure of reassuring corporeality?” (“Ornamentalism” 428).

Cheng’s response is to consider a framework of racialization and femininity that does not reject nor sacralize the organic body as a means of achieving redemption as Frantz Fanon,

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difficult to maintain. Moreover, their repeated use of the blanket term “women’s writing in French” also blurs this boundary.

Hortense Spillers, and Trinh Minh-ha have advanced, but by allowing for an alternative, in-between existence (“Ornamentalism” 415, 444, 446).<sup>158</sup> In other words, for the Asian woman to attain any kind of liberty, her body must pass through the interstices of human and thing as a means of attending to its historical objectification and commodification. Or, as Cheng writes, “flesh that passed through objecthood needs ‘ornament’ to get back to itself” (“Ornamentalism” 446). In this way, Cheng advances the aesthetic as a tool of the utmost importance when dealing with the violence of commodification and objectification of racialized women; “The question is no longer how can we think about aesthetics in the face of violence but how we could not” (“Ornamentalism” 445). Indeed, to do so would limit the potential conceptions of the modes of being of racialized women rather than allow for other possible forms of individualism, freedom, and agency (“Ornamentalism” 444).

In similar ways as Cheng outlines, aesthetic representations of Asian women produced in France at the height of the colonial period objectify and commodify these women through decorative materials such as their clothing and hats, hairstyles and necklaces, and elaborately furnished backdrops. However, we can expand Cheng’s argument, which considers Asian women in general, by taking into account the specificity of Vietnamese women in France who have been ornamentalized in different ways.<sup>159</sup> Namely, they often are also ornamented with

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<sup>158</sup> Cheng is referring to Frantz Fanon’s “epidermal racial schema”—which posits black skin not as natural, but as constituted by the white gaze—in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and Hortense Spillers’ “hieroglyphics of the flesh”—which reveres the organic body as inviolate—in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh Minh-ha recognizes that a woman’s body, in particular might be insensate, but emphasizes the reinvigoration of the organic body as essential to life as well as to writing (36).

<sup>159</sup> While Cheng does address the possible differences of aesthetic objectification between Japanese and Chinese women, she concludes that while the Japanese style is more minimalist and natural than Chinese ornamental decadence, they are both forms of ornamentalism (“Ornamentalism” 441).

food. For example, Michel Géo's *Principales exportations d'origine végétale* (figure 21), a propaganda painting that is part of a series commissioned by the organizers of the Exposition coloniale de Paris in 1931, depicts an ensemble of colonized subjects working together in a dense forest to harvest alimentary products for export to metropolitan France.<sup>160</sup> Many such images from the period propagated this fantasy of the colonies as naturally teeming with an abundance of resources and populated by primitive yet noble and peaceable natives willing to extract this bounty for French consumption in order to mask the realities of forced labor, limited rights, and inadequate material conditions of the colonized. The names of the products shown—such as “coco,” “ananas,” and “cannelle”—are traced in elaborate gold cursive, effectively teaching French citizens in the mainland to identify exotic, unknown foods.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> The series *Principales exportations d'origine végétale* by Michel Géo was originally intended for the walls of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, which was built during the Exposition coloniale internationale in 1931 to serve as a museum of the colonies. The museum changed designations many times, becoming the Musée de la France d'Outre-Mer in 1935, the Musée des Arts africains et océaniens in 1960, the musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in 1990, before closing 2003 and moving the collections to the musée du Quai Branly. The Palais de la Porte Dorée has since repurposed itself yet again, transforming into the Musée nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration in 2007. Michel Géo's paintings were part of an exposition at the musée de Quai Branly entitled “Peintures Lointaines” in 2018.

<sup>161</sup> These myths were also propagated in cookbooks written during the same period that describe the exotic dishes of the colonies, such as Raphaël de Noter's *La Bonne cuisine aux colonies: Asie, Afrique, Amérique. 400 recettes exquisés ou pittoresques* (1931).



more relevant for my analysis, is how the racialized women pictured here are also ornamented with food, both with the literal food products and the *idea* of laboring to provide food.<sup>163</sup> This freighted association between Vietnamese women and the preparation and serving of food extends well beyond the fact that for Vietnamese men and women alike in mainland France, cooking, either as a domestic for a French family or in a restaurant, was historically and very often continues to be a means of survival in the face of inhospitable economic forces, discriminatory hiring practices, and limited language abilities upon arrival.<sup>164</sup> In ways rather similar to those Cheng describes, popular depictions of Vietnamese women notably belabored their relationship to the culinary.

For instance, the propensity at the height of the colonial period to also include representations of racialized bodies in advertisements for exotic foods further compounded and propagated this association across mainland France, such as in an advertisement for Indochinese rice dating from 1933 (figure 6).<sup>165</sup> This image features a Vietnamese woman who is dressed with the synthetic and decorative elements that habitually identify Vietnamese—or more generally Asian—people to the French public at the time; adornments that both constitute and

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origins of the individuals depicted are noted in the painting, we can presume that those who appear to be Asian are from Indochina, or what is today Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

<sup>163</sup> This association is true not only for the Asian women, but also for the African woman featured holding a pineapple in the bottom right corner. However, as Cheng notes, “the point here is not to posit a naturalized difference between Africanist and Asianist femininities,” because although such representations were often meant to demarcate racial difference, they were in reality “wholly promiscuous in application” (“Ornamentalism” 416). Indeed, Ousmane Sembène’s 1967 film *La Noire de...* underscores the connection between food preparation and service and African Blackness in the French imaginary.

<sup>164</sup> For more on reasons why Vietnamese migrants arriving in France tended to open restaurants, see Lê H. K..

<sup>165</sup> This advertisement appeared in the February 25, 1933 edition of the magazine *L’Illustration*. Funded by the Office of Colonial Propaganda. For a detailed analysis of such advertisements for Indochinese rice, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

eviscerate her personhood by rendering her body both organic flesh and inorganic decor, as Cheng argues: the ubiquitous conical hat, a loose-fitting tunic, large circular earrings, hair in a chignon, and a made-up face with generously applied lipstick.

What is critical in this image, however, is that she is pictured holding a tray of culinary accoutrements—bowls and a pair of chopsticks—and apparently intends to serve a meal to the viewer of the advertisement. Her existence here is animated not only by her stylish and foreign femininity, but also by her capacity to prepare delicious food and to serve it. Furthermore, her projected talent for cooking is naturalized by the images featured behind her. On the panels of the Chinese-style folding screen are rather crude sketches of figures wearing conical hats engaged in agricultural and culinary activities that are meant to appear primitive, such as fishing out of a rowboat, cooking over a fire, and feeding livestock by hand. The rudimentary quality of the images serves two purposes here; on the one hand, they corroborate the pervasive notion of Indochina as a technologically backwards society and, on the other hand, they imply that the preparation of food is an ancient tradition for the Indochinese, thereby doubly sanctioning the subjugation of Indochinese women (and men) by the French for culinary and domestic ends.<sup>166</sup>

However, if we not only consider how images such as these demean Vietnamese women through commodification and objectification to advance racist and racializing colonial aims, but also examine how such processes have affected these women's modes of being, we will begin to

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<sup>166</sup> In addition, the text that accompanies the image further emphasizes servitude by referring to the story of a clever servant in Aesop's *Fables* from Ancient Greece while also listing possible recipes to make with rice that might please the reader's guests. Confusingly, it appears as though the woman is speaking, but the text is presented as a one-sided dialogue addressed to a "vous" from the perspective of "le riz d'Indochine" who uses the first person: "Rien de meilleur que moi, quand je suis bien préparé!" For a more detailed discussion of this attribution of the first-person to Indochinese rice, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

take seriously the “bifurcated condition” that Cheng suggests is central to building a “yellow feminist theory.” Calling Asian femininity a kind of “perihumanity,” Cheng writes,

Freedom for the captured may not be the gift of uncompromised liberty but the more modest and more demanding task of *existing* within entombed shells. It is not only that bodies can leave their residue in the things that they produce...but also that objectness reveals the divergent, layered, and sometimes annihilating gestures that can make up personhood... It marks a kind of third nature, one that surrounds and approximates the human and one that manages to survive despite or through commodification.”

(“Ornamentalism” 441)

Rather than condemn the state of being between personhood and aesthetic objecthood, Cheng explains, we need to seriously consider this condition, which will help us address other ways of being, living, and surviving. Cheng therefore suggests that a third space between personhood and objecthood must be created by reconsidering the aesthetic.

Cheng’s third space is compelling for my study of culinary acts and cookbooks by diasporic Vietnamese women who reside in contexts touched by French colonialism. In similar ways, Asian women are constituted as well as eviscerated by their preparing and serving of food. For example, this concept of “perihumanity” and of “existing within entombed shells” rather than being capable of realizing freedom and uncompromised liberty seems to ring true for the Eldest Sister in Lê’s *Les Trois Parques*, in particular. Even though she derives her greatest pleasure from the newness of her kitchen and quite literally *sees herself* in the reflection of her shiny kitchen appliances, her subjectivity is limited to a culinary sphere that is doubly dictated by French and Vietnamese cultural expectations, leaving her with almost no agency to adapt and improvise. Perhaps more surprisingly, I suggest that we can also perceive Thúy’s cookbook and



novel as examples of the in-between state in which diasporic Vietnamese women reside. Despite Thúy's vigorous valorization of Vietnamese women's perspectives in these works, she nonetheless continues to attribute cooking to a gendered, racialized, and cultured sphere; the women in her family, in spite of their many talents and abilities beyond the kitchen that are described in Thúy's cookbook, still feel obliged to prepare food for their family members, whether they like it or not. In short, Cheng's theory thus allows for a third space in between, that cannot be coded as resistance nor as accommodation, where diasporic Asian women survive. As we have seen in Lê's and Thúy's novels, and more briefly in Thúy's cookbook, the act of cooking is both activating and annihilating of the self at the same time; the kitchen can also simultaneously provide a means of escape through collective creativity, social and economic capital, and worldwide interaction through cooking, yet their racialized and gendered roles assign them to the kitchen and induce conformity to layered patriarchal and historically colonial structures.

Can the cookbook—as a form of self-expression, creativity, and power that addresses the particularities of feminine specificity, gender roles, and the racialized and sexualized bodies of Vietnamese women—be particularly suited to explore how diasporic Vietnamese women currently exist in the world? Tethered to feminine and Vietnamese specificity, yet also capable of transcending the kitchen and accessing the world beyond, the cookbook could provide a potential escape from the dualism of the kitchen as prison or site of empowerment for women by testifying to the improvised cultural creations of women in diaspora, alluding to a cross-generational collectivity of women contributors, and elucidating an embodied poetics that exceeds the written

word.<sup>167</sup> At the same time, these cookbooks remain strictly marginal players in the cultural production on the world stage. For their emergence into the public as published works necessitates their participation in a global literary market that voluntarily re-magnetizes colonial poles of influences in an effort to sell, thus quite often compromising the nascent subjectivity of the authors.

### **“Recipistolary Novels”: Literary Cookbooks as Vehicles to Collectivity and Transcendence**

The first scholars to consider woman-authored cookbooks as fertile ground for literary and feminist analyses recognized the genre’s capacity to inspire collectivity among women and thereby transcend the kitchen to reverberate beyond. After all, the Latin root of the word “recipe” is “*recipere*,” which suggests something one might receive from another as an exchange (Leonardi 340; Tompkins, “Consider the Recipe” 442). However, exactly what form these relations take and the extent of their resonance remains a subject for debate. Susan Leonardi, for instance, is widely considered to be among the first to have argued for the consideration of cookbooks as women’s writing in her 1989 article “Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Rischolme, and Key Lime Pie.” In her examination of the formal elements of cookbooks, Leonardi interrogates the practice among women of sharing recipes through textual means as gendered discourse by

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<sup>167</sup> I believe that by examining culinary writings and acts by Vietnamese migrant women with the help of Cheng’s “ornamentalism,” I am adhering to what Lan Duong calls “trans-Vietnamese feminism,” which “...decenters nationalist notions of the family and familial notions of the nation, both dependent on each other and on circumscribed roles for men and women. Trans-Vietnamese feminism especially finds its inspiration in the works of writers and directors in Việt Nam and the diaspora, who have used their art in order to challenge traditional notions of gender, family, and nation” (3). Furthermore, I endeavor to answer Duong’s call to resist the trend in extant scholarship in the West as well as in Vietnam to consider women’s rights solely within a Western liberal discourse of feminism (13).

suggesting that the woman-authored cookbook has the potential to create a sense of community. In particular, she examines the ways in which the recipe is embedded in its frame, or the text within which the recipe is shared, as a narrative strategy for analyzing the recipe (340). Successful cookbooks, Leonardi notes, are not just lists of ingredients with directions for their assembly, but are akin to narratives; “Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be” (340). In her analysis of the successive editions of Irma Rombauer’s *The Joy of Cooking*, Leonardi posits that an authorial persona comes into being in early versions of the cookbook that is not unlike a first-person narrator in a work of fiction who attempts to inspire trust and identification with the reader. By encouraging conversation, improvisation, creativity, and agency, this authorial persona, as Leonardi argues, creates a simulated exchange with the reader (342). Furthermore, by regularly featuring a variety of “characters” in the cookbook, such as friends and relatives of the author, Leonardi suggests that Rombauer’s authorial persona constructs a “community of women that crosses the social barriers of class, race, and generation” (343), within the cookbook, as well as beyond it, through its pointed engagement with readers (342).

In *Black Hunger*, Doris Witt recognizes Leonardi’s pioneering step of bridging the analytical gap between literature and cookbooks, yet takes issue with her claim that the exchange of recipes necessarily leads to the building of a socially inclusive community of women, a notion that Witt calls utopian. Countering Leonardi’s argument that food exacerbates rather than ameliorates social relations, Witt writes:

For those who have historically had few employment options besides underpaid, unorganized labor as domestic servants for white people, the ‘social context of recipe sharing’ was, I assumed not a ‘loose community’ but more nearly a battleground where

the social barriers of class, race, and generation (as well as ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and nationality) were not eradicated but more nearly constructed, maintained, and fortified. (11)

Channeling Davis's Marxist analysis, Doris Witt writes that the work of preparing food is part and parcel of the global exploitation of women, whether that labor be paid or unpaid (10).

However, Witt resists a wholesale adoption of Davis's approach with regards to food, explaining: "I was hesitant to label as simple 'false consciousness' the (aesthetic) pleasures that housewives, servants, and others might understand themselves to derive from their labor in the kitchen" (10). Rather, Witt continues, "We need to be attuned, in other words, to the historical/cultural contexts and individual idiosyncrasies which render a standard materialist framework insufficient for thinking about the experimental dimension of food, cooking, and eating" (10).

Indeed, it is a novel, that includes recipes embedded in its text intended to stimulate exchange—what Witt calls a "recipistolary" novel, namely Ntozake Shange's 1982 *Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo*—that helps Witt to consider not just cooking, but more specifically recipe writing and sharing, as an important form of creative expression (especially for African Americans for whom it was illegal to learn to read and write during the era of slavery) and a means of maintaining a sense of community across vast distances (10). As Witt explains, it is through the recipes, which are enumerated in the Shange's text, that the mother writes for her daughters who live very different lives around the 1960s United States that the former maintains her relationship to the latter in spite of their geographical, generational, and growing cultural separation. Akin to a lifeline to tradition and history, Witt writes that Shange's novel commemorates Black women's experience working to provide and prepare food. In this way, the

recipe also creates a particular connection with the reader by encouraging her to partake in this history through her own preparation and consumption of the dishes proposed (10-11).

However, as Leonardi notes, the exchange of recipes among women does not always go smoothly. She analyzes how various works of fiction depict women who withhold recipes from one another for a variety of reasons, whether out of spite or betrayal of trust. Leonardi argues that this withholding between fictional characters can be further replicated, or not, between the author and the reader by alternately excluding or including the alluded-to recipes in the text itself (345-346). In this way, authors comment on notions of reproducibility and the feasibility of the connection between author and reader (or, as a quasi-breaking down the “fourth wall” between the actors on stage and the audience, as it is known in theater). In some cases, Leonardi writes, “Like a narrative, a recipe is reproducible, and, further, its hearers-readers-receivers are *encouraged* to reproduce it and, in reproducing it, to revise it and make it their own... Unlike the repetition of a narrative, however, a recipe’s reproducibility can have a literal result, the dish itself” (344). While in other cases, both recipes and stories can be made doubly literal within the text, as a piece of embedded discourse within a frame story, as well as possibly beyond the text itself, thus implying a kind of recipe for living in real life (346). In either case, relations between author, authorial persona, and reader are recognized, whether tacitly or otherwise.

As I argued in earlier sections, Linda Lê’s *Les Trois Parques* and Kim Thúy’s *Mãn* are both “kitchen narratives” as per Valérie Loichot’s designation; both novels posit that processes of culinary creation can enable migrant women to adapt to new contexts as well as achieve resonance beyond the kitchen through narrative, as emphasized either by the success or failure of that creative process for the protagonists. However, I would like to suggest that these works are also “recipistolary novels,” if the term can be understood broadly, even if recipes are not outlined

or embedded in the texts *per se*. For, in addition to the scenes of cooking that structure both narratives and lend considerable symbolic significance, these novels also feature cookbooks that simulate processes of exchange within the works that further the notion of women-authored culinary writings as a means of transcending the inside-outside binary of the home kitchen as a barrier or vehicle for collectivity and self-expression among women. This is not to say that these dynamics must be successful for the argument to be valid; indeed, even their explicit failure points to their importance. Thus, with help the extant studies on the formal elements of cookbooks, I will analyze how these fictional cookbooks reverberate within and beyond their respective novels—in terms of their creation, transfer, dissemination, and reception—in order to explore Lê's and Thúy's differing literary interpretations of the ways in which Vietnamese culture is conjugated in francophone spaces and how these relations permit their women authors to negotiate their own senses of self in diaspora. To what extent can writing a cookbook, with its emphasis on process and adaptation, collectivity and components parts that make up a whole, become a means for these characters to re-write themselves as they cross boundaries and confront conventional structures? How is the cookbook bound to female Vietnamese specificity, yet also able to open up new modes of signification, articulation, and transformation? I am suggesting that because these fictional cookbooks are embedded within novels, authors are able to comment on the origins and trajectories of their own literary works, their potential as a catalyst for relations in the world, and possible outcomes of these connections. In this way, I am borrowing from Leonardi and Witt to suggest that the transmission of Vietnamese culinary culture does not stop with the characters in the novels, but with the reader herself.

## **A Haunted Cookbook: Cooking as Relic of the Past in Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques***

Like Leonardi, Kyla Tompkins highlights the importance of exchange in “Consider the Recipe,” but she follows Witt in distancing herself from the establishment of a community through the exchange of recipes. Rather, Tompkins focuses on the complex intertwining of the multiple temporalities involved in the transmission of a recipe, thus creating ties across time, geographies, and generations (“Consider the Recipe” 442). In her “Consider the Recipe,” Kyla Tompkins draws attention to recipes as “textual remains” that evoke past temporalities and geographies as well as bridge the gap between oral and written textuality. For example, Tompkins calls attention to the particular suitability of recipes for formal literary analysis by examining the convention of recipes to be written in the imperative, which functions both as a mood and a tense. On the one hand, the imperative as a mood evokes continuity between the past and the performative aspects of the present and future, a distance that might be temporal as well as geographical. On the other hand, the imperative tense supposes a one-sided conversation between the recipe’s author and its reader: “The recipe thus exists as an ongoing command—‘you: do this’—implying a hierarchical relationship in which the past—invoked as an eternal present tense—may command the future” (“Consider the Recipe” 439).

This is particularly true in *Les Trois Parques*. The Eldest Sister possesses a book of recipes from her birthplace that her grandmother dictated to her from memory, which she either transcribed word for word in Vietnamese or attempted to translate into French, such that “la voix de la défunte grand-mère n’en était pas étouffée pour autant” (107). As the only one of the three who is able to read and speak Vietnamese, the Eldest Sister is the keeper of this tome, which is in fact a plastic-covered notebook that she calls “le codex secret” (108). Indeed, the ghost of the

grandmother, who is also called Lady Chacal in the text, monitors the Eldest Sister's activities in the kitchen and expresses her displeasure at the lack of respect for Vietnamese culinary customs.

Et chaque fois que ma cousine, dans sa solitude rutilante, ouvrait son carnet, le fantôme de lady Chacal s'échappait du codex pour flairer les relents de gaillon, soulever le couvercle des casseroles sur le feu, se pencher au-dessus du congélateur grand ouvert, promener sur l'office ses petits yeux d'argousin des enfants et claquer la langue avec réprobation parce que tout y sentait la lessive et le détergent, mais les odeurs subtiles et bizarres enfermées dans le codex ne s'étaient même pas déposées sur la buée d'ennui qui suintait des murs. (107)

Unhappy with her granddaughter's modernized kitchen and her neglect of Vietnamese cooking, it is as though Lady Chacal is attempting to dictate the life of the Eldest Daughter from beyond the grave.

Not only is it possible to discern an attempt by the past to gain authority over the future via the book of recipes, the grandmother's authorial voice can even be heard by her granddaughters, almost in spite of themselves. Out of curiosity, the younger sister attempts to decipher a recipe copied down in the notebook in the Vietnamese language—the letters and accents of which she describes as “ces fourmis hiéroglyphiques” (116). Though she feels strangled by the effort of pronouncing a language she never learned, she can hear the “intonations aigres” (115) of her grandmother's voice emanating from the cookbook, listing the ingredients for “du sang de canard parfumé au basilic et aux graines d'arachide pilées”:

Derrière...la voix de grand-mère tintait, qui recommandait de servir à part les morceaux de canard cuits à l'étouffée, de répandre du basilic finement haché dans le sang caillé et de choisir trois feuilles très odorantes pour en décorer la surface. [Elle] réprima un



bâillement en mordillant le bout de son pouce. L'air de la cuisine, nettoyé par la hotte aspirante mise en branle après la dégustation des encornets à la provençale, se remplit des effluves d'une langueur dominicale. [Elle] referma le codex. (117-118)

In spite of the ceremonial importance of this complicated dish—one that the Eldest Sister meant to serve at her wedding in order to appease her grandmother's unsettled spirit, but was overruled because the dinner took place at an “authentique auberge normande” (92) at her fiancé's insistence—the younger sister's incomprehension of the language, her yawning disinterest, and the ambient odor of the seafood dish from Provence consumed the previous day amount to a resounding failure of transfer of Vietnamese culinary culture from grandmother to granddaughters. Furthermore, her inability to grasp the significance of the dish from the text suggests more than linguistic deficiencies. As Tompkins writes, “textuality seems a poor container for the worlds hinted at by the recipe...there is a world of culinary knowledge passed on beyond just words, a field of embodied knowledges, movements, flavors, smells, gestures, and habits that is only hinted at by its own textual remains” (“Consider the Recipe” 442). The tenuousness of the transfer of cultural heritage, culinary or otherwise, between generations of migrant women becomes clear; a loss of language, disinterest, and even textuality itself can inhibit its success.

The Eldest Sister's inability to creatively combine the culinary traditions of Vietnam and France stems from the weight of this prescriptive past emblemized by her grandmother's transcribed culinary legacy, as well as from its specifically textual quality. Even though she possesses the linguistic abilities to read the recipes in the cookbook, she is not adept in the embodied languages required to successfully reproduce the dishes for herself, let alone improvise new ones. Rather, her “codex” is more a repository for deferred memories and repressed

emotions that she consults as though it were an encyclopedia of medicines or a book of spells. Indeed, the Eldest Sister cooks her grandmother's recipes as one would take anti-depression medication, taking great care to follow the instructions exactly as prescribed:

C'était sa pharmacopée personnelle, sa provision de révulsifs, ses mithridates exotiques, ses recettes du pays, appliquées de loin en loin, comme des cataplasmes sur les petites brûlures nostalgiques. Quand les plats lourds, épicés, ne la soulageaient plus de ses quintes d'ennui, ma cousine ouvrait son grimoire et se faisait ses préparations officinales, exactement comme grand-mère le lui avait appris et comme elle en avait consigné dans son codex secret. (91)

However, in spite of her attention to detail, the results of her preparations are inedible, often leading to whole dishes being thrown away because "...il manquait la mystérieuse petite épice que grand-mère ajoutait à la farine" (231). The Eldest Sister's book of recipes is a reproduction, a monument that memorializes the past rather than integrating it into the present and thus allowing the gustatory memories to be adapted and re-signified in the present. Whereas in Vietnam, her grandmother would craft dishes, mixing "des ingrédients de son cru" (231) to make "un ingrédient, un assaisonnement, une épice, qu'en un tour de main grand-mère transformait en une pâte légère, un bouillon parfumé, une sauce onctueuse" (232), the Eldest Sister is not capable of this kind of improvisation or culinary achievement. Ill-adapted to the contingencies of her life in France and in a language that she has already decided to not pass on to her as-yet unborn child, the cookbook's dissemination of maternally passed Vietnamese culinary heritage therefore ends with the Eldest Sister.

Lê's staging of this failure of transfer of culinary culture, on the one hand, confirms Tompkins' assertion that recipes demonstrate how the past envisions the future, yet the novel, on

the other hand, challenges that Tompkins' assumption that recipes inherently allow for the possibility for improvisation and variation. She posits that "A recipe, unlike a poem or a novel, will never be taken as complete unto itself: we assume that other, often entirely orally passed-down iterations preceded it...and we assume many other recipes will follow" ("Consider the Recipe" 440). While this perspective admirably takes into account the condensing and layering of culinary "works" by women authors over generations through an extratextual and oral palimpsest, it is precisely because a recipe is incomplete in its textual forms that this transfer can be so precarious; when the presumed knowledge hidden within the generic conventions of a recipe is lost, the expectation of reproducible results can no longer be fulfilled, even in spite of the recipe's performative quality. As we witness in Lê's novel, the Eldest Sister is unable to adapt her grandmother's recipes in their written form to the demands of her own present.

The inability of the Eldest Sister to reproduce her grandmother's recipes amidst the trappings of her modernized lifestyle points to the greater loss of the culinary traditions of Vietnamese migrants after assimilating to French culture. For the Eldest Sister, in addition to trying to find direction and consolation through her book of her grandmother's recipes, also refers repeatedly to mass-market cookbooks, such as "Le Grand Livre de salades" and "l'Art de la fondue" (13). These cookbooks, with which the grandmother's codex is simultaneously juxtaposed and differentiated, serve to highlight the exclusion of Vietnamese cuisine from what is marketable and publishable in France. Moreover, these rather meaningless, generic books of recipes seem to invade the space of the three heroines, as they are stacked high in the closet (78), piled up around them (90), or scattered around the house (114), thus suggesting that the weight of mainstream French culture will crush Vietnamese attempts to contribute. As she does with her grandmother's recipes, the Eldest Sister seems to search for a kind of "how-to manual" for

success in Western society among the lists of ingredients and instructions for preparation, but although she attempts to cook recipes from these books, such as “des encornets à la provençale” (18), “des rösti” (12), or “des rognons de mouton” (12), she finds them unsatisfying and as bereft as before. The Eldest Sister’s regular perusal of these cookbooks as well as her committed preparation and mechanical consumption of the recipes collected in their contents points to her attempts to abandon the culture of her birthplace in order to assimilate into her adopted home, yet her dissatisfaction with the results hints at invisible boundaries that inhibit her success in that endeavor.

The novel’s co-mingling of the Eldest Sister’s book of her grandmother’s recipes with mass-market cookbooks intended for the French mainstream marks the former as un-publishable and unmarketable and the latter as generic and bereft of cultural attachment. Lê thus seems to emphasize a contemporary disinterest in Vietnamese culture in France all while presaging its future commodification by global capitalism and a subsequent emptying of specific cultural attachment. Though Vietnamese cuisine is unpopular in the novel’s contemporary moment because of its “bizarre” tastes and un-modern techniques, if it ever does enter the mainstream it will be subjected to the same evacuation of cultural specificity in favor of mass consumption that a dish such as fondue from Savoie experienced. Furthermore, our access as readers to those mass-market cookbooks—we could go to any Fnac in France to purchase one—is juxtaposed with the inaccessibility of the Eldest Sister’s book of Vietnamese recipes, thereby implicating the reader as a potential future consumer of a commodified version of Vietnamese culture. Picking up this thread is Kim Thúy, who develops these dynamics further in *Mãn*. In this novel, Thúy describes the rise to mainstream popularity of Vietnamese cuisine in Canada and the establishment of a Vietnamese migrant woman chef as a partial “author” of its ascent.

## Writing the Culinary, Writing the Self in Kim Thúy's *Mãn*

As in Lê's novel, Thúy's *Mãn* also highlights the importance of embodied languages to the transmission of Vietnamese culinary culture. Here, the eponymous heroine explains how culinary transmission worked in Vietnam when she was a girl before she migrated to Quebec:

Les mères enseignaient à leurs filles à cuisiner à voix basse, en chuchotant, afin d'éviter le vol des recettes par les voisines, qui pourraient séduire leurs maris avec les mêmes plats. Les traditions culinaires se transmettaient en secret...un geste à la fois, selon le rythme du quotidien. Dans l'ordre naturel, les filles apprenaient donc à mesurer la quantité d'eau pour le riz avec la première phalange de l'index... (12)

As Thúy describes, this culinary inheritance was also a key to success for women whose personal prosperity depended on an advantageous marriage and therefore was jealously guarded from the putative competition, effectively muffling exchanges among women across filial lines. In this way, a woman's identity and sense of selfhood was rooted in her family, and while she could resort to her culinary creativity to potentially change the course of her life, her identity would remain linearly and hierarchically organized and bound to the kitchen. That women would not generally share this culinary heritage with other women across filial lines for fear of losing their husbands indicates that the dishes they crafted were important to their identities, which were rooted in their ancestries in Vietnam.

However, with the linearity and predictability of relations, traditions, and expectations thrown into disarray by diaspora, *Mãn* has the daunting opportunity to rewrite her identity, to see herself, as she puts it, as "une page blanche" (53). The heroine actualizes the metaphor of "writing the self" by composing and publishing a cookbook. Embedded within Thúy's novel, *Mãn*'s cookbook is a *mise en abyme* that enables author Thúy to comment on the origins and

trajectories of her own literary work, its potential as a catalyst for relations in the world, and possible outcomes of these connections. She thus offers a kind of integrated auto-exegesis on the figure of the postcolonial, migrant author-chef who must reinvent herself within a new globalized capitalist context shaped by trauma and memory, migration and separation, transnational cultural encounters and different conceptions of femininity. I therefore propose that we follow the trajectory of Thúy's cookbook-within-the-novel from the creation of its contents to its dissemination and reception as a means of tracing both the activation and the annihilation of the subjectivity of the protagonist through this process. In other words, although Thúy presents the cookbook as constructive of diasporic Vietnamese femininity as plural and collaborative by self-consciously bringing to the fore a multiplicity of voices, stories, languages, and histories of any one member of the Vietnamese diaspora, she also reveals significant moments when this sense of self is in grave doubt, threatened by the same dynamics that brought it into being.

While working in her husband's Vietnamese restaurant, Mãn's sphere of influence was powerful, but limited only to the customers who would eat there. However, the course of Mãn's life changes when a Quebecois woman named Julie takes interest in the woman behind the delicious dishes: "Julie a été la première à pencher son visage dans la fenêtre par laquelle je sortais les plats. Son sourire s'étendait d'un côté à l'autre de l'ouverture" (54). Rather than allow Mãn's work and creativity to go unrecognized, Julie insists that she escape the kitchen and take ownership of her dishes by meeting her customers: "Julie venait souvent à notre restaurant... Chaque fois, elle me faisait sortir de la cuisine pour me présenter à ses invités en m'enlaçant de tout son corps" (55). Motivated by curiosity and compassion, Julie takes it upon herself to facilitate Mãn's emergence from the kitchen, invest in the expansion of her restaurant, and encourage her to amplify her gastronomic resonance even beyond the restaurant. Effectively

obliged by Julie to take the lead in teaching cooking classes, in a cooking studio that Julie rebrands “Mãn” in honor of her new friend, Mãn discovers her own voice by sharing her culinary knowledge with others who in turn serve as transmitters themselves of her culinary culture: “...une voix a émergé de mon nom—« Mãn »—écrit en vert jade sur les assiettes, les sacs, la devanture. Le premier groupe de vingt personnes venues à l’atelier a amplifié cette voix naissante en emportant les recettes et en répétant les histoires racontées autour de la table” (61). Here, it is through the amplification of Mãn’s perspectives on Vietnamese culinary culture that she begins to shore up her sense of self and shape a role for herself as a vector between the traditions of her homeland and the adaptations necessary for reconstructing a life in a new place.

However, it is not only through the sharing of stories and recipes that Mãn gains an expanding sense of self. As epitomized by the plates, bags, and front window of the restaurant that bear her name, the weight of Mãn’s newfound subjectivity also grows as she puts herself and the otherness of her culture up for sale and for consumption by French Canadians unfamiliar with Vietnamese cuisine. Though it is true that Mãn is relaying her culture by teaching about cooking, which necessarily involves a more significant interaction than picking up take-out food for casual consumption at home, the fact remains that the success of her restaurant, as well as her new awareness of her own voice, hinges on her participation in a more cosmopolitan cross-cultural market. Reminiscent of Cheng’s analysis of the bodies of Asian women, this scene suggests that the aestheticization and sale of her selfhood affirms as well as threatens her subjectivity. Thus, her friend Julie’s intervention is not uncomplicated; while she does successfully magnify Mãn’s culinary prowess, she also exposes Mãn into a Western system of consumption of the Other fueled by the unremitting drives of globalized capitalism and neo-colonial curiosity.

These dueling tensions are made particularly manifest in Mãn’s cookbook. Entitled “La Palanche”—the name for the pole balanced on the shoulders to carry heavy loads, one on each end, used especially by women in Vietnam—the cookbook exemplifies the work that goes into maintaining an equilibrium, particularly for diasporic Vietnamese women. Indeed, Mãn’s cookbook illustrates the challenges faced by female members of Vietnamese history before and after diaspora, who must balance past and present, ancestral relatives and adopted family, North and South, Vietnam and Quebec. In this way, *la palanche* is an adornment that supplements the body of a diasporic Vietnamese woman, thereby symbolizing how she is particularly burdened and reminded of her existence in a kind of “perihumanity” as Cheng theorizes; although they may become citizens of countries far from their homelands, such women will always have to reconcile conflicting cultural expectations according to Vietnamese and Western gender roles.

For better or for worse, Mãn’s recipes demonstrate a means of either accommodating or discovering the limits of this incompatibility, adapting the ingredients according to the needs of the day. Or, as Kyla Tompkins writes in “Consider the Recipe”: “...the recipe choreographs the everyday, marrying the imperatives and wisdom of the past to the contingencies of the present...” (444). The precarious balance between past and present is particularly evident in Mãn’s recipes themselves, which make visible the possibilities and limits of this process of adaptation. For example, Mãn describes the particularities of one of her original recipes: “Comme deux amis de longue date, la sauce de poisson s’accorde avec le sirop d’érable dans la marinade des côtes levées, alors que dans la soupe au tamarin, tomates, ananas et poisson, le céleri remplace dignement la tige des oreilles d’éléphant” (80). Here, Mãn elucidates the potential for gustatory relations between two nationalistically symbolic products—fish sauce from Vietnam and maple syrup from Canada—to suggest that even ingredients as symbolically charged as these can



thereby represent more than themselves, thus symbolizing a rather hospitable gesture in that Mãn makes space for maple syrup in her version of Vietnamese cuisine.<sup>168</sup>

More than a repository of traditional culture, Mãn's recipes are not mere translations of her mother's "cookbook," so to speak, from their original oral and embodied languages to the written idiom of her adopted home. They are new, improvised creations based on her maternally inherited culinary heritage and adapted to the circumstances of the Vietnamese diaspora in Quebec. Though Mãn goes on to admit: "Il va de soi que certains goûts sont exclusifs et tracent une forte frontière identitaire" (79), she explains that "en général, nous recherchions le même équilibre en bouche mais en utilisant des ingrédients spécifiques à chaque région" (79). Here, Loichot's argument that the creative and adaptive culinary acts of migrant women represent a "feminized version of Glissant's creolization" (*Tropics* 100) is particularly apposite. She explains that through creative adaptations exercised in cooking, the migrant woman chef is no longer a consumer of discursive culture of her various cultures, but a producer of that culture: "The reinvented dish is not the simple reproduction of the original by a new creation using substitute products available on the land of exile, a form of creolization that keeps creativity in motion" (*Tropics* 97). Thus, Loichot posits, cooking can be an especially well-suited form of cultural participation and production for migrant women to incite transformations of their adopted cultures by introducing their own culinary, as well as literary, methods (*Tropics* 97).

Furthermore, Mãn applies her creolizing techniques to her cookbook as well. Namely, she incorporates poignant personal narratives of her fellow Vietnamese migrants, mostly women, who inspire her into the Western form of the cookbook in French: "Chaque recette était portée par une histoire" (78), she explains. By sharing her narrative authority, Mãn allows a multiplicity

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<sup>168</sup> Thúy also accomplishes this visually on the cover *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes*.

of voices to contribute to the significance of Vietnamese cuisine in Quebec, thereby demonstrating that the cultures and identities of Vietnamese migrants are greater than any one person and cannot signify only one perspective. In this way, the cookbook anchors a signifier that may be empty or generic—such as “Asian” or “ethnic” cuisine—without tethering it to a single, monolithic signified. For Mãn, her cookbook is a kind of heuristic for people to learn about the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Vietnam and its diaspora for themselves, as well as participate in the embodied activities of cooking and eating, all while creating connections and building understandings.

While I concur with Loichot’s valorization of cooking as a means of creating cultural transformations in a new context of migration, it is important to consider how such interactions play out. This is especially true given that the form of the cookbook invites the reader to actively participate in literary as well as gustatory and consumptive ways, as Leonardi and Witt suggest in their discussions of the reproducibility of recipes. For Thúy, via her protagonist, seems to offer readers not only instructions for cooking Vietnamese food, but also a guidebook to navigating complex intercultural relations, which is emphasized by the *mise-en-abyme* of a cookbook inside a novel. Indeed, this formal technique self-consciously frames the dissemination and reception of the cookbook throughout the world, such that the reader of the novel can discern palpable differences in how readers with different backgrounds react differently to the cookbook’s contents. As we will see, Mãn’s sense of self and access to liberty grows as she and her cookbook become increasingly more well known around the world, but latent colonial dynamics in France will hinder these developments by trapping her in a role of service rather than one as a creator and producer of culture.

## Cookbooks and the Appreciation of Difference

Within the novel, Mãn's culinary innovations and reinventions gain unforeseen worldwide popularity. However, Mãn is quick to attribute this success to the readers' appreciation of the stories of Vietnamese people that are included with the recipes in the book. She describes: "Les lecteurs consultaient les recettes mais me parlaient surtout des contes et des anecdotes qui avaient motivé nos choix" (76). The inclusion of narratives in the cookbook gives profound, specific significance to recipes that for many people who are familiar with one-sided official histories or news media coverage, but unacquainted with Vietnamese cuisine. In this way, Mãn's cookbook accomplishes an important re-signification; the cookbook offers different, "unofficial" perspectives on Vietnamese people and their cultures, told from their own point of view, thus palliating the effects of historical overdetermination of their identities. For that matter, Mãn's cookbook seems designed specifically to thwart the neo-colonial and capitalistic tendencies of the phenomenon in contemporary "food(ie) culture" of "discovering new ethnic foods," also known as "culinary colonialism" or "Columbusing."<sup>169</sup> Mãn replaces the opportunities for "discovery," "exoticism," and "novelty" that are associated with a meaningless pursuit of pleasure with a context that demands empathy, respect, and generosity.

However, the reader of the Thúy's novel also witnesses Mãn's struggle to negotiate the avalanche of publicity that seems to emphasize the unicity and singularity of the heroine, her cookbook, and her restaurant. In Quebec, the publicity of her cookbook propels Mãn into the limelight as a spokesperson, while her cookbook becomes a "référence culturelle" (76), and her restaurant is recognized by reputed international publications as one of the "adresses incontournables" (76) of Montreal. Consecrated by such authorities as *Frommer's* and the

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<sup>169</sup> For more a discussion of "culinary colonialism" see Ray.

*Weekend Guide to Montreal* [*Week-end à Montréal*], Mãn alters the gastronomical and cultural identity of her home city and becomes an arbiter of taste in Quebec. Here, Mãn's rise to popularity through culinary innovation corroborates food studies scholar Krishnendu Ray's call to recognize the capacity of ethnic migrants to shape the cultural scene of their adopted city through the aesthetic choices made in restaurant work. In *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, Ray takes issue with the habit in academia of denying aesthetic license to ethnic migrants chefs and restaurant-owners.<sup>170</sup> While scholars such as Doris Witt interrogate the ethics of devoting scholarly attention to what she describes as "seemingly 'bourgeois' concerns such as the aesthetic pleasure of cooking and eating or cultural representations of food in the arts" ("Globalisms" 75), Ray suggests that a narrow focus on the labor of migrants from the standpoint of political economy prevents migrants from being recognized as arbiters of taste (20), which further propagating the fallacy that taste is "marginal in the lives of marginal people" (17). Attributing these tendencies to "the shrill clamor of post-colonial theorists" (9) who "sometimes speak as if nothing exists between domination and resistance" (10),<sup>171</sup> Ray argues that through aesthetic decisions such as choosing the name and the décor of the restaurant and composing the menu and the dishes, "the ethnic restaurateur in the heart of the Western metropolis conceives and offers the flavor of her experience" (24). In this way, Ray urges recognition of the ways in

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<sup>170</sup> Ray defines "ethnic" as an post-1950s term for a migrant who is "visibly different" (1) and generally held to be inferior and indelibly foreign. For a more detailed discussion of this term and its relation to cuisine, see Ray chapter 1.

<sup>171</sup> Indeed, along the way, Ray goes so far as to complain that Gayatri Spivak's landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" would do better to resort to ethnographic oral interviews to account for the inability of subaltern peoples to express themselves. Here, Ray reveals his fundamental incomprehension of the importance of Spivak's intervention. Rather, she argues that regardless of the mode of expression of the subaltern subject, or the willingness to listen on the part of the researcher, the structures of Western domination render that subject's language illegible and ultimately incomprehensible. Indeed, Spivak seeks to dismantle the idea that ethnography is somehow free from the structures of colonial racial prejudice.

which migrant restaurant-owners exercise agency and influence culture through food in spite of the structural forces of consumerism and commodification they endure (6).

While I certainly find laudable Ray's call to pay critical attention to the aesthetic perspectives of migrants, Thúy's novel demonstrates that Mãn's role as a shaper of taste in Canada is more multivalent and complex than Ray's model would allow for, because Mãn's success depends greatly on her Quebecois friend, Julie. It is thanks in large part to Julie's connections and resources that the publication of *La Palanche* gives Mãn access to the privileged circles of culture-making in Canada, in addition to the globalized networks of imperial powers such as the United States and France. Furthermore, though Mãn is the creator of the innovative dishes, most of the aesthetic choices for the expansion of her husband's restaurant into something grander are made by her friend. For example, it is Julie who convinces Mãn to start teaching classes in Vietnamese cuisine, designs and funds the building of a cooking studio, and chooses the décor for an expanded restaurant. Finding herself unexpectedly at the center of a successful new venture almost in spite of herself, Mãn attributes her improbable rise to her friend: "Julie a travaillé sans relâche pendant des mois dans l'atelier, mais aussi avec moi, sur moi. Elle m'a convaincue de monter un programme de cours de cuisine vietnamienne avec dégustation. Je l'ai suivie parce que personne ne pouvait résister à son élan" (60). Though Mãn appears helpless in this situation, she insists that their work together is based on exchange, because she teaches her Quebecois friend how to cook the food as well as speak the language of Vietnam. In short, Ray's championing of ethnic migrants' ability to shape culinary culture seems to overlook such examples of cross-cultural collaboration, particularly among women, in addition to how relations with a white native-born citizen might affect these processes.

As for Ray's charge that postcolonial theorists overemphasize dynamics of resistance and domination, I find his judgment of these stances naïve.<sup>172</sup> While I agree with Ray that it is important to consider dynamics beyond resistance and domination, this does not mean letting down our guard or abandoning our sense of vigilance, as Said might argue. Indeed, Ray overlooks the ways in which colonial and imperial histories can affect culinary relationships between certain cultures in insidious ways; it is not as though dynamics of dominance and resistance spring from a vacuum. Furthermore, in his consideration of the relationship between the ethnic restaurateur and her cosmopolitan clientele, Ray dismisses analyses that interpret this encounter as, in his words, a "shallow, commodified, and consumerist interaction with an 'Other' culinary culture" (6-7) to argue that we must consider this encounter from the point of view of the ethnic migrant rather than the privileged native consumer. To support his argument, Ray unfairly undercuts bell hooks' important analysis in "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in which she addresses how racial Otherness is commodified and consumed by white mass culture. Ray asserts that hooks overstates the parallels between eating food and sex as two forms of incorporation of the Other, contending that the dynamics of the table are considerably more complex (4-5).<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless, V. Nguyen identifies this tendency among Asian American literary scholars. In *Race and Resistance*, he criticizes this penchant for analyzing Asian American literature in terms of resistance to or accommodation with the various kinds of oppression endured by Asian Americans. Reading for this binary, Nguyen argues, does not account of the heterogeneity of the Asian American population (3-4).

<sup>173</sup> To prove his point that the dynamics of the table involve more than sexual relations, Ray manipulates a citation of de Certeau's *L'invention du quotidien* to suit his argument without alluding to de Certeau's full discussion, which would compromise Ray's critique of hooks. Ray cites: "La table est une *machine sociale* compliquée, efficace aussi : elle fait parler, on « se met à table » pour avouer ce qu'on voulait taire, on se fait « cuisiner » par un voisin habile, on cède à la griserie d'un instant, à une bouffée de vanité, au velouté d'un vin rouge et l'on s'entend raconter ce qu'on s'était juré, hier encore, de cacher à tous" (278). Here, Ray ends his quotation of this text just before de Certeau concludes with an extended discussion of the connections

I would hardly think hooks would disagree with Ray that the eating of food symbolizes much more than sex, but seeing as her point is to explore how race is rendered consumable for the pleasure of the dominant, her heavy emphasis on *metaphors* of eating and sex are warranted. Indeed, even though hooks employs such figurative language—for example, “Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (21)—her article is emphatically not about the real-life travails of migrant restaurateurs. Rather, she argues that forces well beyond the sphere of the racialized individual, such as “commodity culture” and “mass culture,” posit racial Otherness as a source of desire and pleasure, which then recalls well established links to analogous relations of power and seduction between dominant whites and subjugated racialized others under imperialism (25). Furthermore, when the stakes of the commodification and consumption of race include cultural erasure and historical decontextualization, delivered rather insidiously through a positive valence of desire and interracial exchange, there might be good reason to urge resistance (31). For, as hooks notes, “The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (39). This is particularly relevant for discussions related to French republican universalism, which presupposes that cultural diversity can be incorporated

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between lovemaking and the dinner table: “Rien de tel qu’un dîner fin, en tête à tête, pour avancer les affaires d’argent et celle de cœur. On admire l’éclat du teint avivé par le plaisir de la bonne chère, le brillant du regard rehaussé par la lumière des chandelles. On soutient la conversation, on se fait disert, aimable, caustique, et par-dessous ce discours explicite on laisse entendre à demi mot : « Vous me plaisez, vous êtes séduisant(e). Un jour, peut-être, si vous vouliez... » La nappe est aussi, déjà, le drap du lit ; ses taches de vin, de fruit font penser à d’autres marques...La table est un lieu de plaisir, c’est une vieille découverte, mais elle garde sa vérité et son secret, car manger est toujours bien plus que manger” (278-279).

into the French state with little concern for the specificities of the histories, contexts, and knowledges of those cultures.

For example, Mãn's cookbook has the unexpected consequence of resonating with metropolitan French people who had personal experience with Vietnam during the colonial period:

En parallèle, *La Palanche*, séduisait Paris, où bon nombre de lecteurs avaient entretenu une relation intime avec le Vietnam. Certains se rappelaient un grand-père qui y avait vécu pendant la période de l'Indochine française, d'autres se souvenaient d'un oncle ou d'un lointain cousin décrivant les plantations de caoutchouc. (82)

Because of these networks of globalized capitalism, Mãn sells more copies of her book, becoming an instant, international sensation in a way she could have never dreamed possible. But at the same time, not all networks have the same historical weight; in this case, France's history of colonialism in Vietnam facilitates French interest in Mãn's cookbook, suggesting that the commonality of the French language between the Hexagon and Quebec would not be sufficient enough to inspire interest abroad. Moreover, the reference to rubber plantations, where French landowners exacted profits from the land and labor of Vietnamese people, hints that memories of colonial Indochina for the French in the present day are premised on exploitation, domination, environmental destruction, and financial gain. In spite of this re-magnetization of colonial poles, however, Mãn uses her cookbook as a culinary-literary proxy to draw together people with experience in Vietnam, even those whose presence there was predicated on France's colonial domination who likely have a one-sided vision of its culture and people. Re-connecting colonized and colonizer, north and south, communist and capitalist, Mãn's cookbook renews affective attachments or creates them where there was once hatred and misunderstanding.



One such example from the novel occurs when Mãn attends the *Salon du livre* in Paris to promote *La Palanche*, where she meets a French woman named Francine. Francine's parents, we learn, built and managed an orphanage for handicapped children in Saigon and, like many South Vietnamese, fled in 1975. Burdened with guilt at leaving the children behind to fend for themselves, Francine's mother was particularly traumatized and repressed her feelings of culpability and loss. Throughout their childhood in France, Francine and her brother Luc themselves feel the weight of these differed emotions, which their mother would only articulate through cooking her favorite Vietnamese dish, *cá kho tộ*, once a month. Luc describes the oppressive atmosphere of the house when his mother would prepare this dish: "Dès qu'il pouvait, Luc se sauvait de la maison les soirs de *cá kho tộ*. Il ne savait pas s'il détestait plus l'odeur du *nước mắm* [sauce de poisson] cuit ou l'atmosphère entourant ce plat lourd d'obsessions et d'impuissance" (86). Luc's linking of the aromas of Vietnamese dishes with difficult memories strongly resembles cooking scenes in Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques*; like the Eldest Sister, Luc's mother attempts to purge the trauma of exile through cooking dishes that become charged with symbolic meaning, but still cannot manage to find the feeling of solace or sense of community that these same dishes used to provide.

When Francine sees the cover of Mãn's cookbook which features an image of this same dish of caramelized fish in a bookshop in Paris, Francine is moved to tears by the memory and the rush of accompanying aromas and tastes, much like the man from Rạch Giá in Quebec cited earlier: "...la photo de couverture de *La Palanche*...l'avait remuée jusqu'aux larmes. L'odeur de la sauce de poisson était venue la frapper comme si elle était de nouveau debout dans le coin cuisine de l'orphelinat au moment où la cuisinière en versait dans le mélange brûlant de sucre, d'oignon et d'ail" (96). After meeting Mãn in person, Francine and Luc invite her to cook for

their guilt-ridden mother by reprising the role of their cook at the orphanage, to which Mãn agrees. In Paris, Mãn recreates the traditional ambiance of a Vietnamese kitchen by cooking outside and dining on low tables and stools:

Je cuisinai dehors, comme à l'orphelinat, comme dans la plupart des maisons du Vietnam. La mère de Luc est venue s'asseoir sur une pierre à mes côtés et a retiré de mes mains les longues baguettes en bambou pour retourner les morceaux de poisson. Luc l'a prise en photo pour ne plus jamais oublier ce geste, qui avait été absent de sa mémoire durant les vingt-cinq dernières années. (99)

Unlike the Eldest Sister in Linda Lê's *Les Trois Parques* who cannot manage to overcome her crippling gustatory nostalgia through culinary means, Thúy's Mãn helps Francine, Luc, and their mother to recover and relive embodied memories from their stifled past, thereby exorcising their trauma through cooking *together*.

Here, in a gesture that is rather uncommon in postcolonial Francophone literature, Thúy's novel recognizes the loss and trauma of Francine and her family, who themselves live in a kind of exile. Thúy therefore seems to be suggesting that displaced French people living in Vietnam and diasporic Vietnamese people might share a commonality of experience because neither can still call Vietnam home. Acting as an emissary of reconciliation, Mãn's cookbook deploys the sights, scents, and *saveurs* of Vietnamese cuisine to rekindle dormant affective attachments to Vietnam, whether they be forgotten with the passing of time, repressed due to traumatic experiences, or excluded because of political contexts. In the wake of disruption due to war and diaspora, for the Vietnamese as well as the French, Mãn's cookbook is a gesture of sharing and of (re)connection across ancestral boundaries, political persuasions, and historical enemy lines. Indeed, it is this *mise en abyme*—a cookbook being written within the novel—that

highlights a kind of ethical, humanistic ethos of Thúy's work, which seeks to create connections and a greater sense of belonging among members of the Vietnamese diaspora and the world. Furthermore, by following the reception of the cookbook and the subsequent interactions it engenders in France, a model to rehabilitate colonial hierarchies in favor of cooperative postcolonial relations emerges.

### **Consumption of Difference through Food and Writing in France**

However, this model does not extend to Luc's compatriots in France who have not consulted Mãn's cookbook; thus, rather than engage personally and profoundly with Vietnamese culture through stories *and* recipes, they tend to blindly consume both the aestheticization of Vietnamese food as well as the actual dishes served without considering how this act does not recognize the creativity and work behind them. Thúy appears to highlight this dynamic in her novel, when Luc invites Mãn, with whom he is having a love affair, to take part in a festival in which foreign chefs cook in Parisian restaurants to discover potential "mariages de connaissances" (116) in the kitchen. Though the ostensible goal is to celebrate the cultural interactions and exchanges between French and Vietnamese cuisines, Mãn's descriptions of Luc's aesthetic choices for the organization of the festival evoke colonial nostalgia rather than contemporary collaboration. For example, in preparation for the festival, it is Luc who designs the restaurant and plans the presentation of the food:

Luc avait installé trois îlots au restaurant. Le premier soutenait d'énormes plateaux en jacinthe d'eau tressée remplis d'herbes fraîches pour la préparation des rouleaux de printemps et de la salade de papaye verte au bœuf séché mariné dans l'alcool de riz, enrobé de graines de sésame, grillé à très basse température pendant dix heures. Deux

jeunes vietnamiennes en blouse de soie fendue sur les côtés jusqu’à la taille maniaient les galettes avec la lenteur des pays chauds et l’orgueil des jeunes filles en fleur. (128)

From the young Vietnamese servers in traditional *áo dài* dresses, to the leafy touches to the décor and the stereotypically Vietnamese dishes, these aesthetic choices are meant to recall sweltering humidity, nubile sexuality, and familiarly exotic tastes that inspire a particular conception of Vietnamese authenticity that depends on ethnic aesthetic touches.

Additionally, whereas Luc circulates the restaurant and interacts with diners, Mãn cooks, stationary and silent, as if she were a part of the décor:

Le troisième [îlot] m’était réservé pour tourner les crêpes au curcuma, au porc et aux crevettes, une opération qui exigeait souplesse du poignet et vitesse dans le mouvement afin que le mélange adhère à la fois au fond et aux parois de la poêle en une mince couche. Puisque le nom de ce plat—*bánh xèo*—évoque le son du pétilllement du liquide au contact de la chaleur, le feu doit être élevé mais contrôlé pour empêcher l’ébullition. Le défi était de farcir la crêpe de fèves germées et de fèves jaunes et de la plier en deux sans la briser. (128)

Here, it is not Mãn’s creativity and cultural creation in the kitchen that is valorized, but her technical skill honed through years of preparing food.<sup>174</sup> However, she does not seem bothered by this slight to her creative and expressive potential, rather she sees Luc as constructive of her sense of self: “Même si la salle était bondée, lever les yeux des trois woks pétillants ne serait-ce qu’une demi-seconde me faisait rencontrer inmanquablement ceux de Luc... Je m’y

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<sup>174</sup> This is reminiscent of a moment in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* when Binh, the Vietnamese chef for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris, explains that his omelets are delicious, not because of a “secret ingredient,” but thanks to the rote repetition of labor: “If there is a ‘secret,’ Madame, it is this: Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call” (154).

reconnaissais comme je m'étais reconnue dans le miroir sur le mur de notre chambre où nous avions arrêté le temps..." (129). This scene demonstrates the extent to which cooking is both activating and annihilating of Mãn's sense of self; when made aesthetic, Mãn's food triggers gendering and racializing stereotypes of French domination of Vietnamese femininity while also helping her become a subject rather than an object in that process.<sup>175</sup>

In short, while an examination of aesthetics of food from the point of view of ethnic restaurateurs, such as Ray's, is an important one, it is equally important to interrogate how the push and pull between subjectivity and agency, on the one hand, and historical, economic, gender, and racial pressures, on the other hand, influence the ways of being of racialized restaurateurs, especially women. In this way, by considering the connections between aesthetics and ontology as presented by Cheng in tandem with a literary analysis of racialized migrant women in culinary-literary endeavors, I am extending Ray's argument into the realm of the mimetic and taking a closer look at questions of gender and femininity for Vietnamese women. For although Ray mentions in his preface how links between gender and cooking precluded him from learning to cook (*xì*), his discussion of the particular case of racialized women in the kitchen or in the restaurant is cursory at best, preferring to focus on issues of masculinity in the professional kitchen which further reifies the gender divides between the public and the private.

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<sup>175</sup> V. Nguyen argues: "For Asian Americans, this transformation of race into a cultural icon and commodity in the marketplace of multiculturalism is embodied in the model minority. The model minority is an identity that is testimony to the Asian American ability to be a good citizen, productive worker, reliable consumer, and member of a niche lifestyle suitable for capitalist exploitation. The model minority is the vehicle of entry for a racial population not only into American capitalism but also into American politics—indeed, the two go hand in hand" (*Race and Resistance* 10).

Furthermore, in my analysis of Vietnamese women migrant authors, I am positing the literary aesthetics of food as a possible way to negotiate the theoretical chasm of accommodation and resistance to see what might occur *in between* these two poles. Cookbooks authored by migrants have the potential to recover literal taste as a means of contributing to aesthetics and culture, as Ray urges. Such works also account for the ways in which desire and pleasure for Otherness revive imperialist nostalgia by literalizing the transformation of ethnicity into spice, as argued by hooks—but in food that is rendered aesthetic in a cookbook with text and images. Indeed, Ray’s analysis is the only one to consider the choices made in the marketing of cookbooks, calling attention to the ways in which tropes of authenticity, which often involve the performance of ethnicity, can be used as a barometer for how the author is either manipulating or fighting stereotypes. For example, cookbooks might include language and imagery that suggest a “genuflection towards authentic expatriate domesticity,” such as colorful cultural markers, allusions to a family recipe, and a nostalgic sense of ancestral collectivity (Ray 162). Or, they might opt for an emphasis on the originality of the individual chef with a minimalist, modern aesthetic that accents the quality of the ingredients and the nobility of the labor, without references to time or place (Ray 163). The former might imply a cookbook that faithfully reproduces classic dishes with only the necessary changes for accommodating the displaced recipe to the kitchen of the reader, while the latter signals an embrace of adaptation through creativity and improvisation.

To once again nuance Ray’s insistence in calling attention to aesthetic choices in marketing, it is important to remember that the authors themselves do not necessarily have ownership over such decisions on the aesthetics and marketing. For example, in an interview that I conducted with Thúy in Paris in December 2017, she recounted:

Quand *Mãn* a été édité en format de poche ici à Paris, on m'a demandé de faire quelques recettes à la fin. J'ai résisté. J'ai dit que je ne sais pas comment faire ça, je ne suis pas chef. Et je me suis presque battue contre mon éditrice française... Et puis j'étais en tournée en Allemagne et j'ai dit ça, et ils m'ont dit, « Mais jamais on inclurait les recettes parce qu'on considère que votre livre est la littérature, jamais on le baisserait avec des recettes. » Et j'ai dit, « Oui, je suis d'accord avec vous, ça n'a rien à voir avec des recettes » et donc j'ai résisté. (Thúy)

Even established authors such as Kim Thúy struggle with their editors for control over the contents, appearance, and promotion of their works, whether they be cookbooks or novels. Celia Britton analyzes this phenomenon in metropolitan French publishing; in “Eating their Words: The Consumption of French Caribbean Literature,” Britton explains that with the growing market in France for literature from the Caribbean, there has been a rising trend in presenting novels as edible, “as though the association between the Caribbean and food products is so powerful that the most obvious mode of consumption of its literary products is also oral” (49). The metropolitan French reader is thus invited to “eat” the text through its packaging and its press coverage in both academic and mass-market promotional campaigns (49), reflecting precisely the situation Thúy found herself: resisting the attempts of her editor to mix genres in order to conflate the reading of a novel with the eating of a dish.

We cannot pretend that Thúy's ethnic background and gender did not factor into the editor's logic of marketing, in addition to the fact that Thúy's novels tell the stories of Vietnamese migrants in Quebec and women who cook, in particular. Indeed, a kind of analogy is imposed; for a dish to be worth eating, it should include interesting spices and exotic flavors (at least according to the contemporary Euro-North American palate), so it goes for a novel to be

worth reading, it must provide elements that excite and intensify the experience of reading. Though Britton does not make the connection, this line of reasoning harkens back to hooks' commodification of Otherness as novelty: "It is within the commercial realm of advertising that the drama of Otherness finds expression. Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening" (hooks 26). Thus, even attempts to augment the identity and power of the racialized Other by increasing the degree of cultural difference lose their potency when faced with a regime of consumption. As hooks writes, "As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption" (33). Britton seems to concur, for she suggests that these gustatory marketing techniques actually influence the content and language of the novels themselves, as tropes of eating and selling food recur frequently in Creole texts such as those by Patrick Chamoiseau and Maryse Condé (50).<sup>176</sup>

Furthermore, when consumption becomes the dominant form of interaction between the self and the Other, techniques for defending against intrusive forms of (neo)colonial power are rendered ineffectual, at least in part. Britton explains that the shift to consumption problematizes Glissant's notion of opacity as an effective defense of inherent difference against the neo-imperialist drives of our contemporary moment. The "right to opacity," which can be exercised through poetry, contends that all people are entitled to an "irreducible singularity" that can be conceived of and thought of in relation to other singularities, but cannot be *understood* as such, by others (Glissant, *Poetics* 190). In this way, by decrying the Western notion that cultures must

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<sup>176</sup> Loichot analyzes the attempts of Dany Laferrière and Gisèle Pineau at thwarting and manipulating readers driven by this Western mode of consumption of Caribbean literature, in particular as an object of sexual consumption, through irony and humor. See *The Tropics Bite Back* chapter 4.



be made intelligible or *clear*, Glissant guards against the objectification and appropriation of the Other through knowledge. However, Glissant's opacity is a visual metaphor intended to preserve what the Western world might not understand, but it is not necessarily equipped to fend off consumption (Britton 56). Britton writes,

Current forms of neo-colonialism are no longer concerned either to control the Other via a body of knowledge, as in the visual metaphor of opacity/transparency, or to reduce the Other to being the same as oneself via the policy of assimilation, but simply to consume the Other as a commodity which is valued precisely for its difference, and in the Caribbean case for its special "saveur." (59)

To summarize Britton: whereas formerly, racialized writers might have been encouraged to make the foreignness of their cultures more *clear* for the Western public to *understand*, the current emphasis on edibility induces them to augment the unfamiliar for the crude *consumption* of metropolitan readers, thereby treating difference as an exotic flavor that enriches the culinary experience.

Furthermore, cultural difference, rather than being controlled through knowledge, is obliterated when consumed, incorporated into a mainstream that cares not for its socio-historical import within its original context. Perversely, this cultural erasure occurs *through* exchange, as hooks asserts: "Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (31). The "consumption" of a novel as an edible form of cultural exchange thus belies the humanistic potential of the sharing of food and stories in literature as well as in life for it reinforces rather than dismantles (post)colonial

hierarchies. In the face of such a dilemma, the question remains: how can authors defend against the loss of cultural context through “consumer cannibalism” while also indulging in their own desire to explore and share the particularities, especially the culinary ones, of their ethnic heritage?

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of the cookbook, whether in its literal and/or literary forms, as a significant form of cultural expression and sharing among diasporic Vietnamese writers, such as Kim Thúy and Linda Lê, signals that claiming a right to opacity may not be the only or the most effective way to defend against intrusions of Western dominance, particularly in light of the blind consumption of cultural difference encouraged by global capitalism. A cookbook, especially one containing personal narratives of migrants in addition to recipes, is not meant to obscure cultural difference through opacity, but make culinary culture more transparent by explaining step-by-step the ingredients and labor required for cooking dishes, as well as the origins, personal significance, and adaptations of the recipes. Therefore, while the initial exotic appeal of a Vietnamese cookbook might tempt an ignorant Western consumer, recipes coupled with narratives defuse the exoticism of these dishes and the women who prepare them by demanding active personal involvement from the reader by engaging consumers in the stories and histories of the people involved, by self-consciously performing practices of cultural transfer and adaptation of conflicting bases of knowledge, and by openly displaying the labor and expertise required in the sourcing and preparation of dishes. In this way, the reader-consumer participates and honors the work and creativity of the Vietnamese migrant author-chef herself as expressions of her relative agency and subjectivity. On the one hand, narrative cookbooks, or

even “recipistolary” novels with an emphasis on the culinary afford a view into the state of being of racialized migrant women and the dually aesthetic and humanized “perihumanity” in which they reside. While, on the other hand, these books also have the capacity to fight cultural erasure with socio-historical context and promote meaningful appreciation of cultural difference through the pairing of recipes and stories.

## Chapter IV

### Becoming Cannibal, Becoming Writer in Linda Lê's *Les Évangiles du crime*

“La littérature n’est pas faite pour les acquittés, elle n’est pas faite pour les élus. Elle est dans le camp des victimes et des sacrifiés, dans le camp des condamnés qui essayent, comme moi, de trouver leur salut et qui se cassent les dents.”

—Linda Lê<sup>177</sup>

“Si l’on considère ces critères, on voit que, parmi tous ceux qui font des livres à intention littéraire, même chez les fous, très peu peuvent se dire écrivains.”

—Gilles Deleuze<sup>178</sup>

## Introduction

Linda Lê is a prolific and celebrated author on the French literary scene. Since her first novel, published in 1986, she has written over twenty novels and non-fiction essays, a number of which have been selected or nominated by prestigious literary prizes.<sup>179</sup> However, introducing Lê and her oeuvre is never a straightforward or neutral exercise: “En effet, la manière dont les universitaires parlent de ses livres de part d’autre de l’Atlantique semblent ne pas décrire le même écrivain,” (Loucif 880) explains Sabine Loucif in her introduction to a 2007 interview with the author. While American academics tend to emphasize Lê’s identity by alluding to her

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<sup>177</sup> “Linda Lê.”

<sup>178</sup> “La Littérature et la vie,” in *Critique et Clinique* 17.

<sup>179</sup> She received the Prix Wepler-Fondation La Poste in 2010 for her novel, *Cronos* and the prix Renaudot-poche in 2011 for *À l’enfant que je n’aurai pas*. Her novel, *Lame de fond* made the shortlist for the Prix Goncourt in 2012. Most of her work has been published by Christian Bourgois.

Vietnamese heritage, scholars in France are prone to claiming her as one of their own: “Les Français tendent à considérer Linda Lê comme un auteur français dont la sophistication littéraire trouve sa source sur les bancs d’une prestigieuse Khâgne parisienne et omettent de mentionner ses origines vietnamiennes” (Loucif 880). Both approaches—to overly emphasize Lê’s Vietnamese postcoloniality, on the one hand, or to ignore it entirely by considering her elite Parisian *bona fides* as a qualification for French status, on the other—give an incomplete picture of Lê’s authorial complexity.<sup>180</sup> It might therefore be tempting to let her writing speak for itself, because, at least on this subject, Lê’s critics tend to agree. Jack Yeager, groundbreaking American scholar of francophone Vietnamese literature, has lauded her “one of the most provocative, daring, and fearless writers working in France today” (Yeager, “Foreword” i), while French critics have called her an “auteure difficile” who writes in “un français exigeant et recherché” (Bui 1)—high praise in French letters—and who “résiste au discours dominant” (Argand) in her work.

Nevertheless, Lê’s critical acclaim and intellectual pedigree do not occlude the significance of Vietnam to her *and* to her writing, for her works contain not only a profusion of high-culture references and instances of intertextuality, from Greek mythology to literatures from around the Western world of letters, but also numerous autobiographical details that allude to her birthplace (Loucif 880). “Je n’aime pas ceux qui font de l’exil une soupe aigre-douce nourrissant leurs livres,” (qtd. in Loucif 882) Lê explains while also admitting: “Même quand je n’écris pas sur le Vietnam, il est présent en moi” (qtd. in Loucif 891). In consequence, this weighty, often

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<sup>180</sup> Lê is also notoriously reserved during her rare media appearances, visibly reticent to submit to the ploys of interviewers. Nonetheless, she has granted many interviews (many of which have been published) over the course of her career, to myself included, and can be quite forthright. Indeed, scholars of her oeuvre often resort to these interviews to better understand her work, as I will do here. For more on Lê’s public persona, see Chau-Pech Ollier.

oblique presence of Vietnam in Lê's oeuvre has prompted scholars of postcolonial francophone literature (who, like myself, indeed find themselves primarily in anglophone universities) to consider her work through the lens of identity, in spite of Lê's own dismissal of labels, whether francophone, French, or Vietnamese. Meanwhile, the heady, erudite quality of Lê's writing and her imaginative, if mutinous, manipulation of the French language have secured her a place in the inner circle of French literature, thereby giving the impression of the triumphs of French universalism through an example of successful cultural assimilation, a perspective we might call paternalistic at best. Paying heed to the importance of Lê's Vietnamese origins in her work without burdening it with an overdetermining critical lens of postcolonial identity thus demands a more balanced approach. For, as Leslie Barnes states in *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*, "Lê's work is profoundly marked by the trauma of postcolonial exile, even as it seeks to surpass the specifics of the author's own time and place" (25).

Accordingly, it is not irrelevant to consider the biographical details of Lê's life alongside the pivotal historical moments of postcolonial Vietnam that shaped her early life. Lê was born in Dalat in 1963, less than a decade after French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, which triggered the decolonization of Vietnam. Her father was an engineer from the North, while her mother came from an affluent family who sympathized with the colonial regime and were even naturalized French citizens. Thus, when the conflict between Communist forces in the North and the anti-Communist and U.S.-supported government of South Vietnam brought violence to Dalat during the Têt Offensive in 1968, Lê fled to Saigon with her family at the age of six. She attended the French lycée there until leaving for France in 1977 with her mother and sisters, two years after the fall of Saigon. Lê initially settled in Le Havre with her family before relocating to Paris in

order to pursue literary studies, first at the reputed Lycée Henri IV and subsequently at the Sorbonne. She eventually gave up her studies to pursue her own writing in the 1980s.

Lê's position of cultural liminality has led scholars to read her work as an expression of hybridity (Yeager, "Culture, Citizenship, Nation"), an "in-between" (Chau-Pech Ollier), or as having a "fraught relationship with duality" (Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving*) as a postcolonial subject caught between Vietnam and France. However, even though her biography could perhaps designate her as a voice of the postcolonial Vietnamese diaspora in France, Lê refrains from positioning herself within these categories: "She quietly declines to accept or reject critical labels, noting that when it comes to her literary identity she considers herself neither French nor Vietnamese and that the ambivalence of this position causes her little anguish" (Barnes, *Vietnam* 165-166). Barnes, for her part, departs from these notions of the "between" by seeing Lê's preference for being "neither French, nor Vietnamese" as a "double exclusion" that creates a "condition of negation," thereby granting her the possibility of literary innovation through form, rather than through the ossified structures of identity (*Vietnam* 26). For, as Lê explained in an interview, she learned from an encounter with Emil Cioran about the possibility of *not* belonging to one or the other: "Il m'a [...] appris la manière de vivre toujours en étranger. Je ne parle pas seulement d'être d'une origine autre, mais de vivre en étranger par rapport à un certain ordre, à un certain mode tel qu'il est, à la langue elle-même" (Lê and Crépu 9). Accordingly, in her writing, Lê does not seek recognition, which might lead to a greater sense of belonging to a particular identity, but a creative exploration of the realms of literary unbelonging.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> For more on Lê's preference for unbelonging, see Barnes, "Toward a 'Littérature déplacée'"; "Linda Lê, On Writing"; and "Sur les pas de Linda Lê." In a similar vein, Kurmann writes in *Intertextual Weaving* that Lê creates a pseudo-literary family through intertextuality by integrating the works of fellow exiled writers. Winston also makes this point in "Playing Hardball."

One of Lê's earliest novels, *Les Évangiles du crime*, published in 1992, explores the boundaries of belonging and unbelonging through a meditation on cannibalism—an act which is, in itself, an exercise in evaluating difference to determine belonging.<sup>182</sup> For the practice of cannibalism has historically been considered the ultimate sign of cultural otherness; it marked, at least from a European perspective, the dividing line between human civilization and barbarity.<sup>183</sup> Because cannibalism was perceived as oppositional and even threatening to human progress, colonizing Europeans felt justified in eliminating those whom they thought to be cannibals, either through slaughter or cultural assimilation, during their initial incursions in the Americas (Simek, *Eating Well* 167; Kilgour, “Function of Cannibalism” 239).<sup>184</sup> The cannibal, deemed absolutely different from (and by) Europeans, thus teeters on the brink of belonging and unbelonging, inclusion and exclusion. Even the very act of consuming another human being is a process that occurs in the in-between—with the difference of the other, on the one hand, and the sameness of the self, on the other—as what is separate becomes part of the consuming whole. As Maggie Kilgour explains, “cannibalism involves both the *establishing* of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of

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<sup>182</sup> Since Lê does not seem to draw a distinction between cannibalism and anthropophagy, I will also use these terms interchangeably. For a discussion of the differences between these terms, see Hulme, “Introduction: The Cannibal Scene.”

<sup>183</sup> On the other hand, perhaps unsurprisingly, Africans as well as indigenous populations of the Americas have described Western colonizers and their tools of enslavement as cannibals. See, for example, James, *Black Jacobins*; Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*.

<sup>184</sup> There has been much controversy in the anthropology over whether such episodes of cannibalism as described by European explorers even occurred at all, or whether Western thought is capable of interpreting the practice, as Arens argued in his provocative *The Man-Eating Myth* in 1979. Many others have contributed to this debate, such as Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*; Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*; Sahlins, *How ‘Natives’ Think*; King, “The (Mis)Uses of Cannibalism.” Cannibalism has also notably attracted French structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers alike, from Lévi-Strauss, “Nous sommes tous des cannibales,” to Derrida “‘Il faut bien manger’”; Jean Baudrillard, “L’Hospitalité virale” in *La Transparence du mal*.



incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one” (Kilgour, “Function of Cannibalism” 240). Yet, when understood this way, cannibalism does not seem so different from the practice of cultural assimilation as mandated by colonialism; both practices endeavor to incorporate through force, and thereby eradicate, what is perceived as different, other, and threatening.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, this parallel would make cannibalism one of the most fraught topics in (post)colonial studies.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that representations and tropes of cannibalism have persisted in (post)colonial literature. A “master trope” of (post)colonial discourse, literary cannibalism has been widely read as the overt reappropriation of European texts by postcolonial writers in an attempt to wrest discursive authority from, and counter the subjugation enacted by, those colonizing forces (Githire 7; Loichot, *Tropics* 141). As Brazilian modernist writer Oswald de Andrade stated in his 1928 “Cannibalist Manifesto”: “Tupi or not tupi, that is the question” (38), which is, of course, a cannibalization of Shakespeare’s phrasing from *Hamlet*.<sup>186</sup> Rather than interpret cannibalism in negative terms as Europeans had done previously, writers like Andrade moved to instrumentalize it as a cultural practice unique to the Americas that, in its symbolic form, had the potential to recoup political, cultural, aesthetic, and in particular literary, expression from colonial powers (Loichot, *Ethics* 173). Cannibalizing the cannibal, Suzanne Roussi Césaire took Andrade’s words one step further in 1942 by claiming literary cannibalism as a particularly Caribbean practice: “La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas” (*Le Grand Camouflage* 175). When understood this way, literary cannibalism functions as a reaction

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<sup>185</sup> Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Édouard Glissant describe cultural assimilation by the French during colonialism as a “force-feeding,” which must be remedied by “vomiting.” For discussions of anthropemy, see Rosello, “De la révolte à la révulsion”; the introduction to Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back*; Githire, *Cannibal Writes*, chapter 2.

<sup>186</sup> For more on cannibalism in Brazilian modernism, see Bellei; Madureira.

and a response to (neo)colonial power dynamics—a way to stake a claim to a parcel of literary territory in hopes of reclaiming a specific cultural identity in the wake of European colonialism.<sup>187</sup> Literary cannibalism thus offered a form of discursive revenge—a “writing against,” or a “biting back” as Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé famously described it—for postcolonial francophone writers and scholars.

What is more, literary cannibalism offers an escape from the false choice of either imitating the colonizer, or attempting to erase any trace of European influence as though colonialism had not occurred. Instead, it allows for a cultural hybridity that accounts for historical specificity as well as for the effects of European incursion, especially for francophone Caribbean writers such as Césaire and Condé. However, precisely because of its oppositional nature, literary cannibalism maintains a binary understanding of otherness.<sup>188</sup> For example, Condé asserts that literary cannibalism is “a rewriting and magical appropriation of the literature of the *other*” (“Suzanne Césaire” 62). Here, Condé suggests that the italicized “*other*” can be either colonizer or colonized, but each remain absolutely different—effectively fixed to opposite sides of the seesaw of (post)colonial power. In other words, whereas the colonizer once cannibalized the colonized, now the colonized would have their turn. Or, as Nicole Simek writes, “[Literary cannibalism] represents both a claim to a particular identity—the acceptance and promotion of one’s otherness, of one’s independence from a dominating colonial discourse—and the erasure of that difference through an act of appropriation, a claim to a hybrid identity marked

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<sup>187</sup> For a discussion on the cannibal in European fictions see Lestringant. Loichot traces the history of cannibalism in the Caribbean in the introduction to *The Tropics Bite Back*. Sheller also examines cannibalism in the Caribbean, while Britton has discussed contemporary cannibalism in literary markets in *Language and Literary Form in French Caribbean Writing*.

<sup>188</sup> For more on cannibalism in Césaire and Condé, see Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back* ch 5; Githire, *Cannibal Writes*, chapter 1. For a study of cannibalism in Condé specifically, see Rosello, “Post-Cannibalism.”

at once by its inclusive cosmopolitanism and its exclusive national or regional specificity” (*Eating Well* 168). When connected to colonial power dynamics in this way, literary cannibalism is thus concerned with a retaliatory attempt to instill a sense of belonging to an identity based on cultural specificity that is rooted in a particular place.

This renders Lê’s exploration of cannibalism in *Les Évangiles du crime* all the more striking, because this text examines cannibalism both literally and figuratively in a context that draws attention to the contours of (post)colonial dynamics, particularly as these relate to postcolonial Vietnamese migrants and the French literary scene. However, Lê refrains from linking the practice of cannibalism to questions of national identity or cultural specificity. Instead, Lê presents a nuanced form of literary cannibalism that interrogates the space between who is cannibal and who is edible. Additionally, Lê draws an explicit connection between the acts of cannibalism and writing, creating an intricately woven metaliterary thread throughout the novel that links the cannibal with the writer, the postcolonial migrant with the French national. Though Lê, like Césaire and Condé, confronts issues of difference and incorporation, her literary treatment of cannibalism steadfastly refuses to rehabilitate the figure of the cannibal or even “bite back” at the colonizer. Rather, Lê draws attention to how the postcolonial Vietnamese cannibal and the French author—who represent opposite ends of the spectrum between barbarity and civilization—must write *with* one another through mutual cannibalization. This dynamic of ingestion and digestion enables both characters, or both infinities, to span the continuum between them, thus obviating their discernable distinctions. However, this act of “writing with” is by no means an even exchange. As Lê’s oblique references to (post)colonial power structures suggest, these dynamics endure long after the end of colonialism, even if they fade into the background.

Returning to the matter of Lê's liminality in her work, I agree with Barnes that notions of hybridity that posit the postcolonial subject as "in between" two cultures might rely too heavily on dualistic concepts of national identity and cultural specificity that Lê herself disavows. However, I do not believe that the concepts of negation and exclusion sufficiently account for the generative processes of mutual transformation that occur during the cannibal act as depicted in Lê's work. I therefore propose that a concerted analysis of cannibalism and its attendant dynamics of incorporation in Lê's novel reveals how—from the space *in between* cannibalism and literature—the figure of the fused cannibal-writer emerges, induced by a process of becoming. Lê thus reveals the richness of an "in between" beyond the usual binary oppositions associated with nation and culture. Furthermore, by highlighting the dynamic of "writing with" otherness in Lê's novel, I mean to contribute an unexplored iteration of literary cannibalism—one that does not regard cannibalism as an expression of hybridized cultural specificity in opposition to colonial domination, but as a process in which difference can be understood as immanent and generative.

Accordingly, I seek to build on the extant analyses of themes of hybridity, liminality, and doubling in Lê's works by pushing these notions further through an approach that uses Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming, as well as Deleuze's single-authored works on the connections between becoming and the act of writing.<sup>189</sup> For, as Amaleena Damlé writes in *The Becoming of the Body*, "the Deleuzian notion of becoming [is] the vitality of the experience that is produced *in-between* two terms rather than enclosed within the bounded stable subject" (96-97, my emphasis). Rather than focus on the endpoints of the spectrum of difference that separate, for example, the cannibal from the writer, I propose that we allow for a

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<sup>189</sup> For a genealogy of Deleuze's writings on literature, see Bogue.

greater realm of possibility to exist in this “in between” through a Deleuzian interpretation of L  ’s novel. In my view, this will afford a new perspective on the ways in which L   conceives of difference, how it affects the writer and her craft, and how it filters through her literary texts.<sup>190</sup> In this light, I argue that L   draws parallels between writing and cannibalism in *Les   vangiles* to explore the transformative process of becoming that occurs for both writer and cannibal. This shared becoming implies a kind of mutual metamorphosis that, rather than positing the writer and the cannibal as opposites, portrays them as codependent on one another. For the writer becomes cannibal and vice versa through processes of mutual incorporation in L  ’s novel, such that each “writes with” otherness, precisely because that other can now be found within the self. Yet, even though both cannibal and writer undergo joint processes of becoming through mutual consumption, they nonetheless cannot escape French society’s expectations for their respective roles. I therefore suggest that L  ’s literary cannibalism subtly interrogates who exactly has the capacity to become and who does not, thus bringing attention to the ethical dimensions of becoming that Deleuze and Guattari do not address.

### **A Deleuzian Reading of Literary Cannibalism**

Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructuralist philosophy is one of dynamism, stemming from “[a] belief that ‘life’ is frequently imprisoned and that it could be freed” (Marks 4). Or, as Daml   writes, “To grasp the immanent flux of ‘life,’ for Deleuze, is to engage with flows, encounters, rhizomes, multiplicities, differences, nomadism and becoming, philosophical paradigms that are seen as liberating rather than constraining” (31-32). Such concepts do not seek to explain

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<sup>190</sup> See A. Kim for an opposing argument; she discusses literature as presenting “a way of being where difference is not necessary” (2).

through established, pre-conceived systems of knowledge, but attempt to make space for the unfolding of difference through a recognition of multiplicity rather than through the imposition of an essence (Damlé 32). This way of thinking through difference allows for the unexpected to emerge without the need for definition, as Deleuze explains: “À travers tous les codes du passé, du présent de l’avenir, il s’agit [...] de faire passer quelque chose qui ne se laisse et ne se laissera pas coder. Le faire passer sur un nouveau corps, inventer un corps sur lequel cela puisse passer et couler : un corps qui serait le nôtre, celui de la Terre, celui de l’écrit” (Deleuze, *L’Île déserte* 352-353).

This concept of the creation of a “new body” that will not allow itself to be “coded” is reminiscent of Lê’s refusal to be identified as French or Vietnamese, national or foreign.<sup>191</sup> “Tous mes livres parlent de la difficulté à vivre avec son corps et de l’envie de s’en évader” (qtd. in Loucif 890), Lê explains, indicating that the body is deeply implicated in her writing. Could Lê’s writing-self serve as this un-coded new body capable of evading socio-cultural hierarchies of difference through language and literature in a way that her real body cannot, as it is inescapably marked by nationality, race, and gender and inextricably linked to France’s colonial past? Indeed, reading Lê’s text with the Deleuzian concept of “becoming” enables us to read for difference in a way that harmonizes with Lê’s own distaste for identitarian codification. For rather than focus on issues of identity that rely on Platonic notions of “being” and an Aristotelian understanding of difference, “becoming” permits a more fluid and relational dynamic that considers difference as absolute and immanent, not as oppositional, relative binaries (Damlé 46, 50). Damlé explains, “Affirming becoming over being does not just mean acknowledging the value of the one over the other, but doing away with binary distinction all

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<sup>191</sup> See Lorraine for discussion of Deleuze and the feminine body.

together” (Damlé 46). In this way, we can read the cannibal, not as the paradigm of difference from the perspective of European culture, but as absolutely different, in the same way that the writer is equally absolutely different.

It thus follows that the status of the postcolonial, foreign, racialized other is not a position of lack or negativity, particularly when juxtaposed with Frenchness and whiteness—because we are reading difference as absolute, immanent, and not relative, these distinctions become differences-in-themselves. Lê accomplishes this by countering received ideas about literature and cannibalism. If literature symbolizes the apotheosis and cannibalism the nadir of civilization, then Lê exploits their posited antithesis as two extremes on the scale of absolute difference in order to create a Deleuzian dualism that challenges that the oppositional nature of that very dualism.<sup>192</sup> In other words, Lê’s cannibal-writer resists being coded as either/or (as is demanded by French republican universalism), *or* as neither/nor (as Barnes suggests), emerging instead from *in between* these dualisms in such a way that allows for multiplicity and complexity while sidestepping hierarchized, essentialist notions of identity and difference.

Furthermore, the notion of a “new body” that cannot be “coded” is precisely what is produced by literary cannibalism as conceived by Lê. Unlike postcolonial francophone Caribbean writers, Lê does not employ cannibalism in literature as an act of revenge or recuperation in pursuit of a specific cultural identity or in recognition of a particular history. On the contrary, Lê’s literary cannibalism is a means of explaining the transformative process of becoming a cannibal-writer, brought about by the merging of two forms along with their inherent differences, be it through writing or cannibalism. In this way, both cannibal and writer work like

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<sup>192</sup> For a discussion of the distinctions emphasized by cannibalism between civilization and barbarity, see Guest, the introduction to *Eating their Words*.

phagocytes—a type of cell that brings what is outside in, engulfing and incorporating other small cells into itself—which is a term Lê employs frequently in interviews and in many of her novels.<sup>193</sup> Lê draws attention to the similarities between cannibalism and literature in her use of this term, because both involve the drive to consume others, be it their flesh or their stories, in such a way as the composition of the consuming body is fundamentally altered, indeed becomes other, as a result of that incorporation. In this way, I suggest that Lê’s form of literary cannibalism is predicated on the concomitant dynamics of the incorporation of otherness and the disintegration of the self as a result of that encounter, which produces a new amalgamation that is multiple, heterogeneous, and driven by a hunger to continue consuming.<sup>194</sup> In addition, phagocytes are found inside every body, so Lê’s conception, rather than concerning itself with the particularities of any one culture, accesses the universal in such a way as to avoid the pitfalls of supposed French republican “universalism.” Lê thus suggests that literature cannot be separated from cannibalism in a pathological sense, thereby avoiding (post)colonial hierarchies of nationality, race, and culture.

Indeed, Lê recognizes that both literature and cannibalism share a drive to incorporate, or ingest, whatever is “outside” of the work of fiction or the body, thereby creating an insatiable pursuit of the “outside” to be brought “inside.”<sup>195</sup> Here, we can perceive a connection to a Deleuzian conception of literature and of the book as an “agencement,” or “assemblage”—for, as he and Guattari explain, “Un livre n’existe que par le dehors et au-dehors” (*Mille plateaux* 10),

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<sup>193</sup> For example, Vinh L. says that the Author: “[...] phagocyte ma culpabilité” (*Les Évangiles* 257).

<sup>194</sup> For a discussion on Lê’s drive to continue producing literature, see Barnes, *Vietnam*, chapters 4 and 5; Barnes, “Linda Lê, On Writing.” Yeager also writes on this drive to continue to produce creatively in “Authorial Identities.”

<sup>195</sup> Liminality is a common theme in Lê’s oeuvre, see Barnes, “Sur les pas de Linda Lê”; Assier; Chau-Pech Ollier.



and “Comment le livre trouvera-t-il un dehors suffisant avec lequel il puisse agencer dans l’hétérogène, plutôt qu’un monde à reproduire ?” (*Mille plateaux* 35). Echoing this idea, Lê draws literature and cannibalism together in her novel for their similar capacity to produce a kind of Deleuzian assemblage, a multiplicity that is in a constant state of transformation as a result of the convergence with other multiplicities. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Lê seems to abandon the verb “to be,” indicative of a stable notion of identity, in favor of the rhizomatic conjunction “et...et...et...” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 36) that is reminiscent of a phagocyte, to emphasize the constant movement of iterative and creative metamorphosis of the self when faced with difference.

It is important to note that this inside/outside dynamic of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought engages with migration, but not with the importance of nationality or national borders.<sup>196</sup> As mentioned previously, this is also true in Lê’s novel; while Lê explores the effects of exile, she does so in a “deterritorialized” way, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term, by overtly eliding issues of nationality in connection to literary or cultural production in her work and in her self-presentation.<sup>197</sup> Indeed, Lê divorces dynamics of postcolonial mixing, transformation, and creation in language and literature from notions of national or cultural identity in her novel. She therefore parallels Deleuze and Guattari in that both of their approaches value migration as a means of introducing an “outside” to be incorporated and an “inside” to be disintegrated or decomposed. Furthermore, akin to Deleuze and Guattari, Lê explores these dynamics through

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<sup>196</sup> For a discussion on Deleuze and national borders, see Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*; for Deleuze and Guattari on immigration and political economy, see Weeks 94.

<sup>197</sup> Lê also indicates that she does not seek to carve out a space for any kind of community of writers based on this criterion, as Barnes has suggested in her formulation of Lê’s “poetics of exile” in *Vietnam*, chapter 5.

tropes of incorporation and decomposition that operate well below the level of nation, as well as beyond it at the level of the universal.

I will now turn to the ways in which Lê's *Les Évangiles du crime* manages to discuss difference outside of contemporary political schema by focusing instead on the process of literary cannibalism. Accordingly, I will analyze the figure of the writer and the ways in which writing causes the disintegration of the self through the integration of an other through a cannibalistic process of Deleuzian becoming, thereby posing a threat to both mind and body of the writer.

### **The (Dis)integration of the Figure of the Writer**

*Les Évangiles du crime* was published in 1992 by Julliard and was Lê's first novel to garner her a measure of critical acclaim. Though Lê wrote and published three works—*Un si tendre vampire* (1986), *Fuir* (1988), and *Solo* (1989)—prior to *Les Évangiles*, she considers this latter novel to be the first official work on her bibliography, which to date includes over twenty novels in addition to many non-fiction essays. When asked about her reasoning for this in an interview, she explains, “Avec *Les Évangiles*, mon écriture s’est libérée. J’ai pu m’essayer à une forme neuve. Les trois premiers livres étaient peut-être trop sages. Je ne m’y reconnais plus. C’est comme s’ils avaient été écrits par quelqu’un d’autre, un apprenti écrivain encore trop timoré” (qtd. in Loucif 884-885). Cognizant of her position as a postcolonial foreigner—a “métèque” to use her term—Lê tells of how she forced her way into the French literary scene through the sheer force of her originality, by not playing by the rules.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> For a discussion on Lê's obsession with transgression, taboo, and perversion, see Barnes, “Linda Lê, On Writing”; Yeager, “Culture, Citizenship, Nation.” For imposters and femininity, see Ni Cheallaigh, “*Voyelles mutilées*”; Bacholle-Baskovic, *Linda Lê, L'Écriture du manque*.

With the idea of *Les Évangiles* as the site of Lê's writerly transformation in mind, I suggest that we follow this thread into the novel itself, because, curiously, Lê's disavowal of her first three novels and her recognition of her fourth, mimics the narrative structure of *Les Évangiles*. Like the four gospels, this novel is a text in four parts that do not share characters or plot, but have common themes and motifs. Most strikingly, in each of the four novellas—"Reeves C.," "Professeur T.," "Klara V.," and "Vinh L."—all of the eponymous protagonists contemplate and attempt suicide, though only the first three succeed in ending their lives. The repetition of three failed attempts—at writing a novel for Lê and at living life for her tormented characters—followed by an ultimate success, or a "liberation" as Lê would seem to suggest, hints that becoming a writer requires a transformation that verges on self-destruction. This shared triple failure followed by a single transformational success in both Lê's quartet of first novels and her characters in *Les Évangiles* reveals the hazards of writing and the perilous state the writer must achieve to find her own authorial voice.

Lê's fascination with the precarious state of the writer and the limits of that becoming recalls Deleuze's reflections in "La Littérature et la vie" on literature as a problem of the health of the world.<sup>199</sup> He explains:

...l'écrivain comme tel n'est-il pas malade, mais plutôt médecin, médecin de soi-même et du monde. Le monde est l'ensemble de symptômes dont la maladie *se confond avec l'homme*. La littérature apparaît alors comme une entreprise de santé : non pas que l'écrivain ait forcément une grande santé [...], mais il jouit d'une irrésistible petite santé qui vient de ce qu'il a vu et entendu des choses trop grandes pour lui, trop fortes pour lui,

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<sup>199</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Deleuze and artistic creation from a philosophical perspective, see Hallward.

irrespirables, dont le passage l'épuise, en lui donnant pourtant des devenirs qu'une grosse santé dominante rendrait impossible... (*Critique* 14, my emphasis)

Understood here in terms of both body and psyche, the writer is endowed with a sensitivity that puts her at mortal risk; she is susceptible of “merging” with the ills of the world. However, Deleuze also likens writing to “la défection organique” (*Critique*, 12), or “the breakdown of the organic body” (*Essays* 2), therefore suggesting that the literature involves both an integration (“merging”) and a disintegration (“breakdown”) of the writing self, in both body and mind. “Écrire, c’est aussi devenir autre chose qu’écrivain” (*Critique*, 17), as Deleuze explains, because the writer will not emerge from the process unscathed. The concomitant dynamics of integration and disintegration of the writer seem to occur both for Lê and her protagonists in *Les Évangiles*, as the process of writing and questions of authorship are foregrounded in a number of ways that highlight the passage of life into literature.<sup>200</sup>

We can see how Lê’s novel facilitates a writerly transformation, which seems to hinge on the recognition of the authorial self not as internally singular, self-contained, and homogeneous, but as multiple, composite, and incoherent. It is this realization of the breakdown of the physical and psychic self that induces crisis for the writer in each novella and incites transformation. For instance, Lê explodes the singularity of the figure of the writer in *Les Évangiles*; rather than insist on her novel as her own single enunciation, Lê reveals a multiplicity of different “authors” responsible for the creation of each novella, who in turn take inspiration from someone else’s

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<sup>200</sup> That this physical and psychic disintegration happens to all of the characters in the novel regardless of the specific background of each suggests that Lê endeavors to relativize difference in a way that mitigates distinctions of nationality or race.

life.<sup>201</sup> In other words, the author of the novel (Lê) fractures into the four “authors” of the novellas and their various subjects. Then, in each of the novellas, the composer of the narrative has a role as a secondary or tertiary character within that same narrative, such that the reader of Lê’s novel is privy to the authorial decisions of the writer-character as they attempt to construct a story from the life and experiences of the titular protagonist. In this way, Lê breaks down the dominant singularity and coherence of both the author and the novel into doubles and multiples that subvert the unique importance of each, thereby creating an assemblage of diverse literary actors.

For example, “Reeves C.” is a story about a man who kills himself because he wanted to become a writer but his wife beats him to it. Yet the “author” of the novella is a young woman who hears of the life of Reeves C. from an unnamed person she meets in the street and who calls her regularly on the telephone. A detective recounts the life of the secretly schizophrenic Professeur T. while investigating his suicide by reading his journal and interviewing the people he knew. The story of Klara V. is told by the young man who witnesses her jump from the sixteenth floor of a building at La Défense in Paris and tries to decipher the contents of the handbag she left behind for him to find. In “Vinh L.,” Lê stages an epistolary encounter between the story’s eponymous hero, a young man who confesses to having committed cannibalism during his perilous escape from his home on a crowded boat before his eventual immigration to France, and the nameless “homme de lettres,” who admits to plagiarism and then proceeds to plagiarize his interlocutor’s letters.

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<sup>201</sup> This is not to mention the interconnectedness of the works within Lê’s oeuvre and its multiple intertextual connections beyond it. For discussions on Lê’s use of intertextuality, see Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving*.

These examples also show that under Lê's pen, the singular novel disintegrates into four novellas, which are in turn made up of an assortment of source texts, making up one patchwork narrative. Since "the author" of each of the novellas (within Lê's novel) is separate from the person whose lived experience becomes the topic of the narrative, that author must piece together information in order to assemble the resulting text. Telephone conversations in "Reeves C.," the handwritten journal of Professeur T., Klara V.'s diary, letters, and photographs, and Vinh L.'s letters provide the authors with a skeleton structure upon which they base their narratives. The end result, which becomes the novella itself, is a story of a life that is mediated by interpretation, potentially inaccurate, and necessarily incomplete.<sup>202</sup> Deleuze and Guattari designate this as "le problème d'écriture" because:

Il faut absolument des expressions anexactes pour désigner quelque chose exactement. Et pas du tout parce qu'il faudrait passer par là, et pas du tout parce qu'on ne pourrait procéder que par approximations : l'anexactitude n'est nullement une approximation, c'est au contraire le passage exact de ce qui se fait." (*Mille plateaux* 31)

In other words, the writers in the novel cannot depict the experiences of their characters with perfect accuracy, never having lived them themselves. Yet, it is through this very lack of precision that writers can indeed render the experience successfully, if inaccurately.

Deleuze and Guattari's "problem of writing" is particularly apropos in the last novella, "Vinh L." The story of Vinh L. is based on a report that Lê read about in a newspaper of the so-called boat people who fled the incoming communist regime in South Vietnam by sea and who committed desperate acts of cannibalism in order to survive the perilous journey (Chau-Pech

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<sup>202</sup> Barnes describes this layering of various source materials as a creating a sense of dislocation between the original event and the resulting text in order to depict a traumatic experience. For a further discussion of trauma in Linda Lê's work, see Barnes, *Vietnam*, chapter 4.

Ollier 244). By turning that event into fiction, as Lê explains in an interview, she sought to give expression to, and even take upon herself, the suppressed sense of culpability of these alleged perpetrators of cannibalism: “I wanted to assume their guilt, which did not want to express itself, which wanted by all means to spare the additional pain of having to express itself. In taking this upon myself, I felt a bit like a plagiarist writer recapturing the events that have been lived by others” (qtd. in Chau-Pech Ollier 244). Here, as in her novel, Lê explains how she conceives of the imbrication of the figure of the writer with her subject, thereby demonstrating that by assuming the lived experience of that subject through writing, the writer herself is irrevocably changed as a result.

While Lê admits that she felt diminished as a writer for finding inspiration in the lives of others rather than from within herself, her explanation corresponds to Deleuze’s own understanding of the writer not as a source, but as a witness: “L’écrivain comme voyant et entendant” (*Critique* 16). Lê seems to conceive of her role as a writer as a liberating force by functioning as an outlet for the inchoate, muted emotions of the cannibal survivors. Therefore, Lê’s literary production could be further understood in Deleuzian terms as the liberation of life: “But ultime de la littérature, dégager dans le délire cette création d’une santé, ou cette invention d’un peuple, c’est-à-dire une possibilité de vie. Écrire pour ce peuple qui manque... (« pour » signifie moins « à la place de » que « à l’intention de »)” (*Critique* 15).<sup>203</sup> Here, I suggest that we understand Deleuze’s “missing” people in Lê’s novella in two ways: first, as the cannibal survivors who cannot articulate their guilt and are thus lacking an enunciative presence and,

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<sup>203</sup> “Ultimately, the political task of writing consists in ‘inventing’ a people who do not yet exist. In the same way that writers do not write with their ego, so they do not write on behalf of a people. The collective emerges, in this way, from the writer’s creation of pre-individual singularities. The ‘collective’, in Deleuzian terms, is a form of ‘delirium’, speaking *with*, writing *with*” (Buchanan and Marks, “Introduction” 2).

second, as those who died and were consumed to aid the living. In this way, Lê's novella is not an exclusive expression of her own singular authorial voice. For, as Deleuze posits: "[...] la littérature comme l'énonciation collective d'un peuple mineur, ou de tous les peuples mineurs, qui ne trouvent leur expression que par et dans l'écrivain. Bien qu'elle renvoie toujours à des agents singuliers, la littérature est l'agencement collectif d'énonciation" (*Critique* 15). Lê's emphasis on the fracturing of her novel's authorial singularity signals a process of transformation—from singular to multiple, coherent to composite, and stable to unstable—through the merging of the writing self with the stories of others, which triggers the deterioration of that same writing self. In this way, the (dis)integration of the writer draws attention to the gaps between the realities of lived experience and the capacity of literature to account for that experience in narrative form.

Curiously, however, for Lê to liberate the cannibal survivors through literature, she must herself usurp their narratives of suffering in a way that is not unlike cannibal consumption of the other in a figurative sense. When asked in an interview, "Can the cannibal speak in the name of those he ate?" Lê responded, "I would not say 'in the name of those he ate' but I would say that the cannibal is the consumer of that which is silent, and literature is at once the grinder of that which is mute and the spit-up bowl of that which is digested" (qtd. in Chau-Pech Ollier 241). Though Lê expresses her qualms at doing this, she nonetheless explores the repercussions of this act for both the writer and the subject in "Vinh L." in her equation of writing with cannibalism. By making this comparison explicit in the novella, Lê posits the idea that the writer, like the cannibal, is utterly transformed by the experience of effectively absorbing the lives of others. So much so that the writer will not only absorb, but will also be absorbed by, his subject through a



cannibalistic symbiosis that threatens the integrity of the writer himself submits to taking on the ills of world, as Deleuze describes.

When the writer consumes the lives of others in this way, he becomes inhabited by this multitude of people and their experiences. For cannibalism has long been understood as a mutually transformative act that affects the eater, the eaten, *and* all those consumed by the eaten, as Michel de Montaigne observed in his 1580 essay “Des Cannibales.” Relativizing the barbarity of the French wars of religion with the ritual of consuming one’s enemy practiced by the Brazilian *Tupi* or *Tupinamba*, Montaigne explains, “[...] car ils mangeront quant et quant leurs pères et leurs aïeux, qui ont servi d’aliment et de nourriture à son corps [...] savourez-les bien, vous y trouverez le goût de votre propre chair” (*Essais* 312).<sup>204</sup> Therefore, for the cannibal-writer, it is *with* this multiplicity that he has consumed that he will compose his literary text. Lê corroborates this sense of reciprocity in *Les Évangiles* when Vinh L. explains, “L’homme que j’ai tué, dévoré, ruminé, m’appartenait *du dedans*. Mais moi aussi, je lui appartenais. Je n’étais plus qu’une enveloppe, il squattait mes entrailles” (215). Vinh L. realizes that even though he has consumed his victim, he has not in fact eliminated him. Instead, he learns he must live *with* the otherness that he has incorporated.

This confusion as to who belongs to whom and thus who is in control—Vinh L. who consumed his victim for his own benefit, or his victim who now inhabits Vinh L.—is reminiscent of Michel Serres’s theorizations on parasitical relations. In *Le Parasite*, Serres outlines three forms of parasites: biological, social, and “bruit parasite” in French, meaning “static” or “interference.” Interestingly, in the example here, Lê hints at all three versions. She uses

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<sup>204</sup> For a discussion on how this mutual consumption could be understood as a form of commensality, or eating together, see Loichot, “The Ethics of Eating Together.”

biological language of parasites—which Serres qualifies as an “unavoidable” fact of life (Heldke 825)—to describe a social relation that is parasitic, in that the parasite takes without giving anything in return. Yet, Lê’s example is also a kind of “interference,” because it “interrupt[s] the voice of the parasite, to make the parasite move over into the position of the displaced host” (Lydenberg 127). Indeed, Vinh L.’s act of cannibalism profoundly disrupts his sense of self in relation to otherness, forcing him not only into the role of parasite—for having lived off of his victim, but also that of host—to a parasite within. In this way, the duality of self versus other moves from binary to ternary, because, as Serres writes, “La position du parasite est de se trouver *entre*” (*Le Parasite* 309, my emphasis). Yet the interdependence and interchangeability of these roles are difficult to distinguish, which indicates a mutation of a duality into a multiplicity that is “intersubjective” (*Le Parasite* 16).

By the same token, understanding Deleuze’s figure of the writer in this parasitical, cannibalistic sense affords a view on the production of literature as mutually influential, in the sense that the writer writes *with* the others whose stories he has incorporated and is subsequently affected by them. However, this parallel also highlights writing as an act of consumption akin to that of cannibalism, thereby demonstrating that the interdependence of writing is necessarily uneven, as it remains that one does the writing while the other remains effectively silent. This is once again corroborated by Serres’ notion that parasites engage in relations of exchange that are mutually supportive, but not symbiotic. Rather, the parasite takes without anything in return in a “chaîne parasitaire” (*Le Parasite* 10) of “relations à sens unique, où l’un mange de l’autre sans que l’autre puisse rien tirer du premier” (*Le Parasite* 12). Or, as Serres writes, “Le parasité parasite les parasites” (23). Furthermore, the parasite usurps the power of speech, effectively silencing other voices: “[le parasite] commande, il a le pouvoir, sa voix est devenue celle du

maître, il parle de telle sorte qu'on l'entend de partout, nul ne peut plus placer un mot" (Serres, *Le Parasite* 54). However, even though the parasite takes control and the power of speech as a part of the irreversible "parasitical chain," this does not mean that the host remains unaffected, because the disorder that the parasite wreaks also incites a process of regeneration in the host (Bolton 2). In this way, as Robin Lydenberg writes, "the parasite is the archetype of all relations of power; but it is also the agent of change which disrupts those relations" (127).<sup>205</sup>

Indeed, the consolidation of a silent collective of others through a "parasitical chain" within the single figure of the cannibal-writer and his text can be seen in Lê's *Les Évangiles*. First, Lê herself is both parasite, for having used the experiences of the original perpetrators of the cannibal act, as well as host to these voices who emerge in her novel. Then, Vinh L. parasitically consumes the body of his victim for his own survival, but then is inhabited by the victim himself. Finally, the Author plays the role of parasite by passing off Vinh L.'s story as his own, but then finds himself at the mercy of Vinh L.'s narrative, providing the voice to his silent and invisible victim.<sup>206</sup> Though Lê is loath to engage in debates on postcoloniality, she does seem to draw attention to the latent discrimination that continues to exclude foreign-born postcolonial authors of French prose from civic and social inclusivity via literature, effectively rendering them permanent outsiders in the French world of letters. Lê simulates how this discrimination occurs—rather paradoxically—by never actually specifying the nationalities or ethnicities of the characters in the novel in order to point out the importance readers place on such identifying markers. By not explicitly divulging their nationalities, Lê effectively refuses to

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<sup>205</sup> As Serres writes, "[Le parasite], au bout du compte, a le dernier mot. Qui sème le désordre, qui ensemence un ordre différent" (*Le Parasite* 9).

<sup>206</sup> For a discussion on how the desire for the other can lead to cannibalistic consumption that perpetuates racial domination, see hooks, "Eating the Other."

“out” the identities of her characters to the world, essentially relativizing the backgrounds and experiences of all of the characters in a way that approaches a more legitimate form of universalism than that which is practiced in France. She even clarifies that she sought to intentionally efface their origins by obscuring their full last names: “Le fait que les noms des personnages se résument à des initiales est une manière de gommer leur origine” (qtd. in Loucif 885). However, to be clear, an attentive and knowledgeable reader can easily decipher the contextual clues in the text to discover their origins; Reeves C. is likely American, Professeur T. must be French, while Klara V. is probably Austrian.<sup>207</sup> On the face of it, Lê leaves it up to the reader to interpret these hints or not, thereby causing the reader to consciously realize her desire to verify a person’s background as a means of confirming cultural expectations; by making the reader work to find these details, Lê essentially points to the inability of universalism to obviate such differences in reality.

What is more, this is a classic example of Lê’s signature ruse of luring readers into an autobiographical reading with a smattering of recognizable truths from her life story while simultaneously leading them astray with fallacious details (Barnes, *Vietnam* 168).<sup>208</sup> Trinh Minh-ha calls this practice by racialized women writers of fragmenting and distributing of the self across a narrative a “hide-and-seek game with her readers” (30) in order to simultaneously divulge and conceal a true self. However, for Lê this gambit works partially like “hide-and-seek,” but also like “show-and-tell,” creating a dynamic of “hide-and-tell” to deliberately mislead the reader. By deliberately obscuring information to prevent the reader from having full

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<sup>207</sup> For an in-depth study of the role of Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann’s influence on Lê, see Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving*.

<sup>208</sup> For more discussion of autobiography in Lê’s work, see Chau-Pech Ollier; Winston, “Playing Hardball”; Yeager, “Culture, Citizenship, Nation.”

knowledge of a semi-autobiographical character, she ironically only further whets the reader's appetite to know more. Indeed, while some critics have been quick to assume that Vinh L.'s story of migration from Vietnam and attempts at assimilation in France indicates a level of autobiographical similarity to Linda Lê herself, but it is important to remember that even though she figures in this historical moment of postcolonial and post-war migration from Vietnam to France, she is not one of the so-called "boat people" and was never a stateless refugee. Rather, her fascination with the news story on cannibalism was that of a writer; she did not live through the experience herself. Thus, it is likely that although Lê shares her nationality and migratory trajectory with Vinh L., she more closely identifies with the second principal character in the novella: the Author, to whom Vinh L. writes letters that relate his flight from his home on a boat crowded with his countrymen before his eventual immigration to France.

Moreover, Lê intensifies the mystery surrounding the character of "Vinh L." by loading his name with a potentially double significance. For instance, news reports from the late 1980s—remember that Lê first learned about the real-life acts of cannibalism among the Vietnamese "boat people" from reading a newspaper—relay accounts of cannibalism that closely match the plot of *Les Évangiles* that were perpetrated by a man called "Minh" (Fritsch). It is therefore possible that Lê manipulated these stories and the name "Minh" by changing the "M" to a "V," perhaps in order to imply "Vietnamese" and thus hint at his nationality without ever revealing it explicitly. The initial "L" that denotes Vinh L.'s last name could symbolize the homonym "elle" for the author, Linda Lê, or even her own initials (Chau-Pech Ollier 250). But yet again, this is likely only another red herring in her game of "hide-and-tell," meant to lure us toward an autobiographical reading when one doesn't in fact exist.

Furthermore, Lê simulates in the text the ways in which we make assumptions based on a false perception of universalism by providing different biographical details for every character. In the case of the Author, Lê again does not disclose his nationality, but neither does she supply the same information for the Author as she did for Vinh L. The reader must therefore engage in a different process of inference for each character. For instance, on the one hand, the Author is unnamed, resides in Paris, and publishes a book per year. From his coveted title and privileged access to the Parisian publishing industry, the reader *assumes* from these general details that he must be white, upper class, and French. On the other hand, Vinh L. is rendered more specific by the inclusion of his first name.<sup>209</sup> In his prologue to the ten letters, the Author interprets his interlocutor's name as peculiar, carrying out a kind of *reverse* assumption for the reader that automatically designates non-conforming particularity as foreign and inferior. Expressing his shock that a foreigner could discover his crime of plagiarism, the Author exclaims: "Je m'étonnai—je ne savais rien de Vinh L., à part son nom à consonance étrangère—qu'un métèque eût pu découvrir ce qu'aucun de mes pairs n'avait jamais été capable de révéler" (175).<sup>210</sup> Even though Vinh L. outperforms the Author and his literary fellows by identifying plagiarism in published works in French, the Author nonetheless disparages him as a "métèque" for his presumed foreignness.

Though the pejorative term "métèque" betrays the Author's casual prejudice, it also demonstrates a level of respect for the foreigner who has gained mastery over the French language, or "l'orgueil d'être un métèque" (Lê, *Le Complexe de Caliban* 47) as Lê learned from

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<sup>209</sup> This is reminiscent of Trinh Minh-ha's injunction: "Remember, the *minor-ity's* voice is always personal; that of the *major-ity*, always impersonal." (28)

<sup>210</sup> Interestingly, here we bear witness to the discrimination of the Author based on how Vinh L.'s name sounds, indicating that racism can exist without actually seeing a person's face.

meeting Emil Cioran. Meanwhile, Lê's denomination of the Author as an "homme de lettres" is rife with sarcasm; though he might be a member of rarefied Parisian literary circles, he is also merely the *man* who receives and rewrites Vinh L.'s *letters*, passing them off as his own—he is literally a "man of letters" whose writerly reputation depends on his epistolary exchange with Vinh L. for his literary success.<sup>211</sup> With a clever but subtle double entendre, Lê ironically disfigures this illustrious title to ridicule a man who derives his writing from the missives of others. With irony and sarcasm, Lê attacks the revered figure of the author in French letters to reveal the multiplicity of voices that might be found within.

In this section, we have come to see the ways in which Lê's *Les Évangiles du crime* foregrounds the cannibal dynamics of the act of writing as a process of near self-destruction and transformation through the concomitant (dis)integration that occurs when incorporating otherness through narrative. The resulting singularity, I have argued, obscures an inherent multiplicity, a process which strongly resembles the Deleuzian notion of the writer on the verge of becoming. Lê demonstrates this formally through the narrative structure of the novel and the figure of the author, as we have explored thus far, as well as in the narrative voice and in language, as we will discover in later sections. Lê's revelation of inner heterogeneity and multiplicity indicates that for her, the writing self and the body are structurally unsound, composed of a form of difference that is immanent rather than transcendent, and can be constantly divided and subdivided through a re-examination of what can be found within as writer and subject become merged together. However, as Lê demonstrates, the becoming-other through writing entails a kind of cannibalistic consumption that conceals a multiplicity of voices

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<sup>211</sup> Deleuze and Guattari interrogate the importance of letters to literature in the case of Kafka in *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975).

within the figure of the writer, thus implying a critique of the imbalance between that hidden multiplicity who must find an outlet through the writer's privileged capacity to become other.

### **Becoming-Imperceptible through Cannibalism**

The dynamic of (dis)integration as I have described it bears strong resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's differentiation between the molar, or the notion of a coherent whole based on hierarchical binaries, and the molecular, which, counter to the molar, allows for the recognition of the infinitesimal and innumerable internal differences within that whole. Or, as Damlé describes, "While the molar regulates and stratifies social identities within binary constructs, the molecular comprises the flux and micro-particles of the plane of immanence" (Damlé 49). Indeed, Lê seems to take this move to the extreme in *Les Évangiles* by shattering perceptions of molar identity into its molecular parts on several levels. For example, in Lê's novel the molar singularity of the author and even of literature itself become molecular, because any sense of homogeneity is found to be made up of many composite parts that can be broken down, added to, and changed through (dis)integration. In short, by revealing the multiplicity obscured by the singular, Lê insists on the vast array of differences to be found within that perceived singularity. The novel thus hints at the Deleuzian concept of becoming in that the move away from molarity toward molecularity parallels the relinquishing of a majoritarian position in favor of one that is minoritarian. Instead of abiding by the molar categories of French or Vietnamese, colonizer or colonized, national or foreign, Lê liberates the writing subject to explore what might be found between these poles and experience what encounters might result. By seeing the potential for difference as immanent, or as existing within, rather than transcendent



(as in the case with the binary), Lê destabilizes the perception of these categories themselves and allows for an exploration of what might lie in between.

The question of authorship in the novel becomes increasingly molecular through the integration and disintegration of both writer and novel, but Lê does not stop there. She also attacks the singular molarity of the subject by refracting the narrative voice in a way that recalls Deleuze and Guattari's break down of the narrative self through writing: "Non pas en arriver au point où l'on ne dit plus je, mais au point où ça n'a plus aucune importance de dire ou de ne pas dire je. Nous ne sommes plus nous-mêmes. [...] Nous avons été aidés, aspirés, multipliés" (*Mille plateaux* 9). In particular, Lê achieves this in "Vinh L." by equating writing with the act of cannibalism. If writing, like cannibalism, involves the integration of the other into the self to make one articulated whole, then the self disintegrates by becoming indistinguishable from that other to the point where it is impossible to determine which part is which and who wrote what. This difference becomes diffused and even imperceptible, which, once again, aligns with the Deleuzian notion of writing as becoming: "Devenir n'est pas atteindre à une forme (identification, imitation, Mimésis), mais trouver la zone de voisinage, d'indiscernabilité ou d'indifférenciation telle qu'on ne peut plus se distinguer [...]" (*Critique* 11). Thus, the (dis)integration of the writer and of literature, in addition to that of the narrative voice in the novel, through cannibalism also involves ingestion and digestion, which highlight par excellence the molecularity of all of the above. As the writing self becomes increasingly integrated with the other through cannibalism, that self is partially lost in the process of acquiring another body, thereby indicating that any perceived foundation of molarity is structurally unsound because of an inner, immanent difference that cannot be distinguished or determined per se.

This notion of the indeterminacy of authorship is especially emphasized in the presentation of the narrative voice of the novella, “Vinh L.,” in which the narrative is composed of an expository prologue by the Author followed by a series of letters addressed to the Author and told from the perspective from Vinh L.<sup>212</sup> Over the course of his ten letters addressed to the Author, Vinh L. recounts the events and aftermath of his cannibalistic acts and his eventual migration to France. Yet, the Author also explains that Vinh L.’s letters are in fact plagiarized reproductions reconstituted by the Author himself. Furthermore, the Author explains retrospectively in this introductory section how his epistolary encounter with Vinh L. transforms him from a self-satisfied plagiarist posing as a critically acclaimed literary author into a cannibal as well as, ironically, a true writer. As Deleuze explains, “[...] parmi tous ceux qui font des livres à intention littéraire, même chez les fous, très peu peuvent se dire écrivains” (*Critique* 17). Understood this way, even though the Author was able to achieve commercial success and cultural distinction through plagiarizing the works of others, he does not truly become a writer until he becomes cannibal. By analyzing the Author’s first-person confession to plagiarism and his account of his own transformation in this expository prologue, I will show how the Author’s becoming-cannibal forces him to acknowledge his own immanent difference as he is ingested and digested in a process of becoming-imperceptible, which helps him produce a work of literature that rings true according to a Deleuzian standard.

In the first lines of his expository introduction to Vinh L.’s letters, the Author confesses to his inadequacy as a writer: “Je suis un écrivain sans scrupules, un tueur capable uniquement de menus larcins” (193). Relating the pitiable cowardice of being a plagiarist writer with a killer

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<sup>212</sup> Barnes attributes this indeterminacy to the narrativization of trauma, see *Vietnam* ch 4. For a discussion of indeterminacy in Maryse Condé’s oeuvre, see Simek, *Eating Well, Reading Well*, chapter 4.

incapable of murder, the Author establishes the link between writing and murder, the plagiarist and the parasite, the writer and the cannibal. As his confession to plagiarism unfolds, Lê presents us with the illusory paragon of the molar French author. The Author recalls his life before encountering Vinh L., “À l’époque, je publiais chaque année un livre. Je ne me lassais pas d’être sur scène, de présenter mon numéro au public, de m’enorgueillir de prestations qu’un autre avait imaginées et que je me contentais de singer en les faisant passer pour mes créations originales” (194). In the Author’s description of his masquerade as a writer on the illustrious literary scene, Lê ironizes literary production in France and the figure of the writer to suggest that behind the façade of the French author who claims to find inspiration from within his own molarity in fact lies an untapped molecularity, a trove of unrecognized differences from the consumption of the lives of others.

It is Vinh L., in reading the Author’s books, who is able to see the molecular component parts obscured by the Author’s molarity. In his prologue, the Author explains how he received in the mail a copy of his book, filled with handwritten citations in the margins that properly attributed the sources of the Author’s pilfered writings along with an inscription by Vinh L. accusing him of plagiarism. The Author recounts:

Sur la page de garde, [Vinh L.] avait recopié une phrase de mon livre : « Le corps d’un homme contient assez de phosphore pour fabriquer dix boîtes d’allumettes, assez de fer pour forger un clou capable de supporter le poids d’un pendu, assez d’eau pour faire mijoter dix litres de soupe aux tripes. » Il ajouta, en conclusion : « Et assez de bons mots pour engraisser des générations de plagiaires. (195)

Vinh L. effectively eviscerates the molarity of the figure of the Author by regurgitating the latter’s own eloquently phrased breakdown of the molar human body into various components

that could then be used to fabricate some other molar object. Vinh L. therefore expands on the Author's initial conclusion that it is possible to find similarities at a molecular level among things as different as a human being and box of matches by drawing connections between the corporeal and the literary; he also identifies words as elements of the human body that can be (dis)integrated through eating and digestion.

The question here is what enables Vinh L. to perceive the molecularity of the molar Author? For, as the Author explains, no one had yet discovered the secret of his plagiarized writings: "Quelques mauvais esprits m'accusaient parfois d'oublier ici ou là des guillemets : c'était comme s'ils reprochaient à un homme dont le corps est composé de prothèses d'avoir mal mis son dentier" (194-195). Here, the Author admits that he has created the appearance of molecularity by simulating it with prosthetics, when in fact he has not submitted to the process of becoming-other that writing demands. By juxtaposing prosthetics with plagiarism, the Author implies that true writing is not artificial and imitative, but involves a true corporeal transformation. Namely, he must yield to the (dis)integration of the molar self through the process of writing in order to transform from plagiarist into writer. As Vinh L.'s description of the composite nature of the human body intimates, this molecularity can be found within, rather than beyond, the self. Thus, ultimately, Vinh L. is the first and only of the Author's interlocutors to recognize his fraudulence, because, as a cannibal, he is the only one to have experienced the (dis)integration of the self induced by the true incorporation of an other, which has caused him to parse the multitude of different others he possesses inside.

After Vinh L. accuses the Author of plagiarism, the latter concedes, countering: "Le plagiaire, lui-écrivis-je, est la forme sous laquelle la civilisation a accepté l'anthropophage" (197). The Author's equation of plagiarism with cannibalism surprises Vinh L., who proceeds to

admit to being a cannibal himself and reveals the story of how he came to kill and consume one of his countrymen for survival over the course of his series of letters. Indeed, it is Vinh L.'s experience with cannibalism that enables him to discern cannibalistic tendencies in others, or rather, to distinguish the disparate parts that make up a perceived whole. As the Author explains in his prologue, "En ouvrant mon livre, et en y reconnaissant les lambeaux de chair que j'avais arrachés à autrui, [Vinh L.] s'était vu. Il pensa que je devais être comme lui, très malade" (197-198). As two molar wholes made up of molecular fragments, the Author's book and Vinh L. embody the experience with the of (dis)integration through cannibalistic ingestion and digestion: "Mon livre, pour exister, avait mangé d'autres livres. Vinh L., pour survivre, avait mangé de la chair humaine" (197), the Author writes. However, it is important to note that the Author does not suggest here that *he* has become a cannibal; rather, he assigns that role to *his book*, thereby abdicating any sense of responsibility for his acts. It is this distinction of who is the cannibal, the Author or his book, that elucidates whether the Author is a mere plagiarist posing as a molar author or a veritable cannibal-writer, according to Deleuzian standards, who is capable of producing a true work of literature. For both the cannibal and the writer *become imperceptible* through the concomitant processes of (dis)integration via ingestion and digestion, unlike the plagiarist author who is afraid of transformation.

The Author illustrates this process of becoming-imperceptible through literary cannibalism, initially by describing his initial failure, then by recounting his success. First, let us examine the Author's failure to become-imperceptible. In his expository introduction, the Author relates that upon receiving Vinh L.'s letters, he began to repeat the parasitic practices of a plagiarist writer by immediately beginning to dissect and reconstruct the story to suit his own literary vision. Concerned with the style of the writing, the Author replaces Vinh L.'s solemn,

detached prose with poetic flourishes and metaphors that demonstrate, at least according to the Author, the literary quality of the writing:

Il m'écrit de nombreuses lettres sur ce crime qu'il avait commis. Il n'avait pas, au contraire de moi, un penchant pour le bien écrire. Une certaine sévérité à l'égard de lui-même lui interdisait tout effet de style. [...] Les lettres de Vinh L., je les trouvais trop détachées, indécentes à force de s'en tenir à l'apparente rigueur des choses. Je les réécrivais. J'en maculai quelques-unes d'un sang trop rouge, j'enjolivai d'autres, les nourrissant de métaphores incongrues et de comparaisons poétiques. Aussitôt après m'être *approprié* le crime de Vinh L., je détruisais toutes ses lettres. (198, my emphasis)

To elevate his account of his banal narrative theft to a criminal offense, the Author uses words and imagery reminiscent of a gory blood bath as if to impersonate a cannibal, but to no avail. Yet it is clear from the language of his retrospective description of plagiarism that he has undergone a kind of transformation. Now, rather than using “incongruous metaphors,” the Author describes his attempts at writing about cannibalism in cannibalistic terms, describing his embellishment of the letters as “nourished” and “stained with blood.” The Author further describes himself in this visceral and carnal way: as having “un certain goût pour le bien écrire” (193) and as feeling “rapace” at the idea of plagiarizing Vinh L.’s story, which he calls “un morceau de choix” (196). It is as though the Author has been so impregnated with cannibalism by writing about Vinh L.’s life that that experience has invaded the Author’s own text, suggesting that his language has become-imperceptible from an experience he did not himself live through. The line between literature and life thereby becomes increasingly convoluted as the language itself becomes cannibal.

This invasion of language by experience continues as the Author compares writing his book to building a tomb.<sup>213</sup> However, he explains that he realized that his writing was incomplete, like a tomb without a body—empty: “Mon tombeau, cependant, sonnait creux. J’avais élevé un monument funéraire en empruntant ici une planche de cercueil, là une pierre, ailleurs une dalle ; à force de grappiller des bouts de crime, je finis par avoir un tombeau à moi, hélas ! le monument restait vide—je n’avais pas réussi à me procurer un cadavre” (193-194). Here, the Author describes his process of *appropriation* of the constituent elements of a tomb by poaching the various necessary pieces, except for a dead body. Though after his epistolary interactions with Vinh L., he believed he had found a resolution: “Vinh L. était le cadavre qui manquait à ma tombe” (198). The Author intended for Vinh L.’s self-sacrifice to render his tomb whole and thereby complete the project. Yet, after his first pass at appropriating Vinh L.’s story by plagiarizing it as he desires, he comes to realize his error; appropriation and absorption, like plagiarism and writing, are not the same process. He confesses to the deficiency of his reproduction: “Au bout d’une heure de lecture, je dus me rendre à l’évidence : le tombeau sonnait creux. J’avais incinéré le cadavre qui m’avait été offert. Mon livre, comme les précédents ressemblait à un monument funéraire vide...” (198-199). Upon rereading his finished piece before sending to his publisher, he realizes that his factitiousness has failed him; his writing sounds inauthentic and overdone.

Indeed, the Author comes to realize firsthand that writing is not the description of a life with a literary style. Or, as Deleuze explains, “Écrire n’est certainement pas imposer une forme

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<sup>213</sup> Tombs, especially those in France which contain multiple family members, could also be read in terms of genealogy. Lê, for her part, is less interested in family genealogy than in creating a network of relations with other exiled writers. For discussions of this notion of network in Lê, see Barnes, *Vietnam*, chapter 5; Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving*.

(d'expression) à une matière vécue. La littérature est plutôt du côté de l'informe, ou de l'inachèvement [...]” (*Critique* 11). Rather, “Écrire est une affaire de devenir, toujours inachevé, toujours en train de se faire, qui se déborde toute matière vivable ou vécue. C’est un processus, c’est-à-dire un passage de Vie qui traverse le vivable et le vécue” (*Critique* 11). In order to write, the Author learns that he must do more than “appropriate” Vinh L.’s story. Thus, the Author starts over, recalling from memory Vinh L.’s phrasing from the letters he destroyed, but this time he realizes he cannot merely plagiarize Vinh L.:

Je ne pouvais me contenter d’être toujours un plagiaire timoré. Je devais me transformer en anthropophage. Je repris une à une toutes ces lettres factices. J’essayai de me souvenir des formules de Vinh L. Je pénétrai de force dans son intimité. Je participai à son malheur, je mangeai son infortune, je mâchai une chair qu’il avait ruminée. Je réussis enfin à *absorber* son crime... En réécrivant la première fois les lettres de Vinh L., j’avais voulu le manger. Je dus me résoudre à me laisser manger par lui. (198-199, my emphasis)

Here, the Author realizes after his first attempt at plagiarizing the letters that he cannot merely *appropriate* Vinh L.’s narrative by passing it off as his own through his own narrative voice and still manage to create a story with the same expressive power. Rather, the Author must *absorb* Vinh L.’s crime. He must undergo an anthropophagic transformation by sacrificing *himself* to a reciprocal act of cannibalism. As before, the cannibalization of his language demonstrates his transformation; the Author must “eat” Vinh L.’s misfortune, “chew on” his experience as if it were “flesh,” before ultimately allowing himself to become-imperceptible from Vinh L. himself. Finally, by attempting to integrate Vinh L. and his experience through writing, the Author abandons himself to his own disintegration in the face of that story, suggesting that experience is the key to writing, even if that experience occurs second-hand.



And it works: “J’espérais faire de Vinh L. mon cadavre, je devins le sien. Mon tombeau ne sonnait plus creux. J’y déposai mon ancienne peau” (199). The Author discovers that the cost of writing is his own bodily self-sacrifice through the breakdown of his organic body. Instead of maintaining his own physical wholeness, he realizes he must quite literally risk his own skin if he hopes to fill his funeral monument.<sup>214</sup> What is more, that the Author only sacrifices a part of himself speaks to the importance of the incomplete (“l’inachèvement”) in Deleuze’s formulation on writing, suggesting that the Author has entered a process of perpetual becoming that will entail further sacrifice. With part of his molted self already in the grave, the Author’s precarity as a writer is made imminently apparent; the writing of this book forces him to explode his own molarity by entering the in between for himself, a figure who lives on the verge of life and death. This recalls our earlier discussion of the Deleuzian notion of the work—as both *l’œuvre* and *le labeur*—of literature as a problem of the health of the world, with the writer balancing on the threshold between good and bad health. Or, as Damlé explains, “...how far can one go towards imperceptibility before losing oneself entirely? [...] Deleuze advocates going just far enough, just enough to widen the crack, without falling in completely” (Damlé 52).<sup>215</sup> In Lê’s novella, the Author finally learns that the work of literature demands a penultimate sacrifice to which he surrenders by figuratively risking his own skin.

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<sup>214</sup> There are echoes here of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “tomb” poems—“Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe” (1876), “Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire” (1895), and “Le Tombeau de Verlaine” (1897)—in which he elegizes these poets, musing on how death immortalizes men as artists. Lê also shares with Mallarmé a predilection for complicated syntax and obscure imagery that are equal parts innovative and difficult to parse. Lê’s reflection on the writer’s tomb here seems to challenge the molarity of Mallarmé’s poems in favor of a more molecular perspective.

<sup>215</sup> Damlé explains that Deleuze and Guattari explore various forms of self-annihilation, such as in anorexia, alcoholism, and schizophrenia. Lê’s previous three novellas deal explicitly with each of these experiences: Reeves C. tends to drink to excess, Professeur T. is secretly schizophrenic, and Klara V. deals with anorexia and bulimia.

In a provocative reversal, the illustrious, molar Author must capitulate to the cannibal by eating and being eaten by him in order to write *with* him. In other words, the Author must engage physically, even *viscerally*, with his subject—Vinh L., in this case. By attempting to absorb and in turn reciprocally allowing himself to be absorbed, the Author and Vinh L. become a singular writing body that is made up of multiple heterogeneous parts that are nonetheless indistinguishable from one another. While scholars have described this writing body as an effect of Lê's predilection for doubling,<sup>216</sup> I would like to push this analysis further, because doubling does not sufficiently account for the extent of the consolidation of the two figures of the Author and Vinh L. into one enunciative voice in the novella.<sup>217</sup> For cannibalism, as the Author explains, involves, not just the *appropriation* of the other, but its *absorption* into the self. The other is thus broken down into composite parts—moving from molar to molecular—to then become a part of the absorbing body, which subsequently changes in composition in imperceptible ways that exceed the double. Indeed, because each figure is undoubtedly composed of many others, there is no way of accounting for the extent of the potential multiplicity.

Recalling our earlier discussion of Lê's distaste at incorporating the suffering of others for the purposes of literature, this analysis of the figure of the cannibal-writer in "Vinh L." has explored the repercussions of this act for both the writer and the cannibal. By making this comparison between writing and cannibalism explicit in the novella, Lê posits the idea that the writer, like the cannibal, is utterly transformed by the experience of effectively absorbing the

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<sup>216</sup> See Barnes, *Vietnam* 179; Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving* 134-136; Chau-Pech Ollier 243.

<sup>217</sup> Barnes writes, "In the intricately staged appropriation of the Other and of the self as Other, and in the tension between the presence and absence of the narrated trauma—which is written, copied, destroyed, and rewritten, but which is nevertheless present for the reader's consumption in the form of the novella—Lê generates a series of doubles with which she interrogates the possibility of narration as a literary form" (*Vietnam* 180).

lives of others. So much so that the writer will not only absorb, but will also be absorbed by, his subject through a cannibalistic symbiosis. Lê's conception of the potential connections between cannibalistic and literary acts suggests that the work of literature produced by the cannibal-writer is an indiscernible *mélange* of self and other.

### **Cannibalizing Language**

Following the expository prologue, in which the Author explains his becoming-imperceptible from his subject through cannibalistic ingestion and digestion, are the ten letters that Vinh L. originally penned but the Author has rewritten. In these letters, it is impossible to discern Vinh L.'s original narrative voice from that of the Author, such that the authorship of this portion of the novella cannot be narrowed down to just one person. The result is a palimpsest in which the only trace of the original text is the knowledge that it has been altered—ingested, digested, and regurgitated. Stylistically, the letters are not a sensational and dramatic account of the experience endured by Vinh L., as we might expect when hearing an account of cannibalism. Rather, with a sober and rational tone, Vinh L. (through the Author) meditates on the physical, philosophical, and psychological stakes of consuming another human being. In this way, the letters painstakingly avoid raising emotional tensions by deconstructing his story into ten discrete letters and eschewing any hint of confessional hysteria. Thus, Vinh L.'s letters are evidence of the Author's successful becoming-imperceptible through cannibalism, because the differences between the Author and Vinh L., self and other, writer and subject, are indiscernible in the text.

Moreover, this does not only occur diegetically, but also in the language itself. As we have already seen in the examples cited in the previous section, the Author's language in his prologue showed signs of his own cannibalization; "J'en maculai quelques-unes [des lettres de

Vinh L.] d'un sang trop rouge, ” (198) as the Author describes his first plagiaristic attempts. Indeed, the Author, expressing frustration with Vinh L.'s writerly restraint in his letters, writes: “En secret, j’espérai recevoir non des lettres, mais des lambeaux de chair. J’aurais voulu qu’à chaque fois, il se larde d’un coup de couteau et qu’il me présente sur un plateau de la chair fumant encore de son sang. Il ne m’apporta qu’un crime frigorifié, conservé sous cellophane” (198). In these examples, the literal and the metaphorical are confused; the Author uses the language of cannibalism to speak figuratively about appropriating Vinh L.'s story of killing and consuming another human being.

By also referring to Vinh L. as “le cadavre” (198) that was missing from “le tombeau” (198), meant to signify his book-in-progress, he combines the literal and metaphorical aspects of cannibalism in his language to discuss death. The Author continues by explaining that after plagiarizing the letters, he realizes that he had mistakenly “incinéré le cadavre qui m’avait été offert” (198-199), implying that he was too quick in overlaying Vinh L.'s narrative with his own voice. From this grotesque language emerges an analogy; if to re-tell a story in one's own voice is to effectively destroy through incineration, then to truly write the story is to allow for the process of decomposition.<sup>218</sup> Indeed, as I discussed previously, only once the author submits to self-sacrifice and occupies the tomb himself—“J’y déposai mon ancienne peau” (199)—does his book, or his tomb, no longer sound hollow. Here, death and decay do not indicate the end of the Author's life, but his transformation into a cannibal-writer and the subsequent invasion of cannibalism into his written language in such a way that fuses together the literal and the symbolic.

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<sup>218</sup> For a discussion of the grotesque in Lê's work, see Barnes, “Trauma and Plasticity” in *Vietnam*, chapter 4.

The same is true for Vinh L. as well, whose letters are infused with cannibalistic language through motifs of eating and death that blur what is real and what is figurative, just as in the Author's prologue. For instance, Vinh L. describes his state of mind once he had arrived as a refugee in France: "J'étais en état de guerre avec moi-même. Le poison avait imprégné mes entrailles. Je cherchais l'instrument qui m'aiderait à extirper cette racine empoisonnée. Je ne pouvais avoir recours ni à la sagesse, ni à la religion, ni à l'oubli, ni à l'inconscience. Ne me restait qu'une seule voie : je me gavai de culture pour me purifier de ma barbarie" (207). For Vinh L., the distinction between literal and symbolic is obviated by the fact that he has actualized the metaphors of his letters with the real experience of consuming another human being, which has affected both his body and his psyche.

Turning to culture as a means of counterbalancing his past as a cannibal, which was caused by his physical need to eat to survive, he focuses on literature as the key to his salvation and a balm for his mind: "je me nourris de mots, je remplis ma tête de la voix de la conscience, des bégaiements de la culture [...] J'encombre mon crâne, je le transforme en bibliothèque, en musée vivant, pour oublier que mon ventre est une morgue" (210-211). However, Vinh L. discovers that reading literature is not sufficient for someone like him to find the clarity to contemplate his own horrifying actions: "Il ne lui suffit pas d'avoir trempé dans l'horrible, il lui faut encore acquérir la lucidité pour macérer dans la souffrance" (211). Here, Vinh L. learns that in spite of his desire to resolve the aftermath of his cannibalistic act through consuming culture, he must live with and reflect on it by accepting the body that decomposes in the "morgue" inside him. In this way, though Vinh L. has committed literal cannibalism while the Author's cannibalism is more symbolic, what is similar is their realization that they must accept and even meditate on the slow decomposition of their senses of self through writing with one another:

Vinh L. through his letters to the Author and the Author through his book about Vinh L.'s experience.

What can we make of Lê's layering of meaning through the meanings of the words themselves and in their figurative implications? From the imbrication of the literal and the metaphorical in the discussion of cannibalism and death in the novella, I suggest that cannibal writing reproduces the effects of decomposition at a connotative and denotative level to comment not only on the dynamics of cannibalism, but also on those of language. For decomposition, though unappealing, should not be perceived here as negative, but as generative in a creative sense given that the Author is able write once he yields to what is ultimately a natural process. The decomposition in and of language might bring forth new language in the same way that a plant might grow from matter that has decomposed over time. Vinh L. describes this experience exactly; when contemplating his unexpected turn from cannibalism to writing, he writes, "Je suis une plante qui exhibe une ramure verte, et qui pourrit par les racines" (248). Here, Vinh L. comes to terms with his forced abandonment of what had previously connected him in the world, such that the decomposition of his roots brings forth new growth, a new perspective on the world.

This idea that cannibal writing incites creative regeneration aligns with extant analyses of literary cannibalism in Lê's novel, while also pushing them further. Barnes, for instance, understands cannibalism in the novella as a "metaliterary trope" that demonstrates "the exhaustion of mimetic language" in that Lê "push[es] the union of form and content to its limits" (*Vietnam* 179). Yet, even though this overlapping of literal and figurative cannibalism pushes language and narrative to the breaking point, Barnes maintains that this approach is regenerative in that it spurs literary creation (184). Yeager, for his part, also sees literary cannibalism in Lê's

novel as a metaphor for creation: “the consumption of texts to produce others” (“Authorial Identities” 89). Meanwhile, I am suggesting that the dynamics of decomposition in Lê’s novel push us to consider that literary creativity might come from the decomposition, or the destruction, of what we perceive to be real and figurative in literature in order to find new creative possibilities.

For, if we consider literature not as an imposition of form on experience, but as a Deleuzian becoming of language, we will, as Damlé argues, be able to “[conceive] of both writing and reading, after Deleuze, not as a mimetic, representational act that fixes meaning or that submits to ideological constraints, but as an agentive, aleatory and creative connection to the immanence of experience” (Damlé 56). In other words, Lê forces language to describe both Vinh L.’s experience with literal cannibalism and the Author’s experience with metaphorical cannibalism by writing in cannibalistic terms, such that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell what is real and what is figurative in the novel—it is as though language itself has trouble accounting for both at the same time. Because the experience of cannibalism has entered language and has become-imperceptible, rather than the other way around, the separation between what is real and what is figurative becomes difficult to detect. Bereft of the usual compass that points toward the real, the reader must submit to the text and to the experience that the writing offers by abandoning the hierarchical distinction traditionally imposed on narrative. For the reader, too, must recognize that she cannot only consume Lê’s text, but be consumed by it; she must therefore submit to an exploration of the in between that spans the continuum of the limits of the real and the figurative to discover what new growth might be found in the middle. The creative regeneration comes from the exploration of what can be found between two binary points, such as the real and the figurative, which affords us a view on the innumerable

possibilities that can arise in “des interstices du langage” (*Critique* 16).<sup>219</sup> When conceived this way, it is as though the real and the figurative must work *with* one another, rather than in an oppositional either/or or neither/nor, in a symbiotic way that both overcomes and includes, instead of obliterates, the differences between them.

Here, I suggest that we borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the molar and molecular once again to understand how language might change when acted upon by literature. Deleuze explains, “[...] comme dit Proust, [la littérature] y trace précisément une sorte de langue étrangère, qui n’est pas une autre langue, ni un patois retrouvé, mais un devenir-autre de la langue, une minoration de cette langue majeure [...]” (*Critique* 15). More than this, however, Deleuze suggests that literature induces “une décomposition ou une destruction de la langue maternelle” (*Critique* 16, my emphasis). In Lê’s *Les Évangiles*, this “decomposition of the maternal language” occurs for both Vinh L. and the Author as they become-imperceptible from one another through the writing of the novella. On the one hand, Vinh L., whose mother tongue is Vietnamese, learns to speak and write in French through his self-imposed force-feeding of French literature. The letters he writes to the author, though ostensibly written in French, are in fact made up of a composite language that breaks down, or “decomposes,” the molarity of both languages. On the other hand, the Author—after his initial plagiarism of Vinh L.’s letters in his own molar linguistic style—learns to incorporate Vinh L.’s already-compounded language through his own authorial voice, thus allowing for a molecular heterogeneity. The result is the text we read in Lê’s novella, in which the becoming-other of maternal languages takes center

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<sup>219</sup> In the preface of the English translation of *Dialogues*, Deleuze writes, “In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms of the elements, but what is ‘between’, the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like a blade of grass or the rhizome” (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II* vi-vii).



stage to flout the perception of French as a major language. Furthermore, both characters must learn to write *with* the other whom they have ingested and digested, as their molar selves have been (dis)integrated through the process of cannibal becoming. It is thus important that we interpret Lê's novella through this idea of "a foreign language within a language," because we will see that her writing inhabits an in between that critiques the molarity of language in favor of an immanent, absolute difference that cannot be erased through assimilation.

Indeed, this becoming of a major language that is enacted by a writer through literature is once again reminiscent of the early stages of Lê's career and her decision to elide her first three novels from her official bibliography. Lê explains that in these works, she "approached the French language with respect and intimidation in the face of its authority, writing out of submission to it" (Hage). Aware of her position as a postcolonial foreigner, Lê seems to be expressing her inability at the time to attack the molarity of her acquired language. Yet, neither could she find expression in Vietnamese, her mother tongue. Lê explains:

Je ne parle plus guère le vietnamien, langue que j'ai presque totalement oubliée. Le français est ma langue, le territoire dans lequel j'évolue. J'y habite, mais tout mon travail a consisté à trouver une langue personnelle, une langue dans laquelle je peux recréer des parts d'enfance. Je crois qu'en tant qu'étranger, on a toujours un rapport double à la langue d'emprunt : on éprouve pour elle une dévotion teintée de polémique. Elle est votre refuge, mais c'est un abri précaire. On est comme un hérétique, qui se fait passeur et transgresseur. (qtd. in Loucif 884)

Here, Lê describes how she instrumentalizes her foreignness in order to attack the molarity of language—whether Vietnamese (her mother tongue and therefore her major language *for her*) or French (the dominant language of her postcolonial context)—by findings its "limits" and

inventing “une nouvelle langue dans la langue” (Deleuze, *Critique* 16). What is particularly important to Lê is that though she has managed to infiltrate the French language and create her own language within its boundaries, she nonetheless remains an outsider, or a “transgressor” to use her words. Indeed, for her, writing requires that the decomposition of language to generate new language must never end, because once accepted, this new language is no longer transgressive. Literature, therefore, demands the persistent incorporation of what is outside, not to promote the acceptance of the foreign, but to make foreign what is already considered acceptable.

### **Conclusion: How Does the Cannibal Write?**

Even though Lê finds success in *Les Évangiles* by instigating a becoming of language through a Deleuzian decomposition of her maternal language, questions about this process remain. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari seem to not consider the ethical ramifications of becoming-imperceptible through the perpetual incorporation of “the outside.” For example, in Lê’s novella, it is difficult to ignore the ethical implications of the Author’s maintenance of the position of writer of the text while Vinh L. becomes effectively dependent on him to tell his story. Curiously, however, it is the Author who remains unnamed, while Vinh L. *is* named. Indeed, it is difficult to tell who ultimately cedes to whom. Is this measure of expression that Vinh L. achieves through becoming-imperceptible with the Author satisfactory to him even though it seems to be inequitable? It appears so. Through writing his letters to the Author, Vinh L. discovers that writers are not the grandiose figures he initially imagined them to be: “Mais les écrivains s’ingénient à nous décevoir” (246), he explains. In his words, they are incapable of committing crimes for themselves and are therefore nothing but “renifleurs de charogne” (246),

“trafiquants d’hémoglobine” (246), and “jolis pantins de bois” (225) who excel at describing and staging life yet perpetually elude its reality. The work of the writer is not generative, but parasitic: “Ils ont en commun avec les parasites le sens de la solidarité, et avec les sangsues celui de la fraternité” (247). Compared with parasites and blood-sucking leeches, writers are removed from their pedestal in French society by Lê who forces them to reckon with the material, and even visceral, aspects of their work in a process that is once again reminiscent of Serres’s “parasitical chain.”

Nonetheless, the exercise of writing letters proves to be salutary. Vinh L. explains to the Author, “Une fois la déception surmontée, je vous écris comme un pauvre type écrit à un autre pauvre type, c’est-à-dire que je soliloque, je me laisse aller à me regarder bien en face, je n’ai plus besoin de prendre la pose, d’élever ma voix” (218). Lê’s unites the Author and Vinh L. in their mediocrity in spite of their obvious differences to interrogate the privileged position of the figure of the writer. Vinh L. writes, “Je deviens moi aussi homme de lettres” (233), suggesting that this moniker is just as ironic for him as it was for the Author, because they are but two men in an epistolary relationship, two men of actual letters written, sent, and received. By writing letters that the Author then re-writes for publication—by writing *with* the Author—Vinh L. is able to see his interlocutor as his fellow, or even as his reflection, which helps him overcome the enormity of his crime as well as see beyond the trappings of the revered Author; neither the cannibal, nor the author merit the inflated cultural status they are assigned.

In her demotion of the esteemed writer, Lê suggests that what counts is not a politics of recognition or equality of representation, but a chance for liberation from guilt from a traumatic past. Vinh L. even consents to the Author’s use of his writing for publication, exclaiming: “Plagiez-moi. Détrousez-moi. Dépiautez-moi” (257), thereby suggesting that their exchange

was less a parasitic one than a symbiotic one. Ultimately, Vinh L. does not become the face behind his own story, stirring the indignation of the postcolonial literary critic, but Lê seems to be indicating that the recognition that comes with publication is less important to Vinh L. than the practice of writing itself. Or, as Barnes explains, Lê emphasizes the process of “writing through” crisis rather than attempting to resolve it, which allows for further creative exploration of that trauma (*Vietnam* 170). In this case, Vinh L. finds absolution in literary cannibalism by communing with a fellow cannibal, a writer who has also consumed others for his own benefit.

Lê’s approach to literary cannibalism is demonstrably different from her fellow practitioners in francophone postcolonial literature. Guadeloupien writer Maryse Condé’s 2014 novel *Histoire de la femme cannibale* is perhaps the closest comparison, as this work deals with the violence of artistic creation in similar ways as Lê’s. In this text, a black Antillean painter named Rosélie, who resides in post-Apartheid Cape Town, identifies with a South African woman called Fiéla who has been accused of murdering and planning to eat her husband. In spite of the dubious nature of the allegations, Fiéla is roundly condemned in the news media, especially when she refuses to speak during her trial, and she is found guilty. However, she commits suicide en route to prison, thereby putting an end to the possibility of ever knowing the truth. Rosélie follows the accounts of Fiéla’s trial in the newspaper and finds inspiration in her story to create her masterwork, a painting entitled “Histoire de la femme cannibale.”

Condé’s novel, like Lê’s, addresses the ways in which artistic creation is akin to cannibalism because both involve the consumption of the lives of others, the former through narrative and the latter through eating. Yet, the two authors diverge in that the drive to commit the violence of literary cannibalism, for Condé, is fueled by an ethical responsibility to those whom she represents, while for Lê this desire comes from an almost compulsive voracity. As

Simek explains in her analysis of Condé's novel, the incorporation of previous texts for one's own artistic creative is to effectively commit a cannibal act, but to not consume that story and retell would also be ethically problematic. She writes:

To tell someone's story is inevitably to consume and transform it, to place it within one's own history and assimilate it to oneself. To represent—in the sense of portraying another, but also in the broader sense of using language, of appropriating 'a given code that [one] has not created,' as Condé puts it—is to cannibalize. Yet to refuse to speak, to refuse to create, is to retreat inward, to deny one's ethical responsibility to the other. (Simek, *Eating Well* 199)

While Condé primarily takes the privileged position of the writer in her novel by focusing on Rosélie's problematic identification with Fiéla, Lê examines the violence of artistic creation from the perspective of both the Author and Vinh L. in order to show how they write with one another in an ultimately symbiotic way. Rather than try to outline an ethics of appropriation, Lê amplifies the violence with grotesque references and visceral descriptions of abject experiences to show that writers do not emerge from the creative process unscathed, but wholly altered by the self-sacrifice that literary cannibalism demands. As for Vinh L., the source of the Author's artistic inspiration, the exercise of working through his trauma by writing is compensation enough. Less concerned with cultural erasure, legitimate representation, or cultural recognition, Lê focuses on the processes of becoming that take place for both the Author and Vinh L. when they engage in cannibalism, whether literal or literary.

In Lê's novella, Vinh L. allows his story to be appropriated, and indeed absorbed, by the Author to the point that we cannot distinguish whose voice is whose. However, Lê's text does the opposite; she draws particular attention to the indeterminacy of authorship, not just in this

last section, but throughout the novel through her layering of narrative voices and disintegrating the figure of the author. Moreover, as discussed previously, Lê plays a game of “hide-and-tell” by including oblique references to her own autobiographical facts as well as partially obscures the nationalities of her characters only to provide tantalizing details that make deducing their identities easy work. By persistently emphasizing uncertainty yet still activating a desire for knowing in the reader, Lê identifies ideologies of knowledge of others that exist while also pushing the reader to understand that there is much we cannot know. Simek argues that in Condé’s novel, this notion of indeterminacy serves as a critique of this desire for certainty in literary interpretation—an “ethico-hermeneutical hesitation” that allows for the opacity of those who are consumed in literary cannibalism and to mitigate the potential for erasure (*Eating Well* 177, 189). But in Lê’s case, as we have seen, her novel thwarts the reader’s search for identitarian markers not to protect the opacity of the characters, but to stymie the generalization that occurs in consequence, thus allowing the figure of the writer to remain un-coded.

Yet, concerns relating to the writer’s potentially problematic identification with the other in such a way that does not respect that other’s opacity remain important in Condé’s *Histoire*. In her analysis of this novel, Simek proposes that the way out of the ethical dilemma of literary cannibalism—to cannibalize the stories of for the purposes of one’s own artistic creation, on the one hand, or to not consume them at all and resign them to silence, on the other—is to “eat well,” borrowing from Derrida’s injunction. Because we all inevitably commit symbolic anthropophagy in a variety of moral, political, and legal ways, Derrida argues, the question is not whether to abstain or not from “eating” (296). Rather, the only way out is by teaching oneself how to “eat well,” or “il faut bien manger” (296). Accordingly, “eating well” involves learning to provide sustenance to others, or “apprendre-à-donner-à-manger-à-l’autre” (296), in a form of hospitable

commensality. To do this, Derrida proposes: "...on doit commencer à s'identifier à lui, à l'assimiler, l'intérioriser, le comprendre idéalement (ce qu'on ne peut jamais faire absolument sans s'adresser à l'autre...)" (297). If we connect "eating well" with practices of reading and literary interpretation, as Simek suggests, we can engage in more ethical relations with others and their narratives.

In Lê's novel, the Author does exactly as Derrida prescribes; he learns to identify with Vinh L. by endeavoring to identify, understand, and ultimately write *with* him, as I have argued. Indeed, while the Author manages to nourish himself, he also learns to feed Vinh L., as well, yet perhaps not in the way that Derrida imagined. Rather, Lê takes Derrida's charitable, and rather sanitized, view of cannibalism to task by examining in detail the particular ways that writers cannibalize their subjects, but also how writers must in turn cannibalize themselves—to provide sustenance to Vinh L., the Author must nourish him *himself*. Lê is not interested in validating symbolic cannibalism as a widespread practice in contemporary society and promoting an ethics of consumption, as Derrida recommends, or in dislocating the practice of cannibalism from the Caribbean in an attempt to achieve a post-cannibalistic moment in Antillean literature as Condé might suggest (Rosello, "Post-cannibalism" 49). Instead, Lê seems to be suggesting that "eating well" is impossible for the writer, who must be unafraid to break taboos and transgress morality. From this perspective, to "eat well" is to try to render cannibalism as cultural acceptable, when Lê in fact seeks to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in literature.

For the unending quest for originality is what truly motivates Lê's fiction, such that an unintended consequence of the literary cannibalism in Lê's novel is that it counters the typical discourse of francophone postcolonial literature in which questions of originality are the purview

of the colonized and not the colonizer.<sup>220</sup> It is not the cannibalization of French literature and language by the colonized, as established by Suzanne Césaire and Maryse Condé, but that, as Trinh Minh-ha explains, "...writing constantly refers to writing, and no writing can ever claim to be 'free' of other writings" (21). For Lê, literary cannibalism is not a form of resistance, nor a demand for recognition of a particular group based on identity. Rather, it is an act of self-conscious acknowledgement that the creative process necessitates writing and eating *with* the other—whoever that other may be. Writing thus inherently engages dynamics of power, (post)colonial or otherwise, in ways that can be destructive to and generative of the self and writerly authority. In between body and psyche, life and literature, literary cannibalism spurs a becoming that explores the multiplicities that arise from the in between, such that difference is not erased, but incorporated, becoming constitutive of the perceived whole. By foregrounding practices of reading and writing in her novel, Lê presents her own acknowledgment of these forces that inhabit her and her work. Though she certainly does not instrumentalize her writing in any political sense, she does nonetheless demonstrate how to look beyond initial perception and seek out those internal differences to dismantle the socio-cultural hierarchies of difference in pursuit of her own personal transformation. For, as Trinh Minh-ha writes, "To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively" (18-19).

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<sup>220</sup> For a discussion of plagiarism and originality in postcolonial francophone literature, see Yeager, "Authorial Identities."



## Conclusion

Over the last decade—and especially in the last few years—writers and artists of Vietnamese heritage have emerged as influential figures in a number of cultural fields, attracting considerable attention on both sides of the Atlantic. From poetry and novels to graphic memoirs and films, diasporic Vietnamese narratives recounted through a variety of forms have received many high-profile accolades and honors. The magnitude of this kind of critical validation and public visibility suggests to me that the literature under study in this dissertation is at the forefront of a growing body of creative works that employ increasingly diverse forms of storytelling to explore the experiences of the diasporic Vietnamese throughout the world.

To give a few of the most prominent examples, in the United States, this has culminated in the decoration of the novel *The Sympathizer* with the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 and its author, Viet Thanh Nguyen, with a MacArthur “Genius” Grant in 2017. That same year, Ocean Vuong, another Vietnamese-American writer, won the T.S. Eliot Prize for his poetry before being awarded a “Genius” Grant of his own in 2019, following the publication of his bestselling and critically acclaimed novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*.<sup>221</sup> Monique Truong, named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2010 and considered “among the most talented literary fiction writers working in the United States” (Magosaki), published her third novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, to much media fanfare in 2019. In graphic storytelling, Australian-born and New York-based Matt Huynh debuted *The Ark*, an “animated video adaptation” of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s much-anticipated second novel, at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. in 2017, while Thi

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<sup>221</sup> Films by Asian American directors telling the stories of Asian American protagonists have also been particularly visible, from the blockbuster success *Crazy Rich Asians* in 2018, directed by Jon M. Chu, to the indie film *The Farewell* in 2019, directed by Lulu Wang, making household names of Asian American actors Constance Wu and Awkwafina (the stage name of Nora Lum). For a critique of *Crazy Rich Asians*, see A. Cheng, “Anxious Pedigree.”

Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* was nominated for several prizes, including an Eisner Award for best reality-based comic in 2018. In the meantime, in francophone Canada, Kim Thúy has solidified her status as a “beloved novelist” (Nurse) and as a “Quebec media star” (Everett-Green). She frequently appears on popular talk shows on TV, and the releases of her novel, *Vi*, in 2016 and her narrative cookbook, *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes*, in 2017 have been fêted with large-scale publicity campaigns. Thúy was also among three finalists for the New Academy Prize in Literature (that year's alternative to the Nobel Prize in Literature) in 2018.

In France, works by French artists and writers of Vietnamese origin have garnered similar popular and critical attention. Novels, essays, and memoirs by writers Linda Lê, Doan Bui, and Minh Tran Huy have been lauded by cultural critics in the last few years while *bandes dessinées* such as *Une si jolie petite guerre* (2012) by Marcelino Truong and *Quitter Saïgon: Mémoires de Viet Kieu* (2013) by Clément Baloup have achieved commercial success. Playwright and director Caroline Guiela Nguyen premiered her play *Saïgon* at the Festival d'Avignon in 2017 and now sells out performances all over France and around the world, from the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in Paris, to the Théâtre Ben Thanh in Ho Chi Minh City. Actor Frédéric Chau has starred in blockbuster films *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon dieu?* (2014) and its sequel *Qu'est-ce qu'on a encore fait au bon dieu?* (2019) as the undesirable Asian son-in-law who marries the daughter of a white, French-Catholic couple in Paris—as well as *Made in China* (2019), in which Chau plays “François,” a Parisian of Chinese descent who reluctantly reconnects with his roots.

However, it is as though the increased visibility of the diasporic Vietnamese in contemporary French culture has also made their racial identity as Asian more visible as well. The films in which Chau has appeared, popular as they have been, blatantly straddle the line between dismantling and reinforcing stereotypes that generalize the diversity of Asian cultures

into one homogeneous group based on race. Yet, at the same time, Chau has been able to use his celebrity to publicly denounce anti-Asian racism in France through digital media, such as hashtags and videos posted on YouTube and Facebook. Indeed, what is intriguing about the rise of diasporic Vietnamese cultural expression in France, in particular, is that more traditional forms like literature, film, and theater have been accompanied by increasingly diverse aesthetic media that depict the less savory side of contemporary life, not just for the Vietnamese, but for Asians more generally. These forms have allowed for more democratized access to public self-expression while also fostering collective solidarity, but more than this, they have also given vent to frustration with growing trends of anti-Asian racism and violence in France.

The tipping point for many Asian communities in France occurred in August 2016, when Zhang Chaolin, a Chinese resident of the Parisian suburb of Aubervilliers, was held up and murdered in the street by three teenagers. In the wake of this event, many individuals of Asian heritage began to mobilize collectively. Subsequent street protests in the Place de la République in central Paris numbered in the tens of thousands of people (Ponniah), while young people, in particular, took to the internet. Actor Chau directed a video denouncing racially motivated anti-Asian violence entitled “#SecuritePourTous” in 2016. Similarly motivated by frustration with anti-Asian racism, Grace Ly, a French writer of Chinese-Cambodian heritage, wrote and directed a documentary webseries, *Ça reste entre nous*, in 2017 about Asian experience in France and began hosting a podcast, *Kiffe ta race*, in 2018 with Rokhaya Diallo. Perhaps the most influential of these works of digital media has been a video, entitled “#AsiatiquesDeFrance,” in which Chau joins other French celebrities of Asian descent in naming the racial epithets they regularly face before collectively affirming their French nationality. Directed by H  l  ne Lam Trong, the video

was shared 5,000 times within hours of its posting on Facebook in March 2017 and has been viewed over one million times on Facebook and YouTube to date.

As the “#AsiatiquesDeFrance” moniker suggests, Chau and other French-Asian public figures have found a measure of collective solidarity in their shared racial background. Yet this is precisely *because* they collectively face the same forms of racism, which tend to homogenize individuals of diverse backgrounds and circumstances into one visibly recognizable racial category. The potential pitfalls of organizing this way are reminiscent of debates surrounding the term “Asian American” in the United States, which was born with the establishment of “Asian American Studies” and its subsidiary “Asian American Literature” at the height of the Civil Rights movement in 1968. On the one hand, these academic categorizations enabled individuals of diverse backgrounds to organize together to fight for the possibility of self-articulation and equality (V. Nguyen, *Race* 4-5, 7). Under the banner of “Asian American,” American writers of diverse Asian origins, as well as the scholars who study their works, have been able to join together to shape discussions of political and cultural import, often addressing issues of race and racism. Indeed, the successes of Vietnamese-American writers like Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, and Monique Truong could be thanks, at least in part, to such collective organization, which has no doubt helped them find a place at the heart of American literary culture.<sup>222</sup> Similar initiatives have recently launched in Canada that model themselves off the American example, including the founding of academic programs and a national academic organization called

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<sup>222</sup> As V. Nguyen is quick to point out, this is not to say that such markers of success suggest that such cultural acceptance is uniform or durable, as there instances of racism and discrimination persist in many forms (“The Great Vietnam War Novel”).

“Asian Canadian Studies” as well as the publication of *Asian Canadian Studies Reader* in 2017.<sup>223</sup>

On the other hand, the sacrifice of individual difference in favor of collective solidarity that the term “Asian American” (or “Asian Canadian”) involves has not been without critique.<sup>224</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen explains that this identitarian category is paradoxically dependent on the continued racism that unites them: “There are implications, of course, for Asian American identity as we know it today if anti-Asian racism subsides or changes—namely, that Asian American identity may no longer be necessary or at least no longer as compelling for political mobilization” (*Race* 18). While Lisa Lowe argues that organizing collectively as “Asian American,” while politically advantageous to an extent, also brings with it inherent risks: “not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities of among Asians, but it also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogenous group, that implies that we are ‘all alike’ and conform to ‘types’” (*Heterogeneity* 30). It is thus vitally important, Lowe explains, to consider the identity of “Asian American” as based in “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” (*Heterogeneity* 28).

Like the designation “Asian American,” the hashtag and video “#AsiatiquesDeFrance” encourages solidarity along racial lines in response to the homogenizing force of anti-Asian

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<sup>223</sup> Three Canadian universities offer an undergraduate minor in “Asian Canadian Studies”: Simon Fraser University since the 2000s, University of Toronto since 2013, and University of British Columbia in 2014. The academic association “Asian Canadian Studies” began in 2013 (Pon et al. 11).

<sup>224</sup> There has also been concern that “multiculturalism,” which is an official policy in Canada and an unofficial principle in the United States, gives the impression that discrimination and racism do not exist in these countries, which is obviously not the case (Pon et al. 12). The “model minority” myth—which posits Asian migrants as having particular characteristics that have enabled them to assimilate more successfully than their fellow migrants of other backgrounds—is another potential stumbling block when discussing the “success” of the Vietnamese in adapting to their adopted nations.

racism. However, the political motives behind “#AsiatiquesDeFrance” differ considerably from its American counterpart. The video does not, for instance, highlight the diversity of national and ethnic backgrounds of the participants, but the variety of professions they exercise as exemplary members of the French body politic. Rather than emphasize the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” of their national and ethnic identities, as Lowe suggests, the participants in the video demonstrate their heterogeneity *as French citizens*. In a way, the participants in the video are lobbying to be generalized, not as Asian, but as French, thus calling attention to the failure of the republican ideal of a “colorblind” society in which every French citizen benefits from the same universal rights.

In short, the recent profusion of popular aesthetic representations *of and by* “Asians of France” that deal explicitly with issues of cultural assimilation, racial othering, and racism brings up two important points. First, these works speak to the very real harm caused by racial discrimination, even if the creators of these works still adhere to French universalism by claiming their rightful place as citizens of the nation. Indeed, creative works by Asians of France often explore such experiences of rejection along racial lines in spite of their own commitment to French nationality, language, and culture. Second, the turn to the aesthetic through a variety of digital media by these artists and thinkers to make such political statements regarding their own racial impediments to social inclusion indicates the important role that digital aesthetic forms can play in recognizing and subverting harmful anti-Asian stereotypes.

In spite of these collective actions, both in the form of in-person and online protests, against anti-Asian racism and violence, as well as increased conversation on race, aesthetics, and digital media in France in general, there continues to be little recent academic discussion among French and American scholars of these topics as regards the particularities of racism against

people of Asian descent. Rather, perhaps because there is no institutional equivalent in France to “Asian American Studies,” extant studies on this topic tend to presume a universality of racism by neglecting to address the specific forms confronted by individuals of shared Asian heritage, if diverse individual backgrounds, in France. If anything, it is all the more crucial to consider race with regard to individuals visibly recognizable as Asian, as racism against such groups is often considered tacitly permissible even as it is stigmatized for others.

In this dissertation, I have focused on the diasporic Vietnamese in particular, and the ways the colonial legacy has shaped their experience of contemporary France. I believe this project will be helpful for dismantling anti-Asian racism overall since many racial stereotypes find their source in colonial-era ideologies of race. However, I also hope to spur further consideration of collective solidarity among “Asians of France” in the face of anti-Asian racism, and how aesthetics and digital media converge to create expedient political tools as well as poignant artistic statements that exemplify the changing character of the postcolonial in France today. Furthermore, given the possibilities for global interaction that digital media provide, such a study could explore the ways underrepresented groups in France interact with other racialized minority groups around the world, thus advancing discussions of minor transnational import.

These questions will remain salient especially as it does not appear that anti-Asian racism is diminishing anytime soon. In January 2020, a regional French newspaper, *Le Courrier picard*, described the threat of the “COVID-19” pandemic as an “Alerte jaune”—evoking “le péril jaune,” or the colonial-era fear of Asian immigration to France—alongside a photograph of an Asian woman wearing a face mask (Giuffrida and Willsher). The headline was roundly condemned on social media, leading the newspaper to apologize publicly, but this was but one instance of anti-Asian racism that employed degrading references to colonial racial ideologies

accompanied by images of Asian people reported during the outbreak. Nor were such occurrences limited to France; the hashtag “#JeNeSuisPasUnVirus,” which was launched by an anonymous woman of Asian descent to counter pandemic-related discrimination, was taken up and translated the world over.

As the virus rages on and “social distancing” isolates us from one another, such dehumanizing ways of thinking have the potential to go “viral” themselves for lack of in-person interactions that can humanize those whom we fear as other. At the same time, however, it is also through digital means, rather than at the family table or the restaurant, where we have begun meeting each other to enjoy collective conviviality. It is in these digital interstices, between antagonism and sociability, that the future of aesthetic creation by postcolonial artists and writers might reside.



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