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Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature

Leslie Barnes

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VIETNAM AND THE
COLONIAL CONDITION OF
FRENCH LITERATURE

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VIETNAM *and the*
COLONIAL CONDITION *of*
FRENCH LITERATURE

LESLIE BARNES

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Introduction

[I]t is arguable that dominant European movements . . . may themselves, in fact, be more indebted to the cultural effects of the material practice of colonization and its aftermath than is usually acknowledged. In fact, the history of literary and critical movements in the twentieth century is, as one might expect, deeply determined by an interaction with imperialism.

—Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin¹

In an interview with Xavière Gauthier in 1974 Marguerite Duras spoke briefly of her childhood in colonial Indochina and of her attempts, once in France, to separate herself permanently from childhood and the native land to which she would never return. She then conceded: “But the Mekong still remained somewhere. This Mekong next to which I slept, played, lived for ten years of my life, it stayed with me. Then when I say, ‘What is that murmuring? . . .,’ it’s the Mekong speaking.”² Duras was born near Saigon in 1914 and lived primarily in the southern regions of French Indochina, including Sadec, Vinh Long, and Prey Nop, until her definitive departure for Paris in 1933. And yet, though a considerable amount of critical work has been devoted to examining the sexual, psychic, and ideological significance of these sites as they appear in Duras’s *œuvre*, there is still much to be learned about the ways in which this symbolic Mekong River may have conditioned her fiction. In other words, Duras criticism has yet to account fully for the formal influence of the colonial experience on the development of her writing. Moreover, this oversight is representative of a larger aporia in

historical studies of twentieth-century French literature and in critical overviews of contemporary literary production in France.

Informed by the notion that neither cultural identity nor cultural production can be given as pure or homogeneous, and seeking to develop a new discourse on the French literary canon that makes its cultural heterogeneity explicit, this book examines an aspect of modern French literature that has been overlooked in previous accounts: the relationship between the colonies — their cultures, languages, and people — and formal shifts in French literary production. And if I evoke Duras's comment to begin my discussion, it is because this book addresses the question by focusing on the specific example Vietnam offers. In the terms of Duras's metaphor, my aim is to listen for the murmur of the Mekong in twentieth- and twenty-first-century French literature. Through close analyses of works by André Malraux, Marguerite Duras, and Linda Lê, I examine the specific relationship between these authors' lived experience of colonial Indochina or postcolonial Vietnam and their subsequent literary creation.³ Based on these analyses, I argue that colonial contact in Vietnam significantly altered the development of the modern French novel. Indeed, despite the stylistic and thematic differences that distinguish Malraux, Duras, and Lê, each author's literary innovation is intimately connected to that author's position between, and experience of, France on the one hand and Vietnam on the other.

Beginning in 1926 with Malraux's publication of *La Tentation de l'Occident* (*The Temptation of the West*) and continuing through Lê's collection of literary essays published in 2009, *Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau* (To the depths of the unknown to find something new), the works examined here correspond to three major currents found in French literature after Marcel Proust. Malraux's most acclaimed literary production takes place in the 1930s and not only participates in the exotic literary tradition then flourishing in France but also inaugurates the existentialist novel, which is subsequently honed by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Duras, whose experimental narratives in the 1950s and 1960s led many to associate her with the *nouveau roman*, develops in her later work a linguistic complexity that has often been

linked to Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. Finally, Lê writes diasporic trauma narratives that testify not only to a specific mode of postcolonial exile but also, and perhaps more important, to the author's own preoccupation with the shifting relations among language, form, and representation. In both her novels and literary essays, which function simultaneously as interrogations of the specificity of literature as such and as examinations of the self in postcolonial France, Lê seeks to rethink the very possibility of literary expression at the dawn of the twenty-first century. All three authors occupy limit-positions within twentieth-century and contemporary French literature, transitioning the novel, as Malraux did, from exoticism to literary existentialism, or, as is the case with Lê, mediating among the various frontiers that mark the contemporary moment: French and francophone, the particular and the universal, and the past and future of literary production in French.

Offering an image of the French novel as shaped by the colonial project, this book does not address the ideological implications of representing Vietnam in metropolitan literature. Instead, through an emphasis on linguistic, metaphysical, and textual border crossings, and on negotiations with the experience of colonialism within and beyond the national space, it asks how intercultural contact in Vietnam has been constitutive of this literature. Colonialism is understood here to be a "complex process of transculturation whereby the metropolitan, in a disruption of the entropic logic of globalization, is itself altered, denatured, and sent back in often unrecognizable forms."⁴ With this definition of colonialism in mind, I examine these unrecognizable forms in the projects of Malraux, Duras, and Lê. My readings of these authors show that the formal innovations of the existentialist novel, the post-war experimental novel, and the contemporary immigrant narrative all have France's colonial relationship to Vietnam as one of their essential historical conditions. Further, bridging the gap between a metropolitan and a nonmetropolitan focus, and between formal/aesthetic and socio-political frameworks, each chapter implicitly questions what is meant by "French" and "francophone" throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The book demonstrates, through a specific focus

on Vietnam, how these categories have coexisted throughout (literary) history and, by extension, reveals the extent to which they are “no longer, and perhaps never were, watertight.”⁵

The point of departure for this project was a simple observation: even the most recent histories of modern French literature fail to interrogate fully the potential influence of colonialism on shifts in hexagonal literary production. While scholars of francophone postcolonial studies have been working for decades to situate France within a global context, scholars of metropolitan French studies have been slower to account for its transnational dimensions. Given the intertwined political, economic, and cultural histories of France and its former colonies, a number of connections could plausibly be drawn among different French literary movements and France’s colonial project. And yet most accounts, jettisoning more than a century of transcultural exchange offered by the French civilizing mission in Asia, Africa, and the Americas as well as the multiethnic influences on contemporary French cultural production, tend to present French literature as a culturally homogeneous national tradition looking inward for creative inspiration. In Michel Prigent’s comprehensive *Histoire de la France littéraire*, for example, Patrick Berthier and Michel Jarrety discuss the evolution of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literary creation in terms of literature’s relation to “other cultural spaces,” notably painting, music, the cinema, literary criticism, and the history of ideas.⁶ They neglect, however, to take into consideration literature’s relation to the physical spaces of other cultures. For his part, Prigent alludes to the myriad conflicts, critics, and characters that have historically come together to produce the unique and limitless theater of French literary production, but he too leaves very little room for the colonies on France’s literary stage.⁷

This is not to suggest that colonialism has been ignored in literary criticism in France.⁸ And yet French literary studies of Indochina, for example, generally tend to avoid any examination of the psychic, sociopolitical, or cultural implications of the French colonial project and instead focus on Indochina as a theme or object of representation in metropolitan literature. One such study is Henri Copin’s *L’Indochine*

*dans la littérature française des années vingt à 1954: Exotisme et altérité.*⁹ In addition to providing a useful investigation of exoticism and colonial literature, this book documents the creative works inspired by Indochina and assesses twentieth-century representations of the cohabitation of old Annam, French colonial society, and the future Vietnam that was taking shape between the 1920s and 1950s. But Copin figures literature as an approximate reproduction of a given civilization at a given point in time and thus means his project to serve as a commentary on French civilization through its specific representations of Indochina.¹⁰ As Copin's study demonstrates, while significant attempts have been made to understand the exploitation of colonial and exotic themes in modern French literature, these inquiries have been restricted to a focus on how European authors conceive of and represent the colonial Other, not how contact with this Other might have affected metropolitan literary production.

While the same is not true in anglophone criticism, where franco-phone postcolonial methodologies have more currency, the publication of Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman's *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* nevertheless marks an important shift away from Franco-centric readings. Seeking to challenge the traditional conception of a geographic, political, and linguistic unity behind such readings and to provide "a global approach to literary history," the volume's contributors address the patterns of mutual influence between the colonies and metropolitan France and explore the potentially decisive impact of the former on the literary production of the latter.¹¹ In the process, the authors articulate new ways of reading French literature as a product not of homogeneous, monolingual, and inward-looking cultural practices but of intersecting and interdependent countries, cultures, and languages. Rather than contest the claim subtending French literary histories that the great writer, the one worth including in the narrative, is the writer in whose work we find an expression of *l'esprit français*, the essays in McDonald and Suleiman's collection demonstrate that both *l'esprit français* and the literature reflecting it have been determined historically by contact with the outside world.

The current study continues this critical gesture by exploring the textual traces of a Vietnamese colonial experience in modern French literature. As such, it also contributes to an existing body of francophone postcolonial criticism focused on Indochina/Vietnam. Beginning with Jack Yeager's seminal study *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism*, a number of scholars of francophone postcolonial literature have concentrated on the collision between Vietnamese culture and the French language in twentieth-century indigenous literary production. Yeager notes in his introduction that despite the many volumes devoted to understanding the French, and later the American, involvement in Vietnam, very little attention has been paid to the effect this involvement had on Vietnamese modes of literary expression.¹² After presenting an overview of Vietnamese history and literary culture, and tracing the impact of the introduction of the French language in Vietnam, Yeager explores the historical importance of exposure to French literary forms in the colony and documents the emergence of a hybrid genre of "Vietnamese Francophone literature." Yeager's project is to understand how the linguistic and cultural clashes inherent in the Vietnamese experience of colonialism were translated into the literature published by Vietnamese French-speaking authors in the twentieth century. As his is the first study of this kind, Yeager's primary goal is to define the general contours of the field and thus lay the foundation for subsequent critical interrogations.

Nathalie Nguyen and Karl Britto, both seeking to build on Yeager's groundwork, engage more closely with the textual practices displayed in works by a range of Vietnamese francophone authors, including Nguyen Phan Long, Pham Van Ky, Ly Thu Ho, and Pham Duy Khiem.¹³ Nguyen, arguing that Vietnamese francophone literature is one of encounters, explores the contradictory impulses often informing the creation of individual literary works. Like Yeager, she sees these works as hybrid creations, products of both classical Vietnamese literature, with its emphasis on Confucian values and florid style, and the new, stylistically succinct genres discovered in the increasingly available body of French literature in translation. Nguyen sheds new light on these hybrid

texts by examining the ways in which they manifest postcolonial concerns, such as displacement or self-image, and by considering how these manifestations differ according to gender. For his part, Britto focuses his study on the effects of the colonial education system in Indochina, insisting on the liminal subject positions it created for members of the Vietnamese elite. Alienated from both the majority of their countrymen, who were not given a French education, and from the French, who firmly enforced the cultural glass ceiling that precluded successful assimilation — however problematic or illusory such an ideal may have been — French-educated Vietnamese authors employed specific techniques to represent their hybrid identities. Britto examines these techniques in detail, highlighting the tension and angst that accompanied the intercultural subject's forced navigation among multiple, and often conflicting, allegiances. Yeager, Nguyen, and Britto have all made vital contributions to the larger field of francophone studies by providing careful investigations of Vietnamese francophone literature, a body of literature that, in contrast to its African or Caribbean counterparts, has generally received little attention from scholars.

Other francophone postcolonial critics have contributed to our understanding of the literary imbrication of France and Vietnam by concentrating on the dominant ideological assumptions underlying twentieth-century French cultural representations of Indochina. For interrogations of this nature, one turns to Panivong Norindr and Marie-Paule Ha, two scholars who focus their critical lenses on what Norindr calls the *phantasmatic* creation of “Indochina” as “an elaborate fiction,” and who both include chapters on Malraux and Duras in their studies.¹⁴ Norindr draws on postcolonial and poststructuralist theory to lay bare the mythical constructions of Indochina in the French imaginary. Citing Michel de Certeau's *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, he examines the emergence of Indochina “as a blank space on which Western desire is written.”¹⁵ And in its breadth of coverage — treating French colonial architecture and education, literary and cinematic representations, the colonial exposition of 1931, and the Surrealist counter-exposition of the same year — Norindr's project offers a remarkable look at the myriad forms

that this desire has taken. With concerns that echo those of Norindr, Ha examines the cultural codes that frame narrative engagements with Asia in the writings of Victor Segalen, Malraux, Duras, and Roland Barthes. Combining Edward Said's *Orientalism* with Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*, Ha provides what she calls an "off-center" reading of these authors, one that focuses on the details often ignored — landscapes, minor characters, and decor, for example — and seeks to "re-establish the dialogic relations between the metropolitan and colonial worlds."¹⁶

The participation of both Norindr and Ha in the ongoing critical conversation about Western discursive constructions of the East has greatly influenced my own work, which I hope will complement and expand the scope of the above-mentioned studies.¹⁷ Where the works of Yeager, Britto, and Nguyen have explored the specificities of Vietnamese literary production in French, and the analyses of Norindr and Ha have concentrated on representations of Indochina, the current study endeavors to account for the multidirectional nature of intercultural exchange in a way that these previous works have not. I examine the ways in which the literary innovation of Malraux, Duras, and Lê was itself transformed by the political, linguistic, and psychic stamps of the French colony and of metropolitan France. Though each of the authors examined here spent a relatively important amount of time in what was known until 1954 as colonial Indochina, their experiences there varied significantly. Thus, while the title of this book invokes "the colonial condition," it is perhaps more accurate to speak of conditions in the plural. Indeed, the lived experiences of Malraux, Duras, and Lê in Vietnam, which span a period from 1914 to 1977 and which I briefly outline later, were shaped not only by divergent class positions and varying levels of political and social awareness but also by the rapidly changing colonial and postcolonial realities in both Asia and Europe.

To assess the broader significance of the colonial conditions giving rise to these three projects, I adopt a method that combines the concern for context displayed in New Historicist criticism with the desire to maintain a certain degree of textual autonomy in more formalist

approaches. I proceed from the conviction that every literary work is rooted in a context, be it social, cultural, political, or all of the above, and is largely conditioned by the particularities of this context. My readings thus require some familiarity with the history of French colonialism in Southeast Asia and with certain aspects of Vietnamese culture, and I include relevant detail where necessary, creating historically and culturally situated analyses. But because the literary text as a work of art possesses a degree of integrity that is irreducible to its contextual origins, just as it is irreducible to authorial intentions, I also remain attentive to the unpredictable, often counter-intuitive internal logic of a given text. Just as my goal is to situate the works of Malraux, Duras, and Lê at the intersection of France and Vietnam, I also endeavor to situate my own investigation at the intersection of these methodological practices.

In an attempt to respect the multiple conditions experienced in twentieth-century Vietnam, as well as the stylistic heterogeneity of the subjects included in this study, I allow no singular theoretical framework to inform my readings. The different questions posed by the author, the historical context, and the work itself independent of both require that I adjust my reading strategies accordingly. If, as Said has argued, Orientalist representations employ a “discursive consistency,” then my choice of a methodological inconsistency is hardly an accidental one.¹⁸ On the contrary, while this project has a deliberate discursive goal, and while it is itself shaped by the specific debates and intellectual norms common within contemporary francophone studies, I have sought at all junctures to question my assumptions about Vietnamese culture and French literary production in a way that is free of metropolitan (French studies) or postcolonial (francophone studies) biases. In other words, I have worked consistently to remain “responsive to the material and not to a doctrinal preconception.”¹⁹ The point is not to argue for an Asian or specifically Vietnamese essence at the heart of modern French literature, since adopting such an essentialist position would be committing the same orientalizing gesture Said has cautioned against. Rather, in privileging the cultural heterogeneity behind twentieth-century and contemporary French literary production, this project not only echoes

Said's refutation of cultural monolithism; illustrative in nature, it also suggests a new framework for considering the traces of other colonial spaces in French literature.

Finally, reading Malraux and Duras, two canonical twentieth-century French authors, in dialogue with Lê, a contemporary immigrant author who refuses to be pigeonholed as such, requires that we reflect critically on the labels assigned to these authors (e.g., canonical, immigrant) and on the cultural capital fixed to such labels. How is our narrative of the twentieth-century canon altered by reading Malraux and Duras as (post) colonial authors? What is to be gained from focusing on how the work that emerged from their respective colonial experiences articulates various thematic and linguistic tensions and intersects with the assumptions of French imperialism? In other words, how did these colonial conditions shape their work, and how have these diverse dynamics thus shaped the French canon? On the other hand, how might we account for the universalist aspirations of an ethnically Vietnamese author without lapsing into a metropolitan assimilationist agenda? How might Lê's representations of the postcolonial immigrant experience allow for a broader reflection on literary expression in French that would encompass both "metropolitan" and "francophone"? These questions have shaped the larger thematic concerns of this study, which in turn seeks to question the ways in which these authors have been and continue to be received, classified, and circulated within the domain of French-language literary production. Indeed, the project as a whole raises questions about the processes of categorization and exclusion that inform canon formation and that reinforce the hierarchical relation established when we juxtapose French and francophone literatures.

Canon Formation in France

The twin processes of categorization and exclusion, especially when combined with judgments of literary value, necessarily evoke questions of canonicity. Though the creation, dissemination, and contestation of the literary canon has not preoccupied French intellectuals as it has their anglophone counterparts, there nevertheless exists a virtual Pantheon

of preeminent French authors and literary texts. These texts — one thinks of Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* — satisfy the requirements of canonization. They give voice to a particular time and culture while also addressing what is universal and enduring; they offer a stylistic model for future writers while demonstrating their inimitability.²⁰ Moreover, the production of this cultural elite has been the subject of much literary and sociological study, most notably in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.²¹ Indeed, while anglophone energy has been directed toward debating possible revisions of the canon, research in France has focused more on assessing questions of the literary field and the institutional practices that surround it. As such, the question of canonicity in France is perhaps best understood as a multifaceted process of consecration by which the various institutional practices confer aesthetic, symbolic, and, inevitably, economic value onto the work of literature. These practices, while distinct, overlap and often mutually inform one another. And yet, each plays a unique role in determining which literary works are to be transmitted, however ephemeral this transmission may ultimately be, and which are not.²² Each thus contributes to rendering sacred a given literary text within the secular space of the French reading public, and to entrusting certain works of literature with the responsibility of upholding the French literary patrimony.

The institutional practices at work in the assignment of literary value in France can be divided into roughly three domains: the educational system, the media, and the literary field itself. These domains engage in different activities, employ different registers, interpellate different sections of the population, and are motivated by different concerns.²³ Consequently, though they form an interconnected system of individuals who often wear more than one hat (writers who teach literature, editors who also write, etc.), these institutions produce significantly different versions of the French canon. To cite a recent example, 2010 saw Michel Houellebecq awarded the Prix Goncourt for *La Carte et le territoire* (*The Map and the Territory*), while Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) and *Oh les beaux jours* (*Happy Days*) appeared on the

annual *agrégation* list in French literature. Meanwhile, Marc Levy, who has regularly topped *Le Figaro*'s list of best-sellers since his first novel in 2002, *Et si c'était vrai* (*If Only It Were True*), sold over 1,500,000 copies of *Le Voleur d'ombres* (*The Shadow Thief*). The assessments involved in the construction of these competing canons — annual prizes, examination programs, and “top ten” lists — offer alternately synchronic and diachronic views of French literary excellence. At the same time, however, they question both the idea of excellence upholding the canon and the authority of any one canon posited over another. Indeed, as James Hullbert has noted, “the very moment that we speak of canon formation, we treat the canon as something that is historically determined and thus in a sense not a simple recognition of eternal ‘value.’”²⁴ Finally, the institutional practices that form the context in which a given work of literature has been received, circulated, and valued over the course of the twentieth century highlight the tensions subtending literary production in modern France between economic and aesthetic value, between inclusion and exclusion, between French and francophone.

Of these spheres of influence, the oldest and most deeply entrenched is the educational system. Since 1881 when Jules Ferry, the minister of public instruction, mandated free, secular education for all French children, the modern French educational system has set as its goal the creation of republican citizens. For Ferry, universal education was the ideal means of producing a nation of rational, law-abiding individuals who shared a set of cultural values. Though his political goals concerned the survival of the Third Republic, the larger ideological goals of Ferry's centralized educational program were to establish and propagate a collective French identity. An essential component of this collective identity was, and still is, the nation's literary tradition. Secondary and tertiary curricula in France, and in particular, the uniquely French *agrégation* competition, have long been responsible for inculcating future generations with an appreciation of French literature. The *agrégation* is a prestigious and highly competitive civil service examination through which high school instructors are recruited. The exam, which consists of a written portion and an oral *explication*, dictates not only which authors and texts are to

be studied but also, by assigning specific exercises that determine the parameters of interpretation, *how* they are to be studied.²⁵

Including a text in the program of the French *agrégation* thus confers a certain linguistic status, difficulty, and cultural capital upon that text, since the kind of reading sanctioned focuses primarily on the work's formal and stylistic components rather than on its thematic concerns or the ideas behind it. The tradition of the *agrégation* has served to legitimize—or confirm the already established legitimacy of—a corpus of French literature in the university.²⁶ This scholarly canon is organized by century and is reserved for metropolitan authors. When Aimé Césaire's poetry appeared on the list in 2010 and 2011, for example, it was listed under Comparative Literature, not French Literature. And if Rousseau and Beckett figure regularly on the French exam, it is not for their distinctly Swiss or Irish characteristics but because they have been fully assimilated by the French tradition. Living writers are not included, and women authors are a rarity, though Marguerite de Navarre and Madame de Sévigné have both been studied in recent years. Among the twentieth-century authors consecrated over the last few decades, we find Beckett, Julien Gracq, Georges Bernanos, Malraux, and Duras. Indeed, Malraux's *La Condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*) appeared on the program in modern French letters in 1995, a first for Malraux, and in 2006 candidates were asked to prepare three of Duras's works: *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*), *Le Vice-Consul* (*The Vice Consul*), and *India Song*. Moreover, according to Alain Viala, who has compared the texts and exercises given on the annual programs to subsequent doctoral thesis titles and publications in France, the canon of the *agrégation* has a marked influence over research practices in the French academy.²⁷ This may partially explain the continued research interest in Malraux the novelist, despite the fact that he is largely remembered by the French as an activist and a statesman.

Popular interest in Malraux and Duras, however, has less to do with their appearance on the *agrégation* reading list than it does with the advent and rapid expansion of the public sphere of the media. The mass media's attention to and valorization of French literature is considerable.

In addition to literary magazines, most French publications include sections devoted to culture, and specifically literature, and magazines like *Le Figaro*, for example, publish annual best-seller lists. These lists offer their own versions of the French canon and tend to feature heavily the popular, romance, and detective fiction writers. Further, they not only consecrate value according to market performance, but they perpetuate that performance insofar as they lead to an increase in visibility for the laureates and influence subsequent consumer choices. Indeed, since the 1960s, literature has emerged as an economic market where success is measured largely in terms of public accessibility (i.e., sales) rather than in relation to great works of the past.²⁸ Other mass media activities designed to bring literature to the public include the annual organization of well-publicized literary festivals, televised documentaries about celebrated authors, and interviews with contemporary writers on radio, internet, and primetime television programs. The most famous of these is Bernard Pivot's *Apostrophes*, which aired every Friday evening on France 2 from 1975 to 1990 and which attracted between 5 and 6 million viewers weekly. An institution in itself, one that Régis Debray publicly denounced in 1982 for its sway over the French publishing industry, *Apostrophes* assembled yet another list of canonical French authors through interviews and panel discussions: Malraux, Duras, Sartre, Camus, Marguerite Yourcenar, Julien Green, and Romain Gary, to name a few. Appearance on the show promised a boost in sales, which prompted much lamentation from the publishing industry when Pivot stepped down after fifteen years.²⁹ The industry's response to Pivot's decision speaks volumes about the market realities that affect what Bourdieu named the "autonomy" of the literary field, and indeed, few authors today can afford to evade such publicized events.³⁰

The mass-mediatization of literature, part of a more general industrialization of cultural production, was one of the most salient developments of the twentieth century, one that inevitably altered the way value is assigned within the literary institution itself. Nowhere is this more evident, perhaps, than in the case offered by the Prix Goncourt. Every year the French publishing industry celebrates its most innovative literary

production by bestowing a series of culturally, and sometimes financially, lucrative prizes. These typically accompany the annual *rentrée littéraire*, or the two-month period between the end of August and the beginning of November during which France witnesses a surge in literary publications. The most famous of French literary prizes, the Goncourt was established in 1903 to encourage original literary production by young French authors. The prize is awarded by the members of the Académie Goncourt, which was created by Edmond de Goncourt in 1882, and is decided by vote every fall at the famous Drouant restaurant in Paris. The creation of the prize, and in fact of the Académie, is part of a larger legacy of struggles for control over the right to define literary legitimacy in the French context. Founded in reaction against the Académie Française, and in particular the latter's discrimination against the genre of the novel, the Goncourt was originally designed to defend literary values from market forces and to guide French readers in the refinement of their literary tastes through peer selection. In other words, the Goncourt is a closed system in which authors award prizes to other authors. As Sylvie Ducas explains, however, the lofty ideal behind the prize was soon beset by a number of difficulties. From its struggles to reconcile the expectations of the public with its goals of recognizing literary excellence to its acquiescence to editorial pressures to the academy's inability to overcome its attachment to traditional literary forms in the face of avant-gardism, the legitimacy of the Goncourt has been threatened at almost every turn.³¹ Moreover, it has become one of the most powerful generators of media spectacle, with crowds and television cameras camped eagerly outside the Drouant every year at the moment of its announcement. And, like both the best-seller list and the televised interview, the Goncourt now acts, in Ducas's words, as "the life blood of the French publishing industry," ensuring that books donned with the famous red label will not wither on the shelves of Parisian bookstores.³²

While the increasing influence of the media in the discernment of literary value has weakened the autonomy of the field of contemporary literary production, literary prizes, and in particular the Goncourt,

remain unparalleled in their ability to shape French literary tastes. The notion of literary tastes evokes Bourdieu's discussion of "distinction," not necessarily in terms of his analyses of class, a treatment of which is beyond the scope of the current study, but to the extent that one of Bourdieu's tasks in this work is to challenge the assumption that taste is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Indeed, tastes are created, shaped, and reinforced through the institutional practices earlier discussed. Moreover, literary tastes in the French context in particular have historically served as key signifiers of a national identity. Consequently, the establishment and regulation of the national literary canon(s) are acts through which the nation expresses its shared taste in literature and thus reinforces its collectivity. Canon formation involves entrusting certain works of literature with not only the French literary patrimony but with nothing less than the French national identity. In twentieth-century France this identity faced a number of threats, including the Occupation, the establishment of the European Union, and the decline of France's cultural capital (its language and literature) at home and abroad. The traces of these historical affronts to French identity still inform French political discourse and cultural practice. Further, the rise of the French colonial empire and its attendant calls to embrace *la plus grande France* must also be included in this list of threats to the French identity insofar as colonialism expanded the conceptual parameters of "Frenchness" to include Africans, Asians, Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

Within the field of literature then, a refusal to recognize the colonial elements of otherwise canonical twentieth-century French authors — Malraux and Duras, for example — serves to reinforce French identity through the accumulation of cultural capital. The discussion of literature in relation to other French and European cultural spheres would, for Bourdieu, be a kind of perpetuation of symbolic violence, one that imposes a culturally homogeneous view of French literature through the deliberate exclusion of the transnational elements informing — to whatever degree — its production. Both Malraux and Duras have been consecrated by France's institutional practices, with the exception of the best-seller list, which neither ever topped. Both have also been

elected to the elite group of French authors whose works are anthologized in the Pléiade editions, yet another means by which the literary institution confers symbolic value on its canonical authors. But as the analyses that follow demonstrate, neither author's critical reception has fully accounted for the colonial conditions out of which these literary projects emerged. Indeed, if the works of Malraux and Duras have been recognized as canonical, it is not for their distinctly extra-metropolitan qualities, a fact that returns us to the question of what is included and excluded in the creation of "French literature" as a historical category.

Canon formation is inherently a process of exclusion, in François Cusset's words, "a way to shut out ideas and unfamiliar forms considered as threats to the established order."³³ The Goncourt academy's general resistance to avant-gardism offers a salient example of such exclusion. And while a host of metropolitan authors and texts deemed too experimental, too popular, or too contemporary are cast aside by the various institutions that confer symbolic value, the exclusion Cusset identifies here also refers to a tendency to confine lauded authors to certain categories: Malraux the resistance fighter and proto-existentialist, for example, or Duras the *nouveau romancier* and writer of feminine desire. Duras's work, like that of many first- and second-generation francophone authors, articulates an assault on imperial policy and the values upholding it, including the "genius" of the French language. But these multicultural — *métis* — elements have been almost entirely sidelined in the assimilation of Duras's work to the canon. Finally, exclusion is enacted in the systematic institutional marginalization of francophone authors. Though the crowning of Marie NDiaye (Goncourt, 2009), Dany Laferrière (Prix Médicis, 2009), and Linda Lê (Prix Wepler, 2010) in recent years suggests institutional and commercial recognition of France's mixed-race, overseas, and immigrant authors, the children of France's former colonies are still generally refused entry into the French pantheon of literary excellence. Though in recent years increased numbers of French volumes have broached the subject of postcolonial studies in France, secondary and tertiary curricula, despite the relative autonomy enjoyed by the university in particular in determining course material,

have been slow to incorporate francophone content in the classroom.³⁴ This perpetuates not only the relative ignorance of francophone literature in France but also the perception that this literature does not contribute to the French national identity, the definition of which has yet to fully incorporate the multicultural reality of the country and its modern history.

“Littérature-monde” and the Institutions of Francophonie

Such is not the case in the context of anglophone academia, however, where francophone postcolonial studies has gained steady ground over the past few decades, and where a francophone canon has emerged, both in the university classroom and in the publishing industry. In fact, by some accounts, francophone studies in the United States has kept French departments afloat in a time of sharply declining enrollment. In stark contrast to France, where francophone studies maintains a tenuous position, trends in the United States over the last three decades have indicated a significant, if gradual, shift toward the francophone in teaching, research, and hiring practices. Francophone studies as an anglophone academic discipline, however, is not to be confused with Francophonie, the linguistico-political institution represented by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), though obvious parallels exist. Francophonie has from its inception in the late nineteenth century carried two distinct though related meanings: the first is sociolinguistic, referring to those peoples who share French as a language, while the second is geographic, indicating the countries where French is spoken. This broader perspective would leave room for the francophonie of countries like Belgium and Switzerland, which generally fall outside the conceptual parameters of the term as it is used within postcolonial critical discussions. For francophonie gained a new, political connotation in the years following decolonization, when it was first revived by francophone politicians in the former colonies to address their shared sociocultural situations, and then reappropriated by the French and recast into the center-margin (French-francophone) institutional hierarchy it now inhabits. This same hierarchy dominates

the field of literary production and of canon formation in both France and the anglophone world, and the rise of francophone literature in the latter context reflects the influence of anglophone postcolonial studies, and in particular the political project of recognizing the communities and narrative practices that have been excluded by the national tradition. The “reshaping of Frenchness” throughout anglophone academia has meant the construction of a new canon, free from the metropolitan biases of French studies, and thus giving wider recognition to women, contemporary, and francophone authors.³⁵

Given the historical instability of francophonie as a category and the contradictions that complicate current usage of the descriptive label “francophone,” however, francophone studies have also been the subject of debate for decades. Indeed, the same scholars who have seen francophone studies as a necessary means to question the monoculturalism predominant in French studies have also been the first to interrogate its limitations.³⁶ Among the various issues troubling the label “francophone” is the fact that it is so often employed in contradistinction to “French,” a usage that reinforces the dominant position of metropolitan French literature and paradoxically ensures francophonie’s own ongoing marginalization. Further, in separating French and its Other, it perpetuates “an illusory homogeneity in camps on either side of the divide.”³⁷ Indeed, juxtaposing French and francophone continues the erroneous assumption that metropolitan literature is culturally and linguistically uniform. In the same way, it imposes a homogeneity on authors classified as francophone, uniting under the same category figures who come from very different historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions: NDiaye, an author of Franco-Senegalese origins who was born and raised in France; Laferrière, a Haitian writer who has lived between Montréal, New York, and Miami since the 1970s; and Lê, a Vietnamese author who immigrated to France at the age of fourteen. How do these authors align with Michel Tremblay, for example, a white, homosexual author from working-class Quebec, who is also often classified as francophone? To present these four authors together without acknowledging the limitations of such a critical gesture is to rely on

a label that, in Roger Little's rather severe assessment, is "etymologically absurd, semantically confused (covering several distinct realities), and worst of all divisive."³⁸ Essential to the project of resisting French monoculturalism, the term nevertheless operates by another form of exclusion, whereby important distinctions are concealed in the promotion of a presumed shared problematic. Indeed, the right to difference at times borders on the imperative. Finally, it inevitably ghettoizes these authors, a reality rendered spatially in the organization of the Gibert Joseph bookstore in Paris, where francophone literature is confined to a few jumbled bookshelves in a remote corner on one of the upper levels.

In March 2007, forty-four francophone authors proposed a solution to the paradoxes and pitfalls vexing francophonie by coining a new term that would, in their view, account for the heterogeneity of contemporary literary production in French, both within and beyond the metropolitan space, in a way that francophonie could not. Drawing strength from the 2006 prize season, which saw the crowning of four non-Franco-French authors, the signatories of the "Manifeste des 44" claimed to be witnessing the "Copernican Revolution" of French literary production, a decentering that would replace francophonie with a notion of world literature in French: "the center, so the fall prizes tell us, is now everywhere, at the four corners of the world. End of Francophonie. And birth of a world literature in French."³⁹ For Dominic Thomas, the rejection of francophonie has more to do with the sociopolitical realities of francophonie than with francophone studies.⁴⁰ And yet, aside from the vociferous denunciation of Abdou Diouf, the president of the OIF who accused the signatories of an alarming misinterpretation of the term, much of the debate surrounding the manifesto has taken place in anglophone academic circles.⁴¹ The subject of multiple conferences, round table discussions, and journal volumes, the manifesto has been applauded for its efforts to articulate the contemporary diversity of French writing and undo the hierarchy of French and francophone. Conversely, it has been taken to task for its bravado, its elitism, its lack of clarity, and its ultimate reinforcement of the same biases and hierarchies it claims to overthrow. Moreover, it has raised questions as to whether

this “end” of francophonie does not also spell the end of postcolonial studies and a return to (metropolitan-based) business as usual.⁴²

Francophonie is not dead, however, and neither is the discipline of francophone studies. The manifesto neither witnessed nor accomplished the decentering of the French literary institution, despite its claims and the increasing autonomy of other publishing spaces in North America and elsewhere. But by suggesting that French is a world literature, by challenging the category of francophonie, and by extension putting pressure on the center/margin distinction essential to the critical concerns of francophone studies, the manifesto encourages us to reexamine this center. It urges us to accept the challenge of what Dominick LaCapra has called the postcolonial turn in French studies by exploring the ways in which metropolitan France as a site of cultural production is historically enmeshed with its francophone Others.⁴³ Indeed, the question is not whether the center needs to be decentered, but rather, how the center might already reveal its own “post-national status” in the very texts it puts forward as its literary patrimony.⁴⁴ And as I endeavor to demonstrate in this book, colonialism is among the central components of this history, this identity, and this patrimony.

Colonial Conditions

What, then, are the colonial and postcolonial realities to which Malraux, Duras, and Lê are responding? How does each interact with his or her “colonial condition,” and what methodological approach best assesses this interaction? Of the three authors studied here, Malraux spent the least amount of time in colonial Indochina. And yet most scholars of twentieth-century France are familiar with the scandal that defined his early career. Malraux, an autodidact, avid traveler, and aspiring dandy, left for Indochina in the winter of 1923, accompanied by his wife, Clara, and his old school friend, Louis Chevasson. Having been initiated to the world of Asian art and learned of the lost Cambodian Voie Royale (Royal way) in 1922, Malraux requested and was granted permission from the colonial government in Hanoi to conduct an archeological study of the temples found along this route. But in December 1923,

the three “archeologists” were discovered transporting a few tons of stolen bas-reliefs and were arrested on charges of theft and defacement. Thanks to the strident response of Parisian intellectuals and, in particular, to the “rectification campaign” led by Malraux’s wife and supported by figures like André Breton, André Gide, and François Mauriac, the colonial authorities revoked the three-year prison sentence given to the budding author, and Malraux returned to Paris in November 1924.⁴⁵ The Malrauxs did not remain in Paris long, however, and by February 1925 they had returned to southern Indochina to campaign for colonial reform. Malraux had come face to face with colonial corruption during his trial, and his return in 1925 combined the author’s passion for travel and adventure with his nascent urge to engage politically. For approximately six months during 1925 and the early part of 1926, Malraux and his partner Paul Monin ran two anticolonial newspapers in Saigon: *L’Indochine* (Indochina) and *L’Indochine enchaînée* (Indochina in chains). These papers, which bear the mark of both Monin’s commitment to justice and Malraux’s biting sarcasm, focused primarily on tackling the colonial question in Indochina and on documenting political and social unrest in other parts of the world, with special interest paid to developments in China.

The first section of this book consists of two chapters examining Malraux’s three-year period in Indochina (1923–26) and the four novels that followed (published between 1926 and 1933). I adopt a comparative approach to demonstrate that despite the prevailing reading of Malraux as an author of universalist import, the contours of the human condition he describes, as well as his response to it, are shaped within an imperial context and bear the mark of specific ideological discourses of the 1920s and 1930s. I suggest that the early manifestations of French literary existentialism — via Malraux — have their formal and sociopolitical roots in colonial Indochina. To illuminate the political content of Malraux’s emerging existentialist vision, I read his first novel in the context of his experience with the colonial government and alongside a number of newspapers published in Saigon in the early 1920s, including Malraux’s own short-lived papers. I then read the Asian trilogy in dialogue with

other exotic novels of the early twentieth century, producing textual analyses that illustrate the formal and thematic traces of French exoticism in Malraux's existentialist novels. Because the aesthetics of Malraux's blossoming literary existentialism are linked to the larger exotic genre of the period, these analyses draw on the work of Jean-Marc Moura and Chris Bongie, among others, to elaborate a working definition for exoticism, in both its Romantic and colonial guises, and they assess Malraux's assumptions and techniques against this definition.

In marked contrast to Malraux, for whom colonial Indochina was the site of a temporary engagement and ultimately one stop on a lifetime of travels, Duras experienced the colony as a native land. Born in Gia Dinh in 1914, Duras spent the majority of her first twenty years in Indochina and only "returned" to France in 1933 to begin her university studies. The family situation was precarious, particularly after the death of her father in 1921. Duras's mother, a school teacher, was unable to secure a permanent position in a desirable location, and she moved her daughter and two sons frequently, alighting in Phnom Penh, Vinh Long, Sadec, and Saigon, and even returning to France for a two-year period immediately following her husband's death. But for Duras, despite her familiarity with France, the land of her ancestors, Vietnam was home, and she once claimed that she felt herself to be more Vietnamese than French. Marginalized from white colonial society because of their unstable financial position, Duras and her second brother, Paul, in particular, were to a large extent socialized in Vietnamese: they were raised by native servants, schooled only intermittently, and counted mostly local children as their playmates. And yet, as suggested by the image in *L'Amant* (*The Lover*) of the narrator traveling to Saigon in the local bus, but riding up front — alone, next to the driver — because she is white, Duras and her family were definitively separated from the native populations by the color of their skin. Duras spent her youth in a culturally liminal space, one marked by the ongoing physical and psychic contact among different classes, races, languages, practices, and individuals. As such, though Duras was not of mixed ethnic heritage, she developed a concept of self in her autobiographical writing that

was largely informed by contact with and knowledge of a plurality of cultures and languages, among which the two most dominant were French and Vietnamese.

Duras's autobiographical returns to Indochina, which record the author's cultural and linguistic plurality, are the subject of the third chapter. This chapter traces the shift from a politics to a poetics of *métissage* in the forty-year period that separates her first autobiographical novel from the last. By *métissage*, which I borrow from the work of Edouard Glissant and Françoise Lionnet, I mean to suggest that Duras's writing displays the coexistence of two seemingly incompatible threads — French and Vietnamese — in one discursive fabric. In Duras's case, *métissage* is not a biological reality but a discursive strategy with which she resists the presumed stability of Western humanist notions of identity and, more important, the presupposition that such an identity can be formed or expressed in “authentic” or “clear” language. My approach to her work is thus informed by questions of language in two different, but ultimately related, senses. After her first autobiographical novel, which demonstrates both thematically and formally the author's mastery of clear language and acceptance of the dominant linguistic norms that Bourdieu associates with the demands of the linguistic and literary markets, Duras cultivated an unstable and often incoherent language, opening her writing to the unpredictable ebb and flow of the unconscious. And if, as Jacques Lacan suggested, the unconscious is structured like a language, the analysis offered here demonstrates that Duras's own literary idiom was in many ways structured like the Vietnamese language.

The book ends with two chapters on the only ethnically Vietnamese writer in this study and the only writer still in the midst of constructing her *œuvre*. Lê was born in Dalat, Vietnam, in 1963, nine years after the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the end of French colonial rule in the region. She lived there until the age of six, when her family moved south to Saigon. The conflict between the Communists in the North and the U.S.-backed government in Saigon forced the family's internal migration, just as the fall of Dien Bien Phu had forced thousands of Vietnamese

Catholics and anti-Communists to flee the area surrounding Hanoi in 1954. Her mother's family were colonial sympathizers and had chosen to educate Lê first at the Couvent des Oiseaux in Dalat and later at the French *lycée* in Saigon, a choice that Lê notes alienated her from her native land long before she was physically exiled. Moreover, her mother's family had been naturalized French. It was for this reason that in 1977, after the fall of Saigon, Lê's mother took her three daughters and repatriated to France, leaving Lê's father, an engineer originally from the North, behind. Lê would never see him again. Landing first in Le Havre and then in Paris, Lê pursued literary studies before abandoning them to concentrate on her own writing. At the age of eighteen she also abandoned her native tongue, choosing to speak and write only in French. She published her first novel, *Un si tendre vampire* (So tender a vampire), in 1987. She subsequently removed this novel, along with the two works that followed it, from her official bibliography, dismissing them for their immaturity and the disproportionate amount of fear and respect they display with regard to the French language. A prolific author, Lê is also a recalcitrant figure in contemporary French literature, skeptical of fame and of contemporary debates on identity. She quietly refuses to accept the label francophone but does not define her work as French, much less as Vietnamese. Moreover, she shows no interest in resolving this tension, and instead seems to push it to extremes, extracting from it works of fiction and nonfiction that are as demanding as they are rewarding.

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, and to conceive of the work of literature as a universal space of aesthetic creation. My approach to Lê's literary output is thus a careful one. I am aware of the dangers inherent in any attempt to position a work in progress and of the particular difficulty posed by Lê's example. Her critics have often attempted to negotiate this challenge by employing psychoanalytic and/or deconstructive frameworks, ultimately locating her identity as well as her literary project within the space of the hyphen, in other words, somewhere *between* Vietnam and France, Vietnamese and

French, colonized and colonizer, silence and noise. My own approach, on the other hand, takes this double exclusion — for example, “neither French nor Vietnamese” — as the point of departure and seeks to understand how Lê thinks the possibility of literary innovation within this condition of negation. Informed by Catherine Malabou’s notion of *plasticity*, a concept that strives to acknowledge the simultaneously creative and destructive potential of form, I read Lê’s work as a doubling that synthesizes heterogeneous elements, bringing them together in order to form a whole while also retaining the inherent dislocation of that whole. Further, I remain attentive throughout to the vast intertextual network that serves in both Lê’s fiction and her nonfiction to *displace* — spatially and temporally — both the text and intertext within a larger literary domain. Like Lê herself, I interrogate the relation between these textual dislocations and the state of contemporary literary production, a field inclusive of the appellations French and francophone but limited to neither. In my allusions to the universal in Lê’s project, I am not suggesting that her work recycles the notions of political, ethical, or linguistic supremacy upheld in French republican ideology. Rather, I am referring to what I see as her pursuit of a common aesthetic space within which the fixed positions prescribed in the universal-particular binary are synthesized, disrupted, and transformed.

In each of the three cases examined in this study, literary innovation appears as something that is conditioned by a colonial experience but that gestures beyond that experience in the work of literature. Since the critical focus is limited here to Vietnam, the analysis is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Indeed, a number of other authors and literary works could be subjected to a similar interpretative framework. To cite but one example, what might we gain from shifting our focus from Gide’s ethnographic representation of sub-Saharan Africa to the ways in which the political, linguistic, and cultural experience of black Africa conditioned the formal techniques found in *Voyage au Congo* (*Travels in the Congo*) and his other later work? This mode of critical inquiry extends not only beyond the geographical boundaries

of the hexagon but also beyond the temporal constraints of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. More important, as we reframe our discussions of canonical French literature and continue to interrogate the necessities and limitations of a French/francophone distinction, it offers a means to examine the center critically, not as that which must be displaced but as that which is already displaced — culturally and linguistically — from within.

Indeed, this study of Vietnam and the colonial condition of modern French literature not only implicitly challenges the dominant and exclusionary practices by which French literature is classified, valued, and canonized; it also questions the intellectual compartmentalization we risk in our insistence on the French and francophone bifurcation. As Said has argued, “imperialism and its culture can now be studied as neither monolithic nor reductively compartmentalized, separate, distinct.”⁴⁶ This understanding of the imperial nation and its former colony as fundamentally altered by the colonial experience is one of Said’s signal contributions to postcolonial criticism. It has in turn helped us recognize that the Other can be neither confined to the outside nor simply assimilated to a cultural sameness on the inside. The chapters that follow demonstrate the extent to which the colonial Other is, in fact, already constitutive of French literary production.

I have included citations from the published translations wherever possible. In some instances I have modified these translations (noting them as “tm”) in accordance with the original French.