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Leslie Barnes

## Linda Lê's *Voix* and the Crisis of Representation

### Alterity and the Vietnamese Immigrant Writer in France

Pour la première fois, j'avais le sentiment que les mots ne me  
sauveraient plus.

Linda Lê, interview with Catherine Argand

Linda Lê's novels are set in a deranged world, one inhabited by ghosts and dismembered bodies. *Voix: Une Crise*, the second book in a trilogy on the death of a father and the resulting psychosis for his progeny, is no exception.<sup>1</sup> In this short but devastating narrative, voices of madness drown out those of reason, and the atmosphere of fantastic paranoia and self-destruction overwhelms the reader. The novel begins with the narrator—a woman author—sitting on a bench in a long hallway, locked up, as she has been told, in a mental hospital, and surrounded by a cacophony of troubled voices. Her confinement is the result of a schizophrenic crisis, which is then recounted in an immediate, crushing prose. The narrator, haunted by the flaming image of her dead father and persecuted by what she calls “l'Organisation,” wanders feverishly among the physical and imaginary spaces of Paris and the *pays natal*. The voices from the hospital give way to those of the Organization, an ill-defined but omnipresent group of men in disguise, which begins by sending death threats in the newspaper but eventually employs the narrator's own nervous system as its primary means of communication.

The goal of the Organization appears simple: it seeks only unquestioned conformity to the precise role created for each individual. For

the narrator, emigrated from an unnamed country, the role to play is one of a representative, but of what exactly, it remains unclear. The specific content of the injunction to conform is vague: she is enlisted to represent a certain notion of alterity, such as this difference is understood by the Organization. Despite her adoption of French culture and her mastery of the language, the narrator is indelibly marked by her race and thus expected to adhere to the Organization's pre-established criteria of "ethnic" literary production. What is especially problematic about this demand is that for the immigrant author, the act of conforming necessarily includes a savage violence against both body and psyche.

Lê, who was born in Vietnam in 1963 and who immigrated to France with her mother and three sisters 14 years later, has infused much of her work with this current of violence. Catherine Argand suggests in an interview with Lê that in *Voix: Une Crise*, the author inflicts the violence upon herself; in fact, Argand wonders if the text does not serve as Lê's own public self-denunciation after the death of her father, who was left behind and who died in 1995, alone in Lê's native country and fixed in an image of her abandoned past (1999, 28). It is indeed tempting to read the trilogy as the dramatization of the exiled Asian's guilt: having left her father to die alone, she has failed to fulfill her filial duty and thus broken Confucian law. The tremendous presence of fire and phantoms in the work points to a world of the living still connected to, or haunted by, that of the dead and effectively recreates the link between the worlds destroyed elsewhere by the author. In fact, we could interpret the trilogy as the literary creation of an altar dedicated to the father, to the past, and to Vietnam, before which Lê kneels in deference. Nevertheless, however useful such a reading might be, it addresses neither the narrator's schizophrenic reaction to her two cultures—the abandoned and the adopted—nor the demands placed upon her by their respective "Organizations." It also ignores the conflict between the polyvocality infusing the narrator's voice and the monological discourse informing the voices that surround her.

The current article analyzes this conflict and suggests that the mental crisis dramatized in *Voix: Une Crise* does not simply result from the death of the father; rather, the narrator's madness is simultaneously the means to resist interpellation and the perceived consequence of failing to assume the political and social role assigned. To better

understand the young woman's resistance as well as the subtle layers of her madness, I focus my study on the polyvalent identity of her persecutors, that is, on the aggressive voices of the Organization, who condemn the young writer for a manuscript—a romance—that she has written. In place of the romance, which the narrator must destroy, the Organization demands that she write according to its desires; specifically, the voices insist that she write about *them*. I discuss three possible identities of the Organization: as dominant French culture, as diasporic community, and as post-colonial literary market. In each case, the Organization represents an exterior and often tyrannical force seeking to define both the author and her literature. I then place my analysis within the larger framework of minority discourse and post-colonial studies, arguing that the crisis in Lê's *Voix* is most revealing if interpreted as one of position: surrounded by forces seeking to situate her as the spokesperson for difference, the author must assert her own voice and suffer the consequences. As such, Lê's novel testifies to a persistent legacy of colonialism, whose pernicious effects have not been obviated, but rather intensified, by the shift toward a post-colonial political culture; in other words, the crisis results not only from the physical and intellectual subjugation of the self to a representation that is not one's own, but also from the demand to represent an other that is not one's self.

In Lê's novel, the voice imposed by the Organization splinters and multiplies, creating a chaotic chorus of interior voices and signaling the narrator's schizophrenic crisis. The young writer believes herself "chassée de partout" (V 67) and alternates between appeasing and fleeing her persecutors. One afternoon, having been spared the bullet she was told to expect at the Butte de Montmartre, the narrator returns home to discover that the Organization was there in her absence:

Ils sont venus, ils ont lu le manuscrit laissé sur la table et maintenant, de retour dans l'appartement, j'entends leur rire qui résonne entre les murs, leurs sarcasmes qui fusent des coins les plus reculés. C'est donc à ça qu'elle occupe ses journées, Elle s'éreinte à tricoter une petite romance tire-larmes, Tu mens, petite princesse cloîtrée dans le temple Littérature, Tu files un conte minaudier, On va t'en faire voir, Tu écriras sur NOUS, sur l'invasion des profanateurs, Joue donc un peu, Joue à la folie et à la mort, Brûle-toi les ailes, Brûle cette petite romance qui sent le roussi. . . . Je suis dans le noir à lutter contre les voix qui suintent des murs, crient à mes oreilles, m'assaillent, me poursuivent, plantent leurs épines dans ma chair. (V 24–25)

The Organization penetrates the narrator's apartment just as the fragmented voices invade her psyche. Close analysis of the language in this passage reveals the extent to which the Organization's presence is linked to condemnation: it ridicules the narrator's creative efforts and denounces her for wasting energy on nothing, on a "petite romance tire-larmes," on a lie. The Organization not only criticizes the author for the pretension to think herself worthy of the "temple Littérature" and for the nerve to write a romance, it also accuses her of prostitution and tawdry seduction. In the eyes of the Organization, her work is despicable and formless, and her motivation is reduced to disengaged selfishness with self-glory as its only goal. The voices of the Organization, unable to tolerate this irresponsibility, attack the young author for her egotism and supply the subject for her future work: them.

### **The "Organization": Culture, Community, and Critic**

Lê's use of the term "Organization" evokes hierarchical power structures and systematic forces of oppression; and in order to fully appreciate the demands placed on the narrator, I will now turn to the various potential identities of her persecutors. Martine Delvaux has argued persuasively that the Organization refers to the monolithic French institution and its desire to erase cultural multiplicity in its assimilatory efforts (2001, 205); indeed, the abrupt shift from the polyvocality present early in the text to the essentially monological discourse of the Organization is evidence to this end. Aware that it is her artistic creation that is to be eliminated, the narrator assumes the role of demented pillager destroying everything around her. Her apartment, suddenly mirroring the native country (V 48), becomes a battlefield, a place where expressions of individual autonomy are reduced to ashes. Obliterating the manuscript is not enough, however; all creation in the native tongue must also be destroyed: "Et les lettres du père que tu conserves si précieusement? . . . Détruis, Fais un bûcher de tout le passé, Table rase, Nous ne voulons personne d'autre ici, personne qui hante cette pièce, à part NOUS" (V 26). The narrator complies, believing her obedience will stop the persecution (V 26). She burns each letter sent by her father, and with each one eradicates all traces of the language and collective past of her ancestors. It is a Lacanian moment transposed onto the immigrant context: the narrator

must renounce identification with the language of the native father in order to be integrated into the symbolic of the new French father. For the alienated narrator, the burning of her past is the proof of assimilation; and only this proof can offer respite from the troubled margins and access to the peaceful center.

As Alain Badiou remarks in his book, *L'éthique*:

Un premier soupçon nous gagne quand nous considérons que les apôtres affichés de l'éthique et du 'droit à la différence' sont visiblement *horifiés par toute différence un peu soutenue*. Car pour eux, les coutumes africaines sont barbares, les islamistes affreux, les Chinois totalitaires, et ainsi de suite. En vérité, ce fameux 'autre' n'est présentable que s'il est un *bon* autre, c'est-à-dire quoi, sinon *le même que nous*? (2003, 41, emphasis original)

To continue briefly with Badiou's rubric, we could say that those who leave the determination of their subjectivity to the governing conception of truth, that is by adopting traditionally French norms and practices, are the only ones who may be seen as *present* in French culture. Conversely, those who maintain "barbarian" or "totalitarian" practices may be *represented* by the governing regime, but solely as a threat to its internal consistency. It is precisely as a result of this representation, which prohibits any ideologically unmitigated presentation, that these immigrant communities can never be seen as present. In other words, representation is endured passively; it presupposes the absence of the identity to represent—or at least, the ability of a person to represent herself—and privileges the reconstruction of the identity by an external authority. The paradox inherent to this discourse, and the one explored in *Voix*, is the fact that even after integration into the dominant culture, the immigrant is always identified by her difference. She is only representable, never authorized to be present.

We may also interpret the Organization as a representative of the ambivalent power of the diasporic community, that is, the force simultaneously protecting and controlling the identity and destiny of each member of the ethnically defined group. Take, for example, the painter B, the pipe smoking character "né au pays de [l']enfance" (V 54) to whom the narrator runs in her terror, but who has already joined "l'ordre des Grands Inquisiteurs" (V 55). B tries to convince the

narrator that the Organization is a product of her mind; but according to the narrator, B's actual goal is to sacrifice her for the crimes that he has committed (V 55). The painter B, one of only two representatives of the immigrant community in the text, is distrusted and feared, despite his seemingly genuine concern for the young woman. In the panicked mind of the narrator, the painter B is nothing more than an agent of the abstract but menacing power of his community, a force that seeks not only to maintain control over the behavior of its members, but also to preserve itself at all costs.

In effect, the conflict here is between the displaced traditional culture and the powers of assimilation; to preserve its identity in the adopted land, the traditional culture must constantly strengthen its boundaries, and in the Asian immigrant context, this reinforcement of the communal relies upon a strict positioning of the individual. Sociological work conducted with Vietnamese communities in France, most notably that of Mong Hang Vu-Renaud, reveals that identification with the collectivity is imperative as this process not only constitutes the stability of the individual, but also maintains the longevity of the group. Vu-Renaud notes that affirming one's affiliation to the group is the only solution to what she calls the "difficulté à être" (2002, 42). In the Confucian system, obligations to the family and to the community perpetuate the social structure necessary to direct the actions of each individual. Sociologist Lê Huu Khoa echoes Vu-Renaud's analysis in his book *Immigration confucéenne en France*, claiming that the individual does not exist outside her group (1996, 56). And yet, the latter has also noted the tendency of some younger generations to create their own sense of cultural identity rather than accept the one historically determined by the group (1985, 107). This tension points to a fundamental instability of the Vietnamese community in France; the trials are those of a community negotiating the increasingly wide gap between the collective past and the future of the individual.

The intellectual or artistic expressions of an individual attempting to define herself independent of the group may consequently become sites of conflict within the diasporic community because they affect not only the position of the group in relation to the dominant culture, but also the integrity and permanence of the traditional culture. Thus, we may interpret the Organization's demand that the narrator write

“sur NOUS,” as an act of inscription, the strategic claiming of the author by a certain ethnic literary tradition. As such, a closer look at the tradition into which Lê is often inscribed may be of use here.

Although born in Vietnam and raised in the French schools of Danang, Saigon, and after 1977, France, Linda Lê does not identify with the Franco-Vietnamese literary tradition such as this institution is defined in Jack Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French*. According to Yeager, the Franco-Vietnamese novel originates in a cultural inferiority complex created in the Indochinese colonial education system (1987, 53).<sup>2</sup> The texts offer today's reader a literary mirror of the political and sociological circumstances specific to pre-1954 Vietnam, with special attention to the effects these circumstances had on the individual. Prose was a new literary form in Vietnam, introduced with the imposition of the Roman alphabet in 1910; and these early authors infused their prose with both traditional Vietnamese literary values and the Romantic *culte du moi*. The new hybrid tradition continued after independence from the French as its subject matter shifted to reflect the growing concerns of cultural “métissage” and national fragmentation. Lê, however, shares neither the cultural values nor the literary preoccupations of her so-called ancestors. She does not feel obliged to explain a culture she hardly knows, nor does she even claim the great writers of this tradition—Pham Duy Khiem (1908–1974) or Pham Van Ky (1916–), for example—as her influences. Rather, Lê is quick to name writers such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Gérard Nerval, and Antonin Artaud as her literary forefathers.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, though Lê was part of the wave of refugees leaving Vietnam after reunification in 1975, she does not identify with other authors of the Vietnamese diaspora in France such as Anna Moi, Kim Lefèvre or Kim Doan. In fact, Lê admits in the interview with Argand that she rarely reads the work of her contemporaries and declines to “[faire] cause commune” (1999, 32). In his article “Culture, Citizenship, Nation: The Narrative Texts of Linda Lê,” Yeager highlights the cultural ambivalence that shines through Lê's work and notes that whereas other authors of Vietnamese origin often treat questions of immigration and the myth of return in their novels, references to a specific ethnic community in Lê's writing are rare. More striking is the near void of explicit references to Vietnam (1997, 256). Given the prevalence of such problematics not only in Franco-Vietnamese



literature, but also in diasporic and immigration literature in general, this absence is remarkable and merits discussion. Nevertheless, when the press or the critics speak of one of Lê's new pieces, the emphasis is still predominantly on her status as outsider or as exiled author; this overly reductive tendency sidelines the aesthetics of her literature in favor of its political implications. The point here is obviously not to denigrate her experiences as a Vietnamese immigrant in France; rather, the goal is to avoid limiting our understanding of Lê's work to these events.

And yet, the demand to write "sur NOUS" restricts the author's production to precisely these experiences, assuring her performed loyalty to the group and obliging her to engage politically on its behalf. Informed by a Sartrean definition of literature, the orders of the Organization echo the words of Congolese author Mongo Beti, who in 1954 criticized any colonial author writing "n'importe quoi à n'importe quel moment pour n'importe quelle raison" (143). The Organization's violent reaction to the narrator's text can in fact be interpreted as symptomatic of a larger tension between politics and pure aesthetics in literary production; the immigrant author is expected to forgo fantasy narratives and romance, representing instead the *real* problems of both her native country and her immigrant compatriots in France. Her refusal of this project, compounded by the distrust of her ethnic community, designates the narrator as an individual attempting to define herself outside the group, where she cannot be permitted to exist. Here, the Organization, who only recognizes the individual by her relation to the group, denies her desired independence and imposes its own prescriptive model upon her work.

The ethnic community is not the only group capable of designing prescriptive models for literary production, however, and I will now consider the Organization as the post-colonial literary institution, that is, the mechanism of consumption and representation including editors, critics, and the press, whose goal is to sell books to a metropolitan public; I am generally concerned here with the abstract but omnipresent authority that imposes its criteria upon any author seeking to belong to a given literary tradition or desiring simply that her work be read. More specifically, I am interested in post-colonial discourse, in spite of the debates surrounding usage of the term,<sup>4</sup>

because it is precisely post-colonial criticism that has reoriented public discussion toward problems outside the Western frame (Ashcroft 2002, 218). Furthermore, the discourse generated by post-colonial critics generally engages with the various manifestations of colonial power and serves as a model—albeit a troubled one—for the literatures emerging in the contexts of globalization and immigration.

For the past three decades, post-colonial literary criticism has sought to rectify the historical situation in which Western writers and modes of literary production are privileged over their non-Western counterparts. As a result of these efforts, the post-colonial author now writes her particularity, the Western public gains access to foreign perspectives, and the post-colonial critic becomes the spokesperson for the oppressed. In the meantime, however, the domain of post-colonial studies has created its own epistemological framework dictating ontological experience. In fact, post-colonialism has, in a sense, become its own dominant discourse, a discourse limiting the expression of identity and imposing its own definition of authenticity on the authors who fall under its critical gaze. These authors become Gayatri Spivak's *native informants*, charged with representing their colonization, their decolonization, and perhaps most importantly, their cultural difference.

Rey Chow argues in *Writing Diaspora* that contemporary post-colonial critics seek increasingly to be the spokespersons for the voiceless; consequently, only those perceived as lacking are worthy of representation (1993, 14). This condition, further complicated by an author's gender as well as the patriarchic system into which representation is inscribed, lends itself too easily to the external imposition of certain reductive categories and critical definitions (ibid.). Because the post-colonial critic plays a vital role in the promotion and reception of post-colonial and diasporic literatures, what is at stake is an author's circulation—or lack thereof—in this literary libidinal economy. As such, in order to be represented in critical discourse, the immigrant author in Lê's novel must accept the double lack imposed upon her by the institution: she must write as woman and foreigner. And given the tendency of many of Lê's critics to call upon her to play the role of exiled author or minority representative in their discussion of her work, we must not ignore the possibility that Lê's Organization is the literary manifestation of this establishment.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Martine Delvaux, Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, and to a lesser extent, Jack Yeager is emblematic of this tendency described in Chow's critique. Delvaux, for example, recognizes the singularity of Lê's work and draws attention to her striking distrust of origins. She notes that instead of attempting to relocate or recreate her roots, Lê seeks to demolish them, and in the process, "disarticulate" herself (2001, 202). Delvaux's interpretation, however, relies on an understanding of Lê's identity as incommunicable. For Delvaux, the author's identity is constructed in the margins and in the spaces of translation, migration, and hyphenation (ibid., 203). Lê, on the other hand, does not appear to interpret her distrust of origins in such a manner. For her, the phenomenon is hardly limited to the post-colonial world; we may look to the *poètes maudits* of the nineteenth century and the Surrealists of the early twentieth century for two other relevant examples. Lê's mention of Joseph Conrad<sup>6</sup> as role model and her insistence that only "enfant[s] trouvé[s]" and "bâtard[s]" (1999, 32) can write suggest that she does not distinguish between her own relationship to mythical origins and that of any other modern writer. Her novels are born from a universal and metaphysical alienation, one which is not limited to the experiences of the post-colonial subject. And yet, for Delvaux, the identity and writing of Linda Lê are enclosed in a neither/nor binary prevalent in contemporary post-colonial studies.

Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier and Jack Yeager recognize Lê's desire to avoid tired binaries in her work: Ollier focuses her critical apparatus on Lê's subversion of the colonizer/colonized polarities (2001, 245), and Yeager emphasizes the creation of a literary *third space*—to borrow Homi Bhabha's celebrated term—in which Lê reinvents both language and literature (1997, 265). Although both analyses speak to the concerns of the present article, neither fully transcends the familiar tropes of identity politics. Ollier, in particular, still employs an epistemological model that encloses the author in a state of neither/nor. In fact, for Ollier, Lê represents "l'hyacinthe d'eau," the uprooted flower resting on the water's surface, powerless against its currents; having found neither place nor voice in any single culture, the author is condemned to float between the spaces of silence and verbal excess (2001, 243). As such, a striking tension is established between refusal and its impossibility; denied both direction and will, the author appears to have no control over her own writing. For Ollier, Linda Lê

is Fanon's *évoluée*, simultaneously cultivated and savage (ibid., 244), but neither in its entirety.

In *Voix*, the “petite romance tire-larmes,” which apparently shows no signs of any particular political bent, is rejected because it does not satisfy the criteria dictated by the Organization. In the post-colonial market and its accompanying anxiety, the immigrant writer cannot write about love because this is not the authentic experience assigned to her. As Bill Ashcroft notes in *The Empire Writes Back*, “one of the most persistent prejudices underlying the production of the texts of the metropolitan canon is that only certain categories of experience are capable of being rendered as literature” (2002, 87). However, where Ashcroft is speaking of a situation in which the post-colonial author lacks the right to record her “post-colonial” experience, here the immigrant author, denied the authority to write on themes more universal in nature, is *limited* to the knowledge of this particular world.

It is not, however, intrinsically reductive to consider Linda Lê's work from this post-colonial perspective, nor would it be wrong to name her a “post-colonial” or “immigrant” writer. According to Chow, the destructive consequences arise when this label is inserted into the system of social relations. She notes:

“Names” of “difference” as such are meant as ways for the marginalized to have some access to the center. And yet one feels that these categories of difference are often used in such a way to stabilize, rather than challenge, a pre-established method of examining “cultural diversity”. . . . (1993, 107–108)

In other words, focusing on this pre-established notion of diversity and on the problems of the other—whether this other be the colonized, the immigrant or an entire diasporic community—signals a domain of study which advances a certain cultural essentialism and seeks to reestablish its own identity as well as its own position of authority (ibid., 7). In order for such an institution to successfully implement what Deirdre Lashgiri considers “systematic violence,” a monological definition of truth must first be established and imposed upon the community; furthermore, members of the given community must be convinced that deviation from this truth risks chaos (1995, 11). In *Voix: Une Crise*, this absolute value to which the members of the community must conform is included in, albeit never elucidated by, the Organization's demands. It is located in the declared “NOUS,” which presupposes

the presence of an opposing “eux,” but which reveals neither its own identity nor that of the other group. More striking is the ambiguity of the narrator’s position vis-à-vis the dominant group: it is never clear if she is included in the “NOUS” she is meant to represent.

My goal here is not to determine which culture—the adopted or the abandoned—places the greater demands on the immigrant author. Rather, the point is that in *Voix: Une Crise* an outside agent imposes the criteria of belonging and the definition of justified literary expression on the immigrant author. And this agent demands that the narrator conform to its own conceptions of “other”, “author” and “authenticity.” As such, the narrator is subject to hostile external forces that prohibit the successful articulation of her own agency.

### **Self-recuperation and the Limits of Minority Discourse**

Let us not forget, however, that the hostile agents torturing the narrator occupy her own spirit. We must note that she is the only person in the apartment and that the crying voices are mere symptoms of her schizophrenic crisis. She hears the voices sniggering in each corner of the room, but the condemnation comes from her alone. Just as they entered into the walls of her apartment, becoming a component of the structure itself, the voices of the Organization invade the interior space of the narrator. In fact, she remarks not long after this first encounter: “c’est par les nerfs magnétiques que les radio-opérateurs de l’Organisation lui transmettent leurs messages” (V 38). Once lodged in her veins, the judgment and will of the group extend throughout the body, contaminating even its most remote areas. They animate the body, pushing it to wander throughout and beyond Paris, chasing it from its own skin. The narrator’s blood becomes as alien to her as the color of her skin is to others; her foreignness is not the product of her immigrant status, however, but of an internalized racist discourse. Convinced by this discourse, the narrator condemns and expulses herself. She has become Julia Kristeva’s abject: deprived of any constructive self-identification process in the exterior world, she finds an impossible identification with the interior voices; in fact, these voices constitute her subjectivity (1980, 5).

The voices also seek to destroy her. Once again they assail: “Détruis-toi!” (V 32). The romance and the letters no longer interest them; they want possession of the author herself. Knowing that one of

the Organization's henchmen awaits her outside with a knife to bury in her back, the narrator decides she will inflict the wound herself: "Je caresse mon poignet avec le tranchant du couteau. J'enfonce la pointe. Le sang goutte. Je taillade la chair. Encore et encore. . . ." (V 32). In a disturbingly sensual passage, the narrator describes her suicide attempt. Robbed of her own will, conquered in thought, body, and language, her death is the only thing she controls. Dying will satisfy the Organization, but suicide will allow her to escape her alienation and reclaim her self-determination. During one of his Surrealist inquiries into suicide, Antonin Artaud, one of Lê's avowed literary heroes, says of its signification: "Si je me tue, ce ne sera pas pour me détruire, mais pour me reconstituer . . . Par le suicide, je réintroduis mon dessein dans la nature, je donne pour la première fois aux choses la forme de ma volonté" (2004, 384).<sup>7</sup> As such, by slashing her wrists, the narrator seeks to impose her own will upon nature as well as upon the order established by the Organization. What is more, she struggles to protect herself from its appropriation of her artistic expression. Lê's narrator sees suicide as the only way to recuperate herself; and yet, the reader already knows from the structure of the text—that is, the fact that it opens on what we must interpret as the culmination of the schizophrenic crisis and closes with the narrator wandering through the countryside still haunted by the Organization—that her attempt is unsuccessful. Furthermore, the chronological and topographical disorder that characterizes the construction of the narrative reflects the narrator's madness, a madness created by the larger system she simultaneously assimilates and refuses.

For Chow, the need to recuperate oneself is perhaps most important in the context of struggle. She asks how we articulate difference—be it cultural or gender difference—without this articulation being reappropriated by hegemonic discourse. How do we avoid "cultural ghettoization" (1993, 170)? Chow problematizes the notion of a minority discourse through which the West seeks to recognize and value the unheard voices; although recognition of "minor" literary or intellectual creations provides a previously unknown legitimacy, it also creates a situation in which this type of production is only legitimate under the category of minor (ibid., 167). Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih address the same problem in the introduction to their recent collaboration *Minor Transnationalism*. In this work, Lionnet and Shih caution against Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's analysis of "minor

literature,” noting that even this celebratory reading relies on a binary paradigm that favors the center over the margins; they observe that for Deleuze and Guattari, the significance of a minor literature is, in fact, located in its relation to the major language (2005, 2). For Lionnet and Shih, as for Chow, the problem is one of maintained hierarchies; minority discourse, as valuable as it may be, maintains a vertical relationship between the center and the margins, even in criticizing it. In fact, criticism only reinforces the positioning. In a similar way, by limiting a work of literature to a category of alterity imposed externally, do we not still rely on notions of “native” or “minor” essential to imperialism’s othering (Chow 1993, 178)? And how does the interpellated author achieve legitimacy if she does not “engage” or accept the fixed category of difference? These are the questions implicitly posed but never resolved in the schizophrenic crisis at the heart of Lê’s *Voix*.

It is important to remember that the crisis in *Voix: Une Crise* results in institutionalization. The question arises: is it possible for the immigrant writer to impose her own design without self-sacrifice? Madness and forced removal from society, are these the consequences of such an act? Warren Motte has interpreted the madness present in Lê’s other works as a liberating force, claiming that it allows her subjects to invent identities for themselves outside the scripted, rational world (2003, 63). We know from the beginning of *Voix*, however, that the narrator is imprisoned “dans un centre de crise, comme on [l]’a dit, ou dans un théâtre avec des comédiens qui jouent leur partie et [l]’enrôlent en [lui] laissant le choix de [s]es répliques” (V 7). Even if the “folle” cannot actually read the script, and in spite of the choice of response provided her, she must still *respond*; she must play the role offered. In fact, the problem of representation is still, so to speak, present.

Lê resists the role of subversive writer just as she has refused to represent the Vietnamese community in France and attach the Franco-Vietnamese label to her work. Her novel, even in its overwhelming ambiguity and despite any potential destructive consequences—perhaps because of these elements—demands that we address her art and not her politics, or, at the very least, that we not obfuscate the former under the weight of the latter. It resists prescriptive models, like the one imposed by the Organization. Linda Lê’s *Voix*—that of the text as well as that of the author herself—reaches beyond the demands of the community, beyond the imposed categories of difference and the

tropes of its literature into the irreducible realm of the aesthetic itself. The dialectic of destruction and creation at work in the heart of Lê's project points to a transcendence that knows no bounds, and that, as a result, reveals the limits of a literary world into which it is born but that it refuses to accept.

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## Notes

1. See Linda Lê's trilogy: *Les Trois Parques* (1997), *Voix: Une Crise* (1998) and *Lettre morte* (1999). Subsequent references to *Voix* will be cited in the text in parentheses and marked V.

2. For a discussion of the history of French education in Indochina, see Karl Britto "The Conquered Student: Colonial Education and Vietnamese Francophone Writers" in his book *Disorientation: France, Vietnam and the Ambivalence of Interculturality*. Britto recounts the experiences of Jean-Baptiste-Eliacin Luro, who recognized that Indochinese cultures were also ancient and civilized and created a system with the goal to "enseigner au peuple conquis tout ce qu'il savait avant nous et lui enseigner, en outre, le plus possible des sciences qui font notre supériorité" (2004, 16). This system produced generations of young, intercultural subjects who acted as interpreters of Vietnamese culture and accepted their inferiority vis-à-vis the French.

3. Lê says in the interview with Argand: "Je suis hantée par les écrivains fous ou vivant dans la crainte de le devenir: Hölderlin, Nerval, Artaud, Byron . . . Dès l'adolescence, j'éprouvais cette même crainte, celle de devenir folle. Je pensais, comme eux, que c'est seulement par la connaissance des gouffres que l'on peut attendre la vérité et par l'exploration des marges et de la nuit que l'on peut atteindre le mythe" (31).

4. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih note in their recent collaboration *Minor Transnationalism*, the term *post-colonialism* is increasingly problematic as a critical tool for assessing and presenting the current global power structure and the relations it determines. They claim the term reinforces the mythical idea of a cultural purity that justifies a continued colonial mentality and discriminatory discourse; furthermore, it provides no sufficient theoretical framework for approaching cultures still effectively colonized or for those who endure the more colonizing effects of globalization (2005, 11). Although Lionnet and Shih's alternative *transnationalism* attempts to move beyond these established hierarchies, I persist with the term *post-colonial* here for two reasons. First, I do not believe that Lê falls in the category of those trying to avoid a relationship with the *métropole*; her work is very much infused with an avowed European heritage and a Parisian spatiality. Second, as one of the goals of this article is precisely to assess the post-colonial literary critic's role in dictating the content of post-colonial literature and the positioning of its authors, use of the term is essential.

5. Richard Watts treats the issue of paratext in *Packaging Postcoloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World* and notes the particular power this sort of writing has on the circulation of Francophone literature. The epigraph of Watts' opening chap-



ter, from Yannick Lahens' *L'exil: Entre l'ancrage et la fuite, l'écrivain haïtien* is especially revelatory: "Nous savons que de plus en plus, c'est l'institution littéraire (l'enseignement, la recherche, la critique, l'édition) qui porte la création et non l'inverse" (cited in Watts 2005, 1).

6. "... ce renégat qui a trahi sa langue, sa famille, son pays ..." (cited in Argand 1999, 31).

7. See Artaud's *Œuvres*, compiled, presented, and annotated by Evelyne Grossman.

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