



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 15, No. 1/2
August 2018



© 2018 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International [CC BY 4.0] License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Averis, K. 2018. Transposing Gender in the Diaspora: Linda Lê's *Les aubes* (2000) and *In memoriam* (2007). *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 15:1/2, pp. 31-42. <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5735>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by
UTS ePRESS | <http://portal.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transposing Gender in the Diaspora: Linda Lê's *Les aubes* (2000) and *In memoriam* (2007)

Kate Averis

Universidad de Antioquia

Corresponding author: Kate Averis, Universidad de Antioquia, Calle 67 Número 53 - 108 P.O BOX 1226, Medellín, Colombia. katherine.averis@udea.edu.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5735>

Article History: Received 08/09/2017; Revised 03/08/2018; Accepted 03/08/2018; Published 23/08/2018

Abstract

Linda Lê's is one of the most resonant voices of the Vietnamese diaspora in Francophone writing, and her works are frequently read through the lens of exile and encounter with the other. While not engaging with explicit representations of the diasporic experience, Lê's fictional and non-fictional texts are profoundly marked by the dislocation and alienation associated with the experience. This article considers the ways in which Linda Lê's fictional writing surpasses the author's own particular experience of the Vietnamese diaspora to offer a literary universe in which the disruptions of diaspora are expressed through the depiction of resistant modes of being and belonging. Focusing on two recent novels, *Les aubes* (2000) and *In memoriam* (2007), this article analyses Lê's resistant construction of femininity, arguing that it is prompted and even enabled by the necessary transitions and transpositions of the diasporic experience. Through an examination of the sisterly solidarity, gender alterity and (in)corporeality that are foregrounded in these novels, the analysis explores Lê's intratextual disruption of inherited models of femininity and modes of participation in domestic and sexual relationships, and draws a link with Lê's extratextual literary universe to reveal the feminist ethics that underpins her resistance to gendered hierarchies.

Résumé

La voix de Linda Lê est l'une des plus significatives de la diaspora vietnamienne dans la littérature francophone et ses œuvres sont fréquemment lues dans l'optique de l'exil et de la rencontre avec l'autre. En contournant la représentation explicite de l'expérience diasporique, ses textes autant fictionnels que non-fictionnels sont néanmoins profondément marqués par

les ruptures et l'aliénation de cette expérience. Cet article examine la manière dont l'écriture fictionnelle de Linda Lê dépasse la propre expérience que l'auteure a fait de la diaspora vietnamienne, pour construire un univers littéraire dans lequel les heurts de l'expérience se traduisent par des modes d'être et d'appartenir contestataires. Tout en se concentrant sur la construction de la féminité résistante dans deux romans récents, *Les aubes* (2000) et *In memoriam* (2007), l'article avance l'idée que se sont les transitions et transpositions imposées par l'expérience diasporique qui l'ont rendue non seulement possible mais nécessaire. À travers l'étude de la solidarité sororale, l'altérité sexuelle et l'(in)corporité au sein de ces deux romans, cet analyse explore d'une part la contestation des modèles hérités de la féminité, et de l'autre part, le refus de participer à des relations domestiques et sexuelles conventionnelles. En conclusion, il s'attache à démontrer comment ce lien entre les féminités contestataires de cette auteure singulière et son univers littéraire intertextuel participe d'une éthique féministe qui soutend la résistance aux hiérarchies genrées.

Keywords

Linda Lê, *Les aubes*, *In memoriam*, diaspora, gender, feminist ethics; genre, l'éthique féministe

Linda Lê's corpus of fictional and non-fictional works spans the last three decades and underlines the singularity of individual experiences of displacement within the collective experience of the Vietnamese diaspora, 'one of the largest and most visible diasporas of the late twentieth century' (Nguyen 2015: 7). Lê's novels and short stories, in particular, offer a close-range, granular view of the personal impact of the disruption of familial and social networks caused by the dispersal of over two million Vietnamese people to, principally, the USA and Canada, France, and Australia (Nguyen 2015: 8). Lê arrived in France in 1977 at the age of fourteen and published her first literary text in 1987; today, she is one of the most resonant voices of the Vietnamese diaspora in Francophone writing and her works are frequently read through the lens of exile and encounter with the other. Yet unlike her Francophone Vietnamese literary contemporaries, such as Kim Lefèvre and Anna Moï, Lê is less concerned with writing 'narratives that ... take place in Vietnam and give voice to Vietnamese characters' (Kurmman 2016: 35) or with explicit representations of her own departure from Vietnam and settlement in France, privileging instead the associated themes of dislocation, guilt, trauma and alienation. In this sense, Lê's writing reflects the problematic intercultural subjectivity expressed in the works of an earlier generation of Francophone Vietnamese writers 'taught to revere and even identify with a culture that nonetheless held them apart as inferior' (Britto 2004: 7–8). For these Vietnamese writers of the colonial period, educated under the French colonial education system which actively affirmed the superiority of French culture and clearly marked Vietnam as inferior, the French language offered an ambivalent means to reappropriate the French cultural tools that they had inherited in order to claim a space of self-representation and assert a sense of identity (Britto 2004: 25–26). Lê's communication of the impact of forced displacement and diaspora, if not explicitly then tellingly, reveals some of the tensions of this intercultural position in a corpus that 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' (Barnes 2014: 25).

This article considers the ways in which Linda Lê's fictional writing surpasses the author's own particular experience of the dislocation of diaspora to offer a literary universe in which alienation is expressed through the depiction of resistant modes of being and belonging. It focuses, in

particular, on Lê's disruption of inherited models of femininity and modes of participation in familial and sexual relationships to reveal a strong feminist undercurrent in her fictional writing. Lê's works are not often read in terms of their feminist ethics, and certain features of her novels and short stories—such as the virtual absence of any affirmative female relationships—have been read as evidence of a suppression of the feminine, or an absence of female solidarity. Yet, as Gillian Ni Cheallaigh argues, 'the isolation of Lê's heroines from other females is moderated and qualified by the motif of the sister and sororial solidarity' (2015: 192). Forged literary or symbolic sisterly relationships counter the apparent absence of female relationships in Lê's works, and form the basis of her feminist engagement with gendered identities and relationships.

This analysis examines Lê's strategies of resistance to gendered hierarchies and normative identities through her presentation of sisterly solidarity, gender alterity and (in)corporeality to reveal the presence of a feminist ethics underpinning her works, despite the author's declared aversion to aligning herself with feminist discourse (Kurmman 2016: 15). Drawing on Leslie Barnes' observation that Lê's 'literary innovation is intimately connected to [the] author's position between, and experience of, France on the one hand and Vietnam on the other' (Barnes 2014: 2), this article argues that these resistant feminist strategies are prompted and even enabled by the author's diasporic experience, and the transposition of self and identity that such displacement demands. If, in order to reassert a sense of self, the diasporic subject must renegotiate the ties between self and other in the new setting, this process may also involve a revision of the nature of those ties in the new surroundings. The task of 'translating' oneself in the many (social, cultural and linguistic) contours of the new setting is at once necessary and impossible, such that this ineluctable process might be best understood as one of 'transposition' of the self into the new environment. The present analysis thus borrows from Derrida's notion of 'the necessary and impossible task of translation' to consider the subjective translation undergone in the diasporic setting (Derrida 2007: 197). If transposition in music is to play or rewrite a composition in a key other than the one in which it was originally written, and to transpose a piece of writing means to relocate it in another time and space with the necessary shifts that this entails, the transposition of the self might be understood as a reaccommodation of self in the new cultural and often linguistic setting in the diaspora. If for Derrida, "Peter" in this sense is not a translation of Pierre, any more than "Londres" is a translation of London,' neither is Linda Lê merely a self-translation in the diaspora, but a cultural and linguistic transposition in France of the young girl who left Vietnam in 1977 (Derrida 2007: 198).

Well-known for her much-cited resistance to imposed categories of either literary or personal identities (Yeager 1997: 256–257), Lê applies equally resistant and disruptive strategies in the construction of her fictional characters. The present analysis focuses on two novels which portray female protagonists who are represented in highly ambiguous terms: *Les aubes* [Dawns] (2000), and the more recent *In memoriam* (2007), while drawing connections between these and other works by Lê. Both of these novels posit alternative models of femininity through the physical and psychological representation of their female protagonists, to offer alternative modes of participation in sexual and domestic relationships to those offered by hierarchised, patriarchal arrangements.

Les aubes: naming and narrating femininity

Les aubes is narrated in the first person by a young man who has lost his sight in a failed suicide attempt. He attributes his persistent suicidal drive to an unhappy childhood caught in the crossfire of his parents' violent relationship, and declares his only solace in life to have been his dedication to three women: Vega, Forever, and Sola. The narrator recounts his past, and

particularly his infatuation with Forever, to Vega, the young woman with whom he falls in love when he employs her to read to him upon losing his sight. The deceased Forever is, herself, a victim of suicide, committed following the narrator's stay with her during his childhood. Prompted by two early suicide attempts in childhood, the narrator's stay with Forever only exacerbates his suicidal drive, which the father sought to eradicate by sending him to stay with his own ex-lover, and the sojourn eventually culminates in the third (failed) suicide attempt that results in the narrator's loss of sight. The three female figures of *Les aubes* are drawn together in a circle of suicide and literature that revolves around the narrator when Vega reads to him the poetry of the tragic figure of Sola (also a victim of suicide), to whose works Forever had introduced him during his stay with her. For the narrator, Vega, Forever, and Sola thus come to form a triad, and he refers to them collectively as 'ses trois Muses'.¹

While Vega and Forever appear as characters in the novel, the figure of Sola takes the form of a literary reference, as the author of the poetry adored by Forever and read to the narrator by Vega. As well as evoking the innate symbolism of Vietnamese names, and revealing one of the ways in which Lê tacitly weaves her Vietnamese cultural knowledge into her French narrative (Roberts 2003: 334), the English and Latin origins of their names reinforces the transcultural texture of Lê's writing. Emily Vaughan Roberts observes the effect of the symbolic naming, typical of Lê's characters and also present in *Les aubes*, in underlining the psychological dimension of their characterisation over any traits that might be grounded in any national or familial heritage (334). Severed from any pre-existing heritage by such symbolic naming, their identities become defined in relation to the male narrator in an illustration of the defining and hierarchising power of patriarchal law. Granted to them by the male narrator, who himself remains nameless and faceless, such symbolic names are employed by Lê in a tactic observed by Warren Motte to be a 'highly deliberate one: a name is after all the first guarantor of identity within a group, and to be nameless is to be very largely unidentified' (55–56). The unidentifiable male narrator in *Les aubes* thus fulfils the role of patriarchal law when he names and designates the identities of the women around him, drawing them together in a celestial constellation that orbits around him in a gesture that the triad will be seen to circumvent.

Their role as guiding lights of inspiration is further reinforced by their description as the narrator's 'Muses', recalling an earlier mythological female triad in Lê's fiction: the two sisters and cousin of *Les trois Parques* (1997a; *The Three Fates* 1997b).² As this novel's title indicates, these three female characters might be read as a transposition into a postcolonial Francophone tradition of the Moirai of Greek mythology, 'better known to modern readers under their Latin name of the Fates' (Rose 2005: 18). Regularly represented as spinners who measure and cut the thread of human destiny, and most often depicted in literature as old women, who 'were above all others the traditional spinners of the Greek household' (18), Lê's Fates are young women locked in antagonistic relationships driven by self-interest and rivalry, in contrast with the severe, stern, yet co-operative elderly spinners of antiquity. The antagonistic (genealogical) sisterly bonds in *Les trois Parques* are rewritten in *Les aubes*, where a forged literary sorority emerges between the three female figures, depicted as a community of writers

1 'his three Muses' (all translations are my own).

2 For an exposition of the mythological dimensions of this novel, see Loucif (2009).

and readers which exceeds the purview of the narrator, as illustrated by Forever's legacy of Sola's works to Vega, via the medium of the male narrator.³

As first noted by Michèle Bacholle-Bošković (2006) and developed by Alexandra Kurmann, such forged literary sororities are not limited to the characters within Lê's fictional universe, but extend to her intertextual 'intellectual engagement with a predominantly European cohort of writers', one of the most consistent interlocutors being the mid-twentieth-century Austrian poet and writer, Ingeborg Bachmann (Kurmann 2016: 2).⁴ Kurmann meticulously traces the 'sixteen-year intertextual commitment to the writer' that threads through Lê's writing to reveal not only the transnational but also the complex intertextual dimensions of her *œuvre* (2). After being addressed since 1989 in Lê's non-fictional works and evoked in her fictional texts, Bachmann finally appears in fictional form behind the pseudonym 'Sola' in *Les aubes*,⁵ such that the sisterly rapport that Sola bears with Forever and Vega is reflected in Lê's extratextual interchange with her literary precursor. Where, as Kurmann notes, women in Lê's previous works of fiction suffer from increasingly unbearable degrees of isolation and mistreatment (14), this gives way in *Les aubes* to a literary sorority, which displaces the centrality of the male narrator. Just as the patriarchal inheritance of either the French or Vietnamese literary tradition is superseded by Lê's forged literary relationship with a female Austrian poet and writer, the sisterly bonds that emerge between the female characters of *Les aubes* are privileged over the ties generated with their male narrator. This gesture of intra- and intertextual female solidarity, which functions to circumvent the patriarchal naming and identification of the female figures of *Les aubes*, does not, however, signal the demise of hierarchical patriarchal relationships, the inherent violence of which Bachmann qualified in her novels as 'the birth place of fascism' (73). Lê's twenty-first-century texts continue to struggle with, and resist, the gendered power imbalances of inherited models of domestic and (hetero)sexual relationships.

In memoriam: resistant femininity and gender alterity

Across Lê's corpus of fictional and non-fictional works, sexual relationships, and indeed most interpersonal relationships, are very rarely, if at all, portrayed as harmonious accords, but rather as violent affairs characterised by their mutually destructive nature. This is all the more so in Lê's portrayal of the domestic heterosexual partnerships that are the models inherited by her protagonists, where traditional power relationships between husbands and wives are often inverted, with wives and mothers carrying out the financially and socially dominant roles historically occupied by their male counterparts. *Les aubes* is no exception, where the figure of the narrator's mother is the wealthy head of an international business 'Consortium' who sees herself as having rescued her husband from his inferior class status and failed career as a painter, and employs him in a purely decorative role within the business in order to keep him occupied and out of the way. Models of husbands and fathers are thus frequently portrayed

3 The figure of the sororal triad might be considered a literary echo of that formed by Lê's own three sisters; the reference to the matriarch as 'lady Chacal' (Lady Jackal) by the sisters of *Les trois Parques* resonates, in particular, with Lê's own disparaging remarks made in numerous interviews about her mother, and suggests a sisterly resistance that is present in both *Les trois Parques* and *Les aubes*.

4 The Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, is also present in Lê's writing as a prominent interlocutor and 'literary sister', in non-fictional works such as *Tu écriras sur le bonheur* (1999) and *Marina Tsvétaïéva: comment ça va la vie?* (2002), as well as more implicitly in the prominence of Lê's suicidal writer-protagonists, echoing Tsvetaeva's own end-of-life.

5 For an in-depth analysis of the personification of Bachmann as Sola in *Les aubes*, see Kurmann (2016: 143–149).

as emasculated, often becoming subsumed by the relationship if not eventually committing suicide, as is the case of Sola's father in *In memoriam*. The offspring of such conflictual domestic arrangements model their own sexual relationships in response to the paradigms of their progenitors with very different stakes for male and female characters, as seen in the two novels at hand. As Ni Cheallaigh observes, Lê's narratives are written almost exclusively from the perspective of the son or daughter (Ni Cheallaigh 2016: 63), an observation that is borne out by *In memoriam*, which presents the daughter's response to the parental relationship, and *Les aubes*, where it is the impact of the parents' violence on the son that is at stake.

Like *Les aubes*, *In memoriam* also employs an unnamed first-person male narrator, who retrospectively recounts a past love affair with a successful novelist who, like the poet referred to in *Les aubes*, is also named Sola. A despairing writer who finally meets the much-admired novelist in a chance encounter in a bookshop after fruitlessly endeavouring to contact her through her publisher, the narrator relates the course of their tormented relationship and his rivalry with his brother, Thomas, who also becomes Sola's lover until her death by suicide. Where the male narrator of *Les aubes* seeks to break the mould set by his parents' violent, destructive relationship by seeking to immerse himself in what he perceives as a fulfilling, affirmative relationship with his sexual partner, Vega, the female protagonist of *In memoriam*, on the other hand, rejects the dysfunctional model of the parents' relationship through precisely the opposite strategy: by keeping herself at a distance from the male partner and rejecting any symbiosis or interdependency, or even any kind of domestic set-up at all. Indeed, it is Lê's female characters who predominantly resist subsumption into the domestic, heterosexual unit, in contrast with their male partners who frequently seek self-fulfilment and completion therein. Lê's female characters, then, might be said to defy gender norms by refusing to participate in the kind of hierarchical sexual relationships that are modelled to them by their parents and offered to them, albeit in altered form, by their (male) partners. Instead, they seek alternative modes of participation in sexual relationships to those imagined as complementary by the male partner, and experienced as engulfing by the female.

Lê's literary construction of femininity, which undermines the gender norms that require a complementarity between feminine and masculine ideals within a hierarchised heterosexual bond, reflects Judith Butler's disruption of the correlation between sex and gender and her assertion of its cultural mutability. As Butler states, 'When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biologyisdestiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny' (Butler 1999: 12). Where the articulation of gendered identity within available cultural terms forecloses in advance, or at least hinders, the possibility of thinking of gender in new and productive ways, circumstances of displacement and diaspora offer a privileged space in which to untether understandings of gender from the historical and cultural intersections in which they are produced. It follows that if gender is not the manifestation of a sex, but a convergence of culturally and historically specific sets of relations, departure from a particular historical and cultural context permits the consideration of gender in radically altered ways. Lê's female characters' resistance to the hierarchised patriarchal relationships that their partners envisage for them demonstrates the author's renegotiation of gendered identities and relations that is facilitated by transposition from a given cultural environment to another. While Lê does not entirely efface the binary gender regime to which Butler attributes the correlation of sex and gender (1999: 10), she might be said to offer a queered form of androgyny through the downplaying of the corporeal in her defiant female characters, as I discuss in the third and final section of this essay.

From (in)corporeality to incorporation

As indicated by the physically vague and psychologically rich evocation of her narrators and protagonists, Lê's fictional works contain very few textual references to bodies (either female *or* male).⁶ The few descriptions of the physical traits of her female characters that *do* appear firmly emphasise their diaphanous presence and physical frailty, foregrounding their psychological over their physiological experiences. Such a representation of incorporeal femininity reaches its most emphatic expression in *Les aubes* in the character of Forever, whom the narrator describes as a light-footed silhouette and 'une fée tombée de je ne sais quel ciel' (Lê 2000: 18), and likens to an underdeveloped child, a helpless old woman, and even an anaemic plant (27).⁷ Her vague physical presence and psychological isolation are reinforced by her habitation of the absolute margin—by the sea, in a cottage on a cliff which faces the horizon. Like Forever, *In memoriam*'s Sola is described as eternally dressed in white (the colour of mourning in Lê's native Vietnam) and deathly pale, effectively presaging her suicide. The dominant emphasis on Sola's wounded psychological state leaves the reader hard pressed to conjure up a mental image of the heroine in *In memoriam*. The narrator's frequent comparison between Sola and birds further emphasises her fragility, and above all, her other-worldliness: 'je ne cessai pas de la comparer à un oiseau de paradis, planant très haut dans le ciel et qui mourrait s'il frôlait le sol' (Lê 2007: 71).⁸ In addition to emphasising her frailty and vulnerability, the likening of Sola to 'un oiseau perdu dans une bourrasque' (89) illustrates the narrator's difficulty in being able to tie her down, underlining his failure to hold her within the confines of the kind of interdependent relationship he envisages with her.⁹ Frequently described by their (mostly male) narrators as slight, frail, weightless 'feu follets',¹⁰ Lê's young female characters respond by showing signs of suppressing their physical existence, notably, through eating disorders that seek to eliminate the body, and by avoiding the maternity that might ensure its descendance.

Forever's anorexia, in which she seeks self-effacement after the narrator's father, her former lover, forces her to seek an abortion before abandoning her, is a sign of her withdrawal her from the physical world of violent, destructive (hetero)sexual hierarchies. For the narrator, this denial of the physical self projects her into a spiritual realm as is made clear when he says:

Forever avait aussi ceci d'une fée: elle se nourrissait peu, d'une tranche de pain ou d'un biscuit sec. Cette abstinence était pour moi une preuve de son immatérialité et non le symptôme de la maladie, l'anorexie, dont elle était affligée depuis ses quinze ans. Pour

6 The exception to the absence of corporeal detail in Lê's works can be found in *Les trois Parques*, where each of the three female protagonists are referred to by a single physical attribute that is key to defining their character: the elder sister is referred to as 'Ventre Rond' (Round Belly) in reference to her advanced pregnancy, the younger sister as 'Belles Gambettes' (Beautiful Legs) in reference to her frivolous and self-involved nature, and the cousin as 'la Manchote' (One-Armed) in reference to the loss of her hand at puberty upon the discovery of her incestuous relationship with her twin brother (Smith 2010).

7 'a fairy fallen from some unknown sky'; 'une enfant arriérée,' 'une vieille dame impotente,' 'une plante anémique.'

8 'I always compared her to a bird of paradise, gliding high in the sky and which would die if it touched the ground.'

9 'a bird caught in a gust of wind.'

10 'will-o'-the-wisps.'

l'heure, la maigre de Forever était à mes yeux comme le signe de sa sainteté. (2000: 28–29)¹¹

As Tess Do observes, 'on peut diviser les personnages de Lê en deux groupes selon leur préférence alimentaire: les mangeurs de viande à l'appétit féroce et les jeûneurs plus ou moins anorexiques' (2004: 146).¹² One of Lê's cast of fasters, Forever is ultimately misguided in her attempt to recover autonomy and achieve self-determination through physical self-harming in the form of anorexia, a physical self-denial that is compensated for by an intellectual exuberance: 'Le refus de la nourriture s'accompagnait chez Forever d'une boulimie d'études' (2000: 29).¹³ Like Forever, the novelist in *In memoriam*, Sola, replaces food with words, and physical sustenance with intellectual sustenance, such that '[s]a chair, son sang étaient faits de la matière même de ses livres' (2007: 176).¹⁴

If the anorexia suffered by Lê's female characters seeks to suppress the existing physical self, the avoidance of maternity ensures against its future reproduction. Where maternity is suppressed in *Les aubes* at the behest of the male lover, in *In memoriam* it is Sola who vigorously resists the desire of the male lover, Thomas, to have a child with her. His attempts to impose onto her 'cette féminité qu'elle refusait' (176)¹⁵ initiate the final mental breakdown which culminates in her suicide. Through her treatment of Sola's refusal of maternity, Lê presents the possibility—as well as the cost—of resisting 'cette féminité' that Sola rejects and which the male partner, by contrast, sees as necessary to her salvation: 'il avait essayé de graver ceci dans son esprit: elle ne se reconcilierait pas avec elle-même tant qu'elle ne serait pas mère' (184).¹⁶ In consideration of Lê's own decision not to have children, expressed in the non-fictional *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* (2011),¹⁷ parallels can be drawn between the protagonist and the author in their shared evocation of possible femininities beyond normative maternal femininity.¹⁸ In a vertiginous *mise en abîme*, both Lê's character Sola, and the characters in Sola's books mirror Lê's stance on maternity: 'Les livres d'elle, que précisément éludaient toujours la question, mett[ait] en scène des personnages sans descendance, ... la procréation devenait alors un tabou inviolable' (2007: 182).¹⁹

11 'Forever shared another trait with fairies: she ate very little, a slice of bread or a dry biscuit. This abstinence was proof for me of her immateriality and not the symptom of her illness, anorexia, which had afflicted her since she was fifteen. At the time, Forever's thinness was, in my eyes, the sign of her saintliness.'

12 'Lê's characters can be divided into two groups according to their dietary preferences: meat-eaters with a ferocious appetite, and fasters who are more or less anorexic.'

13 'Forever's refusal of food went hand-in-hand with a bulimia of studies.'

14 'Her flesh and blood were made of the same matter as her books.'

15 'this femininity that she refused.'

16 'he had tried to engrave this in her mind: she would not be reconciled with herself unless she became a mother.'

17 For a detailed analysis of Lê's use of the epistolary genre to give an account of her decision not to have children in *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* (2011), see Edwards (2016: 75–102).

18 In *Cronos* (2010), Lê creates another remarkable figure of resistant femininity, Una, who is involved in a gendered power struggle that is both domestic and political as she defies her husband, the authoritarian leader of a violent (and misogynistic) dictatorial regime. In the case of Una, maternity, or rather pregnancy, becomes a mode of gendered resistance when she refuses to abort her child, conceived in an adulterous relationship.

19 'Her books, which precisely always evaded the question, present[ed] characters without descendants ..., procreation thus became a sacrosanct taboo.'

In memoriam's Sola and *Les aubes*'s Forever thus present models of femininity that strive for auto-determination and resist any calls to materially defined experience or normative maternity. This is illustrated particularly clearly in *In memoriam* in the resonance of Sola's symbolic naming.²⁰ Suggesting solitary self-sufficiency, Sola's name is, similarly to those of *Les aubes*, granted to her by the male narrator and his brother, Thomas: 'Nous l'appelions Sola parce qu'elle était solitaire et seule, d'une solitude souveraine' (2007: 9).²¹ Despite being granted by the narrator and not of her own invention, the symbolism of Sola's name can equally be considered a strategy on the part of Lê herself to define the female protagonist's identity in and of herself; a measure of her sovereignty insofar as her identity is self-contained rather than measured against the male Other, be it the father or a male sexual partner. This desire for auto-determination is reinforced in Sola's adoption of a publishing pseudonym, which frees Sola from the imposed identity of the patronym and leaves the way open for the redefinition of identity in the present, as a writer.

Fellow diasporic writer, Nancy Huston, includes Lê in a reflection on the nihilist tendency that she observes in a certain strand of contemporary French literature. In *Professeurs de désespoir* (2004), Huston denounces the solipsistic, masculinist drive that evangelises the auto-determination of self and denies the physical, corporeal and genealogical origins of human identity and experience. Yet Huston makes a special case for Lê, stating 'De tous les néantistes vivants, Linda Lê est celle que je préfère' (2004: 324).²² For Huston, despite Lê's embrace of nihilism's self-sufficiency and auto-determination,

Lê fais aussi une découverte importante ... : les hommes néantistes ne sont pas ses frères. Toujours enchantés de rencontrer de belles et fragiles jeunes femmes qui fuient leur mère, ils sont friands de jeux cruels dont son corps et son âme font les frais. Avec le passage du temps, elle comprend qu'à s'identifier à eux, elle risque sa peau. (2004: 328)²³

Echoing Huston's pronouncement, Lê's character Sola does, indeed, come to realise that identifying with the male narrator and the symbiotic relationship he attempts to impose on her risks recasting her 'solitude souveraine' into damaging isolation, a detachment that is appealing to the narrator as he seeks to become indispensable to Sola. Misreading her 'solitude' as a sign of vulnerability and incompleteness on her part, he projects onto her an ideal of the missing and desired other half, describing her repeatedly as 'un miroir' (2007: 13; 78) and 'mon double' (2007: 72; 94), and frequently referring to her as a long sought-after 'twin'.²⁴ For the narrator, the relationship is imagined as a constructive space for the affirmation of personal identity, yet Sola is described as vigorously resisting this symbiotic desire, and refuting any kind of resemblance they may bear to one another, effectively destroying the narrator's 'rêve

20 For an articulate discussion of the mythological origins of the characters' names in *In memoriam*, see Loucif (2009).

21 'We called her Sola because she was solitary and singular, of sovereign solitude.'

22 'Of all the living nihilists, Linda Lê is the one that I prefer.'

23 'Lê also makes an important discovery ... : the male nihilists are not her brothers. Always delighted to meet beautiful, fragile young women escaping from their mother, they are fond of cruel games for which her body and soul pay the price. With the passage of time, she understands that identifying with them places her at great risk.'

24 'a mirror'; 'my double.'

de toujours, celui de [s]'allier à un alter ego' (2007: 14).²⁵ The narrator eventually realises that Sola sees the kind of alliance that he envisages as an undesirable subsumption of the self into the other: 'Je mis du temps à admettre qu'elle se protégeât de toute relation fusionnelle. Elle craignait d'y être engloutie, et cette crainte l'amenait à se partager entre Thomas et moi, à délaissier l'un pour l'autre, puis à fermer la porte à tous deux afin de tenir conciliabule avec les personnages de son invention' (2007: 15).²⁶

Sola thus rejects the narrator's desired fusion and the fact that she seeks the imaginary company of the literary characters of her own invention is a telling revelation of Lê's transposition of gendered identities and relations. In this way, Lê contests the capacity of inherited modes of hierarchical, patriarchal, heterosexual relationships to offer a fruitful space of self-realisation for women. These are depicted as not only hindering women's autonomy and sense of self but as potentially life-threatening, as illustrated by her female characters' physical self-effacement through self-harm and suicide. In contrast with the destructive, isolating relationships that are seen to be resisted by Lê's female protagonists, intra- and intertextual relationships of female solidarity prove to offer women, including indeed Lê herself, an alternative space of interpersonal connection and personal identification that is defined less by material reality than by literary affinity. The sisterly solidarity that is enacted between the female readers and writers of *Les aubes* is echoed in Lê's 'incorporation' of the figure of Ingeborg Bachmann into her literary universe, as seen in the writerly figures that appear as Sola in both *Les aubes* and *In memoriam* in a literary gesture of female solidarity that Kurmann observes to be replicated by Huston when she writes Lê into her own intertextual universe (Kurmann 2016: 8; 58).

Lê's female characters' rejection of inherited modes of being and belonging and quest for definition in and of themselves thus reflect their author's own staking out of a literary universe that exceeds the inherited traditions of French, Vietnamese or even postcolonial Francophone literatures. Having disowned her first two literary publications (1987, 1988) due to the deference with which they approached the French literary tradition insofar as they sought 'd'être à la hauteur des indigènes',²⁷ more recent works have intervened in that literary tradition, expanding and redefining its contours. Lê loosens the hold of hierarchical, patriarchal constraints of the inherited traditions she works in and from, creating a literary space whose textures are decidedly intertextual, transnational and feminist. If the works produced in the first three decades of this singular author's literary trajectory have engaged with the impossible translations and necessary transitions of diaspora, it remains to be seen how the resistant transpositions of female, intercultural identity will further develop in the mature works of a writer at the height of her career and craft.

References

Argand, C. 1999, 'Linda Lê,' in *Lire*, 1 April. Online, available: https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/linda-le_803102.html [Accessed 2 May 2018].

25 'lifelong dream, to ally [him]self to an alter ego.'

26 'It took me a while to realise that she was protecting herself from any fusional relationship. She was afraid of becoming engulfed, and this fear led her to share herself between Thomas and me, to abandon one for the other, and then to close the door on both of us to hold counsel with the characters of her own invention.'

27 See Lê's comments in an interview with Catherine Argand (1999); 'to measure up to the natives.'

- Bacholle-Bošković, M. 2006, *Linda Lê: l'écriture du manque*. Edwin Mellen, Lewiston, NY.
- Barnes, L. 2014, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE.
- Britto, K. A. 2004, *Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality*. Hong Kong University Press, Aberdeen, HK. <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2007.2.2.306>
- Butler, J. 1999 [1990], *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York & London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13213-2_87
- Derrida, J. 2007 [1987], 'Des tours de Babel,' in *Psyché: Inventions of the Other*, vol. I, trans. J. F. Graham. Stanford University Press, Stanford: 191–225.
- Do, T. 2004, 'Entre salut et damnation: métaphores chez Linda Lê,' *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2: 142–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155804044094>
- Edwards, N. 2016, *Voicing Voluntary Childlessness: Narratives of Non-Mothering in French*. Peter Lang, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knx254>
- Huston, N. 2004, *Professeurs de désespoir*. Actes Sud, Arles; Leméac, Montréal. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1636-6522\(06\)77374-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1636-6522(06)77374-3)
- Kurmann, A. 2016, *Intertextual Weaving in the Work of Linda Lê: Imagining the Ideal Reader*. Lexington, Lanham, MD. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wfs.2017.0017>
- Lê, L. 1987, *Un si tendre vampire*. Table ronde, Paris.
- _____ 1988, *Fuir*. Table ronde, Paris.
- _____ 1993, *Calomnies*. Christian Bourgois, Paris.
- _____ 1996, *Slander*, trans. E. Allen. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- _____ 1997a, *Les trois Parques*. Christian Bourgois, Paris.
- _____ 1997b, *The Three Fates*, trans. M. Polizzotti. New Directions Publishing, New York.
- _____ 1999, *Tu écriras sur le bonheur*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
- _____ 2000, *Les aubes*. Christian Bourgois, Paris.
- _____ 2002, *Marina Tsvétaïéva: comment ça va la vie?* Jean-Michel Place, Paris.
- _____ 2007, *In memoriam*. Christian Bourgois, Paris.
- _____ 2010, *Cronos*. Christian Bourgois, Paris.
- _____ 2011, *A l'enfant que je n'aurai pas*. Nil, Paris.
- Loucif, S. 2009, 'Le fantastique dans *Les trois Parques* de Linda Lê,' in *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women's Writing*, (ed.) M.-A. Hutton. Peter Lang, Bern: 115–127.
- _____ 2009, 'Linda Lê, la passeuse,' *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4: 495–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409290903096376>
- Motte, W. 2003, *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1990*. Dalkey Archive Press, Normal, IL. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2005.0022>
- Nguyen, N. H. C. (ed.) 2015, *New Perceptions of the Vietnam War: Essays on the War, the South Vietnamese Experience, the Diaspora and the Continuing Impact*. McFarland and Company, Jefferson, NC. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12230>

-
- Ni Cheallaigh, G. 2015, 'Mad Sisters, Bad Mothers and Queer Maternity in the Work of Linda Lê,' in *Solitaires, Solidaires: Conflict and Confluence in Women's Writings in French*, (eds) E. Hugueny-Léger & C. Verdier. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle: 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.7173/164913316820201634>
- _____. 2016, 'Linda Lê's Antigonal Refusal of Motherhood,' in *Women's Lives in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature*, (eds) F. Ramond Journey & K. McPherson. Palgrave MacMillan, London: 61–76. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40850-7_5
- Rose, H. J. 2005 [1928], *A Handbook of Greek Mythology: Including its Extension to Rome*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421765>
- Roberts, E. V. 2003, 'A Vietnamese Voice in the Dark: Three Stages in the Corpus of Linda Lê,' in *Francophone Post-Colonial Cultures: Critical Essays*, (ed.) K. Salhi. Lexington, New York: 331–342. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.41-3932>
- Smith, L. 2010, 'The Disillusion of Linda Lê: Redefining the Vietnamese Diaspora in France,' *French Forum*, vol. 35, no. 1: 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/frf.0.0112>
- Yeager, J. A. 1997, 'Culture, Citizenship, Nation: The Narrative Texts of Linda Lê,' in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, (eds) A. G. Hargreaves & M. McKinne. Routledge, London & New York: 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315004921>