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## INTRODUCTION

# Introduction: Transdiasporic *Rencontres* in Việt Kiều Literature

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## Abstract

This special issue follows a conference entitled ‘*Rencontres: A Gathering of Voices of the Vietnamese Diaspora*’ that was held at the University of Melbourne, December 1-2 in 2016 and which sought to enable, for the first time, the titular transdiasporic *rencontres* or encounters between international authors of the Vietnamese diaspora. The present amalgam of previously unpublished texts written by celebrated Francophone and Anglophone authors of Vietnamese descent writing in France, New Caledonia and Australia today is the result of the intercultural exchanges that took place during that event. Literary texts by Linda Lê, Anna Moï and Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut are followed by writerly reflections on the theme of transdiasporic encounters from Hoai Huong Nguyen, Jean Vanmai and Hoa Pham. Framing and enriching these texts, scholarly contributions by established experts in the field consider the literary, cultural and linguistic transfers that characterize contemporary writing by authors of Vietnamese origin across the Francophone world.

## Résumé

Ce volume spécial réunit les Actes du colloque ‘*Rencontres : A Gathering of Voices of the Vietnamese Diaspora*’ qui s’est tenu à l’Université de Melbourne les 1<sup>er</sup> et 2 décembre 2016 et qui visait à faciliter, pour la première fois, les rencontres entre les auteurs, chercheurs et universitaires internationaux de la diaspora vietnamienne. Les fruits de leurs échanges interculturels y sont réunis dans ce présent recueil sous deux formes complémentaires : d’un

côté, les articles d'experts en littérature francophone comparée ; de l'autre, les contributions créatives de célèbres auteurs francophones et anglophones d'origine vietnamienne basés aujourd'hui en France, en Nouvelle Calédonie et en Australie. Les textes littéraires de Linda Lê, Anna Moï et Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut, suivis de réflexions d'auteurs par Hoai Huong Nguyen, Hoa Pham et Jean Vanmai sur le thème des rencontres transdiasporiques, se retrouvent ainsi enrichis par les études savantes sur les transferts littéraires, culturelles et linguistiques qui caractérisent l'écriture contemporaine des écrivains d'origine vietnamienne dans le monde francophone.

## Keywords

**Vietnamese diaspora, transdiasporic literature, Việt Kiều literature, Linda Lê, Anna Moï, Kim Thúy; Diaspora vietnamienne, littérature transdiasporique, littérature Việt Kiều**

This special issue follows a conference entitled '*Rencontres: A Gathering of Voices of the Vietnamese Diaspora*' that was held at the University of Melbourne from 1 to 2 December in 2016 and that sought to enable, for the first time, the titular transdiasporic *rencontres* or encounters between authors of the Vietnamese diaspora. Việt Kiều writers, that is, overseas Vietnamese settled, in this instance, in France, the French Pacific and Australia, were brought together by Tess Do and Alexandra Kurmann to participate in a public reading event and study day. The occasion was aimed at showcasing, to both the academic and Việt Kiều community in Australia, the linguistic diversity of cultural production created by refugees and migrants who had fled worn-torn, and later left communist, Vietnam. In facilitating this meeting of minds we intended to bring to light the many ways in which diasporic authors and their texts relate to one another, creating a web of transnational, transcultural and translinguistic exchanges that interconnects three and more generations of one globally dispersed people. The prevalence of the prefix 'trans' in current research on Vietnamese diaspora literature leads us to posit here what we consider to be the contemporary 'transdiasporic' turn in studies of Vietnamese refugee and migrant writing. The texts chosen for this journal issue focus on the 'trans' in *transdiasporic*, drawing particular attention to the cultural, linguistic and literary transfers, translations, and transactions reaching 'across' and 'beyond' the global Vietnamese diaspora (Ghosh & Hillis Miller 2016: 3). As such, '*Rencontres*' stages a collection of transnational conversations between scholars and culture-makers, in a commitment to facilitating international, interdisciplinary dialogues that contribute to transformations in the wider landscape of World and Global Literature Studies.

To open the discussion, Natalie Edwards in her article, 'Linguistic *Rencontres* in Kim Thúy's *Mãn*,' engages with 'translanguaging' in the work of internationally celebrated author of Vietnamese origin, Kim Thúy (Garcia 2016). Thúy, whose renown from her debut novel, *Ru* (2009), has transformed her into a symbol of 'refugee gratitude' in Canada (Nguyen 2013), deploys an innovative blending of her adopted languages of settlement with her mother tongue in what Edwards calls a 'new form of communicating subjectivity in transit.' French, English, and Vietnamese inscriptions framing the narrative intertwine with one another in *Mãn* in an illustration of the generative nature of diasporic literature in its capacity to cross multiple linguistic and cultural borders. Moving from language to the act of writing, Leslie Barnes shifts the conversation to consider in-between spaces in the intertextual essays of the most prolific writer of Vietnamese descent writing in France today: Linda Lê. Rather than focus on what lies between the dichotomy of home and place of settlement and its proliferations (native and adopted language, belonging and unbecoming), an approach that has characterized

exile writing scholarship for some time, Barnes explores Lê's preoccupation with the spaces between 'writing and not writing.' For Barnes, the double-faced Janus figure—who represents beginnings and endings, lives past and present in Lê's novels in *Un si tendre vampire* (*A Very Sweet Vampire*, 1987) and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* (translated as *A Tale of Love*, 2005)—symbolizes the tension between writers' silence and composition, and becomes the common ground on which encounters with Lê's literary precursors, most often European refugees, exiles and migrants, take place. Elucidating further ways in which Lê creates transdiasporic dialogues beyond the Vietnamese-Francophone context to convey universalisms of diasporic experience, Kate Averis demonstrates how Lê moves beyond articulations of her own painful displacement 'to offer a literary universe in which alienation is expressed through the depiction of resistant modes of being.' Averis reveals Lê's destabilization of received models of femininity and modes of behaviour in both the family unit and sexual relationships in the two novels, *Les aubes* (*Dawns*, 2000) and *In memoriam* (2007); in doing so she uncovers sub-textual feminist discourses in the work of a writer who overtly disassociates herself from named political movements.

The evolving historico-political narrative of Vietnam is inextricable from the story of exile, asylum and migration for the diaspora. Jean Anderson's contribution of a translated extract of Vietnamese-French writer Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut's historical crime novel, *L'esprit de la renarde* (*The Spirit of the Vixen*, 2009), set in seventeenth century *Đại Việt*, is a timely reminder that the history of Vietnam extends far beyond the heavily studied colonial and Cold War periods. The work of translation enables the global Vietnamese diaspora to read transnationally and transculturally to become acquainted with its many selves. Australian historian, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, closes the scholarly section of *Rencontres* with her article, "My husband was also a refugee": Cross-Cultural Love in the Postwar Narratives of Vietnamese Women.' Shifting our discussion from the written word to personal oral history, she takes as her subject the intercultural exchange born of the shared experience of refugee flight in the double-diasporic couple. Narratives of the marriage of two diasporic subjects exemplify, in the broadest sense, what we hope our notion the transdiasporic achieves—a movement beyond the borders of one diaspora in order to consider the interrelationality of peoples from diverse diasporic communities at points of cultural encounter across the globe.

The second section of *Rencontres* is divided into two parts: Cultural Production and Writerly Reflections. The three writers in the first section, Linda Lê, Anna Moï and Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut, are all born in Vietnam. Each lived part of their childhood in their native land before leaving for France and the USA (Tran-Nhut) at different times during and after the Vietnam War. Their leave-takings play a significant role in the ways in which they relate to the past and to their experiences as transnational writers.

In 'Sauf-Conduit' (Safe Passage), Lê evokes the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and scenes of panic-stricken Vietnamese desperately seeking a way out of their country. She uses the motif of the French passport to reflect on how, at that historical moment, this official and highly coveted document, which allowed her to leave Vietnam in safety, also bestowed upon her a new homeland and identity, one that she has left behind upon entering her declared new homeland of literature (Landrot 2010). A prolific exiled author of French expression, Lê refuses to use her books as a convenient passport to the safe refuge of the French literary tradition, opting instead for the rich disquiet of displacement and non-belonging. To create is to self-create, she argues, and only by opening oneself to the unknown and excluding oneself from any socially imposed cultural identity label that the writer, a cultural defector and citizen of nowhere, can one claim one's uniqueness and creative freedom in a world built of

nation states and controlled by cross-border gatekeepers. The question of the writer's identity is also the focus of Anna Moï's self-reflective text whose title, 'Meurtres sans préméditation' (Unpremeditated murders), refers to the symbolic killing of the mother tongue seen as the *sine qua non* of the birth of the translingual writer. In a light and witty style blending anecdote and literary essay, which is reminiscent of her recently published short story collection, *Le pays sans nom: Déambulations avec Marguerite Duras* (The Country Without a Name: Strolling with Marguerite Duras, 2017), Moï takes issue with the imposed social identities that came with the names she was given, first as a child by her parents and later as a wife by the man she married. Recalling how 'Anna Moï,' a business pseudonym that she had initially created for her Parisian clothing boutique, allowed her to break free from a past that alienated her and brought forth the translingual novelist she is today, Moï relates her own identity forgery to those of other translingual authors such as Romain Gary, Ágota Kristóf, Milan Kundera and Jorge Semprún. If her new identity led to a momentary confusion when she unexpectedly met an old classmate, Marcelino Truong (creator of the cover art of this special issue), whom she had known as Marco, this confusion makes evident their respective shifting identities and prompts Moï to reflect on her writing and the linguistic 'murders' she has committed each time she has deserted one language for another, that is, Vietnamese for French and French for English. Moving from the symbolic murder of the mother tongue to the murder of a child during the Huế massacre in 1968, Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut's fictional short story, 'Années du Singe' (Years of the Monkey) turns to one of Vietnam's darkest historical moments to reflect on the Vietnamese transnational identity and offers, in retrospect, a somber and critical view of the past. True to her reputation as a crime fiction writer, Tran-Nhut builds a mystery plot in which, after thirty-six years of absence, a native of Huế comes back to her city of birth in search of lost memories that may provide answers to her past. By using a first-person narrative for both the woman returnee and the murdered little girl, the author blends their stories and gives voice to the dead, the silent and often forgotten civilian casualties of war. In solving the enigma of the mysterious 'nuage d'automne' (autumn cloud), Tran-Nhut brings to the fore the distinction between the departee and the remainee, the *Việt Kiều* and the '*Việt d'outre-tombe*' (Vietnamese beyond the grave), and the honoured memory of those who paid for the peace in Vietnam with their own lives.

Hoai Huong Nguyen opens the section of *Writerly Reflections* with an analytical essay, 'Accords et correspondances' (Agreements and Correspondences), which explores her two novels to date, *L'ombre douce* (Soft Shadow, 2013) and *Sous le ciel qui brûle* (Under the Burning Sky, 2017). Set in Vietnam and France in the period between the start of the twentieth century and the 1970s, her narratives express her transcultural position between the West and Far-East and her interest in bridging these two seemingly opposite literary worlds. Through the enduring romance and friendship of her French and Vietnamese fictional couples, who are caught in the middle of a pitiless anti-colonial war that throws them into opposite camps, she evokes the connections between France and Vietnam, war and peace, past and present, harmony and disharmony. Reflecting on the relationship of correspondences between things and signs, she concludes her essay with a firm attestation to the resurrecting power of words in the face of human separation and loss. Similar to Hoai Huong Nguyen, Hoa Pham, born to Vietnamese refugee parents in Australia, grew up between two cultures and with the traumatic post-memory of the wars in Vietnam. In 'We are Vietnamese—A Reflection on being Vietnamese-Australian,' Pham draws on the life-changing encounters she had with Vietnamese exiled writer, Phạm Thị Hoài, in Berlin and with Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh, in a Buddhist retreat in Vietnam, to reflect on what it means to be a Vietnamese-Australian

author. She discusses how her meetings with these two influential figures have led her on a path of literary and spiritually self-discovery, and how their guidance has helped her forge a deeper connection between her Australian and Vietnamese selves. Using the title 'We are Vietnamese' as a mantra throughout the text, Pham lays a strong claim to her place in the Vietnamese community, and despite her inability to speak their language, reaffirms the interconnections between her and the Vietnamese people. Interestingly, Pham's claim clearly resonates with writer Jean Vanmai. Born in 1940 in New Caledonia, Vanmai is the second generation of the *Chân Dạng*, the Vietnamese indentured workers who were recruited in huge numbers by the French colonial government for the New Caledonian mining industry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While, unlike Pham, Vanmai is fluent in Vietnamese, he is nevertheless as eager as her to rediscover his roots through the connection with the Vietnamese communities beyond the borders of his small island. Recalling the enriching and comforting exchanges that he shared with other fellow-writers, readers and researchers at the *Rencontres* colloquium, the 'exceptional encounters' ('*Rencontres exceptionnelles*'), as he describes them in his text, allowed Vanmai to reflect on his personal literary trajectory, taking pride in being both an author of French expression and a true descendant of Dragons and Immortals, the legendary ancestors of the Vietnamese people.

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