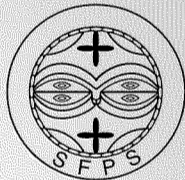


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Duras and Indochina

Postcolonial Perspectives

Julia Waters

Duras and Indochina: Postcolonial Perspectives

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Introduction

Duras's 'pays natal': from Propaganda to Fiction

'Je suis quelqu'un qui ne sera jamais revenu dans son pays natal',¹ Duras stated in 1987, thus simultaneously defining herself in relation to the place of her birth and as eternally displaced from it. Although Duras's reputation as an influential avant-garde novelist, film-maker and celebrity intellectual places her at the heart of the twentieth-century French canon, she was born and raised in a strikingly different, non-metropolitan context. Born the child of impoverished *colons* in the colonial outpost of French Indochina in 1914, Duras left the country of her birth and childhood at the age of eighteen, never to return. This initial displacement was compounded, as Duras pointed out in another interview, by the dissolution of the already artificial union of 'Indochina', after France's ignominious defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954: 'Je suis née dans les colonies. Le lieu natal que j'ai, il est pulvérisé. Et si vous voulez, ça, ça ne me quitte jamais – le fait que l'on ne vive pas là où l'on est né.'² Although Duras never physically returned to her 'pulverized' *pays natal*, her literary works attest to a repeated, almost obsessive, figurative return to the Indochina of her childhood, as originary source of creative inspiration and as the professed key to her writing.

The recollected topography and socio-racial hierarchies of France's showcase colony³ provide the physical and psychological

¹ *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), p. 70.

² *Les Yeux Verts* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), p. 199.

³ Whilst Algeria was France's main 'colonie de peuplement', Indochina was repeatedly promoted, in colonial propaganda and exhibitions, as the French Empire's rival to India, imperial Britain's 'jewel in the crown'. For a discussion of Indochina's special status as the 'perle de l'Extrême-Orient', see Nicola

context of many of Duras's novels and films – most obviously, the 'Indochinese' trilogy, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*.⁴ Indochina is also retrospectively and pre-emptively established as the autobiographical and intertextual key to other, less explicitly autobiographical, novels and films. When discussing the inspiration for her novel, *Le Vice-Consul*,⁵ set in British India, for instance, Duras asserts that: 'il faut aller plus loin que Calcutta et Singapour. Faut aller dans..., dans les rizières du sud de l'Indochine'.⁶ From the 1970s onwards in particular, Duras repeatedly asserted the importance of her non-French origins to her works and to her sense of personal identity. In the important series of interviews, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* – in which Duras discusses the links between the places in which she has lived and her writing – family photographs from the author's childhood in Indochina are included at the very centre of the book, as if to provide authenticating proof of the centrality of Indochina to her literary imaginary.⁷ Such claims to a non-metropolitan, non-centrist identity, and to the role of this identity in shaping her literary works, are echoed in the biographical information that accompanies most of Duras's novels published in Gallimard's Folio series, including those which do not deal, even obliquely, with the subject of the author's Indochinese childhood.⁸

Cooper, *France in Indochina* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) – in particular, Chapter 4, 'Exhibiting Indochina', pp. 65-90.

⁴ *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950) – the version referred to throughout this study is the collection Folio edition (1988); *L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984); *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

⁵ *Le Vice-Consul* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

⁶ Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 120.

⁷ Marguerite Duras and Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).

⁸ The following biographical description, sometimes slightly modified or supplemented by reference to Duras's significant literary works, accompanies most of the novels that appear in Gallimard's Folio series: 'Marguerite Duras est née en Indochine où son père était professeur de mathématiques et sa mère

Despite Duras's own emphasis on the Indochinese sources of her life and work, the author's key place in the twentieth-century French canon and her pivotal contribution to some of metropolitan France's most influential literary, intellectual and theoretical debates mean that the important (post)colonial, non-metropolitan aspects of her work were long overlooked. This oversight was compounded by the predominantly dehistoricized and depoliticized nature of readings of Duras's works, as the majority of Duras critics appear to concur with Julia Kristeva's assertion that 'history moves to the background and eventually disappears in Duras' works'.⁹ In recent years, however, in line with the more general growth in Postcolonial Studies and this new field's concern with the relationship between literature and history, a number of critics have gradually begun to explore Duras's shifting representations of French Indochina and her texts' ambivalent engagements with colonial ideology. Notable amongst these is Jane Bradley Winston's recent study, *Postcolonial Duras*, which challenges dominant (mis)readings of Duras as a metropolitan French writer, concerned solely with abstract, sentimental subjects.¹⁰ Yet, despite the existence of a vast body of

institutrice. A part un bref séjour en France pendant son enfance, elle ne quitta Saigon qu'à l'âge de dix-huit ans.'

⁹ 'The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras', *PMLA*, 102 (1987), 138-52 (p. 143).

¹⁰ *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Postwar France* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). See also Pascale Bécél, 'From *The Sea Wall* to *The Lover*: Prostitution and Exotic Parody', *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 21 (1997), 417-32; Catherine Bouthors-Paillart, *Duras la métisse: métissage fantasmatique et linguistique dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras* (Geneva: Droz, 2002); Suzanne Chester, 'Writing the Subject: Exoticism/Eroticism in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*', in *Decolonizing the Subject*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 436-57; Francine Dugast-Portes, 'L'Exotisme dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras', in *Le Roman colonial*, ed. by Centre d'études francophones de l'Université de Paris 13 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), pp. 147-57; Marie-Paule Ha, *Figuring the East* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), and 'Durasie: Women, Natives, and Other', in *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. by James Williams (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 95-111; Christine Holmlund, 'Displacing Limits of Difference: Gender, Race, and Colonialism in Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's

critical works on Duras, and despite increased recent interest in the (post)colonial aspects of her work, virtually no scholarly attention has yet been paid to Duras's early, pre-literary role as the writer of colonial propaganda. Duras's first published work was not, as her bibliography would lead us to believe, her 1943 novel, *Les Impudents*.¹¹ Nor was *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) her first work to depict French Indochina or to tackle the subject of colonialism. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, given Duras's reputation as an avant-garde, anti-establishment, leftist intellectual, Duras's first published work was, in fact, a non-fictional work of pro-colonial propaganda, entitled *L'Empire français*.¹² Under her birth surname of Donnadieu, Duras wrote this apologist, pro-colonial text, in collaboration with her colleague Philippe Roques, whilst working in the 'Service intercolonial d'information et de propagande' at the Ministère des Colonies in Paris.

Theoretical Models and Marguerite Duras's Experimental Films', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 13 (1991), 1-22; Yvonne Y. Hsieh, 'L'Évolution du discours (anti-)colonialiste dans *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* et *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* de Marguerite Duras', *Dalhousie French Studies* 35 (1996), 55-65; and Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹¹ *Les Impudents* (Paris: Plon, 1943).

¹² Philippe Roques & Marguerite Donnadieu [Duras], *L'Empire français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940). A handful of critics have referred in passing to *L'Empire français*, although generally only in a biographical context. Laure Adler discusses the circumstances in which Duras was commissioned to write *L'Empire français*, in her biography, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 130-32. Winston argues that the experience of producing colonial propaganda represented Duras's 'apprenticeship in writing' (*Postcolonial Duras*, p. 15), but her assumptions about the nature of such writing are not supported by any textual analysis of *L'Empire français*. In *Figuring the East* (2000), Ha focuses on the central propagandist message in *L'Empire français* and highlights the apparent contradiction between the text's pro-imperialist stance and Duras's later, overt criticism of the colonial administration in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. Ha does not, however, analyse *L'Empire français* in any detail and does not consider at all its chapter on Indochina.

Duras later dismissed *L'Empire français* as an 'ouvrage de circonstance'¹³ or an 'erreur de jeunesse'.¹⁴ As if taking Duras at her word, critics too have continued to ignore or dismiss *L'Empire français* – an oversight that is all the more surprising in studies of a writer whose every word, from recipes and shopping lists to interviews with footballers, seems to have been published and analysed in depth. Such critical neglect of *L'Empire français* has, no doubt, been encouraged by its relative inaccessibility¹⁵ and by the fact that it was published under the author's birth surname Donnadieu, rather than the famous *nom de plume* Duras. As a result, the role of *L'Empire français* as non-fictional precursor to Duras's later fictional works has been overlooked, and this particularly fruitful example of the interrelation of two very different discourses, propaganda and literature, as practised by the same author, has remained unexplored.

The aim of the current study is, therefore, to introduce readers to Duras's first and almost unknown work, and to overcome its critical neglect by exploring the intertextual relationship between it and Duras's later, literary works, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. By the time Duras wrote *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the last of her 'Indochinese trilogy', in 1991, nearly sixty years separated it from the author's early life spent in Indochina. Inevitably, Duras's later recollections of her 'pays natal', and her representations of an ever more distant geographic and historic reality, are highly textual, mediated by the language, structures and imagery of her earlier, fictional works – and importantly, as I aim to show, by those of the pro-colonial *L'Empire français*, written just seven years after Duras left Indochina and hence temporally the closest to her lived experience there. Duras once referred to her method of depicting a geographic context as 'descriptions par

¹³ Duras described *L'Empire français* in these terms in a letter to Gaston Gallimard, written in 1941, which is reproduced in *Duras: Romans, cinéma, théâtre, un parcours 1943-1993* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 12.

¹⁴ Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 139.

¹⁵ As Chapter 1 discusses, for historical and contextual reasons, there was only ever one print run of *L'Empire français* and even this failed to achieve a significant distribution. To my knowledge, only one copy is now publicly available, in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.

touches de couleur': that is, rather than attempt a meticulous, realist description, she would choose four or five short-hand motifs or 'signs' which encapsulated for her the essence of that place – a technique which she likened, in its suggestive nature, to abstract painting.¹⁶ My comparative analysis of *L'Empire français* and Duras's 'Indochinese' novels focuses primarily on the later works' intertextual borrowings, and often radical reworkings, of descriptive 'touches de couleur' that were originally deployed in the propagandist precursor's eulogistic chapter on Indochina. Whilst I am not suggesting that Duras's intertextual borrowings from *L'Empire français* occurred at a wholly conscious or active level – a suggestion which would, in any case, be virtually impossible to prove – her novels' successive literary reconstructions of a distant, imperfectly recollected Indochina remain, as later chapters reveal, crystallized around the same limited set of descriptive elements.

Many of the very same motifs that form the basis of the description of Indochina in *L'Empire français* – the powerful Mekong in flood; the monotonous rice plains of Cochinchina; the monsoon rain; the twin cities of Saigon, with its ordered 'haut quartier', and Cholon, with its animated, Chinese streetlife; or the eternal passivity of the indigenous peasants – return to form the geographic and symbolic context of Duras's 'Indochinese' novels. Reslanted and transformed in their intertextual journey from text to text, however, they are often made to serve very different ends. Heeding Duras's repeated warnings of the non-mimetic, non-realist nature of her writing, in such provocative statements as 'J'ai vécu le réel comme un mythe',¹⁷ and avoiding the biographical readings that have tended to dominate critical approaches to Duras's 'Indochinese' narratives,¹⁸

¹⁶ Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Marguerite Duras', *French Review*, 44 (1971), 653-55 (p. 655).

¹⁷ This quotation was used as the title of an interview with Aliette Armel which appeared in *Magazine littéraire*, 278 (1990), 18-24.

¹⁸ Recent years, in particular, have seen the publication of several biographies that link Duras's life and work, including, most famously, Adler's weighty and controversial tome, *Marguerite Duras*. Other biographical studies include: Alain Vircondelet, *Duras* (Paris: François Bourin, 1991); Christiane

my analyses examine both the textual and intertextual nature of Duras's reconstructions of her 'pays natal' and also their characteristically oblique interrelation with the social, political and theoretical concerns of the period in which Duras was writing. In so doing, I hope to address the two seemingly irreconcilable demands that, according to Nicholas Harrison, confront postcolonial critics when reading a work of fiction: 'on the one hand they must give adequate weight to the text in its individuality and "literarity"; on the other they must apprehend it in the socio-historical context from which it emerged and in relation to which it needs, at some level, to be understood'.¹⁹

Consideration of *L'Empire français*'s status as precursor to her literary career sheds new light on the genesis and development of Duras's writerly imaginary, and bridges the biographical and textual gap between the author's *rapatriement* in 1933, and the start of her writing career in 1943. The existence of this pro-colonial, propagandist precursor to the writer's post-colonial, literary works, spanning a period of over half a century, also provides particularly fruitful ground for testing postcolonial theories about the nature of colonial discourse, about the relationship between official colonial rhetoric and fiction, and about the legacies of colonialism in a supposedly 'post-colonial' world.²⁰ Ever since Said wrote his seminal

Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); and Frédérique Lebelley, *Duras ou le poids d'une plume* (Paris: Grasset, 1994).

¹⁹ *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Oxford: Polity, 2003), p. 2.

²⁰ Throughout this book, I shall adhere to the following widely, though not universally, accepted distinction between hyphenated and non-hyphenated forms: 'The hyphenated term "post-colonial" seems more appropriate to denote a particular *historical period* or *epoch*, like those suggested by phrases such as "after colonialism", "after independence" or "after the end of Empire."' Postcolonialism, in the non-hyphenated form, is used instead to refer to 'disparate forms of *representations, reading practices and values*. These can circulate *across* the barrier between colonial rule and national independence.' John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 5 (original emphases).

Orientalism in 1978,²¹ thus effectively launching the field of Post-colonial Studies, there has been heated debate amongst critics as to the nature of western representations of non-European cultures and peoples. Said influentially argues that, in all its multiple manifestations, 'Orientalism' constitutes a fixed, constant 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (pp. 2-3). Underlying Said's assertion is an assumption that western discourses about the East monolithically construct the Orient as the Other of the West – a view which has continued to hold considerable sway amongst analysts of colonial discourse ever since. Homi Bhabha, amongst others, famously contested Said's view of the fixed and constant nature of colonial discourse.²² He argues instead that, since it always ultimately fails in its repeated attempts stereotypically to fix the non-western other, even the most self-assured manifestation of colonial discourse is fundamentally ambivalent and prone to constant slippages. Yet, despite his vigilance to the inherent inconsistencies and fissures in colonial discourse's would-be stable façade, Bhabha's own abstract, dehistoricized approach also fails to consider how particular colonial stereotypes may result from particular historic contexts, or how they may evolve over time.

In her important comparative study, *Critical Terrains*,²³ Lisa Lowe also challenges the prevalent critical perception that Orientalist discourse about the East is consistent, monolithic and univocal, claiming instead that it represents 'a heterogeneous variety of discursive formations of cultural difference' (p. 9). She argues that 'the assumption of a unifying principle [...] leaves uninvestigated the necessary possibility that social events and circumstances other than the relations between Europe and the non-European world are implicated in the literature about the Orient' (p. 8). By studying a selection of representations of the East, from both British and

French literature and from different periods, Lowe demonstrates that different circumstances lead not to a monolithic construction of a homogenized Oriental Other, but to a multiplicity of very different constructions of 'otherness'. Duras's repeated textual returns to colonial Indochina, over a period of more than fifty years and spanning both colonial and post-colonial eras, both propaganda and fiction, offer particularly fertile ground for the exploration of the nature, uses and permutations of colonial discourse, and of representations of the East, as evidenced in the works of one author. My study thus examines how tropes, stereotypes and motifs of colonial discourse, originally employed in *L'Empire français's* eulogistic and propagandist portrayal of 'la plus belle des colonies françaises' (p. 116), are borrowed and adapted in Duras's later, polyvalent, literary representations of Indochina. My intertextual analyses of Duras's colonial and post-colonial works consider how the very same, enduring elements are often radically transformed, as they become inflected by the particular intellectual preoccupations of the historical moment in which each work was written. Such an intertextual, comparative approach seeks to problematize critical assertions of a reductive opposition between the monolithic, racist discourse of colonialism, on the one hand, and the multi-faceted hybridity of post-colonial texts, on the other.

During the half a century which separated the writing of *L'Empire français* (1940) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), significant changes occurred in France's social fabric, in its relations with its (former) colonies, and in consequent conceptions of French national identity. Although the 'golden age' of colonial expansion was already in the past, both *L'Empire français* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* were written at a time when France was still an imperial power, albeit an embattled one. By the time *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* were written, however, France had long since lost its last colonial possessions and, rather than being the origin of colonial emigration, had become the destination of post-colonial immigration. Other historical and social events in the intervening period, such as World War II and the German Occupation, the dominance and subsequent decline of Communism, May '68 and the women's

²¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

²² See, in particular, 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66-84.

²³ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

movement also had a profound impact on the way France thought of itself and considered its colonial past.

In a series of historicized readings, I examine the ways in which social events and intellectual concerns contemporary to the writing of Duras's 'Indochinese' works are implicated in their representations of colonial Indochina. How, for instance, does colonialism's discourse of racial difference, which underpins *L'Empire français's* propagandist rhetoric, interrelate with other forms of difference – nation, class, gender and ethnicity – that emerge over the half-century during which Duras was writing? How does the retrospective narrative perspective of Duras's literary works attempt to overcome the often profound ideological differences between the historical era represented and that of the writing's present? Chapter 1 considers how, in 1940, *L'Empire français's* explicit espousal of colonial discourse's self-congratulatory opposition between the civilized European self and the non-civilized, non-European other attempts, but ultimately fails, to account for the emergence of a new, European other – Germany – and the threat that it poses to France's sense of national identity. Reflecting its didactic, propagandist agenda, *L'Empire français* is alone among Duras's 'Indochinese' texts in adopting the narrative viewpoint of the (colonial) establishment, rather than that of the transgressive other who threatens to disrupt its *status quo*. Yet, as I show, *L'Empire français's* dual function, as both colonial propaganda and wartime propaganda, leads to a reversal of the traditional logic of colonial discourse, whereby European superiority is asserted in order to justify colonial expansion. In *L'Empire français*, in striking contrast, the possession of an empire is cited as proof of France's superiority and, by extension, of its ability to resist capitulation to the Germans.

In Chapter 2, I examine how *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) reworks many of the descriptive motifs from *L'Empire français's* pro-colonial portrayal of Indochina, but to strikingly opposing ends. The eulogistic descriptions of Indochina's southern floodplains or of Saigon's spacious, ordered European district are reworked, to devastating effect, in order to reveal the brutal reality behind colonial propaganda's reassuring façade. My intertextual analysis shows how Duras's novel's bitter indictment of colonial corruption and capitalist

greed reflects her post-war, Marxist concerns with class difference. Whilst problematically avoiding any direct reference to the contemporary realities of the Franco-Indochinese war, Duras portrays Indochina as the embodiment of an exploitative capitalist system, destined to be overturned by the revolution of the united proletariat. As I show, however, *Un barrage's* Marxist-inflected portrayal of the indigenous population as a mass of downtrodden peasants runs the risk of reinscribing the dehumanizing, homogenizing stereotypes of traditional colonial rhetoric that it explicitly refutes.

When Duras published *L'Amant* in 1984, the French political and social climate was profoundly different from that of the immediate post-war era. In striking contrast to Algeria, Indochina had come to represent a relatively unproblematic and even vaguely nostalgic part of France's colonial past, and Marxism, like other 'grand narratives', had been largely discredited in the eyes of contemporary, postmodern thinkers. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which Duras's return to her 'pays natal' in her semi-autobiographical *L'Amant* – particularly in its reworkings of many of her earlier works' key descriptive and symbolic motifs – reflects her engagement with theories of female sexuality and gender difference that had emerged during the 1970s, and with which her earlier, non-autobiographical works had been crucially associated. In its (inter)textual reconstruction, European Saigon's colonial society here represents a patriarchal regulator of *jouissance*, against which the transgressive other of the central, semi-autobiographical protagonist asserts her own, desiring, female identity. Correspondingly, the Chinese district of Cholon and the floodwater of the Mekong become endowed with associations of sensuality, liberation, and destabilizing flux. In this highly gendered topography, the central encounter between the young French girl and her Chinese lover is seen to disrupt the rigid opposition between colonizer and colonized and, I argue, to assert an alternative, non-western model of gender relations.

L'Amant de la Chine du Nord, published in 1991, quite explicitly stages its intergeneric rewriting and revision of Duras's best-selling *L'Amant*, and was purportedly motivated by Duras's dissatisfaction with Jean-Jacques Annaud's commercializing, exoticizing film

adaptation of the earlier novel. As Chapter 4 makes clear, although only seven years separate these two works, the same 'Indochinese' material is recast in relation to an entirely different set of concerns – with immigration, ethnic difference and national identity – that dominated French domestic politics during the late 1980s. In line with these contemporary, postcolonial concerns, Duras presents her 'pays natal' as a potentially utopian – but highly paradoxical – site of multi-cultural exchange and productive *métissage*, simultaneously made possible by the migration and displacement that characterized colonization, but fatally flawed by its invasive racial prejudices and artificial prohibitions.

For the purposes of this book, my analyses concentrate on the intertextual relationship between *L'Empire français* and Duras's explicitly 'Indochinese' works, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*: that is, those novels whose historical and geographic setting is most unambiguously established as being that of colonial Indochina. This is not to suggest, however, that similar, intertextual comparisons could not be made between *L'Empire français* and Duras's other 'colonial' novels and films. I would argue, for instance, that Duras's depiction of a doomed British Empire, in *Le Vice-Consul* (1965) or *India Song* (1973), presents an oblique reflection on France's catastrophic loss of its own empire, after withdrawal from Algeria in 1962. Bridging the gap between *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) and *L'Amant* (1984), the works of Duras's 'India Cycle' offer an alternative colonial site on which to explore France's colonial past – a past that was, arguably, still too raw, shameful and traumatic to be tackled more directly.²⁴

Duras's biographical journey – from child of poor *colons*, at the bottom of the colonial ladder in pre-war Indochina, to best-selling writer at the heart of the French canon, feted by the media and public alike – corresponds to a broader, historical shift from colonial to post-colonial world orders. The often ambivalent, intertextual

relation between her various 'Indochinese' works reflects many of the tensions and slippages inherent in those personal and historical trajectories. By means of this study's contextualizing, comparative analyses, I aim to counter the predominant critical perception that Duras's works are entirely divorced from political and social reality, and to explore how, over a period of more than half a century, Duras's 'Indochinese' works continue retrospectively to investigate the structures and ideology of colonialism, whilst also exploring ethical and theoretical concerns arising from the particular historic moments in which they were written. Duras's repeated literary returns to her 'pays natal' entail both a retrospective reconsideration of France's colonial past and, often problematically, the textual construction of a largely imaginary space onto which to project a shifting set of contemporary, fundamentally metropolitan, concerns.

²⁴ Such an interpretation would, for instance, explain the invasive presence of the Laotian beggarwoman on the streets of Calcutta in both *Le Vice-Consul* and *India Song*, or the haunting superimposition of a map of Indochina in the closing frames of *India Song*.

Chapter 1

L'Empire français: Colonial Discourse and Wartime Propaganda

Duras's literary and filmic career was characterized by its diversity, generic experimentation, thematic provocation and frequent, seemingly self-contradictory changes of direction. It is, therefore, paradoxically both typical and highly surprising that Duras's first writing and publishing venture should have been in propaganda, a genre whose unequivocal, didactic purpose is the antithesis of the openness, plurivalence and ambiguity that characterize her fiction. The tendency in Duras studies, as mentioned in the introduction, has been to write off or write out *L'Empire français*, at most regarding it as an example of misguided juvenilia, a long-buried, regrettable and largely irrelevant part of the pre-history of the 'real' Duras. Yet can *L'Empire français* really be so easily dismissed, either in relation to Duras's subsequent works or in its own right, as an example of pro-colonial rhetoric? Subsequent chapters of this study will examine the role of *L'Empire français* as a virtually unknown, non-fictional precursor to Duras's well-known 'Indochinese' novels, exploring the nature and extent of intertextual links between the two very different forms of discourse, propaganda and fiction, as practised by the same author, over a period of more than half a century. In this chapter, however, I shall analyse *L'Empire français* itself as a manifestation of colonial discourse, examining the very particular circumstances within which it was produced, and exploring the ways in which these circumstances at once dictate and disrupt its propagandist agenda. Notwithstanding the foundational role of *L'Empire français* in Duras's literary œuvre, the fascinating and tragic context surrounding the text's production offers of itself compelling grounds for its reconsid-

eration by Duras scholars, historians and analysts of colonial discourse.

Having left Indochina for good in 1933, to complete her education in France, Marguerite Donnadiou [Duras]¹ was taken on at the Ministère des Colonies in Paris in 1938, initially working under Philippe Roques as an 'auxiliaire' on various 'comités de propagande' set up to promote produce from France's colonies. Duras later moved to the 'Service intercolonial d'information et de propagande' where, according to Laure Adler, Georges Mandel, the colonial minister, recognized her 'esprit de synthèse, sa capacité de travail, sa facilité à rédiger et sa connaissance du passé de l'Indochine' (*Marguerite Duras*, p. 132), and chose her to write the propagandist work that would become *L'Empire français*. Duras was assigned the task of writing the manuscript in its entirety, whilst Philippe Roques, her superior, had the role of reading, editing and amending her work.

Whilst the major part of the mechanics of writing and arranging the text may well, therefore, have been Duras's work, *L'Empire français* was very much a collaborative project, conceived by Mandel himself as an integral part of his wartime colonial programme. The centrality of *L'Empire français* to the promotion of Mandel's colonial agenda is underlined in the following extract from a recent biography of the politician:

L'une des missions primordiales qu'il s'était assignées était de 'faire prendre conscience' à la France qu'elle était un 'empire de cent dix millions d'habitants'. Aucun moyen de propagande ne fut négligé. Ce fut le sens [...] du livre que Philippe Roques et M. Donnadiou consacrèrent à l'Empire français'.²

¹ In order to avoid potential confusion and inconsistency, I shall use the name 'Duras' throughout to designate the co-author of *L'Empire français*, rather than the patronymic surname, Donnadiou, under which it was in fact published. The writer's *nom de plume* was not adopted until the publication of her first novel, *Les Impudents* (Paris: Plon, 1943).

² Bertrand Favreau, *Georges Mandel: ou la passion de la République, 1885-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1996). Duras's subsequent adoption of her *nom de plume* not only long facilitated the omission of *L'Empire français* from her own bibliography, but also probably accounts for Favreau's omission of even the briefest biographical details here. In contrast, Philippe Roques – himself no more than a faceless co-

From the point of view of Mandel's biographer, *L'Empire français's* importance lies in its role as part of the minister's colonial propagandist agenda and not in the identity and later renown of its second co-author, who is not even granted the individuation of a first name. From the very different point of view of Duras scholars, however, it is also important to bear in mind that *L'Empire français* was a commissioned work. As an employee, Duras was paid to produce propaganda, reflecting the contemporary policies of the Ministère des Colonies. As such, the views expressed in *L'Empire français* arguably need not be those of Duras herself. Duras's role in the creation of her first published work was primarily that of a spokesperson for ministerial policy, rather than of the 'author' in any more creative, originary or inspirational sense.

Stylistically and ideologically, there is little in *L'Empire français* that immediately stands out as prefiguring the nature of Duras's later, literary writing. The majority of the highly derivative text is composed of familiar clichés, terminology and structures from classic colonial rhetoric, moulded to the needs of its particular wartime context. Much of *L'Empire français's* propagandist rhetoric only gains intertextual significance in relation to Duras's literary œuvre with hindsight: that is, many of the puzzling areas of ambivalence and contradiction in Duras's literary portrayals of Indochina or of the colonial regime are helpfully elucidated by means of a comparative consideration of the tropes of colonial ideology deployed in their propagandist precursor. On the other hand, many of the thematic and descriptive motifs that will form the basis of Duras's fictional representations of Indochina's landscapes, towns and people are immediately and strikingly recognizable in *L'Empire français's* chapter, 'L'Indochine, carrefour des peuples', in which Duras appears to have been granted a greater degree of creative freedom than elsewhere. This chapter's broad brushstroke evocation of the salient features of the colony most readily presents itself as fertile ground for an intertextual comparison with Duras's various literary representations of colonial Indochina. Subsequent chapters of this study will,

author in those Duras studies that refer to *L'Empire français* – is granted a very different status, as 'l'inflexible serviteur de Georges Mandel' (p. 461).

therefore, primarily plot the intertextual metamorphoses of some of the 'touches de couleur' from the original descriptions in *L'Empire français*, on their transformative journey through Duras's 'Indochinese' novels. In order to contextualize these intertextual readings, however, the current chapter will examine *L'Empire français* more broadly, as a fascinating, paradoxically atypical manifestation of many of colonial discourse's most typical features. In examining the structures and devices of its pro-colonial, propagandist agenda, I shall consider whether *L'Empire français* really is such an unreconstructed example of colonial ideology as to warrant Duras's later rejection and suppression of it, or whether the exceptional circumstances in which it was produced to an extent legitimate, but also undermine, its triumphalist, imperialist rhetoric.

On an initial reading, *L'Empire français* appears to epitomize the modes of representation that Said, in *Orientalism*, first termed 'colonial discourse': that is, the system of knowledge (statements, beliefs and practices) used by western colonial powers to exert material and political control over colonized peoples.³ As propaganda, the relationship of *L'Empire français* to such material and political practices is even more direct – or, as JanMohamed puts it, 'symbiotic'⁴ – than that of literature, the most common object of colonial discourse analysis. The following, two-part description of the common characteristics of colonial discourse provides a useful starting point for our analysis of *L'Empire français*:

Colonial discourse tends to exclude, of course, statements about the exploitation of the resources of the colonized, the political status accruing to colonizing powers, the importance to domestic politics of the development of an empire, all of which may be compelling reasons for maintaining colonial ties. Rather it conceals these benefits in statements about the inferiority of the colonized, the primitive nature of other races, the barbaric depravity of colonized societies, and therefore the duty of the imperial power to reproduce itself in the colonial society,

³ To provide readers with an idea of the structure and scope of *L'Empire français*, its table of contents is reproduced in an appendix to this study.

⁴ In 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 59–87, Abdul R. JanMohamed asserts that 'a profound symbiotic relationship [exists] between the discursive and the material practices of imperialism' (p. 64).

and to advance the civilization of the colony through trade, administration, cultural and moral improvement.⁵

In constructing a wholly positive picture of French colonization in *L'Empire français*, Duras deploys many of the strategies listed in the second part of this quotation – strategies which are, arguably, more readily characteristic of classic colonial discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, than of the mid-twentieth century.⁶

In line with the above description of colonial discourse's most common features, a social Darwinian hierarchy of races – with sub-Saharan Africans at the bottom, North Africans and 'Annamites' in the middle, and the civilized French at the top – underlies and structures the colonialist message in *L'Empire français*.⁷ In three central chapters, each purporting to 'teach' the French reader about one of the main regions of French colonization, Africa, Madagascar and Indochina,⁸ Duras borrows pseudo-scientific theories to classify and characterize the different peoples and so, by extension, to justify their colonization. Africa's primitive, unevolved state means that, anthropomorphically, it is 'incapable d'améliorer le sort de ceux qui vivent sur son sol' (p. 84), and hence it is shown to be both natural and just for the superior, civilized French to put right the continent's

⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 43.

⁶ For a useful study of common characteristics and recurrent strategies of colonial discourse in different genres and periods, see David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁷ In asserting such a hierarchy, Duras's colonial rhetoric follows many historical antecedents. Notably, in his infamous and influential 'scientific' treatise, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853), Gobineau used racialist theory to divide humankind into three races: white, black and yellow. 'Yellow' peoples were seen as superior to black, but were characterized as feeble, lazy and passive, thus making them malleable raw material for colonization by superior white nations.

⁸ In the introduction, the aim of *L'Empire français* is set out as to 'apprendre aux Français qu'ils possèdent outre-mer un immense domaine' (p. 9), and the didactic tone of the verb 'apprendre' is carried on throughout the text, in its deployment of a range of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses.

failings through colonization. Considered more evolved than Africans, on account of their ancient culture and Confucianist education system, the peoples of Indochina elicit muted admiration: 'une société où il existe une mentalité semblable est riche de promesses' (p. 222). Underlying this apparent praise, however, is the implicit understanding that this 'promise' can only be fulfilled with the corrective inculcation of French culture, social values and pedagogy.

A causal link is insistently constructed, in *L'Empire français's* propagandist reasoning, between the various colonized peoples' collective racial inferiority (whatever their relative position in the hierarchy of races), and the benevolent, humanitarian duty of the French colonizers. Such a link underlines the following depiction of the colonized populations' relationship to France:

Le sentiment unanime des populations de nos territoires d'outre-mer a su pour s'exprimer trouver soudain des mots qui nous sont familiers depuis longtemps, mais dont nos indigènes goûtent encore la fraîcheur. Eux aussi ont parlé de la 'Mère Patrie'. Eux aussi ont employé avec une foi d'enfants ce terme de 'douce France'. (pp. 9-10)

Duras's clichéd portrayal of the colonizing nation as the 'Mère Patrie' or 'douce France', her depiction of the 'natives' as faithful children, and the repetition of the possessive article 'nos', all serve to assert France's natural right to dominion over other, more 'primitive' peoples and lands. Euphemistic references to the humanitarian benefits that colonization has brought to colonized peoples abound. The inferiority of the colonized peoples and the benevolence of the imperial power are repeatedly asserted as conforming to 'des lois naturelles' (p. 38), so portraying colonization as a moral duty, rather than as the result of brutal coercion or exploitation. This humanitarian argument is most explicitly asserted in Duras's admiring reference to France's 'mission civilisatrice', namely that 'les races supérieures ont le devoir de civiliser les races inférieures' (p. 45).

The narrative that Duras constructs of the history of Indochina's conquest similarly selects and slants events in such a way as to present French colonization as natural, inevitable and desirable, as illustrated by the assertion that: 'Si l'Indochine était livrée à son propre sort, elle pourrait très difficilement vivre par elle-même et ne saurait se défendre des convoitises de ses voisins en mal de con-

quête' (p. 209). The only example of indigenous resistance alluded to is that of the nineteenth-century emperor, Tu Duc, who is dismissed as 'très xénophobe' (p. 33) for his vain opposition to the French occupation of Annam. In keeping with the euphemistic portrayal in *L'Empire français* of the glories of 'un Empire, un et indivisible' (p. 10; original emphasis), a wholly rosy picture is painted of Indochina, 'la plus belle des colonies françaises' (p. 116). In the chapter, 'L'Indochine, carrefour des peuples', evoking its geography, climate, ethnic peoples and main sites, the colony is repeatedly represented as passive, compliant and welcoming: 'L'Indochine s'offre à eux [les nouveaux venus] avec ses côtes plates et accueillantes' (p. 103). In a descriptive stance that Mary Louise Pratt has called 'the fantasy of dominance',⁹ Duras anthropomorphically represents Indochina as amenable to domination, so justifying its conquest and exploitation by the more active French colonizers. The indigenous population of Indochina is similarly depicted, homogenizingly, as a harmonious extension of this environment: 'les villages khmers sont à l'image des habitants' (p. 112); 'le calme, l'immuabilité de son atmosphère tient au caractère silencieux de ses habitants' (p. 114).¹⁰ By representing both the geography and the population of Indochina as passive, compliant and in need of France's protective, civilizing guidance, *L'Empire français* portrays the appropriation and exploitation of the colony's land and people as an inevitable, moral duty. Whilst appealing to the French reader's taste for the picturesque and exotic in her portrayal of Indochina as 'par excellence, le pays du tourisme' (p. 113), Duras also, more pragmatically, includes allusions to the 'trade, administration, cultural and moral improvement' brought to the

⁹ 'Scratches on the Face of the Country: or What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 138-62.

¹⁰ Identifying the tendency in colonial discourse to mystify the colonized people as 'some magical essence of the continent', JanMohamed argues that 'the ideological function of this mechanism, in addition to prolonging colonialism, is to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical "fact of life", before which those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making' ('The Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 68).

colony by the French through urban planning, engineering, transport, sanitation and education programmes.

In *L'Empire français's* depiction of the harmonious unity of the French Empire and of the civilizing influence of the benevolent colonizers on the inferior colonized, and in its portrayal of Indochina as a model colony within that empire, Duras deploys the full panoply of euphemistic, rhetorical strategies identified, in the quotation above, as characteristic of colonial discourse. Yet reading *L'Empire français* as a typical example of colonial discourse overlooks its many areas of internal contradiction and fails to consider the very particular historical and socio-political circumstances in which it was produced. Much colonial discourse analysis has been criticized for failing fully to consider the particular historical context within which the texts it studies were produced. In 'The Other Question', for instance, Homi Bhabha famously criticizes Said for homogenizingly presenting western stereotypes of the non-western world as unified, fixed and constant, and argues instead that colonial discourse is inherently unstable, split and ambivalent.¹¹ Yet, as discussed in the Introduction, Bhabha has also been criticized for the abstract, ahistorical nature of his own theories.¹² As I hope now to demonstrate, consideration of the timing of *L'Empire français's* publication and of the very particular context within which it was produced, is absolutely crucial to a full understanding of its seemingly triumphalist, self-aggrandizing tone, of Duras's recourse to the tropes and stereotypes of classic colonial discourse, and, inversely, of the many instances where ambivalence, doubt and contradiction appear beneath its would-be polished, propagandist surface.

¹¹ See the introduction, n. 22, for full reference.

¹² Moore-Gilbert argues, for instance, that Bhabha's theories would be 'unable to explain the varied patterns and expressions of affective structures like ambivalence in diachronic terms, thus registering the fact that certain stereotypes emerged in particular periods and locations, and often in response to specific socio-political developments' (*Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 151). Abdul R. JanMohamed similarly criticizes Bhabha for '[circumventing] entirely the dense history of the material conflict between Europeans and natives and [for focusing] on colonial discourse as if it existed in a vacuum' ('The Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 60).

Absolutely no reference is made, in the eulogistic description of Indochina and its history presented in *L'Empire français*, to the contemporary situation in the colony. In fact, the 1930s had been a period of catastrophic shortages, famines and unrest in Indochina, caused by the repeated failure of the rice harvest, the failure of France's agricultural modernization and forced migration programmes, and the worldwide Great Depression. All of these had led to a virtual halting of Indochinese exports and the near-collapse of the Indochinese economy. Growing anti-colonial dissent, the rise of nationalist and pro-independence movements, and the proliferation of indigenous political journals and papers, often with strongly communist leanings, had led to numerous strikes and uprisings, all met by increasingly violent French reprisals. The rapid and brutal militarization of the colonial regime, in response to frequent anti-colonial protests, had served to alienate large swathes of the indigenous population and increase the appeal of communism. Following a decade of internal indigenous opposition to the French presence, there also came a serious external threat to the French holdings in South-East Asia. In 1940, at the time when Duras was writing *L'Empire français*, the Japanese were at war with China and, having taken the island of Hainan, were threatening imminently to invade Indochina.¹³ The situation in Indochina could hardly have been further from the idealized, propagandist image portrayed in *L'Empire français*.

One could possibly argue that Duras's eulogistic portrayal of Indochina reflects her own out-dated experiences of growing up in the colony from 1914-1933, before the very worst of the troubles and, as a child, somewhat protected from them. Yet, even on a personal level, Duras was still in regular contact with her mother who had remained in Indochina. In addition, such widely-read works as Roland Dorgelès's *Sur la route mandarine* (1925), Louis Roubaud's *Vietnam la tragédie indochinoise* (1931) or Andrée Viollis's *Indochine SOS*

¹³ For an informative history of the French colonization of Indochina, including a detailed analysis of the turbulent 1930s, see Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001).

(1935)¹⁴ had already drawn attention to the serious failings of the colonial system, its inherent economic and social injustices, and the rise of indigenous opposition. Moreover, as an employee at the Ministère des Colonies, Duras would have been far better informed than the general public of the contemporary crisis in Indochina. Indeed, one of Mandel's most controversial decisions as colonial minister was to complete the building of the Hanoi-Yunnan railway line, so facilitating the supply of arms to the Chinese. Mandel believed that by supporting Chiang Kai-Shek in the Sino-Japanese War, the French could prevent the Japanese from taking Indochina. In the depiction of Indochina in *L'Empire français*, Duras thus wilfully seeks to hide the huge gap between her text's triumphalist rhetoric and the contemporary reality in the colony.

The propagandist will to conceal the real situation in Indochina behind a façade of idealizing superlatives is inextricably linked to the very particular set of circumstances in which metropolitan France found itself in early 1940. As Favreau points out in his biography of Mandel, 'l'action entreprise au ministère des colonies demeure indissociable de son époque'.¹⁵ An ardent anti-armistice campaigner, Mandel had initially hoped for a military appointment, such as Ministre de l'Armement or de l'Air, but when, in the event, he was posted to the Ministère des Colonies, he made it his primary objective there to prepare France and her colonies for war. In this context, Mandel's colonial agenda was first and foremost a wartime agenda. As a reflection of ministerial policy, the main function of *L'Empire français* was thus as wartime propaganda, calqued onto the traditional model of colonial propaganda. Just as Mandel adapted his role and remit at the Ministère des Colonies to the material needs of the wartime context, so too, in many ways, did Duras adapt the form of traditional colonial discourse to deliver a wartime message of morale-lifting reassurance and defiance. Techniques that were initially deployed in defence of the conquest, establishment and creation of empire were borrowed to argue for its maintenance, development and funding.

¹⁴ Published in Paris by Albin Michel (republished by Kailash in 1994), Valois, and Gallimard respectively.

¹⁵ Georges Mandel, p. 340.

L'Empire français was hurriedly conceived, written and published during the 'drôle de guerre' – the period between France's official declaration of war with Germany in September 1939 and the German Occupation of Paris in June 1940 – and there was a real sense of urgency behind its production. Commissioned in the winter of 1939-40, Duras's manuscript was sent to Éditions Gallimard for publication in March 1940, without the originally planned foreword by Mandel, omitted for want of time. The published book then appeared on 25 April, with a print-run of approximately seven thousand. Three thousand of these were pre-ordered for the Ministère des Colonies itself and a further seven hundred or so copies were sold, before events cut short both its distribution and the implementation of Mandel's programme of colonial reform. Mandel was arrested by the Pétain government on 17 June, just two days before the German Occupation of Paris.¹⁶ On June 22, Pétain signed an armistice with the Germans in France and then, in August, the Vichy government in Indochina signed the first of two armistices with the Japanese.¹⁷ In many ways, *L'Empire français* represents a desperate, last-ditch and ultimately doomed attempt to persuade the French public (and politicians) that, with the help of their vast empire, they had the strength to resist and defeat German aggression.

The dual role of *L'Empire français* as both colonial propaganda and war propaganda has implications for our reading of its use of the strategies, tropes and stereotypes of colonial discourse. Given the threat of an imminent German invasion, Duras's omission of any reference to internal or external threats to France's hold on

¹⁶ Mandel was later deported to Buchenwald and remained imprisoned, there and elsewhere, for the rest of the war. In 1944, as German defeat became inevitable, Mandel was handed back to the French. He was shot by the Pétainist Militia, in controversial circumstances, on the eve of the Liberation of Paris. For a full account of Mandel's wartime experiences and his execution, see Favreau, *Georges Mandel*.

¹⁷ For a fascinating account of the French-Japanese cohabitation in Indochina, see Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Indochina is not simply another example of euphemistic glorification of colonization per se. The representation, discussed above, of the childlike, loyal subjects of France's colonies, all united in their allegiance to the 'Mère Patrie', is followed by a passage which explicitly, if briefly, refers to the wartime context:

Savoir que nous ne sommes plus jamais seuls, que dans la paix comme dans la guerre se trouvent derrière nous les ressources de tout un monde, d'un monde de plus en plus prospère, de plus en plus civilisé, cela ne saurait être pour nous qu'un puissant réconfort. (p. 10)

As the change of viewpoint in this extract, from colonized to colonizers, displays, the fiction of unity and harmony bonding the various French colonies together in 'un Empire, un et indivisible' (p. 10) is constructed to justify colonization not only on the grounds of the humanitarian benefits it offers the colonized peoples, but also, overridingly, on the grounds of the very real, material benefits that a strong colonial infrastructure offers the colonizers. The wartime context of *L'Empire français* leads here to a portrayal, quite uncharacteristic of colonial discourse in general, of the colonizers as recipients of both psychological and material advantages from their empire. Indeed, in order for maximum reassurance to be gained from the existence of this vast, strong and unified empire, colonial discourse's characteristic binary opposition between civilized western self and barbaric, unevolved non-western other becomes blurred by Duras's (admittedly still racially determined) concession that this other is 'de plus en plus civilisé'. In a wartime context, it is, after all, more reassuring to be supported by cohorts of reasonably civilized and disciplined soldiers, than by a horde of savage, lazy or unruly natives.

As this example indicates, the wartime context of *L'Empire français* complicates Duras's use of racial stereotypes – one of the most common strategies of colonial discourse, characteristically employed to perpetuate the western self's sense of difference from, and superiority over, non-western peoples. Said contends that by constructing fixed stereotypes of other peoples (as barbarous, lazy, primitive, and so forth), colonial powers were able discursively to legitimate their material rule over them. Bhabha counters that, whilst colonial discourse may indeed aim to achieve such fixity in its

stereotypical portrayal of the colonized, this aim is never fully met.¹⁸ In order to maintain the essential difference between colonized and colonizer, on which colonial power depends, stereotypes of the colonized's inferiority – stereotypes which are supposedly already proven – must be constantly repeated. This anxious attempt, and ultimate failure, to fix the colonized other through the repetition of stereotypes constitutes, Bhabha argues, the inherent ambivalence of all colonial discourse, however seemingly self-assured.

As we have seen, *L'Empire français* is structured around a social Darwinian hierarchy of races, the pseudo-scientific premise of which, in keeping with Said's assertion, is used to justify France's colonization of foreign lands and rule over 'inferior' foreign peoples. In the section describing Indochina, which we shall explore in greater depth in subsequent chapters, the colony's various ethnic groups are defined by certain, fixed character traits – notably, laziness, calm and passivity – which portray them as essentially suited to traditional roles, supportive of the colonial infrastructure. Yet in the important central chapter, 'L'Empire, puissance militaire', Duras highlights very different stereotypical traits, in order to emphasize the various ethnic groups' suitability for particular military roles:

Les habitants des plateaux de l'Annam, les 'Moïs', et les montagnards chinois qui vivent sur les hauteurs du Tonkin, à la frontière de la Chine, sont d'excellents soldats, très vigoureux, pleins d'allant et d'énergie, dont il faut même parfois contrôler l'ardeur. Les climats assez rigoureux de leur pays natal leur permettent d'affronter sans dommages les intempéries de nos régions. Les uns et les autres peuvent faire d'excellents fantassins, voire même former des troupes de choc. De son côté, l'habitant des deltas est d'une nature plus frêle et plus délicate, mais son intelligence est remarquable. Il peut devenir un excellent spécialiste et même un parfait mitrailleur. (p. 143)

Whilst *L'Empire français*'s pro-colonial agenda constructs racial stereotypes which support and justify the colonial status quo, its wartime agenda constructs an entirely different, largely contradictory, set of stereotypes which bolster France's military capabilities. Duras

¹⁸ See, in particular, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 85-92.

still uses such racial stereotyping to fix the colonized peoples in certain roles and to portray them as the natural servants of their colonizing superiors, but the specific context of world war leads both to a partial elevation of the status of the colonized peoples and, importantly, to a recognition of the colonizers' reliance on their support.

Whilst the racial stereotyping used in *L'Empire français* may seem both offensive and entirely bogus today, in 1940 Georges Mandel was considered something of a radical. He had, for instance, championed the call for Algerian Muslims to be granted equal rights to French citizens – a move then considered too outrageous to be countenanced. As *Ministre des Colonies*, Mandel's 'grand dessein'¹⁹ was to do away with the centralized, 'one size fits all' system of colonial administration, and, along the lines of Britain's assimilationist imperial model, to devolve greater autonomy to the colonies. These seemingly radical new reforms were, however, based in large part on social Darwinian notions of the relative evolution of different races, a fact reflected in the words of Francisque Varenne (a colleague of Mandel, Roques and Duras at the *Ministère des Colonies*), when explaining Mandel's reasons for wanting to overhaul the existing system:

Nos possessions coloniales contiennent les unes des races évoluées, reste d'anciennes civilisations qui ont laissé des traces dans l'histoire, races capables d'organisation et susceptibles de culture, d'autres, des races primitives, encore au berceau de toute civilisation, et qu'il est nécessaire de guider et de conduire. [...] Nous n'avons, dans la pratique administrative, fait aucune différence entre les peuples les plus dissemblables.²⁰

Paradoxically, the offensive racial stereotyping characteristically used in colonial discourse to maintain the status quo is redeployed by Mandel and his propaganda team to serve what has been described as 'le programme colonial sans doute le plus audacieux de l'entre-

¹⁹ This term is used by both Francisque Varenne, *Georges Mandel, mon patron* (Paris: Éditions Défense de la France, 1947), p. 158, and Bertrand Favreau, *Georges Mandel*, p. 336.

²⁰ Francisque Varenne, *Georges Mandel, mon patron*, pp. 158–59.

deux-guerres'.²¹ The possibility of increased autonomy is, indirectly, presented as a reward to the colonized peoples for their loyalty to France during the war. The wartime context within which *L'Empire français* was written thus results in Duras's use of racial stereotypes to serve at least three very different ends: to defend the perpetuation of colonization on the grounds of France's superiority over its colonized peoples; to present the peoples of the French Empire as essentially suited to various military roles in the colonial army; and to argue for the decentralization of the colonial administration, according to the degree of racial 'evolution' of the various colonized peoples. Such representational instability and ambivalence are not simply illustrative, as Bhabha contends, of the failure of any colonial discourse to fix its racial stereotypes, but result directly from the specific socio-political circumstances within which France found itself in the spring of 1940, and from the meeting of often competing political priorities.

Colonial discourse's traditional assertion of a neat, self-assuring binary opposition between civilized, western self and primitive non-western other was thrown into disarray by war in Europe and by the threat of France's imminent invasion by its neighbour. If, traditionally, stereotypes are a means of making incomprehensible societies seem comprehensible, and of containing the alien within a knowable, familiar framework, then the Second World War and the seemingly incomprehensible, barbaric actions of a formerly comprehensible, western society turned stereotypical racial certainties on their head. Within the imperialist rhetoric of *L'Empire français* there emerges a new and far more hostile 'other' than the colonized 'native' – Germany. Duras constructs new stereotypes, opposing western self and western other, so establishing a racial hierarchy of solely European nations, and further complicating binary colonizer-colonized oppositions.²² In keeping with the avowedly pro-colonial agenda of *L'Empire français*, the explanation given for Germany's

²¹ Jean-François Sirinelli, *Histoire des droites en France*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), III, 145.

²² Whilst the threat from Germany results in the discursive construction of a new 'other', France's long-standing rivalry with imperial Britain continues to be a strong theme throughout the nationalist propaganda of *L'Empire français*.

inherent difference from France, despite similarities of western culture, geography and skin colour, is that Germany never had an empire. Duras does not, as logic might seem to dictate, attack Germany's contemporary imperialist drive, as this would completely undermine *L'Empire français's* own positive portrayal of the benefits of imperialism, but instead she cites the fact that the Germans do not already have a long-established empire as proof that they are less civilized than those countries that do, especially France.

The influence of its wartime context on the content of *L'Empire français* is most direct in Duras's long account of the history of French colonial expansion, where military and imperialist interests most readily overlap. The euphemistic language used to describe the various colonial battles as 'des opérations vigoureuses', 'les autres théâtres d'opération' or 'notre activité' (p. 34) is, indeed, typical of both military and colonial propaganda, in their common tendency to couch in benign, humanitarian terms the often brutal reality of violence used to enforce colonization. Local resistance is not entirely omitted from this account, with reference made to the numerous 'vicissitudes' which interrupted the otherwise smooth and ineluctable progression towards empire. Yet the specific examples given – such as the diplomatic and military squabbles prior to the French occupation of Algeria, or Tu Duc's 'xenophobic' opposition to the French presence in Indochina – are taken from the now distant past and, importantly, all represent struggles that France ultimately won. A clear message is being conveyed to the contemporary French public, beset by war and threatened with imminent invasion: if France was able to overcome such 'vicissitudes' to create a vast and unified empire of 110 million inhabitants, the propagandist reasoning of *L'Empire français* goes, then France will win the war.

Within Duras's account of France's unswerving drive toward Empire, one historical figure who is frequently referred to is Jules Ferry – the late-nineteenth-century politician who most vigorously and controversially championed a renaissance of France's colonial mission. The admiring tone with which Ferry's 'noble' motives are evoked in *L'Empire français* may, at first sight, seem surprising.²³

²³ Varenne comments that, 'Il est assez singulier qu'il fût réservé au disciple de Clemenceau, anti-colonial déterminé, d'imposer aux Français la conscience

Mandel was the ardent disciple and former minister of Georges Clemenceau, who had expelled Ferry from his government for treason, on account of the latter's over-zealous push for colonial expansion and repeated demands for more money to fund such unauthorized expansion. Whatever the two men's respective political persuasions, however, there are evident parallels between Ferry's unpopular demands in 1885 and Mandel's situation in 1940, as he seeks to persuade a potentially sceptical French public of the need to invest in the colonies. These parallels underlie the following retrospective reappraisal of Ferry's colonial policies:

Avec le recul de cinquante années, comme le verdict des hommes paraît injuste! Seul Jules Ferry avait compris tout l'intérêt que pouvait présenter pour la France la possession d'un Empire dont il avait activé la conquête. (p. 50)

Throughout *L'Empire français*, the link between its functions as colonial propaganda and as war propaganda leads to the paradoxical situation that, whilst it quite explicitly deploys reasonings, terminology, tropes and stereotypes characteristic of colonial discourse, it also disrupts many of the generally-held assumptions about the nature of such discourse. Far from excluding what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (see above) class as 'statements about the exploitation of the resources of the colonized, the political status accruing to colonizing powers, the importance to domestic politics of the development of an empire', Duras makes these 'compelling reasons for maintaining colonial ties' a very explicit part of *L'Empire français's* pro-colonial rhetoric. Indeed, the possibility of exploiting the resources of the colonized in support of France's war effort is quite emphatically signalled as the paramount justification for maintaining and boosting the colonial infrastructure. This important shift in emphasis is reflected in the book's structure: chapters entitled 'L'Empire, puissance militaire' and 'L'Empire, puissance économique', each outlining the benefits of empire to the French, precede the chapter, 'L'Empire spirituel', which lists the humanitarian bene-

qu'ils possédaient un Empire colonial. Mais l'histoire offre de telles surprises' (*Georges Mandel, mon patron*, p. 158).

fits of empire to the colonized peoples. The workforce of the French Empire's 110 million inhabitants – more than the entire population of Western Europe at the time – and the economic revenue from the various colonies' natural products are repeatedly invoked as material benefits, to match the psychological benefits afforded by France's possession of vast, unified overseas dominions.

As well as promoting the psychological and material reassurance offered by the existence of a harmonious, loyal empire, Duras explicitly underlines the political status associated with colonization, stating that France's programme of colonial expansion 'engagera l'honneur national' (p. 36). Far from hiding the connections between imperialism and international politics, distinctions are made between the relative status of various European nations on the basis of their past and present colonial possessions. Thus, whilst Britain's empire sets it on an equal (and intensely rivalrous) footing with France, Spain is portrayed as having lost its prestige with the relinquishing of its empire, and Italy is criticized for its lack of a consistent colonial policy. Importantly, as discussed above, the fact that Germany had never had an empire is presented as the reason for its relative lack of political status in comparison to other (colonial) European countries. Indeed, the centrality of France's empire to its political status in Europe could not be asserted more emphatically than in the following italicized statement from the Avant-Propos: '*la politique d'expansion a toujours été chez nous fonction d'un équilibre en Europe*' (p. 13).

Of course, in wartime France, it was impossible to separate global from domestic politics, as Germany's impending invasion threatened fundamentally to disrupt France's traditional way of life, its sovereignty, independence and self-belief. Far from being occluded, therefore, domestic politics become the fundamental motivating factor behind *L'Empire français's* eulogistic representation of the benefits to the French public of possessing overseas colonies. The compelling reasons for maintaining and strengthening colonial ties at a time of war and imminent invasion – exploitation of resources, political status, and domestic politics – are all brought together in the following reflection on the history of France's colonial expansion:

Jusqu'à présent nos colonies avaient pu servir de monnaies d'échange dans les négociations européennes, elles sont aujourd'hui cimentées à la métropole par un amalgame d'intérêts, de sacrifices et d'avantages récipro-

ques. Il n'y a plus aujourd'hui une France et ses colonies, mais un Empire qui peut réunir des forces considérables pour vaincre l'ennemi. (pp. 66-67)

Whilst colonial discourse's characteristic emphasis on the benefits of empire to the colonized peoples persists in Duras's reference to 'avantages réciproques', the overriding message here is that France can exploit the resources of its colonies – especially its colonial battalions – in its fight against Germany. The paternalism and humanism of traditional colonial discourse are very much overshadowed by the self-interested exigencies of war. The uneasy fit between the text's function as pro-colonial propaganda, euphemistically promoting France's 'civilizing mission', and as wartime propaganda, pragmatically foregrounding the selfish benefits of exploitation, leads to frequent areas of ambivalence, slippage and internal contradiction, that disrupt colonial discourse's characteristic display of self-assurance and stability. Whilst explicit references to the very real fear and anxiety gripping France at the time are occluded, repressed glimpses of this underlying reality periodically surface, fracturing the reassuring fiction of the empire's harmonious unity and of France's continued world dominance. In an early exposition of the book's aims, for instance – 'A une vision fragmentaire, ces pages tendent à substituer la vision d'une unité organique' (p. 10) – the assurance of the second part of the sentence is preemptively undercut by the admission of a quite different, fragmented view of the colonies. Although the element of uncertainty introduced with the clause 'à une vision fragmentaire' is presented only in order to be overturned, the doubt persists, the implicit revelation of the colonial edifice's perceived shaky foundations undermining, in advance, the subsequent picture of solidity and confidence. Whilst there is always a gap, in colonial discourse, between representation and reality, never could this gap be greater than at the time of *L'Empire français's* writing.

For all its triumphalist praise of the French Empire and assertions of France's inevitable victory against its enemies, *L'Empire français* betrays a strong awareness that, in the climate of 1940, its readers will not be duped by propagandist optimism alone. Hence, Duras linguistically preempts the likely objections and doubts of a sceptical French public, whose thoughts are very much at home.

Whilst the book's introduction alludes to the general lack of interest in the colonies of the majority of the French public, its seemingly self-aggrandizing conclusion hammers home the message that French domestic interests are inextricable from colonial interests:

Il n'y a pas un seul peuple au monde à qui la France n'ait apporté quelque chose de sa pensée.

Il existe des peuples qui donnent largement et d'autres qui reçoivent. Cette mission 'd'universalité', comme l'a qualifiée Paul Valéry, la France n'a cessé de la remplir. Si elle était effacée du monde, toutes les nations seraient privées d'une présence précieuse, et aucune autre ne pourrait la remplacer. Chacune en souffrirait dans son individualité, comme si son intégrité même se trouvait entamée.

La France, qui aspirait à employer ses trésors de bonté et d'intelligence, a appliqué dans ses colonies tout ce qu'elle tenait à la disposition de l'humanité. (pp. 232-33)

Whilst explicitly acting as an up-beat rallying cry, singing the praises of imperial France, the image of France as a world power and purveyor of universal values is underscored by a clear if allusive warning of the very real dangers of inaction. The short but eloquent suppositional clause, 'Si elle était effacée du monde' (p. 233), hints at the shattering of France's self-image occasioned by the threat of imminent defeat and capitulation. Whilst embedded in a passage glorifying France's *past* status, it ominously signals the very real contemporary risks at stake in refusing to invest in its colonial and military infrastructure.

On initial reading, as its title leads us to expect, *L'Empire français* appears to be an archetypal example of arrogant, self-congratulatory colonial discourse, in which Duras deploys the traditional clichés of French supremacy and of the colonized people's childlike loyalty to the 'Mère Patrie'. Duras's subsequent attitude to her first published work – her dismissal of it as an 'ouvrage de circonstance' and her attempt even to deny its existence – would also lead us to assume that it is nothing more than a shameful repetition of tired, offensive racist ideology and stereotypes. Indeed, this is how *L'Empire français* has consistently been interpreted by those Duras scholars who have referred to it at all. Yet the very circumstances in which Duras's work was produced require a more nuanced and historically situated approach to its study. As we have seen, whilst *L'Empire*

français does resort to many of the textual tactics of traditional, nineteenth-century colonial discourse, it does not do so for the same self-seeking reasons. In *L'Empire français*, colonial discourse is harnessed to serve France's war effort, redeployed as propaganda against German aggression.

This dual propagandist function, calquing wartime propaganda onto the language, structures and pronouncements of colonial propaganda, leads both to a fragmentation of propaganda's characteristically univocal purpose and, strikingly, to a reversal of the traditional function of colonial discourse. Whereas, traditionally, the western, colonizing nation's racial superiority is cited as justification for their colonization of others, in *L'Empire français* Duras cites colonization of other nations as a reason for asserting France's superiority, at a time when this superiority is being eroded. The threat that war and Germany's imminent invasion pose in 1940 to France's self-image leads to Duras's desperate attempts to bolster this image with self-flattering clichés, racial fictions and ideological reasoning from an era when France's political status may be seen, at least in retrospect, to have been at its height. By shoring up the myth of Empire, *L'Empire français* tries to shore up the myth of France as a world power. If the Empire is still unified, Indochina is still 'la plus belle des colonies françaises', and the colonized peoples are still loyal and obedient, then, Duras's propagandist logic goes, 'all's right with the world' – despite the fact that all is so glaringly *not* right. In *L'Empire français*, Duras seeks to create a myth of the stability, strength and security of Empire in the face of a fragmented, disintegrating and menacing global reality. This myth is not simply deluded escapism, however: as we have seen, the text's creation of a sense of Empire is closely related to Mandel's political aim of garnering support for increased financial investment in the colonies, in order to boost France's defences.

In *L'Empire français*, the adaptation of the already largely anachronistic discourse of colonialism to a very different context results in an explicit assertion of the traditionally occluded self-interested motives for colonization and in frequent inconsistencies and ambivalence. Such rhetorical slippages make *L'Empire français* both a fairly ineffective work of propaganda, unlikely to convince its

sceptical public, even had it had the chance to reach them, and a fascinating manifestation of colonial discourse, at once typical and exceptional. Whilst I do not wish to recuperate *L'Empire français* either for its limited literary merits or for the offensive racial views that Duras voices in it, I do believe that the nature of the context within which it was written and the complex way in which it interacts with that context are reason enough to reinstate it in Duras's bibliography. Whatever the misguided means of *L'Empire français*, its more laudible aim was to show how the colonies could help France combat Nazism. Duras was later an active member of the Resistance, and both Mandel and Roques were shot during the war for their committed opposition to the German Occupation. Read in relation to its traumatic and tragic context, *L'Empire français* can be seen, like Duras's mother's barrage against the Pacific, as a desperate, possibly misguided, and ultimately vain attempt to hold back the tide of history.

Chapter 2

Un barrage contre le Pacifique: Colonialism and Class

A decade after the publication of *L'Empire français*, and five years after the end of World War II, Duras returned to the subject of colonialism, with the publication of her first novel to be set in French Indochina, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950).¹ Many of the very same stock of descriptive motifs are used to depict the landscape, people and towns of Indochina as in *L'Empire français*, but the transformative reworkings that these undergo, in their move from propagandist to literary text, reflect a marked shift in ideological attitude between the two works.² Whereas *L'Empire français* enthusiastically espoused France's colonial mission, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* presents a bitter indictment of colonial exploitation, corruption and greed. When writing *L'Empire français*, Duras acted as a spokesperson for authority and thus portrayed colonialism's exploitation of the natural resources and workforce of the colonies as a positive benefit. In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, however, the point of view is effectively reversed, as the narrative follows the experiences of Suzanne and her family, victims of colonial exploitation. Whilst this striking shift may be due in part to the move from the univocal, didactic discourse of propaganda to the more ambivalent, open and

¹ *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950; coll. Folio edition, 1988) was Duras's first best-seller and remains one of the best known of her early novels. Before *Un barrage*, Duras had also published *Les Impudents* (Paris: Plon, 1943) and *La Vie tranquille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), neither of which is set in a colonial context.

² I have already examined, from a different perspective, some of the material covered in this chapter in my article 'Marguerite Duras and Colonialist Discourse: An Intertextual Reading of *L'Empire français* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 39 (2003), 255-66.

polyvalent discourse of literature, it also reflects the very different political and social contexts in which the two works were written, and the corresponding politicization of Duras herself.

In 1940, there was little concerted, public questioning of the validity of France's colonial mission: criticism tended to be aimed at the way in which the colonies were managed and at the cost to the French economy, rather than at the colonial system itself.³ Thus, whilst the heyday of the French Empire was already past, the self-aggrandizing, flag-waving rhetoric of colonialism was still sufficiently resonant to be broadly in line with the rousing, morale-boosting, propagandist requirements of *L'Empire français's* wartime context. In the immediate post-war years, however, during which Duras wrote *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, the political and social climate in France was very different. As the whole world tried to come to terms with the horrors of the Holocaust and of Hiroshima, and Europe attempted to rebuild its wrecked infrastructure, France was also still reeling from the humiliation of the German Occupation and remained deeply marked by the divisive legacy of Pétain's collaborationist regime. The late 1940s in France were a period of national self-questioning, doubt and shattered self-esteem.

The blow that the war had dealt to France's image of itself as a world power no doubt played a crucial part in the government's unwillingness to relinquish its colonial claims: having just emerged, humbled and bruised, from war in Europe, France rushed headlong into another war in Indochina. The anti-colonial sentiment in Indochina, which had erupted in a series of strikes and uprisings during the 1930s, had gathered steady and increasingly militant momentum during the 1940s. Hoping to benefit from France's preoccupation with domestic problems in wartime Europe, Ho Chi Minh had returned to Vietnam in 1940, after thirty years' self-imposed exile, to

³ The French Communist Party (PCF) was the only party consistently and adamantly to oppose colonialism throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. It was particularly vocal in its opposition to the Rif War in Algeria, and to the violent reprisals following the Yen Bay uprising in Indochina. By 1935, however, the PCF had turned its attentions to the more pressing threat of Fascism. For an interesting account of domestic reactions to France's colonial policies, see Nicola Cooper, Chapter 5, 'Rebellion and Uprising in Indochina: Responses from France', *France in Indochina*, pp. 91-107.

wage war on both France and Japan. When Japan capitulated at the end of World War II, Ho Chi Minh seized the opportunity to declare Vietnam's independence. Whilst France at first recognized this independence, albeit as a 'free state' under the umbrella of the French Union, it soon reneged on this position, provoking outright war with Ho Chi Minh's nationalist, anti-colonial and Communist Vietminh. Thus, despite growing public distaste for colonialism in war-weary France, and despite the example of Britain which, in 1947, had granted independence to India, when Duras published *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* in 1950 France was in the midst of a costly, embittered and unpopular war in Indochina – a war that would ultimately end in France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu, in 1954.⁴

Although only a decade separates the publication of *L'Empire français* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, their respective portrayals of French Indochina (and of the colonial ideology that underpinned it) are marked by the profoundly different contexts in which the two works were written and by Duras's corresponding shift in political and intellectual allegiance. The individual and collective traumas of war did much to awaken Duras's political consciousness, transforming her from 'une Française moyenne'⁵ into a left-wing political activist. Inspired by the crucial part that it played in the Resistance movement, in which she was also active, Duras joined the French Communist Party in 1944, remaining a committed and militant member until 1950. The Marxist commitment to the class struggle for a more just and egalitarian society seemed to offer Duras, like

⁴ After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, 1954, the French left Indochina on 9 October, 1954 – but this did not mark the end of war in Vietnam. Fearing the spread of Communism in the region, the Americans backed the South Vietnamese army in their war against Ho Chi Minh's northern-based, Communist Vietminh, finally evacuating Saigon in 1975. For a fascinating account of the American-Vietnamese War and its origins in the Franco-Indochinese War, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London: Century Publishing, 1983).

⁵ Laure Adler explains the pro-colonial tone of *L'Empire français* on the grounds that 'Marguerite Donnadiu s'est comportée comme une Française moyenne plus que comme une sale colonialiste attardée' (*Marguerite Duras*, p. 139).

many other intellectuals in the immediate post-war era, a message of hope, solidarity and change for the better, amidst the ruins of war-torn Europe. The production of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* coincided with Duras's most ardent commitment to Communist politics and thought: Duras began writing it in 1947, gave the completed manuscript to Éditions Gallimard in 1949, and saw the published novel appear the following year, in 1950. Radically incompatible with her previous pro-colonial line, Duras's post-war, Marxist *engagement* can be seen to colour her novel's representation of colonial Indochina.

In this chapter, I shall explore the ways in which Duras's portrayal of colonial Indochina in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* reflects the historical, political and intellectual context in which it was written, examining how Duras's Communist politics coincide with the novel's strongly anti-colonial tone. How is the novel's depiction of colonial society inflected by a critique of the structures of capitalism? What relationship is set up between the racial hierarchies that underpinned the colonial system and the class system on which a capitalist mode of production depends? I shall explore such interrelations by examining, in particular, the intertextual borrowings of descriptive 'touches de couleur' from the propagandist *L'Empire français*, in *Un barrage*'s literary depictions of the natural landscape, indigenous people and towns of Indochina. How are motifs and stereotypes that were originally deployed to glorify French imperialism reworked in the novel's anti-colonial critique of capitalist exploitation and injustice? I shall discuss how Duras's anti-colonial critique coincides with a critique of capitalism's class structure, but also how the inexact correlation between race and class introduces in-between areas of ambivalence and slippage in the novel's retrospective portrayal of colonial Indochina. Whilst many of the novel's thematic and descriptive components can be traced back intertextually to *L'Empire français*, in this chapter I shall examine in particular *Un barrage*'s representations of two, key geographic locations – the southern floodplains and colonial Saigon – and of Indochina's indigenous population.

In many ways, colonialism is a quintessential manifestation of capitalism: beneath its humanitarian, civilizing rhetoric, its main mission is to amass maximum profit for the colonial elite through the exploitation of the labour and resources of the colonized masses.

In Duras's Marxist-inflected portrayal of Indochina, capitalism's division of society into the exploited proletariat and the exploiting bourgeoisie is represented by the symbolic, geographic and narrative opposition between the periphery of the impoverished flood plains, where Suzanne and her family live, on the one hand, and the centre of the colonial capital city, the luxurious *haut quartier*, on the other. In *L'Empire français*'s eulogistic portrayal of the material and psychological benefits of its empire to wartime France, as we saw in the last chapter, Indochina is presented as France's colonial jewel – a hospitable, compliant ally, essentially ripe for colonial settlement and economic exploitation. Accordingly, in the introductory panorama of the colony's main geographic features, its plains are first defined as 'limoneuses et fertiles' (p. 103), with a causal link thus established between their flooding, their siltiness and their agricultural fertility. So too, in the following extract, the flood plains' inherent fertility is explicitly linked to their appeal to settlers:

Les plaines légendaires de l'Indochine française ont décidé de son aspect. Celles-ci, de tous temps, par leur fertilité et leur accès facile [...] ont attiré les peuples en quête d'espace et de terres cultivables. (p. 105)

A very different atmosphere is created in the following passage from *Un barrage*, describing the plain in which the first part of the novel is entirely set:

ce dont mouraient les enfants dans la plaine marécageuse de Kam, cernée d'un côté par la mer de Chine [...] et murée vers l'Est par la très longue chaîne qui longeait la côte depuis très haut dans le continent asiatique [...] ce dont ils mouraient [...] c'était de la faim, des maladies de la faim et des aventures de la faim. (pp. 32-33)

In striking contrast to *L'Empire français*'s positive description of the plain as 'limoneuse et fertile', the same essential attributes are transmuted, in the above quotation, into the debased and negative 'marécageuse'. A similar shift in perspective and style can be seen in the later reference to 'la boue chaude et pestilentielle de la plaine' (p. 116). In their intertextual shift from *L'Empire français* to *Un barrage*, from propaganda to fiction, the same geographic feature and

attributes – the flood plains and their essential wetness⁶ – are granted entirely opposing connotations, as the narrative viewpoint correspondingly shifts from that of the potential settler and colonial exploiter, to that of the exploited, poor inhabitants.

The welcoming, fertile and profitable space of the plain becomes, in transference to the novel form, the site of suffering, hunger and exploitation. Whilst Suzanne's family were, indeed, initially attracted to the plain by the propagandist promise of vast tracts of cultivable, fertile land, the reality with which they are faced is quite the reverse: 'leur coin de plaine saturé de sel' (p. 13); 'leur coin de plaine, dans la solitude et la stérilité de toujours' (p. 14); 'la misère toujours égale de la plaine' (p. 30). Space and accessibility ('d'accès facile'), portrayed as attractions of the plain in *L'Empire français*, are either recast in wholly negative terms – 'la solitude' (p. 14); 'la plaine était si loin de toutes les villes'; 'ces espaces liquides et sans fin' (p. 108) – or, elsewhere, are psychologically reversed and refuted: 'la plaine était étroite' (p. 116), 'cernée' (p. 32), 'murée' (p. 33). Although remote and isolated, the plain is anything but vast and empty: instead, it is over-populated by the hungry victims both of hostile natural forces and of the greed of exploitative colonial administrators. Whereas the pro-colonial rhetoric of *L'Empire français* occluded the presence of indigenous inhabitants in its portrayal of Indochina, so justifying the colonization and appropriation of its 'terres vacantes', *Un barrage* repopulates the space of the plain with the oppressed, forgotten but ever-present masses of the colonized. The 'fantasy of dominance' over an amenable, foreign other, constructed by the colonial discourse of *L'Empire français*,⁷ is debunked by the reintroduction into the landscape of the exploited human objects of that wilfully blinkered European fantasy.

⁶ The theme of water is recurrent in Duras's recollections and representations of Indochina, as underlined in the following statement: 'Je ne peux pas penser à mon enfance sans penser à l'eau. Mon pays natal, c'est une patrie d'eaux' (*La Vie matérielle*, p. 69).

⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, the 'fantasy of dominance' is a term adopted by Mary Louise Pratt in her study of European travelogues, 'Scratches on the Face of the Country', to describe the characteristic, colonialist description of colonized lands as empty, compliant and amenable.

The transformative effect that the shift of viewpoint, from exploiter to exploited, has upon the two texts' respective portrayals of the very same descriptive material is particularly striking in the following two extracts:

Peu à peu, ces terrains se colmatent et se superposent; les terres gagnent sur la mer. La plaine des joncs, ainsi qu'une partie de la région côtière du Cambodge, sont encore impropres à la culture. [...] Mais ces terres à peine délivrées de la mer sont d'année en année plus cultivables, et on peut s'attendre d'ici quelques centaines d'années qu'elles le soient tout à fait. (*L'Empire français*, p. 108)

La plaine était étroite et la mer ne reculerait pas avant des siècles, contrairement à ce qu'espérait la mère. (*Un barrage*, p. 116)

Both quotations refer to the same phenomenon – the annual flooding by the sea of large areas of the plains of the Mekong Delta – and both assert that, eventually, the land may gain ground on the sea. Yet the perspective from which these same facts are viewed profoundly alters their significance. From the point of view of the colonizing nation, the audience for *L'Empire français*'s propaganda, this anecdote offers the proud prospect of further colonial expansion and increasing economic gains, projected into the distant future. From the point of view of the poor farmers and workers whose lands are *now* rendered useless by this annual flooding, such far-off possibilities are utterly irrelevant, condemning them to a lifetime of futile toil. Only someone as naively and irrationally deluded as the mother could hope to resist such a fate and to reverse the plain's one-way flow of exploitation. The plain, in *Un barrage*'s portrayal, is the place where the mother's pioneering dreams of adventure and fortune, fed by colonial propaganda, fall apart, washed away by the unstoppable force of the sea, and drained by colonial officials' greed. Along with the thousands of starving peasants who populate the plain, the family represents the forgotten, unseen, socio-economic 'base' on which colonialism's self-serving, ideological 'superstructure' rests – a superstructure that Duras had herself previously supported.

Whilst the whole of the first part of *Un barrage* is set on the plain, the site of the suffering and exploitation of both indigenous peasants and poor whites, in the second part, the focus shifts to the

colonial capital, home of the colony's rich, capitalist elite. Whilst there are striking parallels between the descriptions of the colonial city in *Un barrage* and that of Saigon in *L'Empire français*, and the inclusion of specific landmarks makes its identification reasonably unproblematic, the city is never explicitly named in the novel. This has the effect of making Duras's depiction of its divisions, excesses and inequalities applicable to any colonial city, so forming part of a far broader critique of global colonialism and capitalism. It also allows for the eloquent play on the near-homonyms, 'la capitale' and 'le capital', which are inextricably linked in Duras's portrayal of the economic, social and racial divisions on which the colonial city is constructed. In *L'Empire français*, Saigon is presented, in keeping with Indochina's status as 'par excellence, le pays du tourisme' (p. 113), as a place of picturesque contrasts, centring on the main contrast between the order and space of the European Saigon and the crowded animation of its indigenous districts:

Bâtie sur une vaste échelle, composée de villas et de jardins, que coupent de larges avenues rectilignes, Saigon comprend également de populeux faubourgs indigènes, et en particulier Cholon, véritable cité dans la cité. (p. 114)

Evading all reference to the original indigenous districts that were demolished in the nineteenth century to make room for the construction of the European town, so forcing the local population out of the centre,⁸ the separation between the different districts and their inhabitants is euphemistically highlighted with the disingenuous observation that, 'Il est curieux de remarquer que Saïgon et Cholon, séparées par une courte avenue, coexistent sans s'influencer en rien, dans leur urbanisme et dans le mode de vie de leurs habitants' (p. 114).

The colonial city in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is narratively constructed upon similar stark divisions. Unlike in its propagandist precursor, however, in the novel such contrasts serve to underline the class and racial segregation which underpinned colonial town-planning: 'Comme dans toutes les villes coloniales, il y avait deux

villes dans cette ville; la blanche et l'autre. Et dans la ville blanche il y avait encore des différences' (p. 167). The separation between different zones and different groups of people is, from the very start of Duras's wonderfully evocative and ironic description, revealed as anything but 'curious'. Colonialism's racial ideology underlies the city's division into separate white and indigenous districts, but this is combined with a capitalist division of society into different classes, rich and poor. The heart of this archetypal colonial capital is thus occupied not just by white colonialists, but by the small elite of European financiers who control the economic and hence the social relations of the colony:

Le centre, pressé de tous les côtés par la masse de la ville, éjectait des buildings chaque année plus hauts. Là ne se trouvaient pas les Palais des Gouverneurs, le pouvoir officiel, mais le pouvoir profond, les prêtres de cette Mecque, les financiers. (p. 167)

Whereas the plain represented the forgotten, impoverished outposts of the capitalist, colonial system, the colonial city at the very centre of the system is, in turn, both literally and symbolically constructed as a reflection of different social and racial groups' respective relations to its financial centre.

The first ring out from the city's financial heart, in *Un barrage's* Dante-esque series of concentric circles, is the residential *haut quartier*, inhabited by the white, rich, colonial elite. As in *L'Empire français*, the European district of Saigon is characterized by its order, space and luxuriant gardens: 'La périphérie du haut quartier, construite de villas, de maisons d'habitation, était la plus large, la plus aérée' (p. 167). Yet *L'Empire français's* uncommented description of the European district's arrangement is expanded and inflected, in *Un barrage's* intertextual reworking:

Dans le haut quartier n'habitaient que les blancs qui avaient fait fortune. Pour marquer la mesure surhumaine de la démarche blanche, les rues et les trottoirs du haut quartier étaient immenses. Un espace orgiaque, inutile était offert aux pas négligeants des puissants au repos. (p. 168)

⁸ For a discussion of colonial urban-planning in Saigon, see Chapter 3, 'Making Indochina French', in Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina*, pp. 43-63.

As the highly emotive language used in this extract conveys – ‘immenses’, ‘orgiasque’, ‘inutile’ – the space of the *haut quartier* is not simply a ‘curious’, picturesque phenomenon, but is the symbolic projection of the inhabitants’ own self-image, an exhibitionist display of excess, luxury and idle leisure – a concept that was unheard of for the working poor. The European district is narratively presented as a physical, architectural embodiment of the Marxist concept of ‘surplus value’: of the fact that ‘the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes. [...] It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things, but for the worker it produces privation’.⁹ In an inherently unequal capitalist system, all profit from the labour of workers like the indigenous *caporal* or Suzanne’s family goes to produce ‘the wonderful things’ for the rich that are so ostentatiously on show in their exclusive *haut quartier*.

This imbalance of power, on which the rich whites’ extravagant lifestyle depends, is explicitly underlined with the insertion of the following aside:

Des centaines de milliers de travailleurs indigènes saignaient les arbres des cent mille hectares de terres rouges, se saignaient à ouvrir les arbres des cent mille hectares des terres qui par hasard s’appelaient déjà rouges avant d’être la possession des quelques centaines de planteurs blancs aux colossales fortunes. Le latex coulait. Le sang aussi. Mais le latex seul était précieux, recueilli, et, recueilli, payait. Le sang se perdait. (p. 169)

Duras forces an evocation of the harsh, unjust reality of exploitation into the depiction of the rich colonialists’ luxurious world, this textual disruption symbolically foreshadowing what Duras, following Marx, saw as the inevitable overthrow of the oppressor by the united masses of oppressed: ‘On évitait encore d’imaginer qu’il s’en trouverait un grand nombre pour venir un jour en demander le prix’ (p. 169). In the phrase ‘travailleurs indigènes’, Duras underlines the Indochinese workers’ double oppression: as workers within a capitalist system, and as ‘natives’ within a colonial system. Throughout

⁹ Karl Marx, ‘Estranged Labor’, in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), pp. 109–10.

Duras’s portrayal of colonial Indochina, colonialism is portrayed as largely synonymous with capitalism, resulting in overlaps between the two systems’ racial and class hierarchies. As Marxist critics of colonialism, such as Stuart Hall or John Rex, have argued,¹⁰ colonialism’s racial hierarchies and stereotypes coincided neatly with the economic requirements of capitalism, colonialism hence providing the means by which the global expansion of capitalism could be achieved. By portraying particular races as naturally suited to certain jobs – as we have seen, for instance, in the stereotyping employed in *L’Empire français* – colonial ideologues were able to create a vast, racially-determined proletariat and so to justify their exploitation in the capitalist machine. The critique of colonial exploitation and inequality in *Un barrage* highlights such exploitative proletarianization of the indigenous population, but also, inversely, focuses on the complex ways in which the economic and class distinctions of capitalism are inflected by the racial hierarchies and terminology of colonial ideology.

The complex interrelation of race and class in Duras’s portrayal of colonial Indochina is signalled in the novel’s depiction of the different quarters of the colonial city. Whilst the inhabitants of the *haut quartier* are clearly defined by their wealth – their financial success being the key to their social success – they are repeatedly referred to, in racial rather than class terms, as ‘les blancs’ or even as the capitalized form, ‘les Blancs’. Within Duras’s depiction of the colonial hierarchy, not only is race used to dictate class (with the indigenous population relegated to working-class roles), but, inversely, class constitutes race – only the richest, most successful colonialists are seen as truly ‘white’. The label ‘blancs’, as Suzanne painfully comes to recognize during her misguided foray into the *haut quartier*, is not one with which poor Europeans are able or allowed to identify. Only the rich ‘super-whites’ of the European district are the true representatives of ‘la race blanche’ (p. 169) and the defenders of the values and privileges with which whiteness

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’, in *Sociological Theories, Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), pp. 305–45; John Rex, ‘Theory of Race Relations: A Weberian Approach?’, in *Sociological Theories, Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), pp. 116–86.

becomes associated. Within this exclusive racial super-stratum, whiteness becomes a self-selecting and self-defining quality to be protected and constructed. Hence, the rich white elite protects itself from 'contamination' by cutting itself off from other racial and class groups, and by prohibiting access to its exclusive world to all but its own ilk. Whiteness is constructed and accentuated through the cult of ostentatious cleanliness and the wearing of 'l'uniforme colonial, du costume blanc, couleur d'immunité et d'innocence' (p. 168). The colonial, capitalist elite thus asserts its own supremacy by becoming 'plus blancs que jamais' (p. 168) – a state to which neither indigenous locals nor poor whites can aspire.

Despite their apparent superiority and exclusivity, the rich 'Blancs' of the *haut quartier* become, in Duras's Marxist formulation, the object of ridicule and criticism, as the excesses and peculiarities of their existence are brought under mocking scrutiny. The Whites' self-preservatory withdrawal inside the boundaries of the *haut quartier* comes to symbolize their essential fragility, their unsustainable whiteness the physical reflection of their state of moral and social etiolation. Seeking to protect themselves from contamination from outside, they are portrayed in a state of gradual self-destruction, as their excessive, profligate and non-utilitarian mode of existence heads inexorably towards alcohol-induced implosion. Rather than embodying the habitat of the best and the fittest, the *haut quartier* becomes 'un immense jardin zoologique, où les espèces rares des blancs veillaient sur elles-mêmes' (p. 168). The social-Darwinian language of racial hierarchies and the survival of the fittest is turned against the very people who conventionally use it to their own self-seeking advantage. Reflecting the Marxist belief that capitalism is doomed to collapse, as it is eroded by self-created, internal problems that it cannot solve, Duras's novel presents colonial society's demise as a *fait accompli*, its period of dominance linguistically relegated to the distant past in such phrases as 'cette grande colonie que l'on appelait alors l'Indochine française' (p. 23); 'dans cette période-là' (p. 167); or 'C'était la grande époque' (p. 169). Although, in 1950, France had still not relinquished its increasingly precarious hold on Indochina, this retrospective narrative position establishes not only a temporal but also an ideological distance between the context of the novel's writing and that in which it is set.

In contrast to the Whites – those 'qui avaient fait fortune' and are thus allowed access to the 'Eden' of the *haut quartier* – the other, poor, unsuccessful whites are physically, and seemingly racially, relegated to a different space: 'C'était dans la zone située entre le haut quartier et les faubourgs indigènes que les blancs qui n'avaient pas fait fortune, les coloniaux indigènes, se trouvaient relégués' (p. 171, my emphases). Not only is their social position reflected in their physical location, *between* the central European district and the native suburbs, but it is also reflected in the visual and phonic similarity of the terms 'indigènes' and 'indignes'. Elsewhere, the poor Europeans are described in derogatory terms as 'la pègre blanche' (p. 171): their classification as white is introduced, in the non-capitalized, adjectival form, as an epithet to their primary grouping as 'la pègre', emphasizing their inferior social status outside the successful, respectable colonial classes. In contrast to the rich 'Blancs', the poor whites are rendered almost 'non-White' and 'other' on account of their poverty, their class thus dictating their racial grouping and status.¹¹ In the quintessentially capitalist society of colonial Indochina, based on personal gain, ostentatious wealth and self-seeking exploitation, to be white and *not* rich is an aberration, a failure punishable with racial excommunication and relegation to the social underclass.

Duras's introduction of the in-between, forgotten social group of working-class whites into her critique of the capitalist, colonial society of Saigon, confuses both colonial ideology's construction of a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, and Marxism's division of society into bourgeoisie and proletariat. So, what are the implications of *Un barrage*'s ideological conflation of colonialism with capitalism, or of its narrative focus on the exploited poor whites, for its portrayal of the doubly-excluded indigenous population? What

¹¹ Such insistence on the social and racial segregation of poor, 'dirty' whites in colonial society is reminiscent of the derogatory connotations of the term 'pieds noirs', applied to Algerian-born settlers of French descent. This treatment of the poor whites recalls Spivak's coining of the term 'othering' to describe the process by which western colonial discourse constructs its 'others' – that is, those who are excluded or oppressed by colonial power and ideology. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Simur', in *Europe and Its Others*, ed. by Francis Barker *et al.* (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985), pp. 128-51.

relationship is set up, either explicitly or implicitly, between poor whites and Indochinese characters, and in what ways might this reflect or refute the nature of the depiction of the peoples of Indochina presented in the pro-colonial, precursor text, *L'Empire français*?

Despite the evident parallels that the novel underlines between the lot of the *petits colons* and of the indigenous locals, united in their common position as the exploited 'base' of the colonial regime, distinct differences persist, in both thematic and formal terms, between the status allotted to the two groups. As we have seen in the depiction of Saigon's segregated urban-planning, the colonial context does not destroy the capitalist class divisions transposed there from metropolitan French society. Yet nor does the highlighting of these class divisions disrupt the fundamental racial hierarchy, between colonizer and colonized, on which colonial society, economy and ideology are based. In *L'Empire français*, emphasis was placed upon the distinct contrasts between Saigon's European centre and the 'faubourgs indigènes'. In *Un barrage*, however, an underlying contrast is constructed between the rich *haut quartier* and the intermediary zone, where the lower-class whites live and work. The narrative does not cross the delineating tramlines into the 'native' areas, to which it merely alludes in passing, nor does it depict any urban, educated, indigenous characters. Saigon's indigenous inhabitants are kept narratively out of sight, beyond the city's physical barriers of racial segregation.

The indigenous population is, instead, predominantly depicted within the non-urban, peripheral location of the southern floodplains, and hence is confined to the traditional, socially-excluded role of poor, rural peasants. Even in the representation of this marginal site, there are no central, well-rounded, indigenous figures on a par with the novel's cast of poor white characters. The depiction of the *caporal* could, arguably, be seen as an exception to this rule, as his story of suffering and brutal exploitation is treated at length and with intense narrative sympathy, but, as we shall examine, this explicit sympathy remains implicitly conditioned by the unequal racial structures of colonial ideology. Although Suzanne's family's poverty and social ostracism bring them into a degree of contact with the *caporal* that would be unthinkable within the upper echelons of

colonial society, there are still distinct differences between their respective situations. Though poor in comparison to the colonial elite, the mother can still afford to house and feed the *caporal*, in return for his manual work, so replicating, in an impoverished version, the patterns of paternalistic dominance and subservience that structure colonizer-colonized relations. This fundamental difference is underlined in the following, indirect observation by the *caporal*: 'Il était conscient de la misère de la mère mais il n'arrivait pas à trouver une commune mesure entre la sienne et celle-ci. Chez la mère on mangeait quand même chaque jour et on dormait sous un toit' (p. 248). Both Suzanne's family and the *caporal* are poor, both are exploited, and both are 'administrés' by the fat-cat bureaucrats who manage the colonial system to their own kind's advantage. Unlike Suzanne and her family, however, the *caporal* is also a member of the indigenous, colonized population, and hence is denied even the minimal degree of social and economic advancement available to the poorest whites. The mother's relations with the *caporal*, as with the other locals, are based predominantly on paternalistic pity, rather than on empathy, equality or respect. Her attitude and actions towards the colonized can be seen to embody the humanitarian face of colonialism's rhetoric, as opposed to the more exploitative reality of its material practices, as embodied by the corrupt *agents du cadastre* – but they still remain essentially dictated by colonialism's hierarchical racial reasoning.

The *caporal*'s socially subordinate status is reinforced textually, as the following examples illustrate, by the fact that his presence is consistently and almost exclusively constructed in association with manual, servile actions, and hence as an extension of the wishes of those he serves: 'Devant elle [la mère], le caporal binait le talus après l'avoir arrosé' (p. 18); 'Le caporal monta [...] et alluma la lampe à acétylène' (p. 81); 'Joseph [...] aidé du caporal...' (p. 100); '[Joseph] descendit les poulets au caporal pour qu'il les fasse cuire' (p. 160). Just as whites are the only people to have a chance to prosper in the colonial system, so too, on a formal level, are they the only characters granted voice, identity or agency. Even the story of the *caporal* and his wife – highlighted, amidst the masses, as exemplary of colonial exploitation, injustice and violence – is told in the third-

person, their minimal words and thoughts mediated by either the omniscient narrator or the mother. This external narrative position, of sympathy but distance, is in stark contrast to the novel's predominant narrative identification with the poor white characters, an identification that is most strikingly betrayed in the occasional slippages of narrative voice, from third-person 'elle' to first-person 'je', when referring to Suzanne (pp. 131, 132, 152, 167). There is no such level of narratorial identification with the situation of the *caporal* or his wife. However explicitly sympathetic it may be to their plight, the narrative speaks *for* them and not *as* one of them.

Although the *caporal* and his wife are not granted the status of full characters, their story is at least indirectly highlighted as representative of the general injustice suffered by the colonized population of Indochina. Otherwise, the indigenous inhabitants of the plain are represented as an undifferentiated mass of downtrodden, passive peasants, present only in the background of the central white family's lives. Although very different ideological convictions from those in *L'Empire français* motivate *Un barrage*, the novel's representation of the people of Indochina in many ways echoes that of the precursor text. In *L'Empire français*'s chapter, 'L'Indochine, carrefour des peuples', the colony's various ethnic groups are all stereotypically and homogenizingly characterized by their indolence, calm and passivity: 'L'Annamite a un goût très prononcé pour la vie sédentaire. [...] Son idéalisme le pousse vers une vie calme et assurée. [...] Le paysan annamite [...] mène l'existence du paysan de toujours' (p. 110); 'Indolent et calme, le Cambodgien vit de très peu de chose. Mauvais riziculteur, il est, par contre, un excellent pêcheur' (p. 111); 'Les Laotiens, insoucians et indolents, sont d'habiles piroguiers' (p. 113). As discussed in the previous chapter, such racial stereotypes are deployed, in line with conventional colonial discourse, in order to present the diverse, multi-ethnic, indigenous population as naturally suited to subservient, menial roles, and hence to justify as 'natural' France's control over them and appropriation of their land.¹²

¹² As also discussed in the previous chapter, other, contradictory stereotypes are constructed elsewhere in *L'Empire français*, reflecting its often incompatible dual function as both colonial propaganda and war propaganda. In the chapter on Indochina, from which *Un barrage*'s descriptive motifs are predominantly borrowed, however, the depiction of the racial traits of the

Although *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is explicitly sympathetic to the colonized people's lot, the indigenous people are nonetheless depicted, on a textual level, in similar terms. Not only are they cast exclusively in the subservient, 'primitive' role of peasants, but, as the following examples reflect, they are also consistently referred to as a non-individuated, voiceless mass: '*des centaines de paysans de la plaine enfin réveillés de leur torpeur millénaire*' (p. 30); '*Elle avait saccagé la paix de centaines de paysans de la plaine*' (p. 183); '*Tout autour du bungalow il y avait beaucoup de paysans qui étaient venus pour veiller la mère*' (p. 361, my emphases). As in *L'Empire français*, an implicit, seemingly natural link is established, reinforced by the repetition of such phrases as 'depuis des millénaires', 'depuis toujours' or 'éternel', between their collective status as peasants and their characteristic passivity. All such descriptive features are present in the following extract, which recounts the locals' reaction to the mother's plan to build dams against the sea:

Les paysans s'étaient un peu étonnés. D'abord parce que depuis des millénaires que la mer envahissait la plaine ils s'y étaient à ce point habitués qu'ils n'auraient jamais imaginé qu'on pût l'empêcher de le faire. Ensuite parce que leur misère leur avait donné l'habitude d'une passivité qui était leur seule défense devant leurs enfants morts de faim ou leurs récoltes brûlées par le sel. (p. 53)

Whereas, in *L'Empire français*'s colonialist ideology, the indigenous people's inherent passivity was portrayed as making them naturally suited to the role of peasant, in *Un barrage*'s anti-colonial critique, the misery of peasant life is portrayed as conditioning their self-defensive passivity. Whilst still portraying the indigenous population in the same, limited terms, *Un barrage* does at least reverse the cause-and-effect link between their perceived character traits and their role in life, showing how colonial exploitation has exacerbated the suffering caused by natural forces.

Not only does the novel reverse the self-serving logic of colonial discourse, but it also seemingly contradicts its own, con-

different ethnic groups conforms to conventional, Orientalist stereotypes of colonial discourse, identified by Said.

ventional representation of the indigenous peasants as inherently and eternally passive, by briefly portraying them as capable of action: 'Un rien avait suffi à les faire sortir de leur passivité' (p. 54). Such uncharacteristic action on the part of the peasants is, however, only prompted by the intervention of a European character – either the mother, with her hubristic plan to build dams, or Joseph, with his incitement to fight against the colonial officials – an intervention which, in many ways, replicates the humanitarian, 'civilizing' rhetoric of western cultural and technological advancement, deployed in *L'Empire français*. The novel's ambivalent relation to colonial discourse in its portrayal of the colonized people of Indochina is reflected in the ambivalence of the mother's action and motives in her failed project of building barrages against the floodwater. As a *petit colon*, she was able to buy land and the materials for the barrages' construction and, like a bourgeois boss, was reliant on the labour of the indigenous peasants to complete her project. Yet her utopian plan to divide the profits of the venture amongst all the workers and to found a co-operative farm on her land resembles Marx's vision of a truly socialist society, in which wealth would be equally distributed. The socialist dream of a more egalitarian society is thus, paradoxically, dependent for its very conception on both colonial and capitalist inequalities in Indochina's socio-economic system: by virtue of her race, the white mother is able to save, invest and borrow money, that she hopes then to redistribute. Likewise, the seemingly benevolent motivation for the mother's failed plan remains based on the propagandist colonial dream of self-advancement and on the existence – or textual construction – of a large, amenable (since passive and impressionable) indigenous proletariat.

Given the explicit critique of colonial and capitalist injustice in *Un barrage*, how should one interpret Duras's ambivalent thematic and formal representation of the indigenous people of Indochina? As a novel, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is far more ambiguous, polyvalent and shifting than is the didactic, univocal genre of propaganda, making it inherently more open to different, contradictory or overlapping interpretations than its precursor, *L'Empire français*. The representation of the colonized could thus, on one hand, be viewed as the self-conscious *staging* of the stereotypical attitude of colonial discourse, which sought discursively to justify the exploitation of the

colonized – that is, as an ironic repetition of a dehumanizing, homogenizing rhetorical move that the narrative explicitly refutes. On the other hand, it could be viewed as illustrative of the insidious persistence of denigratory attitudes towards the indigenous people that underpinned the colonial system in which Duras herself was raised – that is, as the unconscious reinscription of the internalized racial prejudices and structures of colonial discourse that she had previously espoused. Or, paradoxically, this ambivalent textual attitude could be seen to result from the imposition of a Marxist analytical framework onto Indochina's colonial context – that is, from Duras's intellectual interest in the indigenous, colonized population as collectively representative of the oppressed mass of the proletariat, rather than as individuals or rounded characters.

Whilst, as we have seen, many of *L'Empire français*'s original stock of descriptive motifs persist in Duras's first literary return to Indochina, the intertextual transformations that many of these undergo, in the novel's representation of the colony, reflect the author's profound shift in ideological allegiance during the tumultuous intervening decade. The shift from enthusiastic espousal of the colonial mission to bitter criticism of colonial corruption and exploitation reflects Duras's post-war dissatisfaction with the inequalities and injustices of French society, and her corresponding Marxist commitment to a more egalitarian model of social relations. Whilst the defining characteristics of Indochina's places and people remain the same as in the pro-colonial precursor – the plain is still wet and muddy, the capital city is still divided into distinct districts, the indigenous people are still passive peasants – these attributes are re-worked and transformed to reveal the harsh reality of social injustice and exploitation behind the eulogistic, propagandist fiction of *L'Empire français*. Thus, far from making it fertile, the plain's flooding renders it uncultivable, disease-ridden and impoverished. The city's divisions are not simply a 'curious', picturesque phenomenon, but the physical manifestation of colonial ideology's class and racial segregation. The indigenous peasants' passivity is not solely the result of their natural, racial make-up, but is a form of self-defence against hardship and exploitation.

In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, in line with Duras's contemporary Marxist beliefs, Indochina's colonial society is recast as a quintessential example of a capitalist society. This recasting is based on evident parallels between colonialism's exploitative racial opposition between European elite and non-European masses, and capitalism's class division of society into exploiting bourgeoisie and exploited proletariat. In many respects, Duras's criticism of capitalism corresponds neatly with a critique of colonialism, as it serves to reveal the economics of greed and exploitation that underpinned the rhetoric of France's 'mission civilisatrice'. The novel's focus on the forgotten, exploited *petits colons* in the colonial system complicates this apparent parallel, however. Whilst the existence of this white under-class reveals further levels of social division and inequality within the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, it also leaves the fundamentally racial nature of this underlying opposition largely in place. Although sympathy is explicitly expressed for the indigenous people's lot, they are maintained, both thematically and formally, in subservient, homogenized and depersonalized roles, and denied narrative agency, voice or individuation.

Despite Duras's contemporary commitment to the Marxist class struggle for a more egalitarian, socialist society, absolutely no reference is made, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, to the very real, anti-colonial war that was being fought against the French in Indochina, by Ho Chi Minh's Communist Vietminh, at the time her novel was being written – a war which would end with France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu just four years later. Indeed, the possibility of proletarian rebellion, with which the novel open-endedly and ambiguously concludes, is incited by a European character, Joseph, rather than by members of the indigenous population themselves. Read in the context of the author's post-war membership of the French Communist Party, the narrative identification throughout *Un barrage* with the central character, Suzanne, can be seen to provide Duras with the means of asserting her own left-wing credentials, not just as a Marxist intellectual, but also, essentially, as a member of the proletariat. Marxism also provided Duras with a theoretical system and language with which to understand and criticize the society and ideology of which she was both the product and the alleged victim.

In later interviews,¹³ Duras revealed the novel's autobiographical roots in her own mother's vain battle against colonial corruption. In this sense, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* can be viewed as Duras's retrospective apology for her former support – whatever her particular, contemporary motives may have been – of the colonial regime which had been the cause of her own family's suffering. As the novel's sympathetic but homogenizing and paternalistic portrayal of Indochina's indigenous population implicitly reveals, the primary intellectual and political motivation of *Un barrage* is not to attack the racial inequalities that underpinned the colonial regime. By highlighting instead the class injustices of the capitalist colonial system of which she too is retrospectively cast as a victim, Duras reconstructs colonial Indochina in accordance with the Marxist concerns that preoccupied the intellectual elite of post-war, metropolitan France.

¹³ See, in particular, *Les Parleuses*, pp. 135-43, and *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, pp. 56-61; p. 84.

Chapter 3

L'Amant: Colonialism and Gender

Over thirty years separate the publication of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* from Duras's next, explicitly 'Indochinese' work, *L'Amant*, during which time the socio-political climate of France, as well as Duras's own intellectual concerns and literary standing, had changed significantly. Whilst Duras's 'India Cycle' of the late 1960s and 1970s could well be seen as an oblique exploration of France's loss of Empire, transposed onto the alternative colonial setting of British India, Indochina does not resurface as the overt narrative context of Duras's literary work until 1984. During the intervening period, the French public's attitude towards colonial Indochina had mellowed considerably. No longer a pressing current concern, the Franco-Indochinese War had long been replaced, in the French collective consciousness, by the atrocities of the more recent Algerian War, as a focus for anti-colonial sentiment and national soul-searching. On an international stage, France's ignominious defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 paled into relative insignificance when compared with the high-profile retreat of US troops from Vietnam in 1975, after two decades of a bloody and intensely unpopular war. By 1984, French Indochina of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to represent a distant, relatively unproblematic and even vaguely nostalgic part of France's colonial past – a very different situation from the one it had occupied in 1950, in the midst of the Franco-Indochinese War, when Duras published *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.

Similarly, class difference, that had preoccupied the Marxist-dominated post-war era, had been largely superseded by sexual difference, as the main subject of political and intellectual debate.¹ One

¹ This transition, at least at first, involved an appropriation and absorption of Marxist thinking into feminist debates, rather than its outright rejection. The early thinking of the MLF, for instance, was very much influenced by Simone

of the major events to have profoundly altered France's social, cultural, political and intellectual climate, in the meantime, was May 1968. Ensuing from the social and attitudinal upheavals of this time, the 1970s witnessed a growing disillusionment amongst intellectuals with rigid (often patriarchal) systems of all kinds, including Marxism – a 'postmodern' disillusionment which Lyotard famously described as 'l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits'.² Correspondingly, although *L'Amant* returns to the same colonial, Indochinese context and reworks much of the same narrative material as in *Un barrage*, it quite explicitly signals its rejection of the rigid Marxist ideology that had motivated the earlier text's portrayal of colonial society.³

The women's movement proved to be the most enduring political and intellectual movement to spring from the events of May 1968, continuing to exert enormous influence throughout the 1970s and beyond. After 1968, the age of majority was reduced from twenty-one to eighteen, abortion was legalized, new divorce and family laws were introduced, and equal pay legislation was established. The *Mouvement pour la Libération de la Femme* (MLF) and its various feminist splinter groups (such as *Psych et Po*) were particularly active throughout the 1970s, attracting much media attention and contributing to the creation of numerous women's publishing series and the unprecedented burgeoning of women's writing.⁴ A fertile, influential

de Beauvoir's analysis of class and of the social construction of supposedly 'feminine' roles.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 7.

³ Duras draws a parallel between her membership of the Communist Party and the collaboration of her wartime neighbours, Ramon and Betty Fernandez: 'Collaborateurs, les Fernandez. Et moi, deux ans après la guerre, membre du P.C.F. L'équivalence est absolue, définitive. C'est la même chose, la même pitié, le même appel au secours, la même débilite du jugement, la même superstition disons, qui consiste à croire à la solution politique du problème personnel' (p. 85). Whilst the assertion of a moral equivalence between membership of the Communist Party and Collaboration with the German occupiers is provocatively contentious, this extract reflects Duras's own postmodern suspicion of rigid ideological systems and of simplistic approaches to the complexities of human experience.

⁴ For an overview of the development of the women's movement and of women's writing during the 1970s and 1980s, see the introduction to Elizabeth

and often contestatory body of feminist theories developed hand-in-hand with the political and material changes effected in women's social, cultural and literary circumstances.

Duras was active in many of the major political movements of the 1960s and 1970s,⁵ and her literary work was central to the development of some of the period's most influential intellectual and literary debates, particularly on the nature of sexual difference. Her work did not simply reflect the contemporary, intellectual *Zeitgeist*, but was central to its very creation and development. The important post-structuralist thinkers Jacques Lacan and Hélène Cixous both cite Duras's writing as exemplary of their theories. In his 1965 essay, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein',⁶ Lacan claims that Duras 's'avère savoir sans moi ce que j'enseigne' and analyses Duras's novel as an example of his psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious and of the role of desire in the construction of a divided female subjectivity.⁷ Lacan's investigations of the nature of femininity, of sexual difference, and of women's relation to language played an important part, in turn, in the development of psychoanalytic feminist thought of the 1970s. Refuting the notion that women's relation to language is based on a lack of identification with an essentially phallic linguistic order, feminist theorists

Fallaize, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 1-29. For a detailed study of French feminist politics and activism, see Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France from May '68 to Mitterrand* (London: Routledge, 1986).

⁵ In 1960, Duras was one of the first of 121 intellectuals to sign the controversial 'Manifeste des 121' against the Algerian War. Duras is anecdotally credited with devising the May '68 slogan, 'Sous les pavés, la plage'. In 1971, she was one of 343 women to sign a statement, published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, declaring that they had had an illegal abortion – a statement that was influential in the legalization of abortion in 1974.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 52 (December 1965), 7-15. This essay is reproduced in *Marguerite Duras par Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Éditions Albatros, 1975), pp. 93-99. The novel which Lacan analyses in this essay is Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

⁷ See also *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) and *Le Séminaire XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

asserted women's identificatory relation, through the body of the mother, with an alternative, pre-symbolic level of language. In her seminal essay, 'Le Rire de la Méduse' (1975), Hélène Cixous cites Duras as the only living woman writer whose writing practice embodies the notion of an '*écriture féminine*' – a fluid, bodily form of writing which, emerging from a feminine libidinal economy, disrupts the rigid grammar and syntax of phallogentric language.⁸ Not only was Duras's work thus central to the development of psychoanalytic and feminist theories, but such theoretical readings also contributed to the establishment of Duras's canonical literary status. Although Duras's own engagement with such theories was highly ambivalent,⁹ by the early 1980s her name and work were inextricably and symbiotically linked to theoretical debates on gender difference.¹⁰ With *L'Amant*, the issues of female subjectivity, gender relations and desire, which were key to many of Duras's fictional works of the 1960s and 1970s, are shifted onto the new ground of autobiography

⁸ 'Le Rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), 39-54.

⁹ The following exchange is representative of Duras's ambivalent attitude to feminist appropriations of her work: 'X.G.: Je me demandais si ça, ce ne serait pas quelque chose de femme, vraiment de femme, blanc. S'il y a, par exemple, une chaîne grammaticale, s'il y a un blanc dedans, est-ce que ce ne serait pas là que serait la femme? M.D.: Qui sait?' (*Les Parleuses*, p. 12) For a fuller discussion of Duras's shifting relationship with feminism, see Julia Waters, *Intersexual Rivalry: A Reading in Pairs of Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), especially pp. 41-45.

¹⁰ Two studies that were influential in establishing Duras's centrality to broadly psychoanalytic theories of gender difference were Michèle Montrelay's *L'Ombre et le nom: sur la féminité* (Paris: Minuit, 1977) and Marcelle Marini's *Territoires du féminin: avec Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Minuit, 1977). This tendency has continued to characterize Duras studies since. See, for instance, Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1987); Trista Selous, *The Other Woman: Feminism and Femininity in the Work of Marguerite Duras* (New Haven, CONN: Yale University Press, 1988); Janine Ricouart, *Écriture féminine et violence: une étude de Marguerite Duras* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1991); and Stephanie Anderson, *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras* (Geneva: Droz, 1995).

and, hence, of Duras's own early life and first love affair, in colonial Indochina.¹¹

This chapter will consider how Duras's literary return to her 'pays natal', fifty years after her physical departure and more than thirty years after *Un barrage*, reflects the very different social and intellectual context within which the later novel was written. As we shall examine, *L'Amant's* colonial context is constructed upon many of the same stock descriptive elements as were deployed in *Un barrage* or, more implicitly, in *L'Empire français*. Yet, the later novel's narrative focus on a central semi-autobiographical female protagonist, on gender roles, on the tense mother-daughter bond, on different female figures' relationships to *jouissance*, and on the interrelation of gender, writing and individual subjectivity, all attest to the distinct set of contemporary concerns with gender difference that underpin its intertextual reworkings. What kind of interrelation is set up, in *L'Amant*, between colonial ideology's racial opposition between European colonizer and non-European colonized, or a Marxist opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and a feminist-inflected investigation of the unequal gender relations underpinning patriarchal society? My intertextual analyses will examine, in particular, *L'Amant's* representations of the key geographic and symbolic sites of the European *haut quartier*, the Chinese district of Cholon, and the river Mekong, before considering how issues of gender and race intersect in the portrayal of the central, inter-racial relationship between the young girl and her Chinese lover.

As we saw in Chapter 2, *Un barrage's* narrative and symbolic division between the impoverished, isolated flood plain and the luxurious, exclusive European district of the colonial capital, was motivated by a Marxist concern with class difference. In *L'Amant*,

¹¹ This shift mirrors, both generically and stylistically, the contemporary move of other avant-garde writers, such as Roland Barthes, Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet: Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1985). The self-reflexive nature of these works, blurring fact and fiction, past and present, and undermining any notion of an 'autobiographical pact' of truth, has earned them the label of 'autofiction' or 'Nouvelle Autobiographie'.

concern with gender difference underlies the central symbolic opposition between the European districts of colonial towns, on the one hand, and Saigon's Chinese district of Cholon, on the other. The change in symbolic significance attributed to different geographic locations can be detected most strikingly in the following description of Saigon's *haut quartier*, which transformatively reworks those, already discussed above, from *Un barrage* and *L'Empire français*.

Je regarde les femmes dans les rues de Saigon, dans les postes de brousse. Il y en a de très belles, de très blanches, elles prennent un soin extrême de leur beauté ici, surtout dans les postes de brousse. Elles ne font rien, elles se gardent seulement, elles se gardent pour l'Europe, les amants, les vacances en Italie, les longs congés de six mois tous les trois ans lorsqu'elles pourront enfin parler de ce qui se passe ici, de cette existence coloniale si particulière, du service de ces gens, de ces boys, si parfait, de la végétation, des bals, de ces villas blanches, grandes à s'y perdre, où sont logés les fonctionnaires dans les postes éloignés. Elles attendent. Elles s'habillent pour rien. Elles se regardent. Dans l'ombre de ces villas, elles se regardent [...]. Ce manquement des femmes à elles-mêmes par elles-mêmes opéré m'apparaissait toujours comme une erreur. (pp. 27-28)¹²

As in *Un barrage*, the European residential districts are defined by their separation from the rest of society, by their ostentatious spaciousness, and by the luxury of their well-ordered, shady villas and gardens. Again, the inhabitants of this rarefied environment are the idle, self-indulgent, narcissistic members of colonial society's financial and administrative elite, set apart by their distinctive and cultivated whiteness. Yet the focus and purpose of the description have fundamentally changed. The *haut quartier* is no longer representative of social and racial exclusion, in its self-protective separation from other districts and other social groups, but is symbolic of entrapment, surveillance and control. Those oppressed by this society are not the 'natives' or the poor whites who are kept out of the *haut quartier*, but the colonial women who are kept in. In *L'Amant*'s intertextual reformulations, colonial society no longer embodies an

¹² Duras's portrayal of the alienated, bored housewives of colonial society is reminiscent of Beauvoir's influential analysis of female narcissism in 'La Narcissiste', *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), II, 353-75.

exploitative, capitalist system, but a patriarchal regulator of female *jouissance*. Colonialism's urban segregation is thus less reflective of class or racial inequalities than of gender-based, unequal relations to sexual desire. The male inhabitants of the European district are portrayed as hypocritical, lascivious adulterers and paedophiles, gossiping disapprovingly about 'cette petite vicieuse [qui] va se faire caresser le corps par un sale Chinois millionnaire' (pp. 109-10), whilst cheating on their wives to pursue under-age schoolgirls and indigenous servants. Colonial women, in contrast, have been silenced and restricted by colonialism's patriarchal prohibitions and proscriptive gender roles, alienated from their own bodies and from pleasure. As the narrative focus of the portrayal of the *haut quartier* shifts between the two novels, from self-seeking male officials to their bored, suppressed female counterparts, from 'les Blancs' to 'les blanches',¹³ the colonial women's idleness, social superiority and even beauty are portrayed not as the objects of envy, but as the cause of despair, madness and even suicide. Trapped both by geography and convention, the bored, self-alienated women yearn to 'sortir de la solitude effroyable dans laquelle se tiennent les postes de la brousse perdus dans les étendues quadrilatères du riz, de la peur, de la folie, des fièvres, de l'oubli' (p. 111).

On a narrative level, the divisive structures of the *haut quartier* provide the grounds for the female protagonist's self-definition in relation to other colonial women. The young girl defines her own sense of female subjectivity in opposition to those frigid, self-alienated women of the colonial elite who have been cut off by social convention from their own desire. At the moment of her sexual initiation, the girl's accession to womanhood and to full identity is marked, linguistically, by a pronominal shift from 'elle' to 'je' and, symbolically, by a self-distinguishing opposition to her own mother who, having internalized colonial society's repressive gender roles, 'n'a pas connu la jouissance' (p. 50). In contrast, the young girl

¹³ The capitalization conventions applied here reflect Duras's own. In *Un barrage*, as discussed in the previous chapter, Duras repeatedly uses the capitalized form, 'les Blancs' to designate the rich colonial elite. In *L'Amant*, however, the wives of such colonial officials are referred to in the non-capitalized form, as in the quotation above.

identifies with women who, flouting colonial society's prohibitions, are both the objects and the instigators of transgressive desire. The story of the young girl's sexual relationship with her Chinese lover is textually interwoven with that of the affair between the wife of the French ambassador and a younger lover.¹⁴ The juxtaposition of these two chronologically separate scandals draws a textual parallel between the two female figures, who are otherwise separated by class and by age:

La même différence sépare la dame et la jeune fille au chapeau plat des autres gens du poste. De même que toutes les deux regardent les longues avenues des fleuves, de même elles sont. Isolées toutes les deux. Seules, des reines. Leur disgrâce va de soi. Toutes deux au discrédit vouées du fait de la nature de ce corps qu'elles ont, caressé par des amants, baisé par leurs bouches, livrées à l'infamie d'une jouissance à en mourir. (pp. 110-11)

The two women's identification through social and sexual transgression is symbolically reflected in their mirrored relation to the colonial space of the *haut quartier* and its 'longues avenues', which they both observe whilst remaining essentially separate from it and from those who inhabit it. Refusing to conform to colonial society's rules of decorum and gender roles, the two 'disgraced' women are similarly ostracized by the 'other people', but both self-assertively revel in their imposed isolation and in the expression of their sexually liberated female bodies.

Rather than conform to the stifling gender conventions of the *haut quartier*, the young girl crosses over, as if carried along by the 'circulation of desire' (p. 20), into the alternative geographic and symbolic space of Cholon. In the section of *L'Empire français* on the towns of Indochina, a significant part of the description of the colonial capital is dedicated to the Chinese district of Cholon, characterized by its 'curious' separation and fundamental difference from the ordered, spacious European centre of Saigon:

¹⁴ Although *la dame* is never named, she is readily identifiable to readers and viewers of Duras's 'India Cycle' as Anne-Marie Stretter, its enigmatic central female figure.

Saigon comprend également de populeux faubourgs indigènes, et en particulier Cholon, véritable cité dans la cité que peuplent 150.000 Chinois. [...]

Cholon est célèbre par ses 'immeubles-restaurants', création de la Chine moderne, ses magasins de soies et de jade, le tintamarre de ses rues et ses fêtes nocturnes. Il est curieux de remarquer que Saigon et Cholon, séparées par une courte avenue, coexistent sans s'influencer en rien, dans leur urbanisme et dans le mode de vie de leurs habitants. (pp. 113-14)

In *Un barrage*, despite its anti-colonial Marxist agenda, the 'faubourgs indigènes' are not entered: as we saw in the previous chapter, the novel's narrative focus remains on the European side of the delineating tramlines. What lies beyond is only hinted at: 'C'était à partir de ces trams [...] qu'on pouvait avoir une idée de l'autre ville, celle qui n'était pas blanche' (p. 190). In *L'Amant*, however, the young girl crosses over the tramlines into the very different, separate district of Cholon, where her first sexual experience takes place: 'C'est à Cholon. C'est à l'opposé des boulevards qui relient la ville chinoise au centre de Saigon, ces grandes voies à l'américaine sillonnées par les tramways, les pousse-pousse, les cars' (pp. 46-47). Her geographic transition into this quite separate world mirrors her personal transition from the familiarity of childhood and family life to the new experiences of sexuality and womanhood. It is precisely the Chinese district's associations with radical difference, separation and inaccessibility, already present in the two earlier texts and emphasized here by the phrase 'à l'opposé de', that make it such a powerfully suggestive, symbolic location for the girl's accession to womanhood and for her self-discovery as both object and subject of desire.

As site of sensory stimulation, sexual initiation and *jouissance*, Cholon is constructed as the very opposite of repressive, regulatory colonial society. The reference in *L'Empire français* to Cholon's characteristic 'fêtes nocturnes' is intertextually recast and expanded in *L'Amant*, to stress the area's associations with pleasure and excess: 'C'est une ville de plaisir qui bat son plein la nuit' (p. 52). Reflecting Cholon's role as place of pleasure and indulgence, the Chinese 'immeubles-restaurants' that *L'Empire français* lists as one of Cholon's famous features are borrowed and refigured as the context of the couple's nighttime excursions and, later, of their tense outings with

the girl's family. These vast restaurants are portrayed as open to the outside world and as radically, incomprehensibly different from European experiences:

Nous allons dans un de ces restaurants chinois à étages, ils occupent des immeubles entiers, ils sont grands comme des grands magasins, des casernes, ils sont ouverts sur la ville par des balcons, des terrasses. Le bruit qui vient de ces immeubles est inconcevable en Europe. (p. 60)

As this evocation of the disorientating, alien din of its restaurants suggests, *L'Amant's* literary reconstruction of Cholon also creatively expands upon *L'Empire français's* original reference to the characteristic 'tintamarre de ses rues.' In the scene of the girl's sexual initiation, which takes place in the lover's *compartiment* in Cholon, there are frequent shifts between the intimacy of the couple's private space inside and the crowded animation of the public street outside, with these shifts again being effected along the path of sound. A persistent, psychological and symbolic parallel is established between the girl's personal discovery of the otherness of *jouissance* and her sensory contact with the cacophonous otherness of the streets of Cholon, as in the following quotations:

Elle est très attentive à l'extérieur des choses, à la lumière, au vacarme de la ville dans laquelle la chambre est immergée. (p. 47)

Elle est entourée du vacarme continu de la ville, embarquée dans la ville, dans le train de la ville. (p. 52)

Le lit est séparé de la ville par ces persiennes à claire-voie, ce store de coton. Aucun matériau dur ne nous sépare des autres gens. Eux, ils ignorent notre existence. Nous, nous percevons quelque chose de la leur, le total de leurs voix, de leurs mouvements. (p. 53)

The girl's accession to womanhood, through the unleashing of her dormant sexuality, is portrayed as being inextricably linked to her heightened sensory attention to the quintessentially alien noises and presences outside the room's limits. The free-flowing, transgressive nature of desire is reflected in the flimsy cotton blind's interpenetrability, blurring rather than demarcating the girl's responses to immediate and external sensations. Adrift upon the sounds and

smells of Cholon, and yet separated from them by the liminality of the blinds, the lover's *garçonnière* becomes the intimate location of sexual discovery, far away from the surveying, censorial gaze of patriarchal, colonial society.

L'Amant's feminist-inflected exploration of the nature of freely-expressed female desire colours the portrayal of Cholon as the liberating site of erotic adventure and self-discovery. Such a portrayal replicates, albeit with very different, positive connotations, colonial-era stereotypes of the Chinese district as a 'quartier mal famé' (p. 109). As Clavaron highlights, absolutely no reference is made in *L'Amant* (or, indeed, in any of Duras's 'Indochinese' novels) to Cholon's role, in the 1920s and 1930s, as centre of anti-colonial political opposition: 'Cholon est [...] une des places fortes dans les mouvements révolutionnaires d'inspiration chinoise mais, pour Duras, cette ville reste le lieu mythique des torrides nuits d'amour avec l'amant, et c'est tout.'¹⁵ Evading all allusions to Cholon's historical role as a hotbed of nationalist insurgence, the 'curious', picturesque opposition between European Saigon and Chinese Saigon that *L'Empire français* constructs is reworked, in *L'Amant*, to emphasize Cholon's psychological, symbolic role in the affirmation of the girl's sexuality and adult identity.

Beyond the urban structures of colonialism's divided society, a key geographic feature in *L'Amant's* representation of the natural landscape of Indochina is the river Mekong – a feature whose inherent qualities make it symbolically redolent of the novel's evocation of the fluid, irrepressible power of desire.¹⁶ In *Un barrage*,

¹⁵ Yves Clavaron, *Inde et Indochine: E.M. Forster et Marguerite Duras au miroir de l'Asie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), p. 61.

¹⁶ For a more detailed study of the intertextual reworkings of the motif of the Mekong in Duras's 'Indochinese' works, see Julia Waters, 'La traversée du fleuve': Representations of the Mekong in Marguerite Duras's Colonial and Post-colonial Works', in *Remembering Empire* (Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies, 2002), pp. 98-115, or the reproduced, abridged version of this article, 'Colonial Undercurrents: the motif of the Mekong in Marguerite Duras's "Indochinese" texts', in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 253-62.

the river was only implicitly present as a literal, background cause of the plain's flooding and its subsequent, inescapable cycle of poverty. The centrality of the Mekong to *L'Amant's* 'imaginative geography'¹⁷ reflects instead its key place in *L'Empire français's* depiction of the colony, as is seen in the assertion that 'on peut affirmer sans exagérer qu'une majeure partie de la Cochinchine est une création du Mékong' (p. 106). The precursor text's superlative references to the river's 'aspect torrentiel' (p. 104), 'plénitude' (p. 106), 'opulence grandiose' (p. 107), and to its local sobriquet, 'Souveraine des Eaux' (p. 106), all cast the Mekong as a powerful ally in France's economic development of the colony. The following passage from *L'Amant*, depicting the pivotal ferry-crossing during which the girl first meets her future lover, echoes the precursor's evocation of the Mekong's superlative beauty, size and power, but subverts its blandly positive description, to emphasize the wild, unstoppable nature of its flow:

Je regarde le fleuve. Ma mère me dit quelquefois que jamais, de ma vie entière, je ne reverrai des fleuves aussi beaux que ceux-là, aussi grands, aussi sauvages, le Mékong et ses bras qui descendent vers les océans, ces territoires d'eau qui vont aller disparaître dans les cavités des océans. Dans la platitude à perte de vue, ces fleuves, ils vont vite, ils versent comme si la terre penchait. [...] Dans le courant terrible je regarde le dernier moment de ma vie. Le courant est si fort, il emporterait tout, aussi bien des pierres, une cathédrale, une ville. Il y a une tempête qui souffle à l'intérieur des eaux du fleuve. Du vent qui se débat. (pp. 17-18)

A striking contrast is set up between the monotonous flatness of the surrounding area and the dangerous, excessive speed of the river's waters, hurtling towards the vast depths of the ocean. An identificatory link is implied, by means of the first-person narrative voice and gaze, between the young girl and the river, so hinting at the powerful and inevitable forces – of desire, of time, of self-dissolution – which lie ahead on the girl's journey of self-discovery. Far from being the reassuring, strong ally that it represented in *L'Empire français*, the Mekong's dizzying, excessive power here threatens to

¹⁷ Said coined this term to describe the largely arbitrary body of images that, through repetition, have come to constitute the difference between the familiar and the unfamiliar, 'ours' and 'theirs', West and East (see *Orientalism*, especially pp. 54-55).

wash away man-made colonial structures – 'des pierres, une cathédrale, une ville' – and to bring about dissolution and death.

Nowhere is *L'Amant's* transformative intertextual reworking of *L'Empire français's* original motif more striking than in the depiction of the debris carried along in the Mekong's floodwater. Whilst acknowledging the river's awe-inspiring power, the precursor text describes the floods in characteristically positive terms:

Le fleuve charrie de la terre et des matériaux en suspens dans ses eaux. Au moment maximum de la crue, à son point mort, ceux-ci se déposent lentement et forment une couche que couvre et que fixe l'année suivante une abondante végétation semi-aquatique, dont les joncs et les palétuviers sont en Indochine les spécimens les plus répandus. (p. 107)

The river's unstoppable and potentially catastrophic annual flooding is symbolically contained by the text's pro-colonial emphasis on the gradual depositing and fixing of the sediment carried by the flood water, which then contributes to the area's fertility and future productivity. In *L'Amant*, the description of the flood water, and of the materials carried along by it, is expanded and reslanted, to very different effect:

Autour du bac, le fleuve, il est à ras bord, ses eaux en marche traversent les eaux stagnantes des rizières, elles ne se mélangent pas. Il a ramassé tout ce qu'il a rencontré depuis le Tonlésap, la forêt cambodgienne. Il emmène tout ce qui vient, des paillottes, des forêts, des incendies éteints, des oiseaux morts, des chiens morts, des tigres, des buffles, noyés, des hommes noyés, des leurres, des îles de jacinthes d'eau agglutinées, tout va vers le Pacifique, rien n'a le temps de couler, tout est emporté par la tempête profonde et vertigineuse du courant intérieur, tout reste en suspens à la surface de la force du fleuve. (pp. 30-31)

The hyperbolic list of the debris that is carried along, including concrete and abstract objects, plants, animals and humans, expands and refutes the reassuring picture painted in *L'Empire français*. Far from settling and so becoming fixed and stable, the debris is portrayed as being in a state of perpetual motion and suspension. All around the ferry, threatening to overflow and invade it, the river's constant, vertiginous flow physically and symbolically underlies the

overtly subdued first meeting on board of the young girl and her future lover. Whilst no explicit connection is made between the couple on the ferry and the floodwater below, the repeated, unmarked shifts between the two spaces underline the symbolic parallels between the flow of the powerful, unstoppable river and the disruptive, irrepressible force of nascent desire.

The metaphoric association of the river with the power of desire is reflected in the language and syntax used, in the following passage, to describe the violent, ambivalent passions that characterize the central couple's sexual relations:

Il me traite de putain, de dégueulasse, il me dit que je suis son seul amour, et c'est ça qu'il doit dire et c'est ça qu'on dit quand on laisse le dire se faire, quand on laisse le corps faire et chercher et trouver et prendre ce qu'il veut, et là tout est bon, il n'y a pas de déchet, les déchets sont recouverts, tout va dans le torrent, dans la force du désir. (pp. 54-55)

Not only is desire here described using the same terms as are applied to the Mekong – 'le torrent', 'la force' – but the long, flowing sentence, composed of many subordinate clauses, and referring to the lover's words as 'les déchets', reflects, in its style and language, the above evocation of the flooding river and its debris. Whilst sexual desire is here described in metaphorical terms which associatively recall the river, the river is correspondingly described in terms which evoke the novel's central thematics of transgressive desire. The female protagonist's unleashed desire, like the river with which it becomes symbolically associated, overflows colonialism's social, racial and gender boundaries. Mirroring the shifting intellectual and ideological concerns of the different contexts in which Duras's 'Indochinese' texts were written, the motif of the Mekong is intertextually transformed from a powerful ally, assuring the colony's fertility, in *L'Empire français*, to a background cause of poverty and suffering in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, to a multi-faceted symbolic trope of desire and transgression, in *L'Amant*. Whilst *L'Amant*'s representation of Indochina's physical context is constructed around key elements from *L'Empire français*'s original, pro-colonial descriptions of the colony, the sites with which the novel's central female protagonist self-assertively identifies – the Chinese district of

Cholon, and the powerful Mekong in flood – are intertextually transformed, to embody the liberating antitheses of repressive, patriarchal, colonial social structures.

Set against this symbolically-laden context, the complex relationship between issues of gender difference and racial difference is most centrally elaborated in the portrayal of the inter-racial affair between the young white girl and her older, Chinese lover. The specificity of the lover's ethnic and cultural origins is underlined in the girl's (and the reader's) first meeting with her future lover: 'Chinois. Il est de cette minorité financière d'origine chinoise qui tient tout l'immobilier populaire de la colonie' (p. 44). The terms in which he is described mirror strikingly those used, over fifty years earlier, in *L'Empire français*, to describe the Chinese district of Cholon: 'C'est là que se concentre la haute finance et le grand commerce chinois, qui détient toutes les minoteries et entrepôts de la Cochinchine' (p. 114). The decision to cast the lover as Chinese, rather than Vietnamese, allows Duras to exploit the striking opposition between Saigon and Cholon that was already present in *L'Empire français*, casting the Chinese district as an embodiment of difference in multiple, liberating forms. In both texts, an important distinction is also established between the ethnically Chinese inhabitants of Cholon and Indochina's indigenous population – a distinction which, as we shall examine, complicates and nuances our understanding of the gender and racial politics of the white girl's relationship with her Chinese lover.

The sexual relations between the young girl and her lover at first appear to conform to traditional, Freudian, gender roles of male activity and female passivity. The Chinese lover, as an older, rich, well-travelled man, is far more sexually experienced than his young partner. Indeed, an important part of his sexual appeal to the previously inexperienced girl is the fact that he has had many lovers before. This allows her, in a highly Lacanian move, to define herself as object of desire, in a substitutional relationship with her predecessors, as she says to him: 'je voudrais que vous fassiez comme d'habitude avec les femmes' (p. 48). Yet, whilst both parties consciously perform the conventional gender roles of male seducer and female seduced that heterosexual norms dictate, their sexual

relations also disrupt them. As the following extract stresses, recounting her feelings just before their first sexual encounter, the girl's paradoxical power over her older, more experienced lover lies in her inexperience and in her self-centred ambivalence towards him:

Elle est sans sentiment très défini, sans haine, sans répugnance non plus, alors est-ce sans doute là déjà du désir. Elle en est ignorante. Elle a consenti à venir dès qu'il le lui a demandé la veille au soir. Elle est là où il faut qu'elle soit, déplacée là. Elle éprouve une légère peur. Il semblerait en effet que cela doive correspondre non seulement à ce qu'elle attend, mais à ce qui devrait arriver précisément dans son cas à elle. (p. 47)

In keeping with *L'Amant's* exploration of female subjectivity, the couple's love-making is portrayed primarily in terms of the girl's self-discovery through the unleashing of desire. Whilst passively indifferent to her lover, she is actively fascinated, in anticipation, by the self-defining potential of desire.

Through its repeated use of gendered personal pronouns, the text linguistically insists upon the gender difference between the two lovers. Yet the male lover's assumed and stereotypical role of seducer and initiator is progressively debunked and appropriated by the increasingly active female partner:

Il a arraché la robe, il la jette, il a arraché le petit slip de coton blanc et il la porte ainsi nue jusqu'au lit. Et alors il se tourne de l'autre côté du lit et il pleure. Et elle, lente, patiente, elle le ramène vers elle et elle commence à le déshabiller. Les yeux fermés, elle le fait. Lentement. Il veut faire des gestes pour l'aider. Elle lui demande de ne pas bouger. Laisse-moi. Elle dit qu'elle veut le faire. Elle le fait. Elle le déshabille. (p. 49)

The male lover is progressively overcome with traditionally 'feminine' emotion, whilst the female lover takes on the conventional male role, repeating his actions and dictating the rite of seduction herself. The male lover is seemingly emasculated, diegetically, by the girl's active appropriation of his former role, and formally, by the feminizing narrative gaze that is cast on his exposed, naked body: 'Il est maigre, sans force, sans muscles, il pourrait avoir été malade, être en convalescence, il est imberbe, sans virilité autre que celle du sexe' (p. 49). The lover's body is portrayed as the diametric opposite of the conventional, western model of masculinity as muscle-bound, strong

and hairy. Much critical attention has been paid to the ambivalent gender roles ascribed to the young girl and her Chinese lover in *L'Amant*, and to their uneasy interface with colonialism's binary racial oppositions. On one level, the couple's sexual relations have been seen as liberating and transgressive, in their refutation of the archetypal Freudian gender models of male activity and female passivity.¹⁸ Yet such an interpretation neglects the racial dimension of the couple's relationship. As several critics have argued, the girl's power over her weakened, feminized lover could, for all its subversion of patriarchal gender norms, be seen to reinscribe the colonial racial hierarchies of European superiority and non-European inferiority.¹⁹ According to such readings, despite the trappings of dominance that the lover's gender, age and class conventionally grant him, his essential racial difference nonetheless maintains him in a position of powerless inferiority to 'la petite blanche' – an inferiority that textually repeats colonialism's unequal racial hierarchy between colonizer and colonized.

What the latter, otherwise compelling, interpretation overlooks, however, is the crucial fact that the lover is Chinese, rather than indigenous Vietnamese, and as such is not a member of the 'colonized' population. As we shall explore in more detail in the next chapter, China was, historically, a rival colonial power to France in the region, and the important Chinese ethnic minority in Indochina occupied a distinct cultural and economic position in the colonial system. The lover thus represents a form of racial and cultural difference that largely escapes the opposition between colonizer and colonized. As Kam Louie's fascinating studies of Asian masculinities argue, Chinese culture has historically promoted a concept of ideal manhood, based on a *wen-wu* (literally 'literary-martial') dyad, which encompasses both intellectual and physical qualities. Within such a model, intellectual prowess (*wen*) is generally privileged over physical

¹⁸ See, for instance, Suzanne Chester, 'Writing the Subject: Exoticism/Eroticism in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*'; or Yvonne Hsieh, 'L'évolution du discours (anti-)colonialiste dans *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* et *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* de Marguerite Duras'.

¹⁹ See Pascale Bécél, 'From *The Sea Wall* to *The Lover*: Prostitution and Exotic Parody'; and Marie-Paule Ha, 'Durasie: Women, Natives, and Other'.

strength (*wu*), which, in turn, is characterized by control, restraint and persuasion, rather than brute force. As Louie points out, 'Confucius as the god of *wen* has been a potent symbol for sustaining Chinese notions of the ideal gentleman for millennia'.²⁰ He goes on to argue that:

Because of the privileging of *wen* above *wu* in constructions of ideal Chinese masculinity, appropriate male sexuality in the Chinese tradition differs markedly from the Occidental tradition. [In imperial China] both the *wen* and the *wu* type of male were 'desirable' and 'sexy', unlike the Anglo-American image that until recently has been singularly dominated by the macho man. This is still the case today, with mass media or advertising images of 'desirable' males in the Chinese cultural context often appearing akin to the 'weakling' of the Western vision. (p. 6)

If we take the particularities of the lover's ethnic origins and of the Indochinese context into consideration when interpreting *L'Amant's* central inter-racial relationship, the girl's desire for a weak, sensitive, seemingly feminized lover could therefore be seen *not* as a reversal of the traditional, western conception of masculinity, but rather as an assertion of a different, non-western model of masculine beauty. Indeed, such an interpretation of the significance of the lover's thin, smooth body is supported by the reference, in the closely related, later text, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, to the young girl's love of 'des hommes faibles' as constituting a defining part of her hybrid, non-French identity.²¹ Whilst a Western gaze would see the lover's weak, hairless body as conforming to Orientalist representations of a feminized, emasculated Orient, a non-western gaze – which the girl claims to have – would see such 'soft' masculinity as a recognizable, desirable model of male beauty.²²

²⁰ Kam Louie, 'Global Masculine Identities', in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. by Kam Louie and Morris Low (London & New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 1-15 (p. 5). See also Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²¹ *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, p. 36.

²² For a discussion of the portrayal of 'soft' masculinities in Chinese culture, see Cuncun Wu's chapter, 'Beautiful Boys Made Up As Beautiful Girls: Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China', in *Asian Masculinities*, pp. 19-40.

Even according to this non-western interpretation of the relation between gender and cultural difference in the central encounter, however, *L'Amant* cannot entirely escape potential accusations of colonialist racial prejudice. The fact that the lover is portrayed as Chinese, rather than as Vietnamese, could also be read as symptomatic of colonial-era prejudices against the colonized. That is, it is precisely because the lover's origins in imperial China place him outside the hierarchical racial logic of colonizer and colonized that he can represent a worthy object of sexual desire for the young white *colon*. Indeed, Indochina's colonized, indigenous population occupies a very different place in the novel from that of the central, Chinese lover. As in *Un barrage*, though for different reasons, the indigenous people of Indochina feature almost exclusively as background, contextualizing figures, identified solely by their subservient positions in the colonial system, such as domestics, 'petits boys', chauffeurs or bus drivers. Even Dô, the mother's loyal and long-suffering servant, is not granted a narrative or social role beyond that of serving the European family. As with the *caporal* in *Un barrage*, Dô's presence is repeatedly signalled in relation to the menial tasks she performs for the central, white characters: 'elle brode et elle fait des plis. [...] Comme elle brode, ma mère lui fait broder des draps. Comme elle fait des plis, ma mère me fait faire des robes à plis' (pp. 28-29); 'ses bras de coton reprisés par Dô' (p. 31); 'Dô faisait le guet dans les chambres mansardées du dernier étage du château' (p. 39). So too, the precise social position of the central family within the colonial hierarchy, as poor but white, is constructed in opposition to that of the indigenous, colonized population:

nous étions des enfants blancs, nous avions honte, nous vendions nos meubles, mais nous n'avions pas faim, nous avions un boy et nous mangions, parfois, il est vrai, des saloperies, [...] mais ces saloperies étaient cuites par un boy et servies par lui. (p. 13)

Whilst this observation ironically makes explicit the racial prejudices and inequalities which structured colonial relations, and which classified the indigenous population as subservient to even the poorest whites, similar distinctions nonetheless implicitly structure *L'Amant's* representation of *colons* and colonized. The central

protagonist's ability to transgress colonialism's social and sexual boundaries, to express her female sexuality, and to assert her individual subjectivity, is inextricably linked to the fact that she is white and is thus granted a mobility and agency, both diegetically and formally, that is denied to indigenous figures. The non-individuated crowds on the 'car indigène' or on Cholon's streets constitute, in a move reminiscent of the spectatorial gaze of *L'Empire français*, little more than an element of picturesque, local colour in the construction of a contextualizing, colonial background, against which the central story of self-affirming, inter-racial desire is distinguished.

The only non-European female figure to be granted a non-subservient role, thematically and textually, is the beggarwoman whom the girl first meets on the streets of Vinhlong and whom Duras readers will intertextually identify with the Laotian beggarwoman of the 'Indian' works, *Le Vice-consul* and *India Song*.²³ Whereas the young white girl asserts her socially transgressive non-conformity via her liberated female sexuality, the indigenous beggarwoman eludes colonial society's rigid structures on account of her madness: 'c'est la folle du poste, la folle de Vinhlong' (p. 103). The depiction of madness, and especially female madness, as a powerful, liberating force that disrupts essentially patriarchal notions of reason, logic and social order, was central to many of Duras's works of the 1960s and 1970s, and echoed the contemporary concerns of the anti-psychiatry movement and of psychoanalytic feminist theory. The application of metropolitan concepts of the empowering potential of unreason to a colonial context, and the casting of a non-European figure in the role of the madwoman are, however, highly problematic. The beggarwoman's laughter in the stillness of the 'longues avenues' of Vinhlong's European district could be seen as a symbolic intrusion of the natural, visceral and spontaneous into the sterile, repressive, colonial order. The evocation of her fantastic journey from the southern flood plains of Cochinchina to Calcutta, following the route of the Mekong and then of the Ganges, could be seen as the symbolic reappropriation of colonized space by the colonized population. As she crosses colonial boundaries from French Indochina to

²³ *Le Vice-consul* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), and *India Song* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

British India, she could be seen to sow seeds of disorder and resistance in their alternate colonial settings. Yet the beggarwoman's unrestrained laughter, abandonment of her sick children, and aimless, extravagant trek inspire feelings of incomprehension – 'Elle court en criant dans une langue que je ne connais pas' (p. 103) – and fear – 'Le souvenir est celui d'une peur centrale. Dire que cette peur dépasse mon entendement, ma force, c'est peu dire' (p. 104) – in the central protagonist and narrator. There is no sense of a self-defining identification with the beggarwoman's disruptive madness on the part of the central female character, as there is with the transgressive sexuality of the ambassador's wife. Nor, for all her extravagant geographic mobility, does the beggarwoman's rejection of society's behavioural norms empower her with any personal or political agency. The beggarwoman's disruptive madness ostracizes her to both a social and a narrative position that is entirely outside, 'eccentric' and other.

In *Les Parleuses*, Duras asserted that feelings of shame at the colonial system in which she had been raised had long led her to repress all memories of her 'pays natal':

J'avais dix-huit ans quand je suis partie, [...] et je n'ai plus pensé à l'enfance. C'avait été trop douloureux. J'ai complètement occulté. Et je me trimbalais dans la vie en disant: Moi, je n'ai pas de pays natal; je reconnais rien ici autour de moi, mais le pays où j'ai vécu, c'est l'horreur. C'était le colonialisme et tout ça, hein? (p. 136)

Whilst the existence of *L'Empire français* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* clearly undermine the veracity of this assertion, it is striking that Duras's later, literary return to the territory of her childhood and of colonialism seems to have lost the sense of anger and injustice that motivated both the words just cited and *Un barrage*'s indictment of colonial injustice. Rather than reflect the class and racial inequalities on which colonial society was constructed, the contrastive elements that made up the original depiction of Indochina's natural landscape and towns in *L'Empire français*, become symbolic of oppositional, gendered relations to desire. The emphasis in *L'Amant* on colonial society's oppression of European women (and on the central character's individual rebellion against such oppression) does

not lead to any corresponding disruption or critique of colonialism's oppression of its racial others. Its contrasting emphasis on the transgressive force of freely expressed female desire, symbolically crossing social and racial boundaries, largely ignores the brutal material realities of colonial rule. Throughout *L'Amant*, the indigenous population is thematically and formally relegated to subservient or 'eccentric' positions, in the background of the central Franco-Chinese encounter. Whilst Duras's portrayal of the central inter-racial relationship between the young girl and her lover disrupts reductive oppositions between colonizer and colonized, and seems to privilege an essentially non-western model of masculinity, the relationship between gender and racial difference here and elsewhere in the novel remains highly ambivalent. Just as, by 1984, Indochina was widely regarded as a relatively unproblematic, exotic chapter from France's distant colonial past, so too the retrospective viewpoint and 'autofictional' form of *L'Amant* mean that both a late twentieth-century celebration of female sexuality and nostalgia for the author's lost childhood become unresolvedly interwoven with the novel's representation of the early twentieth-century colonial context in which that childhood was spent.

Chapter 4

L'Amant de la Chine du Nord: Colonialism and Postcolonial Identities

In 1991, just seven years after the publication of Goncourt-winning *L'Amant* and despite the novel's phenomenal success,¹ Duras returned to the territory of her childhood in colonial Indochina, as the subject-matter and setting of another, semi-autobiographical text, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*.² One of the main reasons behind Duras's decision to rework the same textual material was her much-documented, acrimonious fall-out with Jean-Jacques Annaud, the director of the film version of *L'Amant*.³ Yet *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is not simply a filmic reworking of *L'Amant*, written as an intertextual rebuttal to Annaud's eroticizing, exoticizing version of Duras's far more complex original. In returning to the semi-autobiographical narrative of the young French girl's affair with a Chin-

¹ Duras was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *L'Amant*, but the novel's massive popular appeal largely preceded the award. One of the Goncourt judges highlighted the unprecedented critical, public and international appeal which led to the novel's phenomenal sales success: 'Nous sommes là dans les eaux des miracles d'édition [...]. Dans ce club très select des hauts succès, le déchaînement des phénomènes de librairie est parfois plus évident que le couronnement des ambitions littéraires... "la magie"' (François Nourissier, 'Goncourt: pourquoi Duras?', *Le Point*, 19 November 1984, p. 132).

² *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

³ Although Duras had initially collaborated with Annaud, she was later banned from the film set. Allegedly infuriated by this treatment and by Annaud's commercializing (mis)interpretation of her novel, Duras decided to write *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* as the novelistic version of the film that she would have made of *L'Amant*. The filmic origins of Duras's last 'Indochinese' work are evident throughout in its highly self-reflexive, intergeneric and dialogic form, and in the author's repeated suggestions of how particular scenes might be shot or of what sounds and images might accompany the narrative.

ese lover in early 1930s colonial Indochina, Duras recasts and revises the same central story in accordance with a very different set of intellectual concerns. Although only seven years separate the two novels, the intervening period witnessed another striking shift in the broader political, social and cultural climate, with immigration replacing earlier decades' interrogations of class or gender relations as the major topic of debate. The very title of Duras's last 'Indochinese' novel, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, in adapting and expanding that of *L'Amant*, foregrounds the issues of race and origins that underpin the text's reworking of the same essential story. The novel's *dédicace*, 'À Thanh', prefigures the key narrative and thematic place that will be allotted in the text to non-metropolitan characters and issues. The novel's paratextual framework thus signals, in advance, the distinctly postcolonial concerns underlying its return to the familiar inter-textual territory of colonial Indochina.

Immigration was, without doubt, the major issue of French domestic politics and of the broader social context in France in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Duras was writing *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. During the earlier era of colonial expansion, migration had been predominantly uni-directional, as French *colons*, like Duras's parents, left the metropolis for France's colonial possessions overseas. Following decolonization and the collapse of the French Empire in 1962, however, a pattern of reverse migration began, with migrants from France's ex-colonies moving to the former metropolitan centre, either to escape persecution (as in the case of Algeria's *harkis* and *pieds noirs* or, later, the South Vietnamese 'boat-people') or, increasingly, as manual workers in France's booming industrial economy of the 1960s and 1970s. Although immigration was hardly a new phenomenon, it was not until the late 1980s, with the emergence of a new and vocal generation of French-born children of immigrant parents, that the impact of migration on the nature and conception of French national identity began significantly to exercise politicians and public alike. The hybrid identity of this second generation of 'immigrants' – who were often French citizens whilst being widely perceived to belong elsewhere – brought into question traditional, (neo)colonialist oppositions between insider and outsider, French self and foreign other.

The increasingly heterogeneous nature of France's population also posed the political challenge of how best to include growing ethnic minorities within French society. The most worrying response to changes in France's demographics was the rapid rise, throughout the 1980s, of Le Pen's far-right Front National, a rise that was fuelled by France's economic down-turn and high unemployment. In response to a climate of increasing xenophobia, anti-racist action groups, such as the high-profile, government-supported SOS-Racisme, were formed, initially promoting the benefits of a multi-ethnic, multicultural France. By the late 1980s, however, as the far-right's anti-immigration stance continued to garner widespread public support, the government's own line on immigration shifted. At both ends of the political spectrum, and for very different reasons, it was feared that multiculturalism would lead to the fragmentation or even breakdown of French society.⁴ At the 1987 *Commission des Sages* on French national identity, the traditional, republican model of 'intégration', asserting the supremacy of France's universalist values over cultural or ethnic differences, was thus voted in as the official approach to immigration. The 1989 'Affaire des foulards' – in which three girls were excluded from school for wearing Islamic headscarves in class – was a particularly high-profile and controversial example of the implementation of such official integrationist policies.⁵

The political response to the issues raised by immigration and the permanent presence of ethnic minorities on French soil was thus a reassertion of the republican conception of a unitary nation-state. Yet the cultural production of the period paints a rather different, less homogenizing picture of France as a vibrant, multicultural nation. A particularly striking contemporary phenomenon was the

⁴ See David Blatt, 'Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation', in *Post-colonial Cultures in France*, ed. by Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 40–55, for a useful overview of the issues at stake in the immigration debate in France in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

⁵ For a discussion of the issues surrounding this and subsequent similar occurrences, see Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, 'The Issue of the Islamic Headscarf', in *Women, Immigration and Identities*, ed. by Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 69–82.

wealth of novels, films and music by the 'Beur' generation: children of North African immigrants who had been raised, and usually born, in France.⁶ Such best-selling novels as Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (1983), Mohammed Kenzi's *La Menthe sauvage* (1984), Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) or Sakinna Boulshedenna's *Journal: 'nationalité: immigré(e)'* (1986) recount, in highly autobiographical form, the often harsh experiences of individuals of immigrant origin growing up in France, and their construction of hybrid personal identities, composed of both French and North African cultural influences. Between 1984, when Duras published *L'Amant*, and 1991, when she published *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, two thirds of the novels to win the Prix Goncourt – France's most prestigious literary award and a good gauge of contemporary tastes – dealt, in one way or another, with France's colonial past or its post-colonial present.⁷ Although, as critics have pointed out,⁸ the postcolonial problematic was largely absent from French political

⁶ The term 'Beur' is a *verlan* (backslang) version of the word 'Arabe'. This neologism was originally adopted by the children of Maghrebi immigrants in the Parisian *banlieues* as a term of self-designation. Not only did it avoid the often pejorative associations of the word 'Arabe', but it also allowed them to talk of themselves without recourse to the labels of either French or North African/Arab. In more recent years, however, there has been a widespread rejection of the term, as 'Beur' itself has also become used as a derogatory and exclusionary label. For a discussion of the early evolution of the term, see Augustin Barbara, 'Discriminants et jeunes "Beurs"', in *Génération issues de l'immigration: Mémoires et devenir*, ed. by Georges Abou-Sada and Hélène Milet (Paris: Arcantère, 1986), pp. 123–28.

⁷ Tahar Ben Jelloun, the author of the 1987 prize-winner, *La Nuit sacrée*, is from Morocco. Erik Orsenna's *L'Exposition coloniale* (1988) deals, in fictional form, with France's relations with its former empire. Jean Vautrin's *Un grand pas vers le bon Dieu* (1989), in its depiction of America's Cajun community, depicts France as a historical site of emigration. This tendency continued, in 1991 and 1992, with the awarding of the Prix Goncourt to two non-metropolitan, 'francophone' writers: Patrick Chamoiseau from Martinique, for *Texaco*, and Lebanese Amin Maalouf, for *Le Rocher de Tanios*.

⁸ Emily Apter, 'French Colonial Studies and Postcolonial Theory', *SubStance*, 76–77 (1995), 169–80; Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, 'Introduction: The Postcolonial Problematic in Contemporary France', *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (London: Routledge: 1997), pp. 3–25.

and cultural discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s, French society and cultural production were in other ways profoundly marked and enriched by phenomena issuing from France's multi-ethnic population.

Throughout her long career, Duras's literary work was characteristically concerned with the lot of the oppressed and marginalized – women, children, the poor, the insane, Jews. In political pronouncements and journalistic writing, Duras also repeatedly denounced racism and expressed sympathy for the plight of immigrants.⁹ Yet it was only with *La Pluie d'été*, published in 1990, just one year before *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, that the figure of the immigrant became the focus of her fictional work.¹⁰ By depicting a family of alienated immigrants, living in an impoverished Parisian *banlieue*, Duras shifted her career-long concern with the lot of the socially excluded onto newly emergent political and cultural territory. As this chapter will explore, Duras's reworking in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, of the familiar personal mythology of her childhood in Indochina, reflects and continues, albeit in a very different, colonial context, her contemporary engagement with the postcolonial issues of immigration, identity and belonging, that already more overtly shape *La Pluie d'été*.

The interrelation of the colonial setting of *Chine du Nord* with the post-colonial context within which the novel was written is retrospectively signalled towards the end of the narrative when, as the family is aboard the ship taking them (back) to France, the mother is described as 'endormie dans ce sommeil d'immigrée à la recherche d'une terre d'asile' (p. 222). In this characteristically oblique, non-didactic manner, Duras implies a parallel between the situation of the repatriated family of poor *colons* and that of immigrants arriving in contemporary France, seeking refuge and a new home. The term 'rapatriement', presupposing prior acquaintance with the country of return, can only strictly be applied to the mother,

⁹ See, for instance, the articles 'Les fleurs de l'Algérie', 'Racisme à Paris' and 'Les deux ghettos', reproduced in *Outside* (Paris: P.O.L., 1984), pp. 17–18; 77–78; 150–61 respectively.

¹⁰ *La Pluie d'été* (Paris: P.O.L., 1990).

who originally left her native France in search of a better life in the colonies. For her three children, who were all born and raised in the colony, Indochina is their homeland, from which they are displaced when they move to the unknown, 'foreign' land of France. Yet it is the mother, on her return to France, whose situation is metaphorically likened to that of an immigrant, so highlighting the complex web of psychological, formative and adoptive influences which Duras portrays as constituting an individual's sense of belonging and identity – a non-centrist, non-originary sense of personal identity that runs counter to republican or colonial conceptions of unitary, national identity.

In this chapter, we shall consider how, in *Chine du Nord*, Indochina's colonial space is retrospectively and fictively reconstructed on postcolonial terms. We shall examine how intertextual borrowings of descriptive images from Duras's earlier 'Indochinese' texts are transformed and reslanted, in line with a new set of contemporary concerns with ethnic difference and identity, that result from the meeting of different cultures. Reflecting the narrative emphases of the novel itself, our examination will focus primarily on the representation of the multiethnic population of Indochina, before considering the nature of the depictions of the geographical context in which this population lives and interacts. Whilst Duras's representation of Indochina in *Chine du Nord* champions the creative potential of multicultural exchange that colonialism (unwittingly) brought about, it also exposes, both explicitly but also more covertly, the problems and tensions at stake in such an exchange. Our examination of *Chine du Nord*'s intertextual reworkings of imagery and stereotypes originally deployed in the pro-colonial propagandist rhetoric of *L'Empire français* will thus also consider occasions when Duras's most consciously postcolonial 'Indochinese' work unconsciously reinscribes elements of the colonial ideology that it explicitly rejects.

In recasting Indochina as a site of multiethnic, multicultural interaction, *Chine du Nord* reworks the defining characteristic – as a meeting place of different peoples, languages and cultures – that was originally attributed to the region in the chapter, 'L'Indochine, carrefour des peuples' (p. 103), in *L'Empire français*. The representation of Indochina in *Chine du Nord* is prefigured, but in opposing,

pro-colonial terms, in the precursor text's depiction of the colony's historic role as 'le lieu de ralliement de tous les peuples de l'Asie, en quête d'aventures, de terres vacantes ou de gloire, de toutes les races en fuite devant l'opresseur et avides d'indépendance' (p. 103). In *L'Empire français*, Indochina is cast as a welcoming but essentially temporary site, traversed by successive waves of immigration: 'De siècle en siècle, de véritables marées humaines se déversent en Indochine, s'y installent, prospèrent et se retirent ensuite, chassées par de nouveaux venus' (p. 103). Indochina's status as a temporary 'cross-roads' is evoked in order to portray French colonization as the natural, inevitable and desirable consequence of a historic process, ensuring the area's future protection from oppressors. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the propagandist depiction of Indochina as an open, welcoming space, crossed by waves of only transient migrants, and so devoid of an authentically indigenous population, aims to justify France's settlement and appropriation of its 'terres vacantes'.

In *Chine du Nord*, the same notion of Indochina as a crossroads is granted very different, postcolonial connotations, both in the representation of the various people who pass through, and in the symbolism attached to the places depicted. The meeting of different peoples is most centrally embodied in the inter-racial encounter between the young French girl and her Chinese lover. Their relationship is overshadowed, from their very first meeting on the Mekong ferry – a setting symbolically redolent of transience, flux and movement –, by the knowledge of the girl's imminent departure. The theme of migration is reflected too in the text's recurrent imagery of roads, rivers, ports and the sea, all of which represent both physical and psychological routes into, across, and out of Indochina. The French *colon* family's two-stage *rapatriement* reflects, in microcosmic form, the ebb and flow of the 'marées humaines' evoked in the description from *L'Empire français* above. As the French family depart, foreshadowing the end of French colonial rule in Indochina, the Chinese family, who had themselves originally left China 'en fuite devant l'opresseur', symbolically take their place.

Whilst very different, postcolonial concerns motivate the representation of Indochina in *Chine du Nord*, it is striking to note

that the novel's focus on rootless, immigrant figures effects a similar evacuation of the indigenous population as in the pro-colonial depiction in *L'Empire français*. All of the central characters in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* are either immigrants or the children of immigrants: the young girl's parents, wooed by propagandist promises of a better life, migrated from France; the lover's family fled political persecution in China; and Thanh, to whom the novel is dedicated, was entrusted to the French mother's care by his impoverished Siamese parents. Both the white colonial elite and the indigenous population are reduced to largely incidental, non-individuated positions, serving as a contextualizing background to the central, inter-racial relationship between the young French girl and her Chinese lover. Indigenous figures are depicted, as in *L'Amant*, predominantly in terms of the subservient roles, such as bus drivers and 'boys', allotted to them by the colonial system. 'Les Blancs' of colonial society are briefly evoked as the gossiping, prejudiced mothers of the girl's schoolmates, whose potential power the girl self-assertively subverts: 'Elle est boycottée. Elle se veut telle, être à cette place-là' (p. 120). The only non-central figures with whom the girl self-assertively identifies are Anne-Marie Stretter and the *métisse* prefect, Alice, on account of their commonly transgressive and specifically inter-racial desires.¹¹ Despite the postcolonial issues with which it engages, the novel is not primarily concerned with exposing the inequalities between colonizing and colonized peoples that underpinned colonial society. Instead, Indochina is reconfigured as a virtually empty stage, haunted by only the most fleeting indigenous or 'white' presences, on which the central, multiethnic cast of immigrant characters play out their own boundary-crossing, inter-racial adventures.

The complexities of inter-racial relations and the mutually enriching possibilities of inter-cultural exchange are most insistently elaborated, in *Chine du Nord*, in the depiction of the central love story. Whilst many of its essential elements remain the same as in

¹¹ '[A.M.S.] va faire l'amour avec ses chauffeurs aussi bien qu'avec les princes quand ils visitent la Cochinchine, ceux de Laos, du Cambodge' (p. 49); 'ce qui plaît à Alice, [...] c'est ceux qui lui parlent comme à d'autres femmes, qui l'appellent avec d'autres noms, qui lui disent des choses dans des langues étrangères aussi' (p. 58).

L'Amant, crucial differences and changes in nuance between the two works reflect the later text's new set of distinctly postcolonial concerns. In the novel's preface, Duras explicitly highlights the central differences between *L'Amant* and *Chine du Nord* when she writes:

J'ai écrit l'histoire de l'amant de la Chine du Nord et de l'enfant: elle n'était pas encore là dans *L'Amant*, le temps manquait autour d'eux. [...] Je suis restée un an dans ce roman, enfermée dans cette année-là de l'amour entre le Chinois et l'enfant. (p. 11)

As this quotation suggests, the relationship between the girl and her Chinese lover constitutes the far more sustained narrative focus of the later novel, emphasizing the greater importance attributed to inter-racial influences in the formation of the girl's identity. The relationship between the lovers is also a far more egalitarian one, characterized by mutual desire, fascination and even romantic love.¹²

One of the major changes effected between *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, in the depiction of the central couple, is the increased insistence on the lover's Chinese identity.¹³ Repeated, detailed references are made throughout to the lover's origins in the northern Chinese province of Manchuria, so underlining his essential difference not only from the French *colons* and from the indigenous population, but also, as the lover insists, from the majority of other Chinese immigrants in Indochina: 'Je ne peux pas parler de la

¹² The more egalitarian nature of the central relationship in the later novel is underlined in the first description of the Chinese lover, which stresses the differences in his characterization from that of *L'Amant*: 'De la limousine noire est sorti un autre homme que celui du livre, un autre Chinois de la Mandchourie. Il est un peu différent de celui du livre: il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace. Il a plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus "pour le cinéma" que celui du livre. Et aussi il a moins de timidité que lui face à l'enfant' (pp. 35-36).

¹³ For a more detailed examination of the Chinese dimensions of Duras's Indochinese novels, see my article, "'Cholen, la capitale chinoise de l'Indochine française": Rereading Duras's (Indo)Chinese Novels', in *France and Indochina: Cultural Representations*, ed. by Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 179-91.

Mandchourie dans ce pays parce que ici les Chinois de l'Indochine ils viennent tous du Yunnan' (p. 89). The fact that the lover is not an indigenous Vietnamese, but is Chinese and, moreover, is from the far north-eastern province of Manchuria, the historic seat of the powerful Qing dynasty, is central to his appeal and to the nature of his affair with the young white girl. Their inter-racial relationship represents the meeting of radical opposites, of France and China, rival imperialist powers, on the commonly foreign, commonly colonized, 'crossroads' zone of Indochina – and not, as many critics have erroneously argued, the transgressive blurring of the boundaries between colonizer and colonized.¹⁴

The lover's racial origins and culture are central to his 'inconnue nouveauté' (p. 50) for the girl, as opposed to the familiarity of the indigenous population who constitute a mundane part of her everyday life in the colony. This essential difference is stressed by the lover's constant labelling throughout the text as 'le Chinois', by the couple's many discussions of Chinese culture, marriage traditions and family relations, and by the inclusion of a long section, not previously included in *L'Amant*, on the history of China. This lengthy, didactic account of a complex and violent period of Chinese history is interwoven, via the lover's first-person narrative, with the story of his family's experiences of persecution, flight and exile (pp. 86-90). The inclusion of these inter-related personal and national histories grants the Chinese lover's story a similar status to that of the French mother's migration and subsequent exploitation at the hands of a corrupt colonial regime. Via the mouthpiece of her central Chinese character, Duras positions her novel within an identifiable historical and political context, superimposing an alternative (Chinese) colonial history of Indochina onto that of the French. The lover's own identity is here portrayed as fundamentally rooted in his

¹⁴ Yvonne Hsieh argues, for instance, that the young French girl's seduction of an older 'indigène' leads to a levelling of racial difference ('L'Évolution du discours (anti-)colonialiste', p. 59). Catherine Bouthors-Paillart views the central love affair as an example of subversive *métissage* between 'la race blanche' and 'la race jaune' (*Duras la métisse*). Although Panivong Norindr mentions the fact that the lover's Chinese father exploits the indigenous population, he nonetheless refers to the scandal caused by 'a liaison between a white female colonizer and a male "native"' (*Phantasmatic Indochina*, p. 126).

Chinese origins, to such an extent that, as he talks, he seems metonymically to embody the country's difference, rendering the French language that he speaks unfamiliar and foreign: 'Elle écoute la voix, cette autre langue française parlée par la Chine' (p. 89). The identification between the lover and the land of his birth is seemingly so complete that, as he talks about China, 'il est redevenu complètement chinois' (p. 88).

Throughout the 1970s, China had been seen by many intellectuals, including Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and the *Tel Quel* group, to represent an alternative, political and cultural order beyond the usual binary oppositions of western logic.¹⁵ Although the realities of the Cultural Revolution subsequently led to widespread disillusionment with Maoist China as a model of political utopianism, China's perceived difference continued to exert fascination over French postmodern and postcolonial thinkers. Reflecting contemporary investigations into the nature of alterity, China is represented, in *Chine du Nord*, not just as an important, historical, colonial rival, but also as an ontological, mythical embodiment of radical difference. Via the Chinese lover's body, the girl gains a privileged, rare glimpse of the alterity of China:

Elle, elle habite déjà le Chinois. L'enfant, elle sait ça. Elle le regarde et, pour la première fois, elle découvre qu'un ailleurs a toujours été là entre elle et lui. Depuis leur premier regard. Un ailleurs protecteur, de pure immensité, lui, inviolable. Une sorte de Chine lointaine, d'enfance, pourquoi pas? et qui les protégerait de toute connaissance étrangère à elle. (p. 83)

China is portrayed as a mythical, benevolent but ultimately unknowable 'ailleurs', beyond the comprehension of the European self, and so as its radical, absolute 'Other'. Such an evocation echoes Hélène

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: des femmes, 1974); Roland Barthes, *Alors la Chine?* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975). For a discussion of the problematic orientalism underlying French intellectuals' fascination with China, see Lisa Lowe, 'The Desires of Postcolonial Orientalism: Chinese Utopias of Kristeva, Barthes, and *Tel Quel*', in *Critical Terrains*, pp. 136-89. For an overview of the place of Maoism in 1970s French thought, see *The Sixties Without Apology*, ed. by Sohnyay Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Cixous's response to her own question, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est l'"Autre"?': 'S'il est vraiment "l'autre", alors on n'a rien à dire, ce n'est pas théorisable. *L'autre* m'échappe. Il est ailleurs, dehors: autre absolument.'¹⁶ In contrast to the 'otherness' of the indigenous population which is constructed, in a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, as the negative reflection of the European self, China as truly 'Other' escapes all hierarchical attempts to contain it.

Despite the girl's privileged access to the otherness of China via her lover, there is a limit beyond which understanding breaks down – an ineffable 'ailleurs' which manifests itself as linguistic incomprehension. Although the girl speaks 'le chinois des restaurants chinois' (p. 85), this purely pragmatic grasp of the language preserves intact its inherent foreignness, and is incapable of grasping and translating the intricacies of cultural difference that would enable full communication. When the lover is overcome by intense, inexpressible emotions, the reader, like the girl, is faced with a verbal hiatus, the haunting suggestion of words which, being devoid of referential, communicative meaning for their recipient, are, quite literally, 'lost in translation': 'Il l'appelle ma petite fille, mon enfant, puis dans un flot de paroles il dit des choses en chinois, de colère et de désespoir' (p. 134); 'il avait parlé et parlé en chinois' (p. 135); 'C'était un cri parlé de la Chine ancienne' (p. 194). At a certain point in the encounter between Self and Other, between semi-autobiographical self and Chinese lover, there is, as Cixous puts it, 'rien à dire'. This recognition of the fundamental and insurmountable difference between cultures, and the diverse and mutually incomprehensible ways in which they understand and represent themselves, prefigures Homi Bhabha's assertion of the ultimately 'untranslatable' element – the 'kernel of non-sense' – at the heart of cultural identity: 'The work of the word impedes the question of the transparent assimilation of cross-cultural meanings in a unitary sign of "human" culture.'¹⁷ Just as Bhabha equates cultural difference with the 'language metaphor' –

¹⁶ 'Sorties', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975), pp. 114–246 (p. 129).

¹⁷ 'Articulating the archaic: Cultural difference and colonial nonsense', in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 123–38 (p. 125).

that is, the impossibility of ever achieving a perfect translation between different languages – so too does Duras encapsulate in linguistic form the fundamental communicative gap at the very core of the central couple's inter-cultural encounter.

In many ways, Duras's representation of the Chinese lover and, through him, of China as radically Other thus reflects contemporary postmodern and postcolonial investigations of the nature of cultural difference. Yet, at the same time, the depiction of China as essentially alien could also be seen to reflect colonial-era attitudes of fear and muted admiration towards the Chinese. From such a perspective, Duras's insistence on the lover's Chinese identity, and, in contrast, her diminution of the status of indigenous figures, could be seen to reinscribe colonial-era hierarchies which viewed the 'racially pure', imperialist Chinese as superior to the colonized, ethnically mixed population of Indochina. It is revealing that, despite its overall, propagandist agenda of championing the superiority of the French colonizers, *L'Empire français* consistently grants the Chinese a very different status from the indigenous peoples of Indochina, in such stereotyping statements as: 'L'Annamite [...] répugne au commerce, dont il laisse généreusement, depuis des siècles, le monopole aux Chinois' (p. 110), or 'la domination chinoise [...] durera deux siècles et imprégnera fortement les Annamites' (p. 110).

The threat that China, as rival colonizer, was seen to pose to France's imperial claims to Indochina is a persistent theme in the propagandist portrayal of the history of the colony presented in *L'Empire français*. Indeed, French colonization is explicitly linked to a desire to 'arrêter les exigences de Pékin' (p. 47), and to defend Indochina from the 'convoitises de ses voisins en mal de conquête' (p. 209). The link between the representation of China as a quasi-mythical, absolute Other in *Chine du Nord* and China's historical status as a rival colonial power to the French in Indochina, is implicit in the reason the girl gives for colonial society's deep-seated fear of the Chinese: 'Ils ne sont pas colonisés les Chinois [...]. On peut pas les attraper pour les coloniser, on le regrette d'ailleurs' (p. 114). Whilst the girl here mocks colonial society's prejudices and fears, similar sentiments of both awe and fear are nonetheless inscribed in her own attitude towards her lover. The girl's fascination with her

lover's non-European identity is coloured by stereotypes of Chinese inscrutability and cruelty.¹⁸ Different perceptions of China – as a geographic reality and as a myth of alterity, as a historic imperial power and as a modern, global hegemony – all coincide unresolvedly in the representation of the Chinese lover as the metonymic embodiment of his country of origin.

Even as he seems to embody the absolute alterity of China, the lover also illustrates the inevitable limits of such difference. In the multicultural 'contact zone' of Indochina's 'carrefour des peuples', both the lover's and the girl's identities are portrayed as affected by the condition of *métissage*. In colonial ideology, which privileged racial purity and structured social relations on the basis of a hierarchy of races, *métissage* (racial mixing) was regarded pejoratively as synonymous with miscegenation, bastardization or regression. According to its postcolonial, appropriative usage, however, *métissage* has come to connote the creative, mutually enriching, synergistic exchange that arises when different cultures and ethnicities are brought into contact, as a result of either forced or voluntary migration.¹⁹ It is predominantly in accordance with the latter, postcolonial conception that the central characters' *métis* identities are constructed in *Chine du Nord*. In the scene of their first meeting on the Mekong ferry, initial insistence upon the lover's northern Chinese identity rapidly gives way to include other, European influences on his identity:

Lui, c'est un Chinois. Un Chinois grand. Il a la peau blanche des Chinois du Nord. Il est très élégant. Il porte le costume en tissu de soie grège et les chaussures anglaises couleur acajou des jeunes banquiers de Saïgon. (p. 36)

Autour de lui il y a le parfum de l'eau de Cologne européenne avec, plus lointaine [*sic*], celui de l'opium et de la soie, du tussor de soie, de l'ambre de la soie, de l'ambre de la peau. (p. 37)

¹⁸ "Tu m'aurais tuée comment à Long Hai?" "Comme un Chinois. Avec la cruauté en plus de la mort" (p. 109).

¹⁹ For theoretical discussions of the concept of *métissage* within different geographic contexts, see *Post/Colonial Conditions*, *Yale French Studies*, 82-83 (1993), ed. by Françoise Lionnet and Ronnie Scharfman; Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981); and Sylvie Kandé, ed., *Discours sur le métissage, identités métisses* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

Whilst the lover's physical features initially emphasize his racial origins, his European clothes, cologne, car and cigarettes signal the multiple cultural influences that make up his multi-faceted, highly performative identity. The lover's culturally and linguistically *métis* identity is in large part the result of his conscious mimicry of French cultural particularities.²⁰

The Chinese lover does not perform only the second-hand tastes and manners of the rich European society that he frequented in Paris, however. As an immigrant and exile, the lover's experience of China and of Chinese culture is also largely indirect. Ironically, even his detailed knowledge of Chinese history, which seems to mark him as 'complètement chinois', and hence as radically Other, has been only indirectly acquired: 'C'est mon père, il m'a appris. Et aussi à Paris j'ai lu les dictionnaires' (p. 89). In relating and fundamentally identifying with an external, French vision of Chinese history, the lover defines his sense of self, in part at least, in terms of the Other's view of that Self as Other. The complex, dizzying process of mimicry and counter-mimicry that constitutes the lover's already hybrid, immigrant self thus brings into question any notion of an authentic, original identity. Like the ambivalent marker of white skin colour, which denotes both the north China lover and his apparent opposite, the quintessentially European figure of Anne-Marie Stretter, origins, culture and 'race' are shown to be insufficient and largely artificial designators of individual identity.

Just as the Chinese lover learns of his origins and culture indirectly, through his father and from French books, so too the

²⁰ Such a notion of 'mimicry' does not straightforwardly conform to Bhabha's influential theorization of the term, as exemplary of the ambivalence of colonial discourse. Not only is this particular manifestation of mimicry produced in a French, rather than a British, colonial context, where there was no comparable attempt to form colonized subjects in accordance with European models, but the Chinese lover is also not one of the colonized population, who thus, as Bhabha argues, appropriates and subverts the colonizer's language and cultural tools. Crucially, the lover's self-defining mimicry is performed outside the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. See 'Of Mimicry and Man' and 'Signs Taken for Wonders', both in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 85-92, 102-22.

young white girl learns about France and French culture through her mother and, ironically, through her Chinese lover. Not only does her relationship with him offer her access to the 'otherness' of China, but his accounts of his time in Paris, and his adoption of Parisian behaviour and fashions, also teach her about the otherness of France. Her own sense of identity is, however, formed predominantly by contextual rather than racial or originary influences:

Elle, elle est restée celle du livre, petite, maigre, hardie, difficile à attraper le sens, difficile à dire qui c'est, moins belle qu'il n'en paraît, pauvre, fille de pauvres, ancêtres pauvres, fermiers, cordonniers, première en français tout le temps partout et détestant la France, inconsolable du pays natal et d'enfance, crachant la viande rouge des steaks occidentaux, amoureuse des hommes faibles, sexuelle comme pas rencontré [sic] encore. (p. 36)

For the young girl, the child of poor *colon* migrants, Indochina, rather than France, is her 'pays natal'. Whilst her top marks reveal her ability to mimic the rules and expressions of her mother's language and culture, her innate revulsion for the unknown, foreign place that France represents is symbolized by her bulimic rejection of western food. In the novel's explicit intertextual reworking of *L'Amant*'s depiction of the central protagonist ('celle du livre'), the discordant perspective introduced by the expression 'inconsolable du pays natal', anticipating a departure and exile that have not yet narratively taken place, signals the author's own retrospective claim to a non-metropolitan, marginal identity. Reflecting the contemporary potency of postcolonial notions of hybridity or *métissage*, elaborated particularly through the rich cultural production of the emergent 'Beur' generation, Duras's 1991 reworking of her earlier 'Indochinese' works and of her early life recasts the central, semi-autobiographical female character as a culturally and even ethnically ambivalent, *métisse* figure. The young girl is at least bi-lingual, speaking fluent Vietnamese and 'restaurant' Chinese, as well as French. Her daily diet is that of the Vietnamese peasants amongst whom she grew up, rather than the French cuisine that her mother tries to make her eat. Her composite, unconventional clothing includes a man's felt hat, her mother's threadbare 'hand-me-downs', and 'des sabots indigènes en bois léger à brides de cuir' (p. 24), attesting, in external, visible form,

to the mix of influences that constitute her self-styled, hybrid identity.

Whereas others, particularly colonial society, classify the girl according to her skin colour and family origins as 'une jeune fille blanche', 'l'enfant blanche' or 'de race blanche' (pp. 20, 63), the narrative repeatedly signals her own self-designating identification with the land of her birth. When the girl and her future lover first meet, a contrastive parallel is established, as the following exchange underlines, between his composite Chinese-and-Parisian identity and her racially European but formatively Indochinese identity:

– Moi, je reviens de Paris. J'ai fait mes études en France pendant trois ans. Il y a quelques mois que je suis revenu.
– Je suis née en Indochine. Mes frères aussi. Tous on est nés ici. (pp. 38-39)

By constantly repeating the fact that she is 'née ici', the girl – and, by extension, Duras – asserts her formative, self-defining *appartenance* to a non-western place and culture, in opposition to her mother's French roots. This visceral sense of belonging to the land in which she was born is emphasized by the repeated references to Indochina as her 'patrie' or 'pays natal', as in: 'La mère. Elle leur rappelait aussi que ce pays d'Indochine était leur patrie à eux, ces enfants-là, les siens. Que c'était là qu'ils étaient nés' (p. 33). Read against the contemporary context within which *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* was written, this emphasis on the formative, identificatory influence of birthplace over familial origins, of the 'pays natal' over the 'Mère Patrie', has evident parallels with the post-colonial situation of second-generation children of immigrants in France.

So strong is the influence of the particular context within which the *colon* girl has been nurtured, that it is shown to have changed her physical nature, rendering her seemingly racially ambivalent. When the girl and her Chinese lover meet for the first time, for instance, he wonders 'D'où vient-elle?', observing that 'Cette gracilité du corps la donnerait comme une métisse, mais non, les yeux sont trop clairs' (p. 39). Elsewhere, the girl's in-between appearance and identity are signalled in the composite, inter-cultural terms used to describe her, such as 'cette enfant blanche de l'Asie' (p. 81) or 'l'enfant de Sade'

(p. 94). Traditional, colour-coded boundaries between the girl and her Chinese lover become blurred. Whilst the lover has 'la peau blanche des Chinois du Nord' (p. 36), the girl's classification within 'la race blanche' is complicated – or, in colonial terms, compromised – by the transformative effect of her Asian upbringing on her physical make-up. The ambivalence of her physical appearance is underlined in the lover's comment that: 'Tu as la peau de la pluie comme les femmes de l'Asie. Tu as aussi la finesse des poignets, et aussi des chevilles comme elles, c'est drôle quand même, comment tu expliques' (p. 82). The girl's reply – 'J'explique pas' – in many ways reflects Duras's own emotional, instinctual and determinedly non-realist approach to the concept of *métissage*, as elaborated in *Chine du Nord*.

Despite the novel's engagement with the positive, celebratory connotations granted to the concept of *métissage* within the contemporary, post-colonial context within which it was written, it also briefly highlights the derogatory connotations of regression and impurity associated with the term's original, biological sense, during the colonial era in which it is set. A clear distinction is maintained between the girl's self-identification as culturally and formatively *métisse*, and the status of the mixed-race boarders at the Pension Lyautey, the products of literal, biological *métissage*. A rare, contextualizing footnote obliquely explains the particular historical circumstances that led to the existence of so many mixed-race children during the colonial era: 'Dans la grande rizière de Camau, la fin du marécage de la Cochinchine, les fonctionnaires blancs étaient alors obligatoirement tenus d'être sans leur femme à cause du paludisme et de la peste qui étaient à l'état endémique dans la plaine des Oiseaux fraîchement émergée de la mer' (p. 173). By means of this paratextual insertion, Duras highlights the literal, historical origins of *métissage* and narratively stages the derogatory, colonial sense of the term that preceded, but always threatens to infect, its celebratory, postcolonial appropriations. The marginal position of *métis* within colonial society is symbolically reflected in the location of the Pension Lyautey where they live, on the very outskirts of the city: 'C'est une des dernières rues de Saigon, celle du pensionnat des jeunes métisses abandonnées par leur père de race blanche' (p. 173). It could also be argued that this social status is maintained, formally, in the marginal narrative

roles allotted to *métis* figures. As so often in Duras's works, the shifts, tensions and ambiguities between contemporary and historical, literal and figurative understandings of the same term are exposed, confronted, but left ultimately unresolved.

So far, our discussion of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*'s transformative, postcolonial reworkings of material from Duras's earlier 'Indochinese' texts has focused primarily on the depiction of the central, inter-racial couple whose paths cross in Indochina, rather than on the literary reconstruction of the landscapes or towns in which they meet. Whilst the novel itself foregrounds the social, multiethnic and inter-personal dimensions of Indochina's status as a 'carrefour des peuples', interesting intertextual transformations are also effected in the descriptions of the physical context, so continuing the pattern of revisionary borrowings from *L'Empire français*'s original stock of motifs that has been identified, in earlier chapters, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Amant*. The thematic shift that is effected, between Duras's 'Indochinese' works, from an oppositional model of colonial relations (colonizer/colonized; rich/poor; male/female), to an elaboration of an alternative, multicultural, synergistic 'third space',²¹ is reflected in the representation of the towns and natural landscape of Indochina in *Chine du Nord*.

From the very start of the novel, the central female protagonist is portrayed as having a primary sense of *appartenance* with the peripheral sites of Indochina's far-flung colonial outposts, rather than with the colonial centre: the southern 'postes de brousse' where she was born and raised, the Pension Lyautey on the very edge of Saigon, where she boards, and, especially, the Chinese district of Cholon, where her sexual initiation takes place. In the novel's depiction of Saigon, where the majority of the narrative is set, the European centre is reduced to little more than a list of familiar landmarks or 'repères':

Traversée de la ville. Deux ou trois repères dans l'inventaire: le théâtre Charner, la Cathédrale, l'Éden Cinéma, le restaurant chinois pour les Blancs. Le Continental, le plus bel hôtel du monde. (p. 95)

²¹ Bhabha elaborates his conception of this term in 'The Commitment to Theory', in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 19-39 (especially pp. 36-39).

Like a list of sites to be ticked on a tourist's rushed itinerary, the novel's rapid evocation of some of Saigon's main European architectural features merely alludes to the colonial context against which the central story unfolds. The reader is left to construct the broader context from the 'repères', familiar both from general, clichéd colonialist imagery and, more specifically, from Duras's own earlier 'Indochinese' works. The device of listing a few, minimalist and evocative signs, without elaborating any symbolic, social or psychological significance, comes closest of all of Duras's 'Indochinese' novels to the abstract, evocative method that the author described as 'descriptions par touches de couleur'.²² The central, European district, constructed as a narcissistic, reassuring reflection of the colonial elite's own self-image, is a space that the novel's main characters cross but do not inhabit.

The passing reference to 'le restaurant chinois pour les Blancs' underlines the inherent artificiality of the French district and hints at the more authentic experiences that lie beyond its limits. Whilst the young girl merely passes through the European centre, on her way to school or on trips to the cinema, her formative experiences of sexual initiation, self-discovery and intercultural exchange all take place in the multicultural 'contact zone' of Cholon. In the novel's reconstruction of the colonial capital, Cholon is no longer peripheral to European Saigon, but constitutes an alternative, non-European centre, reminiscent of the description of the district as a 'véritable cité dans la cité' (p. 114) in *L'Empire français*. Like the Parisian *banlieues* which, in the 1980s, became the sites of cultural exchange, Saigon's 'faubourgs indigènes' become the novel's narrative centre, and the true 'carrefour des peuples' where Indochina's multicultural encounters take place.

Echoing *L'Amant's* reworking of the original description of Saigon in *L'Empire français*, a distinction is again established between the sterile order of the European district, with its wide streets and tourist landmarks, and the chaotic animation and noise of Chinese Cholon. In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, the narrative focus remained firmly on the European side of the dividing tramlines, evoking but not entering the city's indigenous suburbs. In *L'Amant*, the girl

crossed over the tramlines to access the exotic, liberating alterity of Cholon. In *Chine du Nord*, however, these same tramlines act not as symbolic boundaries between different classes and races, but as the narrative and physical means of transportation into Cholon. The movement, noise and vitality of the trams and their crowds of non-European users become, in the following extract, an extension of the alternative, non-western site of Cholon:

La ville chinoise arrive vers eux dans le vacarme des vieux tramways, dans le bruit des vieilles guerres, des vieilles armées harassées, les tramways roulent sans cesser de sonner. Ça fait un bruit de crécelle, à fuir. Accrochés aux trams il y a des grappes d'enfants de Cholon. Sur les toits il y a des femmes avec des bébés ravis, sur les marchepieds, les chaînes de protection des portes, il y a des paniers d'osier pleins de volailles, de fruits. Les trams n'ont plus forme de trams, ils sont bouffis, bosselés jusqu'à ressembler à rien de connu. (p. 68)

The imported French trams have been appropriated by Cholon's non-French population, making them unfamiliar and unrecognizable to European eyes. In contrast to the fixity and exclusion that characterize the French *haut quartier's* wide, straight avenues and encircling railings, Cholon's mass of humanity is seen to overflow both its noisy, frenetic trams and its geographic limits, in a symbolic movement of openness to others ('La ville chinoise arrive vers eux...').

Throughout the representation of Cholon in *Chine du Nord*, Duras quite explicitly reworks, and even quotes from, corresponding sections of *L'Amant*, as in the following passage, describing the context of the girl's sexual initiation:

Dans le premier livre elle avait dit que le bruit de la ville était si proche qu'on entendait son frottement contre les persiennes comme si des gens traversaient la chambre. Qu'ils étaient dans ce bruit public, exposés là, dans ce passage du dehors dans la chambre. Elle le dirait encore dans le cas d'un film, encore, ou d'un livre, encore, toujours elle le dirait. Et encore elle le dit ici. (pp. 78-79; original emphasis)

In focusing here and elsewhere on the noise and animation of Cholon's streets, its dynamic night-life and its essential separation

from European Saigon, the later novel returns, via the intermediary of *L'Amant*, to the defining characteristics attributed to the district in *L'Empire français's* original descriptions, discussed in the previous chapter.²³ In the depictions in *Chine du Nord*, however, subtle new elements are introduced to these familiar, intertextual borrowings, which recast Cholon as an ambivalent site of both multicultural exchange and post-colonial tension. In *L'Amant's* depiction of the central scene of the couple's first sex in the *garçonnière*, as we saw in the last chapter, constant shifts occur between the intimate, private space inside and the Chinese and, therefore, alien noise of the street ('le tintamarre de ses rues') outside. Whilst *Chine du Nord* explicitly borrows the same in/out structuring device, the sounds which penetrate the lovers' inside space are not solely Chinese. There are also repeated references to the jazz and ragtime tunes – themselves quintessentially synergistic musical forms, forged in the multiethnic 'melting pot' of America's inner cities – that are played by a *métis* neighbour. Just as the outside sounds are themselves *métissés*, so too do the constant shifts between inside and out, effected along the path of those sounds, reflect Cholon's recasting as a 'third space' of multicultural *métissage*, rather than as site of an encounter with radical difference, as in *L'Amant*.

In the evocation of Cholon's crowded trams, discussed above, a contrasting, discordant note is introduced to the seemingly joyous noise and activity of the scene with the brief, oblique reference to 'le bruit des vieilles guerres, des vieilles armées harassées'. Whilst characteristically avoiding historic specificities, through the use of a highly metaphorical, generic plural form, Duras here retrospectively alludes to the violent reality of war and foreign aggression that so profoundly marked the history of 'Indochina': both prior to French colonization (as euphemistically outlined in *L'Empire français*) and, especially, throughout much of the second half of the twentieth

²³ The depiction expands particularly upon the key characteristics that are listed in the following passage: 'Cholon est célèbre par ses "immeubles-restaurants", création de la Chine moderne, ses magasins de soie et de jade, le tintamarre de ses rues et de ses fêtes nocturnes. Il est curieux de remarquer que Saïgon et Cholon, séparées par une courte avenue, coexistent sans s'influencer en rien, dans leur urbanisme et dans le mode de vie de leurs habitants' (*L'Empire français*, p. 114).

century. To a western reader, indeed, the term 'Vietnam' is virtually synonymous with America's bloody intervention in the region.²⁴ In line with the gradual, if reluctant questioning of its colonial past that accompanied the late-1980s debates over France's contemporary status as a postcolonial nation, Duras here fleetingly acknowledges the brutal, coercive reality behind, and ensuing from, France's historical, colonial claims to Indochina. Duras retrospectively recasts Cholon as an ambivalent, postcolonial space, whose status as a multicultural 'carrefour des peuples' is always already contaminated by the violent reality of the colonization that paradoxically also brought it about. Despite the problematic brevity of this allusion to the region's long, bloody history, its intrusion into the novel's first depiction of Cholon sheds an ironic light on the central, colonial-era love story that is played out there. The utopian meeting of opposites that the relationship between French girl and Chinese lover seems to embody is implicitly recast as a fleeting 'brief encounter' in a room, in a 'village dans l'épaisseur de la ville', in the Chinese district of the colonial capital of a far-off country that has since been 'pulverized' by war and that effectively no longer exists.²⁵

Duras's last literary return to Indochina is inflected by the contemporary, metropolitan issues of immigration, belonging and identity, all of which resulted from France's colonial legacy and its status as a multicultural, postcolonial nation. Rather than directly attack the injustices, racial prejudices and self-seeking ideology that underpinned the imperialist edifice, Duras instead draws implicit, eloquent parallels between the position of poor, French *colons* in Indochina and that of contemporary immigrants to France from its ex-colonies. Yet *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord's* postcolonial recasting of colonial Indochina as the site of multiethnic exchange does not entirely avoid neo-colonial pitfalls and areas of slippery ambivalence.

²⁴ 'Vietnam', the indigenous name for one of the constituent countries of Indochina, was banned under French rule. Its use was fundamental to anti-colonial dissent and to the struggle for independence.

²⁵ As quoted in this book's introduction, Duras stated in interview that: 'Je suis née dans les colonies. Le lieu natal que j'ai, il est pulvérisé. Et si vous voulez, ça, ça ne me quitte jamais – le fait que l'on ne vive pas là où l'on est né' (*La Vie matérielle*, p. 70).

The almost exclusive focus on immigrant characters, and the assertion of the *colon* girl's claim to Indochina as her 'pays natal', lead to the virtual narrative effacement of indigenous figures – a move that could be seen to replicate colonial discourse's 'fantasy of dominance' over Indochina's compliant 'terres vacantes'. Duras's portrayal of the lover's identity as both radically 'Other' and, contradictorily, as a hybrid of different cultural and linguistic influences, exposes the limits of received conceptions of personal and group identity. Similarly, whilst the narrative focus on the 'faubourg indigène' of Cholon reflects postcolonial interest in marginality and the cultural cross-fertility of France's multiethnic *banlieues*, it could also be seen to gloss over the racial inequalities and segregation that structured colonial town-planning and ideology.

In Duras's last 'Indochinese' novel, her 'pays natal' is constructed as the site of a unique, but fleeting and ultimately wasted meeting of different cultures, whose truly transgressive, inter-cultural possibilities are inevitably prevented not only by colonialism's unequal ideological structures, but also by what both Bhabha and Cixous identified as the inescapable 'untranslatability' at the heart of any encounter between different cultures. If we regard the novel's appendix of familiar images and accompanying commentary as an integral part of the work, then *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* does not end, as the main narrative does, with the melodramatic declaration of undying love between the Chinese lover and the older narrator, years after the events recounted. Instead, it ends with the following, anti-climactic and self-reflexive comment on the possible soundtrack for an (unmade) film version of the novel we have just read:

Des chants vietnamiens seraient chantés (plusieurs fois chacun pour qu'on les retienne), ils ne seraient pas traduits. De même que dans *India Song* le chant laotien de la mendicante n'a jamais été traduit. Pas un seul chant ne serait utilisé en tant qu'accompagnement (les boîtes de nuit seraient à la mode occidentale). (p. 235)

Whereas the rather clichéd romantic ending of the main narrative hints at the possibility of an enduring, utopian meeting of Self and Other, the appended ending, in contrast, highlights the seemingly insurmountable differences that preclude complete inter-cultural understanding. In the main narrative's depiction of the central, inter-

racial couple's meeting and mutual exchange, as we have seen, a point is reached beyond which comprehension and communication break down. This point is reflected in the lover's recourse to Chinese and in the author's refusal to translate, and so make comprehensible, the lover's words. So too, in the novel's paratextual concluding comment, Duras proposes to introduce moments of untranslated incomprehension into her filmic representation of Indochina. By leaving the words of Vietnamese songs untranslated, so preserving them in their essential difference, Duras both avoids the neo-colonial, stereotypical traps that beset conventional attempts to comprehend cultural difference, and also proposes to introduce a 'metonymic gap'²⁶ of insurmountable, since untranslated and, ultimately, untranslatable, difference into her literary reconstructions and appropriations of Indochina's people and land.

²⁶ Echoing Bhabha's concept of the 'language metaphor', discussed above, Ashcroft argues that the inclusion of untranslated foreign terms into a text written in the colonial language metonymically 'stands for' the colonized culture whilst resisting interpretation, so creating a gap between cultures. W.D. Ashcroft, 'Is that the Congo? Language as metonymy in the post-colonial text', *World Literature Written in English*, 29.2 (1989), 3-10.

Conclusion

Duras's Indochina: From Colonial to Postcolonial Representations

Les images proposées ci-dessous pourraient servir à la ponctuation d'un film tiré de ce livre. En aucun cas ces images – dites plans de coupe – ne devraient 'rendre compte' du récit, ou le prolonger ou l'illustrer. [...] Je vois ces images comme un dehors qu'aurait le film, un 'pays', celui de ces gens du livre, la contrée du film. Et seulement de lui, du film, sans aucune référence de conformité. (*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, p. 233)

This caveat immediately precedes the series of now familiar descriptive motifs of Indochina's natural landscape and people that is appended to Duras's last 'Indochinese' novel – motifs which repeatedly evoke the monotony of the southern flood plains, the powerful flow of the Mekong, the broad avenues of the European district, or long-suffering crowds of Vietnamese peasants. With this paratextual self-commentary, Duras preemptively, but also retrospectively, attempts to deny any direct relation between the literary constructions of her novel's fictional, textual context and the geographic reality of Indochina. Duras thus seems to support humanist and postmodern views of literature as existing beyond or above its historical context, and so encourages us to read her 'Indochinese' works on their own internal and solely literary terms. In this light, the central character's repeated assertions of her formative, identificatory links with her 'pays natal' – assertions that Duras herself echoes in autobiographical articles and interviews¹ – cannot

¹ In an article first published in *Sorcières* in 1976, republished in *Outside* in 1984, Duras explains the essential difference between herself and her mother in the following terms: 'Nous sommes des petits enfants maigres mon frère et moi, des petits créoles plus jaunes que blancs. Inséparables. On est battus ensemble:

be reduced to straightforwardly biographical or historical interpretations. The text's 'autofictional' self is presented as a product of the novel's purely fictional context – the 'pays du livre' – rather than the fictional work being seen as a reflection of the authorial self's lived experiences in a verifiable historical or geographic context.

Yet this retrospective assertion of the dehistoricized, fictional nature of her representations of colonial Indochina runs counter to the textual evidence, uncovered in this study, of Duras's career-long literary engagements with the socio-historical contexts in which she was raised, in which her novels are set, and in which the works were written. Duras's characteristically guarded attitude towards the truth value of her autobiographically based 'Indochinese' works grants her the creative freedom to explore the material of her own childhood, her memories of the distant time and place in which this childhood was lived, and the colonial society and ideology in which she was raised, without being restricted by the rigid, realist criteria of representational accuracy or verifiable evidence. Duras's 'Indochinese' works paradoxically both are and are not about colonial Indochina, in so much as they consciously signal the important role that fiction, myth, projection, cliché and even forgetting play in the literary (re)constructions of both the author's 'pays natal' and her earlier self. The inherently ambivalent, since inextricably interwoven, fictional and historically grounded nature of Duras's literary works

sales petits Annamites, elle dit. Elle, elle est française, elle n'est pas née là-bas.' The children's formative attachment to their 'pays natal' is portrayed as profoundly affecting their physical appearance, in a manner that prefigures the evocation of the central character's ambivalent racial identity in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*: 'On nous demande: êtes-vous bien les enfants de votre père? regardez-vous, vous êtes des métisses. Jamais nous n'avons répondu. Pas de problème: on sait que ma mère a été fidèle et que le métissage vient d'ailleurs. Cet ailleurs est sans fin. Notre appartenance indicible à la terre des mangues, à l'eau noire du sud, des plaines à riz, c'est le détail.' See 'Les enfants maigres et jaunes', in *Outside* (Paris: P.O.L., 1984), pp. 277-79. See also Duras's discussions of the influence of her early life in Indochina on her literary works in *Les Parleuses* (pp. 119-21, 135-43); *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (pp. 26-27, 42-6, 78, 84-87); or the articles, 'Vinh Long', 'Hanoi', and 'Le Livre', in *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), pp. 27-28, 28-29, 86-91.

reflects the author's claim, quoted in the introduction, that 'J'ai vécu le réel comme un mythe'.²

Reflecting on the relationship between a writer's life and literary work, and on the impossibility of granting a coherent narrative form to the mass of lived experience, Duras once pondered: 'Je me demande sur quoi se basent les gens pour raconter leur vie.'³ In returning repeatedly to the material of her early life in colonial Indochina, one of the key resources on which Duras bases her representations of the context in which her inter-related, 'Indochinese' narratives are set is, as we have seen, the long-overlooked, propagandist precursor, *L'Empire français*. Like the family photographs around which Duras famously constructs the central 'family romance' in *L'Amant*,⁴ the descriptive 'touches de couleur' from *L'Empire français*'s original broad brushstroke depiction of Indochina form the enduring basis of her novels' (re)constructions of the former French colony's landscapes, towns and peoples. As the chronological readings of this study have revealed, many of the very same tropes and descriptive motifs originally deployed in the pro-colonial rhetoric of *L'Empire français* endure in Duras's later, literary works, though these are repeatedly recast and reinterpreted as the same material is viewed from shifting historical and intellectual perspectives. Whilst Duras's 'Indochinese' texts do draw, in part at least, on the author's memories of its people and places, and on her direct experiences of colonial society, it is impossible to privilege, as Said maintains, lived experience over 'textual attitude' in her highly ambivalent, 'autofictional' representations of Indochina.⁵ Duras's retrospective reconstructions of her lived experiences of Indochina are always mediated by the structures and imagery of earlier textual representations – even, as we have seen, in the recourse to clichés of

² *Magazine littéraire*, 278 (1990), 18-24.

³ *La Vie matérielle*, p. 88.

⁴ For a discussion of the role of absent photographs in the narrative fabric of *L'Amant*, see Pierre Saint-Armand, 'La photographie de famille dans *L'Amant*', in *Rencontres de Cerisy: Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Alain Vircondelet (Paris: Écriture, 1994), pp. 225-40; or Chapter 3 of Julia Waters, *Intersexual Rivalry*, pp. 87-122.

⁵ See especially 'The Scope of Orientalism', *Orientalism*, pp. 31-110.

traditional colonial discourse in *L'Empire français*. As the gap between the present in which the texts are written and the past in which they are set widens over the span of Duras's long career, the intertextual, self-mythologizing nature of her 'Indochinese' works is increasingly evident, underlining the futility and impossibility of seeking an ultimate lived 'truth' beyond that staged in the intertextual weave of the works themselves.

My approach to Duras's Indochinese narratives in this study has thus combined a postmodern wariness towards any claims of representational or biographical 'truth', and a postcolonial attention to the links, however oblique, between literary works and their historical and social contexts. Following Jane Winston's lead, I too have approached Duras's work with the conviction that 'all creative work can be properly understood only when considered in relation to the contexts from which it emerges, the questions to which it responds, and the contradictions with which it wrestles'.⁶ As this study has demonstrated, whilst Duras's 'Indochinese' novels are highly literary, self-reflexive and intertextually self-referential, they do also engage with the historical, social and political contexts both of colonial Indochina, in which they are set, and of contemporary metropolitan France, in which they were produced. Contrary to what Said and others have argued, Duras's representations of the 'Oriental' people and places of Indochina, although crystallized around the same, minimalist set of evocative, descriptive motifs, are far from constant or monolithic. The often striking changes effected in the symbolic associations attributed to the enduring set of stock 'touches de couleur', in their intertextual journey over a period of more than half a century, reflect shifting public attitudes to (the legacy of) colonialism and broader changes in the social fabric of metropolitan France. Duras's own shifting, in-between status – born in colonial Indochina, as the child of poor *colons*, but later to become an iconic 'femme du siècle'⁷ – itself embodies many of the ambivalences inherent in the relationship between the colonial and post-colonial eras,

⁶ *Postcolonial Duras*, p. 1.

⁷ This is the title chosen for a collection of essays, retrospectively reconsidering Duras's role in twentieth-century French literary history, *Duras, Femme du Siècle*, ed. by Stella Harvey and Kate Ince (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

between France and its former colonies. Duras's geographic shift from far-flung colonial 'postes de brousse' to the intellectual and literary hub of Paris is matched by her constant interrogations of the relationship between centre and margins, oppressor and oppressed, individual and society. In many ways, as Winston asserts, Duras represents 'a crucial intermediary between [...] the French cultural field and its Francophone successor'.⁸ Her various inter-related but transformative representations of the segregative structures of Indochinese colonial society bridge the gap between colonial and post-colonial attitudes to difference in its many forms, whilst remaining precariously and unresolvedly suspended above that gap.

Our comparative, intertextual readings of the relationship between Duras's colonial-era, propagandist *L'Empire français* and her literary works of the late colonial and post-colonial eras blur the reductive opposition, often posited by postcolonial scholars, between the univocal structures and racial stereotypes of colonial discourse and the liberating openness and hybridity of postcolonial texts. As our examination of *L'Empire français* within its wartime context demonstrated, colonial discourse is not always used solely to justify colonial rule. Conversely, our analyses of Duras's 'Indochinese' novels have shown how even anti-colonial and postcolonial texts may not wholly escape contamination by the very colonial-era attitudes and structures that they explicitly seek to subvert. The ambivalences and slippages that our study has uncovered within and between Duras's various 'Indochinese' works are not simply generic characteristics of colonial discourse, as Bhabha might argue, but are the direct result of the specific historic circumstances in which the works were produced, or of the unresolved tensions between opposing systems of thought at stake in any post-colonial representation of colonialism.

Duras's repeated literary returns to her 'pays natal', from the shifting perspectives of different contemporary intellectual concerns, draw attention to aspects of colonial society and ideology that are traditionally overlooked in the binary logic of colonizer-colonized relations. Her engagement with the Marxist concerns of the post-war

⁸ *Postcolonial Duras*, p. 4.

era leads to the highlighting, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, of the exploitation by the colonial elite of a forgotten underclass of poor, working-class whites. The broadly feminist concerns of the early 1980s result in *L'Amant*'s focus on the position in colonial society of European women, who are traditionally sidelined in colonial accounts of male adventurers, politicians and settlers. The novel's investigation of the inter-relation of gender and cultural difference, in its representation of the central inter-racial couple, also implicitly highlights alternative, non-western models of masculinity. Contemporary concerns with immigration and identity in late-1980s France lead to an emphasis, in Duras's last 'Indochinese' work, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, on the enriching, multiethnic encounters that colonialism inadvertently brought about and that its segregative racial ideology sought to prevent. By portraying the young girl's lover as Chinese, rather than as an indigenous Vietnamese, Duras's later 'Indochinese' novels draw attention to the existence of significant non-European ethnic groups in Indochina which escape the binarism of colonizer-colonized relations. By drawing parallels between the situation of French *colons* in Indochina and that of immigrants to France from its ex-colonies, Duras also implicitly highlights causal links between France's colonial past and its present status as a multicultural, post-colonial nation. By engaging with shifting, contemporary, metropolitan debates on diverse forms of difference – class, gender, ethnicity – Duras's repeated returns to the same autobiographical, textual and historical material can thus be seen to offer new, contrapuntal perspectives on the seemingly familiar narratives of French colonization.

Yet, despite their explicit rejection of the colonial ideology that had previously been espoused in *L'Empire français*, Duras's 'Indochinese' novels betray levels of implicit ambivalence and slippage in relation to some of their propagandist precursor's attitudes and structures, most notably in their depictions of the indigenous population. As we have seen, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* all repeat the homogenizing, stereotyping moves originally deployed in the essentialist colonial discourse of *L'Empire français*. In all works, and for very different reasons, the Vietnamese people are depicted as a voiceless, faceless mass of calm and passive peasants. In *L'Empire français*, the indigenous peoples of

Indochina are portrayed in these homogenizing, stereotypical terms, in order to justify the appropriation and colonization of their lands as part of a moral *mission civilisatrice*. Despite the intense sympathy that is expressed for the colonized people's lot in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, the novel's Marxist investigation of capitalism's class inequalities results in their depiction as the undifferentiated masses of the exploited proletariat. In *L'Amant*, the narrative focus on the oppression of colonial women, and on the central female character's transgression of patriarchal society's unequal gender rules leaves unexplored the often brutal, material and ideological oppression of the colonized. Indeed, in a move that is reminiscent of colonial narratives' 'fantasy of dominance', the indigenous population is virtually effaced from the novel, featuring only as subservient and undifferentiated figures in the background of the central Franco-Chinese encounter. Again, in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, despite its explicit concern with the essentially postcolonial issues of immigration, identity, marginality and *métissage*, the only characters to be granted central status, voice and agency are those, like the *colon* girl and her Chinese lover, for whom Indochina is largely an adopted homeland. For all the novels' general sympathy for the lot of the colonized, and despite their occasionally explicit rejection of the unjust and exploitative structures of colonial rule, there is no real identification between the central characters of Duras's novels and the indigenous figures who form part of the context through which they move. Indeed, it could even be argued, following Chinua Achebe's famous criticisms of Conrad's portrayal of Africa and Africans in *Heart of Darkness*,⁹ that in Duras's literary imaginary, Indochina is constructed largely as a contrastive backdrop, its inhabitants virtually effaced in order to make way for the adventures of the central characters. Indochina becomes an exotic, contrastive, passive screen on to which is projected a shifting set of contemporary, and essentially metropolitan, concerns.

⁹ Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 1-20

Duras once claimed in interview that, 'Si jamais j'y reviens [au Vietnam], cela sera pour écrire quelque chose sur la guerre',¹⁰ but, as she stated elsewhere: 'Je suis quelqu'un qui ne sera jamais revenu dans son pays natal'.¹¹ Such a project of direct interrogation of the brutal legacy of western involvement in South-East Asia was never undertaken by Duras. Despite her repeated, even obsessive, literary returns to her 'pays natal', none of Duras's 'Indochinese' works – with the possible, highly euphemistic exception of *L'Empire français* – makes any direct reference to the contemporary realities in the countries that made up French Indochina. *Un barrage*'s portrayal of the inevitable demise of the colonial regime is linked more to a Marxist belief in the inevitability of socialist revolution, than it is to the very real anti-colonial, indigenous struggle for independence that was being fought against the French in Indochina at the time. *Chine du Nord*'s fleeting evocation of 'le bruit des vieilles guerres, des vieilles armées harassées' (p. 68), in a description of Cholon's trams, is the only (characteristically oblique) reference, in all of Duras's 'Indochinese' works, to the violent realities that followed France's colonization of Indochina. Beyond her literary works, too, Duras remained curiously silent about the Franco-Indochinese and Vietnam Wars, despite her vociferous opposition to the Algerian War.

Rather than engage directly with the contemporary situation in her former homeland, Duras's repeated literary returns to colonial Indochina provide her with the textual grounds on which to recast her former self in line with the prevailing intellectual preoccupations and cultural tastes of contemporary, metropolitan France. In *L'Empire français*, the narrative position adopted is that of the ruling class, as Duras appropriates the authority and voice that had been denied to her and her family in the colonies. In *Un barrage*, the almost consistent narrative identification with the impoverished central character, Suzanne, allows Duras to assert her own Marxist credentials as a member of the proletariat. In *L'Amant*, the semi-autobiographical self is portrayed as a liberated, sexually precocious, rebellious figure, who openly flaunts the transgressive potential of

¹⁰ Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Marguerite Duras', p. 654.

¹¹ This statement, quoted at the very start of my study, is from *La Vie matérielle*, p. 70.

female desire. Duras thus portrays her early self, as if prefiguring her contemporary avant-garde, leftist status, as a fashionably scandalous, anti-establishment figure. In *Chine du Nord*, Duras's depiction of her semi-fictionalized self as marginal, non-metropolitan and *métisse* chimes with contemporary interests in the cultural production of France's multiethnic, immigrant population. With the exception of *L'Empire français*, in which Duras mimics the voice of colonial authority, the central character of each of her 'Indochinese' novels, with which the narrative most consistently identifies, is a member of a group or class oppressed by (colonial) authority, and who transgressively subverts this authority. In none of the novels, however, does the oppressed group with which the girl identifies correspond to the colonized, indigenous population. Whilst the narrative self can and does speak *for* the colonized, she does not speak *as* one of them. Instead, the central, semi-autobiographical female figure repeatedly embodies the particular form of otherness – class, gender, ethnicity – that then preoccupies the contemporary French intellectual scene.

In 1958, Duras commented that: 'Sur certains points j'ai toujours été réticente quand on me parle de colonialisme'.¹² For all their cultural shifts and ideological repositionings, during the fifty years that separate *L'Empire français* from *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, Duras's literary representations of colonial Indochina remain marked by such reticence. Paradoxically, it is precisely in their inability or refusal fully to extricate themselves from the insidious, ideological structures of the colonial era that Duras's post-colonial, literary works are most revealing of the fraught and still unresolved relationship between the post-colonial present and the colonial past. As we examined in Chapter 1, *L'Empire français* is not as univocal and self-assured an example of unreconstructed, pro-colonial propaganda as at first appears or, indeed, as Duras's later rejection of it would lead us to believe. Nonetheless, its already rather anachronistic, highly contradictory discourse is only really interesting to contemporary readers when read in association with the very specific context in which it was written. As the plethora of Duras studies

¹² Marcel Bisiaux and Catherine Jajolet, *À ma mère* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1958), p. 12.

(and the radical differences in their approaches and findings) attest, Duras's 'Indochinese' literary works are far richer, more ambivalent, and open to interpretation than their propagandist precursor. *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* all have an aesthetic and communicative value that transcends their immediate historical contexts. The complex, revisionary interrelation between Duras's 'Indochinese' novels and their non-fictional precursor that this study has examined demonstrates Duras's consummate skill at borrowing and reworking the same set of fundamental, enduring elements, constantly making them fresh and relevant to the evolving historical and cultural circumstances in which they are (re)written and, importantly, in which they continue to be read. Though inextricably tied up with the historical events and cultural preoccupations of twentieth-century France, and with the problematic transition from colonial to post-colonial orders that took place during that period, Duras's polyvalent 'Indochinese' novels ultimately refuse to be limited by these contexts.

Duras's above professed reticence towards the colonial context in which she was born and raised is echoed, twenty five years later, in the following words: 'Toute cette poubelle de toutes les colonies, c'est moi. C'est évident. J'en suis née. J'en suis née et j'écris.'¹³ Throughout her long career, Duras's retrospective attitude towards her 'pays natal', and towards the role it played in forming her identity, both as an individual and as a writer, remained characteristically non-didactic and non-judgemental. As such, Duras's ambivalent attitude to her past reflects Canadian-born Nancy Huston's reflections on her own composite, exilic and essentially contradictory identity:

L'enfance, proche ou lointaine, est toujours en nous. [...] Les exilés, eux, sont riches. Riches de leurs identités accumulées et contradictoires. En fait nous sommes tous multiples, ne serait-ce que pour cette raison-là:

¹³ *Les Œuvres cinématographiques de Marguerite Duras: Edition vidéographique critique* (n.p: Ministère des Relations Extérieures 1984), five-part box set of Duras's films, including post-face interviews with Duras by Dominique Noguez (p. 22).

que nous avons été enfants, puis adolescents; ne le sommes plus; le sommes encore.¹⁴

Written from the point of view of a product rather than a critic of France's imperialist experiment, Duras's 'Indochinese' works attest to the extraordinary wealth of contradictory, formative influences that constituted her childhood and adolescent experiences of colonial life. By unresolvedly confronting nostalgia with critique, past with present, self with multiple others, fiction with socio-historical reality, in their retrospective (re)constructions of 'cette poubelle de toutes les colonies', Duras's rich and provocative literary texts challenge the assumption of closure, distance or neat delineation implicit in the term 'post-colonial'. Just as Duras's 'pays natal', however distant and however repressed, continues throughout her career to exert its contradictory influence on her adult identity and on her writing, so too – her 'Indochinese' novels lead us to recognize – does France's colonial past continue to shape its evolving, post-colonial present.

¹⁴ *Nord perdu* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999), pp. 17-19.

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