

From Hungry Ghost to Phallic Mother: Linda Lê's Doubling of the Vietnamese Ancestor in French Exile

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Abstract

The mother figure in the work of Linda Lê, an exiled Vietnamese writer of French expression, is either absent or maleficent (Bacholle-Boskovic). In her novel, *Les trois Parques* (1997) [*The Three Fates*], compensatory grandmothering takes a spectral form for three Vietnamese refugees in contemporary France. Their spectral forebear is first represented as a hungry ghost of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, that is to say, a departed soul lacking descendants willing to provide for her spirit. As an outsider the ghost thus stands as a metaphor for the familial abandonment of the subaltern exile.

The contrapuntal vision of the refugee, who looks at the present through the lens of the past (Saïd), in turn incurs a ghostly doubling. I demonstrate that Lê can be seen to add a second, Western aspect to her spectre in the shape of a Freudian phallic (grand)mother, an inherently ambivalent maternal/paternal figure (Ian Brooks). In the context of colonial mimicry, her guise as a *mère-patrie* [mother-fatherland] is shown to destabilise the authority of the European Other in the lives of her French-Vietnamese progeny (Bhabha).

The potency of the ghost's real-world presence is most evident in her provocation of ambivalent feelings in practices of identity in her primary culture, such as cooking and eating. For this reason, and owing to her propensity to act as a vessel for split selves, I argue that Lê's spectral double-figure is representative of the disturbing ambivalence endured by the subaltern who faces having to manage a double sense of belonging in exile.

Key words: Linda Lê, Vietnamese-Francophone writing, phallic mother, hungry ghost, ambivalence



Whereas the ubiquitous paternal figure in the work of the Vietnamese writer of French expression, Linda Lê, has been much discussed,¹ mothers and characters who substitute for them in her work have never been the subject of scholarly consideration. Paradoxically, it is by means of a maternal figure, albeit a spectral one, that Lê deals with the

¹ For articles on the father figure in Lê's œuvre see: Assier 2008, Bacholle-Boskovic 2002, Bui 2012, Kurmann 2013, Lay-Chenchabi and Do 2008.

death of her father in Vietnam in *Les trois Parques*, arguably her most widely-read novel:² it is an enraged ancestor who returns from the dead to take vengeance on her offspring, while Lê self-reflectively criticises these Vietnamese-French characters for abandoning their father's language and culture.³

In the novel, the ghostly grandmother assumes two distinct forms, one associated with ancient Chinese custom and the other with Western psychoanalytic thought. The first is characterised as a hungry ghost, a spirit doomed to wander the afterlife unfed for lack of descendants to carry out funeral rights, the second is, as depicted by Lê, a ghost having the same role as a Freudian phallic (grand)mother, a maternal figure who in the eyes of her child retains the symbolic power of the phallus. By using a dual view of ghostliness in the context of exile in France, Lê is able to represent the refugee's, or exile's, contrapuntal view of his/her environment, through the double lens of a primary and secondary belief system.⁴

The fact that both depictions of ghostliness evoke sentiments of cultural ambivalence in Vietnamese and French characters alike suggests to me that the insubstantial figure of the ghost serves as means to illustrate the unseen internal conflict of a character who is in the subaltern position of an exile or refugee. My argument is divided into three parts: the first and second are devoted to explications of the role of the hungry ghost and the phallic mother's phantom in *Les trois Parques*; thirdly, I consider the effect of a resulting two-fold ambivalence on the subaltern characters of the novel.

1. Aggrieved Ancestors

In the first novel of 'une trilogie consacrée à la mort du père [*a trilogy dedicated to the death of the father*]' (Argand 1999: 28), it is the death of a fearful grandmother figure which gives rise to a ghostly haunting.⁵ Although *Les trois Parques* (1997a) and its successors, *Voix: Une crise* [Voices: A crisis] (1998) and *Lettre morte* [Dead letter] (1999), were written in response to the exiled author's loss of her beloved father, he only appears in the second book of the trilogy as a primary ghostly figure in the cycle of novels and then without the sense of presence in the real world enjoyed by the grandmother's phantom. Furthermore, although Lê admits that writing her trilogy helped her to deal with feelings of guilt at having failed her

² After twenty years of exile in France, in 1995 Lê's father died in Vietnam without having seen his daughter again.

³ Lê has admitted to having committed these very crimes (Kurmann 2010: 6; Lê 2011 40).

⁴ 'Contrapuntal' is a musical term employed by Saïd to denote the double vision of the exile, who looks at the present through the lens of a pre-exilic past, so as to see two realities at the one time (Saïd 2000: 186).

⁵ All translations from French are the author's, apart from those from *Les Parques*, which are from the published translation, *The Three Fates* (1997b; trans. by Polizzotti).

filial duties with regard to her father (Kurmann 2010: 6), accusations of abandoning an ancestor are voiced first and foremost by a treacherous grandparent. If, indeed, the dead return because they have something important left to say to us (Davis 2007: 152), albeit seemingly displaced, the spectral grandmother's message ought not to go unheeded.

Lê reverses clichés associated with grandmothering in *Les trois Parques* to portray a despotic *materfamilias*. *La grand-mère* [the grandmother], a wealthy funeral director, flees war-torn Vietnam with all of her worldly possessions and three of her granddaughters: two sisters whom she has kidnapped from their widowed father and their cousin, who has been put into her care as a result of the girl's being in an incestuous relationship with her brother. She takes refuge in France 'où [elle] avait ses placements immobiliers, son compte en banque et une partie de sa progéniture, envoyée en éclaireuse [*where (she) kept her real estate investments, her bank account, and a portion of her progeny, sent ahead as scouts*]' (Lê 1997a: 31; 1997b: 18). Instead of providing an emotionally secure environment for her grandchildren as their new (illegal) guardian, her home in exile recalls childhood images of the fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel,' situated near a deep, dark forest. In the same way, the warmth normally associated with the food that traditional grandmothers are said to prepare for their grandchildren is contrasted with this grandmother's special recipes, such as 'le sang de canard parfumé au basilica [*ducks blood infused with basil*]' (Ibid: 117; 78–79), dishes which leave her granddaughters cold. It is hardly surprising, then, that when she dies some years after their abduction, her by now adult granddaughters feel little sadness; indeed, it is their behaviour at her funeral that arouses the wrath of a ghost whom they have left hungry, which in turn leads to confrontation.

The young women abandon their grandmother's body to 'les langues de glace [*the icy tongues*]' of death (Lê 1997a: 64; 1997b: 41), while they go out to celebrate. A reader familiar with both ancient Buddhist customs and the familial expectations involved in Chinese funeral rituals, which are also adopted in Vietnam, will be aware that this is an offence on the granddaughters' part which exposes them to danger. Not only do the granddaughters fail to offer their ancestor at the very least a bowl of rice, in order to prevent her from becoming a hungry ghost in the afterlife, they celebrate her death by consuming the very traditional foods they ought to have given her as a sacrifice. Rubbing salt in the wound, the three cousins rejoice in rebelling against the dictates of their well-bred grandmother. Seeking out a 'gargotte bondée, surchauffée, où les baguettes et les cuillères étaient [...] fourrées dans un récipient malpropre [*a packed, overheated dive, where the spoons and chopsticks were at the*

end of the table, jumbled together in a filthy container]' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 40–41), they take pleasure in 'avalant goulement le potage au tamarin et au poisson, le plat préféré de grand-mère [*greedily gulp[ing] [...] down the fish and tamarind soup, Grandmother's favourite*]' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 41). Not only is the ghost left hungry, she is left salivating on the edge of the world of the living by the very kin who are meant to satisfy her hunger.

A hungry ghost is said to be a wandering spirit of a person who has died without heirs to carry out his or her burial rites. Condemned to roam the earth 'forever hungry,' such ghosts are appeased with food offerings each year during the Festival of Hungry Ghosts, or the Chinese All Souls' Day (Lai 2001: 35). Not surprisingly the grandmother becomes such a spectre and haunts her progeny in order to have her bodily cravings satisfied by their filial duty. When they fail to oblige her by either cooking from the book of her traditional Vietnamese recipes or honouring her with these same dishes at the eldest granddaughter's wedding banquet, as would be ordinarily respectful to the bride's side of the family, the 'fantôme affamé, [*hungry ghost*]' returns to wreak her vengeance (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b:73). With 'l'énergie exterminatrice à revendre et un plan d'enfer pour gâcher la noce [*the vindictive energy to burn and an infernal scheme to spoil the celebration*]', her rage is not just directed towards the Vietnamese bride and her cousins. The starved grandmother takes vengeance on everything that is foreign to her in the celebrations: the Swiss-German groom's guests, the 'authentique auberge normande [*authentic Norman inn*]' in which the reception takes place (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b: 73), the traditional European foods served, and in particular 'la folie crémeuse [*the buttercream folly*]' of the wedding cake (Ibid). Plunging the room into darkness, the grandmother's ghost literally pulls the rug out from under the wedding guests to send the cake flying 'avec un abandon majestueux dans les bras de la petite band [*with majestic abandon into the crowd*]' (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b: 74). The hungry ghost is determined to destroy all representations of Western 'authenticity' at the event, all of which both deny her own cultural heritage as (grand)mother of the bride and obliterate the 'authenticity' of her progeny's ethnic difference.

True to her characterisation, the havoc-causing spectre in this novel stands as 'the epitome of social disorder, contravening the most valued elements of orderly existence' (Ahern 1978: 284). Famished ghosts may be appeased by the living with food offerings, but what they really hunger for is their lost sense of belonging: 'They have no one to carry on their lines of descent, they are without resources, and they are excluded from any social group' (Ibid). From this perspective the grandmother's ghost may be seen as a quintessential

representation of the refugee she was when alive. Culturally excluded, lacking in resources, having been duped into giving away her valuables to a conman and needful of descendants to tend to her funeral rites, the grandmother has, in taking the form of a hungry ghost, simply assumed the societal ghostliness of her subaltern position in life.

As well as the losses caused by her exile, *la grand-mère* has also suffered being banished by her own 'line of descent,' a fate which is avenged by her haunting her own kin. Chinese tradition, says Wolf, makes a distinction between 'ghosts' and 'ancestors': '[o]ne man's ghost is another man's ancestor' (Wolf 1978: 148). In other words, 'ancestors' are deceased members of a particular person's family (Ibid.); 'ghosts', on the other hand, can include 'the souls of people who die as members of some other group' (Wolf 1978: 172). As Wolf puts it:

The category 'ghosts' is always a relative one. Your ancestors are my ghosts and my ancestors are your ghosts, just as you relatives are strangers to me, and my relatives are strangers to you (Wolf 1978: 173)

So long as ghosts have living descendants to care for them, they are not malicious, but they are all 'potentially dangerous because they are all strangers or outsiders' (Wolf 1978: 172). A malicious ghost, therefore, must either be the ancestor of a person other than the person who sees it or must have lost or been abandoned by its living descendants. The frightful vengeance that their own grandmother wreaks on the cousins indicates that she is punishing her offspring for having made her a stranger to the family. By their repudiation of her culture, language and customs and their having become assimilated into their European country of exile, their grandmother has been doubly estranged, from both her nation and her kin.

It is perhaps this very two-fold world view held by the living descendants that gives rise to a Western reading of the ghostly figure. In addition to her express references to a *fantôme affamé*, Lê also creates in the spectral ancestor a double to Freud's phallic mother.

2. The Phallic (Grand)Mother

Evidence of the phallic mother in *Les trois Parques* is directly connected to Sigmund Freud's somewhat convoluted formation of the term, first used in his 1933 work, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, with reference to a pre-oedipal and powerful maternal figure who has escaped castration in the child's mind (Freud 1965: 24). Freud initially associates this figure with the dominant female black widow spider, after Karl Abraham's 1922 essay, 'Die Spinne als Traumsymbol [*The Spider as Dream Symbol*]' (Ibid), thus situating the phallic mother right from the outset in the realm of fantasy and dream work. However, Freud's thoughts on the subject of the uncastrated imaginary mother may be traced back to his 1910 biographical study of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he considers the artist's recollection of an event from his very early childhood, namely that 'when [he] was still in [his] cradle, a vulture came down to [him], and opened [his] mouth with its tail, and struck [him] many times with its tail against [his] lips' (Freud 1990: 82). Declaring this story to be a fantasy memory created in adulthood and transposed to childhood (Ibid), Freud turns to mythology to support his case for reading the vulture as the child's phallic mother. 'In the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians,' he writes, 'the mother is represented by a picture of a vulture. The Egyptians also worshipped a Mother Goddess, who was represented as having a vulture's head' (Freud 1990: 88). Coupled with his discovery of an ancient Egyptian 'fable' that states there were thought to be no male of the vulture species (Freud 1990: 90, 61), the vulture-mother becomes 'a representation of parthenogenesis,' or of asexual female reproduction in Freud's text (Sprengnether 1990: 77). Three years later, Freud's interpretation of da Vinci's recollection was reinforced by Oskar Pfister who claimed that it is possible to trace the outline of a vulture in the way that the garments of Mary, the mother of Christ, are draped in the version of da Vinci's painting *Virgin and Child with St Anne* held by The Louvre in Paris, and, moreover, that the bird's outspread tail touches the Christ-child's mouth in a nursing gesture (Freud 1990: 115).

Freud explains the creation of such a maternal fantasy by once again employing evidence from da Vinci's early childhood. It has been suggested that the artist was born out of wedlock, since his father married another woman, Donna Albiera, in the very same year his son was born (Freud 1990: 91, 113). At the age of five Leonardo was adopted by his affluent father and wife, indicating that the child must have spent the first years of his childhood alone with his birth mother, without a father (Freud 1990: 92). In his biographical case study, Freud therefore identifies the artist as having had an empowered mother, one who had to perform

both parental roles for the sake of her child, and who could only but retain the symbolic phallus, since there was no paternal Other to disappropriate her of it.

Both the details of da Vinci's personal history and the story of the phallic vulture-mother resonate with the parental narrative in *Les trois Parques*. In the first instance, like the artist, the sisters of the novel have been brought up fatherless, in spite of having knowledge of a distant paternal figure. Secondly, the exiled sisters also have two mothers, their surrogate mother in the form of their grandmother and their deceased biological mother. In the artist's case, he, as Freud points out, also 'had had two mothers: his natural mother, Caterina, from whom he was separated at some point between the ages of three and five, and a young, affectionate stepmother, Donna Albiera, his father's wife' (1990: 91, 113),⁶ who can be seen as a surrogate mother.

This brings us back to the narrative of surrogate mothering in *Les trois Parques*, where *la grand-mère* is usually referred to as either 'lady chacal [*Lady Jackal*]' (Lê 1997a: 30; 1997b: 18) or a bird of prey, a 'rapace' [*raptor*] (Lê 1997a: 61; 1997b: 39). However, there are two and only two depictions of her and the children together when she is called by another name: once when she and her granddaughters are on the seashore at Vung Tàu when leaving Vietnam (Lê 1997a: 28; 1997b: 16), and again when the grandmother is dying in the family apartment in France; on these occasions alone she is called 'le condor [*the condor*]', towering menacingly over 'sa couvée [*her brood*]' (Lê 1997a: 62–63; 1997b: 39). The significance of this will be appreciated when it is realised that the condor is classified as a New World vulture, having physical traits and behaviours similar to those of the Old World vultures.

Calling the grandmother a condor is thus critical to the portrayal of her as a phallic (grand)mother, and it is, in my opinion, no accident that this should occur in the novel for the first time at the very moment that she escapes from Vietnam to the West. The comparison of the mother/child relationship to 'de petits poussins jetés dans le nid d'un condor [*chicks tossed into a condor's nest*]' paints mothering as menacing and leads seemingly without detour to the Freudian representation of the phallic mother (Lê 1997a: 31; 1997b: 18).

Three subsequent connections seem to bolster this postulation further; first, Lê admits to being conversant with psychoanalytic discourses, which she has been shown to incorporate

⁶ He also had a grandmother, Monna Lucia, his father's mother (Freud 1990: 91). Freud demonstrates that, although the picture *St Anne with the Madonna and Child* depicting a grandmother (St. Anne) and a mother (the Madonna) might be intended to depict Leonardo's paternal grandmother and his stepmother, in fact the figure of St. Anne corresponds to Caterina, his natural mother (Freud 1990: 113).

into this very text;⁷ secondly, she admits to being a frequent visitor of art galleries in Paris, among which the Louvre, where da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with St Anne* is displayed with an accompanying reference to Freud's theory about the painting;⁸ lastly, from fear of their seemingly uncontrollable power, 'phallic' women in literature are said to be subject to 'ghosting' by means of 'spectral metaphors' (Castle 1993: 6). In the light of such revelations, I contend that Lê specifically utilises the symbolisation of the condor-mother in her novel *Les trois Parques* to imply Freudian, phallic mothering. Her purpose, as an exiled individual who admits to feeling 'duelle, même plurielle [...] et la plupart du temps habitée par des fantômes [dual, even plural [...] and most of the time inhabited by ghosts]' (Bui 2012: 320), is, I argue, to capitalise on the unifying qualities of this fantastical figure.

As Marcia Ian insists, Freud's 'phallic mother is an attempt at resolution of a unitary nature' (Ian 1993: 10), a 'both/and' fusion which aims to resolve the child's fear of castration (Parker, A 1986: 102). As a 'full-grown female [...] possessor' (Freud 1961: 24) of the 'fully fledged phallus' (Brooks 2006: 12), the phallic mother has reached adulthood with *both* her femininity *and* masculinity intact. While castration as such is not of specific interest to this discussion, the ability of a subject to retain that which is threatened with eradication, such as the subaltern's primary language and culture in exile, certainly is. It is for this very reason that I contend Lê houses her Vietnamese refugee turned hungry ghost, in the shell of a Western psychoanalytic imago. The phallic mother in *Les trois Parques* is the only character able to retain her subalternity in a Western context, and moreover, by assuming such a bi-cultural guise she acquires an unrivalled power over all other figures in the novel, whether they be alive or dead.

3. Double the Ambivalence

The capacity of the grandmother's ghost to cause tangible havoc in the lives of the living is perhaps the greatest indicator of her superior potency as a spectral figure in Lê's paternal trilogy. As already mentioned, even the central ghostly figure of the late father is unable to affect the world of the living, his only recourse to power being the filial guilt his memory generates in the psyche of his daughter. Invested with the power of the Gods, it seems, *la grand-mère* conjures a great tempest to cause farcical, but nonetheless frightening, chaos the

⁷ During an interview I conducted with Lê in late 2010, she strongly agreed with my analysis of Lacanian paternal foreclosure in her trilogy (Kurmann 2010: 5; 2013: 126). Lê has also confirmed the presence of psychoanalytic thought in her work, stating: 'Je n'ai jamais cru en l'écriture qui remplacerait une psychothérapie ni en une psychothérapie qui remplacerait l'écriture' [*I have never believed either in writing that replaces psychotherapy or in psychotherapy that replaces writing*] (Guichard 2007: 19).

⁸ After our interview, Lê mentioned that she enjoyed visiting art galleries in Paris on a regular basis.

day of her granddaughter's union with a European, as is seen in the ship wreck of the couple's wedding cake:

Les mariés, unis face au pire, firent l'autruche, se couchèrent sur le ventre, enfouirent la tête dans l'oreiller de crème [...]. Les noceurs [...] firent cercle autour des mariés flottant dans la crème, la croupe rebondie. [...] cette petite chose en sucre éjectée de son piédestal, mais pas un ne se pencha pour la repêcher (Lê 1997a: 113).

[*The wedding couple, joined for better or worse, lay on their stomachs and buried their heads in the frosting pillow [...]. The revellers [...] formed a circle around the floating couple with its backsides in the air. [...] the poor little sugar creatures ejected from their pedestal, but no one bent over to fish them out (Lê 1997b: 75).*]

That 'le chacal affamé [*the famished jackal*]' should seek to destroy the union of cultural and linguistic oppositions in the exilic narrative that throughout the novel she has attempted to foster (Lê 1997a: 108; 1997b: 72), reveals the fundamental ambivalence of the 'double appartenance [*double belonging*]' of the subaltern in European exile (Van der Poel 2004: 247). The phallic mother, akin to mothering itself (Parker, R 1995: 1), is fundamentally ambivalent, being both feared and desired at one and the same time (Brooks 2006: 26; Ian 1993 9).⁹ In this way, I argue that the ghostly phallic (grand)mother is employed as a vessel of the refugee's ambivalent double existence: living in the present in a foreign country, while having to grapple with past memories made in a distant homeland.

Vietnamese and French, Asian and Occidental, torn between the motherland and a French *patrie* [fatherland], the characters in Lê's novels are known for struggling with their postcolonial duality, as is the author herself (Chau-Pech Ollier 2001: 244). Taking the form of a 'father-mother conglomerate',¹⁰ the phallic mother's ghost represents the 'mère-patrie [*homeland/mother-fatherland*]' of the French state (Guichard 1995: 5; Selao 2007: 275), a principal that sees the nation as mothering its people. The metaphor of a mother-child relationship between the nation and its citizens is also seen in the mothering dictum of the *mission civilisatrice* [civilising mission] or programme of re-education in colonial Indochina set up by the French administration (Selao 2011: 15). Just as the first mission of colonial rule was to re-educate the peoples of Indochina by imparting knowledge of the French language, so too the grandmother makes sure to teach her grandchildren 'à parler propre, en français [to speak correctly, in French]' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 40). Her mimicry quickly slips to mockery, however, when, having converted to Catholicism, taught by French colonial

⁹ From the child's perspective, mothering is experienced as equally ambivalent. Melanie Klein's appellations of the 'good' and 'bad' breast refers to the uncertain feelings the child has towards the woman who is perceived as loving if she satisfies one's hunger and hateful if she unwittingly does not (Klein et al. 2002: 200).

¹⁰ This is a universal parental figure with dual maternal and paternal functionality proposed by Julia Kristeva to counter the authoritarianism of Lacan's Symbolic father. I do not argue, however, that Lê's phallic mother has the same 'loving' quality (Kristeva 1987: 40).

missionaries, the living grandmother says her new found prayers on a rosary and adopts the symbol of the cross for the reason that '[d]eux protections valaient mieux qu'une [(t)wo kinds of protector were better than one]' (Lê 1997a: 68; 1997b: 44). From this one can see how the grandmother's hollow cultural mimicry makes a mockery of the French state and its religion. As 'almost the same, but not quite' these partial imitations of the former coloniser are instances of ambivalent slippage in postcolonial discourse which Homi Bhabha asserts destabilise the very authority the postcolonial subject seeks to appropriate (Bhabha 1994: 86).

If the grandmother's ghost were only to be associated with ambivalent feelings in the context of representations of French and European authority she could be seen as a symbol of subaltern subversion. However, as we have observed in the wedding scene, the omnipresent spectre unleashes a barefaced and all-encompassing rage on all who cross her path. It is not simply the former coloniser who is made responsible for the disenfranchisement of the hungry, phallic (grand)mother's ghost from her heritage and heirs; everyone is to blame. Similarly infected with culpability, rage, but also love is the traditional Vietnamese cuisine made from the grandmother's recipe book by the eldest cousin, *le ventre rond* [Potbelly] (Lê 1997a: 10; 1997b: 5).¹¹ If food can be seen 'as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity' (Montanari 2006: xii), then the self-perception of those who prepare and eat Vietnamese dishes in the text is a state of constant, extreme flux.

Food is the ambivalent entity *par excellence* in *Les trois Parques*. In a novel that centres on an afternoon of food consumption and preparation of grandmother's recipes with their secret ingredients, the three cousins notably do not once eat together in the eldest sisters' home. Instead, the household cook, *le ventre rond*, hoards her left-overs, snacking on them alone rather than eating at a mealtime, which would be more appropriate to both Vietnamese and French eating habits. Her younger sister, with whom *le ventre rond* does not share her delicacies, salivates at the smell of 'des odeurs oubliées' [*long-lost aromas*] of 'patates douces fumantes [...] saupoudrées de sucre [*steaming yams [...] dusted with sugar*]' and 'fruits verts à la croquet-au-sel et au piment rouge [*green fruits sprinkled with salt and red pepper*]' (Lê 1997a: 115; 1997b: 77), and the emaciated cousin refuses outright to touch what she calls '[I]e poison de chacal [*jackal poison*]' (Lê 1997a: 119; 1997b: 80). It is plain to see that these

¹¹ The character is thus named as she is pregnant with her first child. All three cousins are named after body parts: *les longues jambes* [long legs] is the Lolita-like younger sister, (Lê 1997a:10; 1997b: 5), while the narrating cousin, *Manchote* [Southpaw], had her left hand cut off as punishment for incest, (Lê 1997a: 10; 1997b: 3).

cousins are distancing themselves from traditional culinary activities — eating and cooking together, perhaps because the performance of a shared cultural activity leads inevitably to a collective remembering. All three young women know the waft of delicious food aromas leads back to the lost world of Vietnam, to war and putrefaction. Olfactory senses being strongly associated with the unlocking of memories, Lê invokes the past in an inverted Proustian manner by turning allure into revulsion. She makes a game of enticing then repelling her protagonists from memorialisation, resulting in variable isolation from their primary culture.

In *Les trois Parques* Vietnamese culinary heritage is ‘sanglant [*bleeding*]’ (Do 2002: 152). Cooking may be traditionally seen as a loving activity, but here, with good reason, it is torturous and murderous, as the grandmother’s ghost that haunts her recipe book brings forth the phantom ‘traces, marks, and scars’ of victims of the Vietnam War (Derrida 1998: 61). In the hands of *le ventre rond* and her ancestor, the pink flesh of a prawn becomes that of a prisoner of a re-education camp:

[L]a carapace arrachée, les pattes coupées, la tête tranchée [...] supplice ordinairement infligé aux plus accortes [...] passer par le chaudron électrique (Lê 1997a: 234).

[*The shell torn off, legs cut off, head sliced off [...] the torture normally reserved for the comeliest ones [...] [to] suffer the electric cauldron* (Lê 1997b: 161).]

Lady chacal noyait une à une les crevettes roses dans une farine mélangée à des ingrédients à son cru [...] puis elle les jetait dans l’huile bouillante, comme on jette le chatons dans une rivière (Lê 1997a: 231).

[*One by one, Lady Jackal plunged the pink shrimps into the mixture of flour and her special blend of spices [...] then tossed them into boiling oil the way one tosses kittens in a river* (Lê 1997b: 159).]

All the while the sisters wait impatiently for their prawns in batter. Following her influence in the reproduction of her recipes, *la grand-mère* fades in the text, making room for the far less corporeal ghost of the father figure to rise at beginning of *Voix: Une crise*, the sequel to *Les trois Parques*. It could be argued that his death at the close of *Les trois Parques* signals an end to uncertain feelings about the homeland, in preparation for a daughter’s reckoning with filial culpability.

The way in which the ghost of the grandmother can evoke such ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and repulsion in her descendants with regard to food and eating as both a disruptive hungry ghost and fear-evoking phallic (grand)mother is testament to her capacity to contain diametrically opposed parts within a mutable, shifting whole. My contention is that the ‘unitary nature’ of phallic ghosting in the text allows for the conglomeration of two disparate

selves,¹² one subaltern and the other French. Yet it is the image of the excluded, disenfranchised hungry ghost in Chinese Buddhist belief that permits us to recognise the so called spectral ‘outsider’ as a representation of the socially marginalised in the novel (Wolf 1978: 175). Lê herself attests to having two souls, one oriental and one occidental (Văn 2010: 2): ‘Je n’ai pu trouver mon unité qu’en écrivant [*I have only been able to find my wholeness in writing*]’ (Lê 2011: 41), she has once said. While writing allows the author to meld together her divided selves, only the ancestral ghost in *Les trois Parques*, one of both Eastern and Western origin, enables the reader to see the exiled subject as a composite whole.

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¹² See footnote 8.

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¹³ Translated from the Vietnamese.