

Stories Told and Untold: Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Anna Moï's *Le venin du papillon*

TO THINK ABOUT NARRATIVE IS, in a sense, to think about proxies. The relationship between a narrator and a character, the transformation of speech into written dialogue, the often unacknowledged role of translation in the staging of cultural and linguistic difference—these common aspects of literary narrative, like the structure of proxy relations, raise questions of power, agency, and authority. Viewed from this perspective, the proxy's ability to speak for or to act as another takes on an oddly fictional quality, as if legal conventions allowed for the kinds of substitutions and displacements we regularly encounter in the literary transmission of individual consciousness and experience.

I begin with this observation in part to gesture toward the ways in which narrators take on the task of representing the words, thoughts, and desires of characters. Narrators themselves may assert their authority to do so, and may in turn ground this authority in an awareness of the particular forms of responsibility inherent in the act of narrating the experience of another. At the same time, to the extent that narrators are bound by constraints and conventions, these are literary and not legal; narrators are of course free to act as unfaithful proxies, but also as proxies who represent the interests of another precisely by *refusing* to speak in their place.

Such issues of authority and responsibility arise with particular intensity in narratives of war, especially those that seek to represent the experiences of characters whose vulnerability is heightened by political and military violence. In the discussion that follows, I will consider two quite different narrators who address aspects of gendered and racialized experience in mid-twentieth-century Vietnam: Thomas Fowler, the jaded British journalist who narrates Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955), and the unnamed narrator of Anna Moï's *Le venin du papillon* (*The Butterfly's Venom*, 2017). I will focus on the choices these narrators make as they portray variously

exploitative relations between Vietnamese women or girls and European or American men, relations that are of course situated against the broader backdrop of violence during this period of transition from French colonial rule to American military intervention. What might close attention to details of language and form reveal about the practices that bring Vietnamese women and girls into these narratives, or that instead speak in their place?

Of Poetry and Pipes

In the disastrous and ongoing wake of US military interventions throughout the world, *The Quiet American* has justly been lauded for its scathing portrayal of the pernicious lack of self-doubt that characterized Cold War foreign policy grounded in “what doesn’t exist—mental concepts.”¹ Fowler’s contempt for American “innocence,” and his horror at the violence it has enabled in Vietnam, seem ever more prescient as they call to us across the decades like an endlessly looping nightmare.² Despite its prophetic quality, however, the novel is at the same time a backward-looking text, reflecting a long history of colonial literature that turns to the landscapes of empire to dramatize a moral struggle in relation to which colonized populations are marginal if not entirely absent.³

The imperial nostalgia that complicates Fowler’s critique of Cold War America is evident in his representation of Phuong, the Vietnamese woman whose body becomes the site of contestation between the narrator and his American rival, Alden Pyle. While this erotic triangle is crucial to the novel’s plot, Phuong’s perspective is largely occluded by the linguistic and narrative parameters of Fowler’s first-person account, along with its ideologies of race and gender. When he remarks near the end of part 3 that he “thought of Phuong just because of her complete absence” (158), he is both lamenting a romantic loss—she has at this point in the novel left him for Pyle—and highlighting the peculiarity of her position within his narrative as a whole: she is both central and absent, both the object of intense attention and a figure whose subjectivity must be effaced for that attention to be sustained.

The nature of Fowler’s investment in Phuong is both homosocial and narcissistic: on the one hand, she is the ground upon which his relationship to Pyle is structured; on the other, she is the surface upon which he projects differently configured reflections of himself.⁴ In this, *The Quiet American* takes up and extends a history of French colonial representation that tends to relegate Vietnamese women to a highly constrained set of possible types, including the prostitute and the related figure of the so-called *congai* or native mistress.⁵ We find these dynamics of gendered and racialized representation in any number of more or less tawdry popular fictions of empire,

but also in higher-brow, more self-consciously literary texts such as André Malraux's *La voie royale* (*The Royal Way*), a 1930 novel set in colonial Indochina in which Asian women appear solely as bodies whose sexual availability shores up the imperial agency of European men—particularly those who, like the aging Fowler, are grappling with the terrifying solitude of death (104–5).

This is not to say that Phuong's position can be considered only in those terms, or that Fowler's representation of her is quite so unambiguous. Indeed, critical responses to Phuong's role in the novel have been remarkably varied. She has been broadly understood as an allegorical representation of Vietnam itself, caught "between European and American imperialism"; she has also been dismissed as a "birdbrain who reads nothing but magazine articles on the British royal family."⁶ Other readings of the novel have been attentive to those moments where Fowler draws our attention to his own position as a narrator and thereby undercuts the authority of his representation of Phuong.⁷ One of the clearest examples of this undercutting occurs in the passage where he lectures Pyle about Phuong's imperviousness to psychic suffering, and then goes on to confess to the reader, "even while I made my speech . . . I was inventing a character just as much as Pyle was" (133). Here, in acknowledging the limitations of his own perspective, Fowler leaves open the possibility that, whatever symbolic value Phuong bears for him, she may also function as a sign that indexes aspects of Vietnamese life inaccessible to his sexual and narrative desire. Beyond the shadow cast by Fowler's representation, we can imagine what Zadie Smith has called her "essential Phuong-ness," the sense of "a real, breathing woman, not just the idea of a woman that Pyle is trying to steal from Fowler."⁸

I would suggest that in addition to these fleeting moments of explicit, self-conscious narratorial reflection, and perhaps in spite of Fowler himself, *The Quiet American* offers more subtle openings through which we might glimpse something like the structural possibility of Phuong's subjectivity. Such an opening appears in the novel's first chapter, which as a whole is worth considering closely, both in relation to Fowler's project of "inventing" Phuong as a character, and in relation to the possibility that his narrative may nonetheless allow her perspective to be staged in a way that exceeds his explicit commentary about her. As the novel opens, Fowler has just gone down into the street from his apartment, after having spent hours waiting for Pyle—or so he claims in the first sentence, without yet divulging that he has good reason to believe that Pyle has already been killed by the Viet Minh agents with whom Fowler has collaborated. He runs into Phuong waiting downstairs and, in a typical gesture of simultaneous recognition and erasure, tells us, "I couldn't see her face, only the white silk trousers and the long flowered robe, but I knew her for all that" (11). Fowler brings her up to his apartment, and

the scene that follows recounts, on the level of the story, a late reunion between the two characters: the moment when, after having previously abandoned him for Pyle, Phuong slips back into Fowler's life. In relation to the novel's structure, however, this is their first encounter—the first meeting to be narrated, followed by the extended narrative flashback that comprises the bulk of the novel—and, as such, sets in motion key dynamics that will recur throughout the text. Before returning to the question of Phuong's own perspective, I will examine in some detail what is at stake in the narrative and linguistic choices that characterize Fowler's first representations of her.

To put it bluntly, the novel's opening pages are almost overwhelming in the extent to which they display Fowler's tendency all at once to exoticize Phuong, to racialize her and to sexualize her, and in so doing to absent her subjectivity from the scene of their supposed intimacy. When she initially hesitates to accompany him back up to his apartment, he counters by warning her that she could be picked up by the police, as if to underscore her proximity to the figure of the prostitute. Soon after, in the midst of his interrogation about Pyle's feelings for her, he breaks off to address the reader directly: "To take an Annamite to bed with you," he notes, "is like taking a bird: they twitter and sing on your pillow" (12). Fowler offers this aside as if it were an insight gained through personal experience, but it is of course saturated with imperial nostalgia, reflecting a common and thoroughly clichéd colonial response to the tonality of the Vietnamese language. From this early moment, he begins to position Phuong within a long tradition of French colonial representations of Vietnamese femininity found in literary texts, travel writing, and even songs such as the enormously popular "La petite Tonkinoise," in which the *Annamite* in her *congai* incarnation is described as "charmante / comme un p'tit oiseau qui chante" (charming, like a little singing bird).⁹

Fowler soon settles in for a night of opium smoking, taking a quick trip up the canonical ladder as he cites the opening lines of Charles Baudelaire's "L'invitation au voyage," which he struggles to remember through a drug-induced haze. As Phuong bends over to prepare his fourth pipe, he tells us that "the poem of Baudelaire's came into my mind: '*Mon enfant, ma soeur. . .*' How did it go on? *Aimer à loisir, / Aimer et mourir / Au pays qui te ressemble*" (14).¹⁰ This untranslated poetic outburst is notable on a number of fronts. First, the fact that Fowler cites the original text underscores his investment in displaying a command over both French and English, a point to which I will return in a moment. It's also worth considering why this particular text comes into his mind, and not Baudelaire's "À une Malabaraise," which would seem to correspond more directly to his situation, in that it is addressed to a racialized, exoticized woman whose task is "d'allumer la pipe de ton maître" (to light the pipe of your master). Unlike "L'invitation au voyage," "À une

Malabaraise” foregrounds a disagreement between the poet and the exoticized woman that turns precisely around the problem (for him) of her subjectivity, as manifested in her desire to leave her land and travel to France. In much the same way as Fowler condescendingly frames Phuong’s desire to leave Vietnam as a touristic impulse to see skyscrapers and monuments, the poet asks the exotic woman, “Pourquoi, l’heureuse enfant, veux-tu voir notre France [et] Faire de grands adieux à tes chers tamarins?” (Why, happy child, do you wish to see our France, [and] say farewell to your dear tamarinds?).¹¹

Given the extent to which Fowler struggles to recall even one of Baudelaire’s best-known poems, it is of course possible that his familiarity with the poet’s œuvre may not extend to “À une Malabaraise.” In any event, “L’invitation au voyage” is in its own way an apt point of intertextual reference: the poem famously takes up a structure of address that apparently invites the beloved to accompany the poet on an imagined voyage to a land that resembles her (“Au pays qui te ressemble”) but which ultimately turns out to be less about the beloved than about the structure of the poet’s own desire.¹² In fact, Fowler goes Baudelaire one better, incorrectly citing the opening lines of “L’invitation au voyage” so as to pass over the invitation itself. “*Mon enfant, ma soeur. . .*,” he begins, and then asks, “How did it go on?” before leaping from the first line of the poem to the fourth. Contained in the two missing lines is precisely the invitation to the land the poet is imagining, the moment at which he acknowledges at least the possibility of the beloved’s interiority or subjectivity—even as he attempts to conscript it into his own desire by commanding her to think of the sweetness of living there together.¹³ Considered from this perspective, Fowler’s citation of Baudelaire can be understood not only as another moment where he aligns his own voice with a French tradition of exoticist discourse, as he did earlier in his reference to the twittering of the Annamite, but also as a particularly complex example of his tendency to absent Phuong even as he is ostensibly representing her.

To extend this line of thinking a bit further, I will turn now to Fowler’s description of Phuong’s quasi-ritual preparation of his opium pipe, which can itself be read as recirculating a highly clichéd set piece of French colonial writing on Indochina.¹⁴ In a gesture that signals the iterative or citational aspect of this element of his narrative, Fowler repeats himself a number of times over the course of the first chapter: “The lamplight made her skin the colour of dark amber as she bent over the flame,” he states, describing Phuong preparing his first pipe; then, as she prepares his fourth pipe, she again “ben[ds] over the flame” as Baudelaire’s poem enters his mind; and then later, after they have returned from being interrogated by the French police officer Vigot, she prepares yet another pipe, and reactivates Fowler’s lyric effusions: “Phuong crouched at the end of the bed and lit the lamp. *Mon enfant, ma soeur—skin the colour of amber. Sa douce langue natale*” (13, 14, 22).

This image of Phuong crouched at his feet and preparing his pipe plays into Fowler's apparent desire to inscribe himself into a long historical narrative of mastery and devotion, a desire made even more jarringly explicit later in the novel, when he refers to her as lying "at my feet like a dog on a crusader's tomb, preparing the opium" (120). His repeated description of Phuong's skin turning the color of amber in the light of the lamp resonates with Baudelaire's evocation of the "vagues senteurs de l'ambre" (the faint scent of amber) that would perfume the room the poet dreams of sharing with his beloved in "L'invitation au voyage," but it also has the effect of underscoring the extent to which Fowler's exoticizing language fixes Phuong, trapping her as if in amber as he casts and recasts her in the role he scripts for her.

It would be difficult to overlook the obvious sexual connotations of Phuong crouching at Fowler's feet and servicing his pipe, which, he proudly notes, is made of "more than two feet of straight bamboo, ivory at either end" (13). Beyond the heavy-handed visual framing of the scene, however, a specifically linguistic aspect of Fowler's narrative further heightens his sexualization of the opium ritual. *The Quiet American* is attuned to the multilingual nature of late-colonial Vietnam, drawing our attention to the speech of characters who communicate, or fail to communicate, across languages, accents, regionalisms, and translations. This is not to say that Fowler treats English, French, and Vietnamese with anything like evenhandedness—recall the stark contrast between the high lyricism of Baudelaire and the birdlike twittering of Vietnamese women. In the opening chapter, Vietnamese is present only in the liminal space of the hallway, as a group of "old women in black trousers" gossip about Phuong and Fowler outside of his apartment, their voices rising and falling, "as though they were singing together" (11). He acknowledges his reliance upon Phuong to translate their speech but seems entirely unconcerned with his own lack of access to it; indeed, he doesn't even bother to respond to or comment on the translation she provides. The French language, on the other hand, occupies a place of considerable prominence in the narrative. Fowler often calls attention to his ability to move easily between English and French, and to engage with poetic registers of literary expression in both languages. He seems to take particular pleasure in differentiating the quality of his French from that spoken by Vietnamese characters. In the first chapter, for example, he ridicules the accent of the Vietnamese police officer who summons him to the interview with Vigot, calling his Vietnamese-accented French "almost unintelligible" and noting his inability to pronounce even the word "French" correctly: "in his mouth," Fowler sneers, "the word sounded like *Françung*" (15). He also claims, with no particular elaboration, that "neither Phuong's English nor her French would have been good enough for her to understand . . . irony" (11).

Linguistic difference and translation emerge as important thematic elements at several points in the novel: during the scenes where Fowler translates between Phuong and Pyle, for example (43, 76), or during the bilingual press conference where French officers feign linguistic ignorance to try to evade questions from American reporters (64). Beyond these thematic elements, however, the question of language also impacts the text on a basic narrative level, in relation to Fowler's representation of Phuong's direct speech. We know, as Douglas Kerr puts it, that Phuong "moves in a Vietnamese language environment entirely closed to Fowler and Pyle."¹⁵ But within the terms of Fowler's representation of her, it's remarkable that he will occasionally narrate her speech directly in untranslated French, because doing so throws into such sharp relief the *translated* status of the vast majority of her speech as it appears in the novel. Without explicitly acknowledging that he is doing so, he translates her words into English, despite the fact that he makes it clear to the reader that this is a language she can barely speak, and that their conversations take place almost entirely in French. If Fowler can be understood to *transcribe* the statements of characters who are speaking English, where Phuong is concerned he acts instead as a kind of proxy, representing her French speech via his English words, and engaging in what Ben Tran has called "literary dubbing," or those moments "during the writing process when an author translates characters' speech and thought from the implied or referenced language, within the diegetic frame, to the language of representation or the reader's language."¹⁶ In the context of Fowler's first-person narrative, we can extend this concept to his translations of Phuong's speech, which must be considered as another aspect of his project of "inventing" her as a character.

I would go so far as to argue that in the novel's opening scene, he self-consciously manipulates his translation of Phuong's speech in order to amplify the sexual resonances of the opium ritual, which begins with her question: "May I make your pipe?" (13). Soon after, she asks, "Shall I make your pipe again?" (14). She produces variations on this expression a number of times over the course of the novel—"Shall I make you a pipe?" (80), "Let me make you a pipe" (118)—and, in fact, all of the expressions she uses to refer to the process of preparing Fowler's opium pipe involve the verb "make" in this way. This is in contrast to Fowler himself, who almost always chooses the verb that would normally be used to describe this process, in both French and English: "prepare," as in "préparer une pipe" or "prepare a pipe"—for example, "while she prepared the second pipe" (13), or "she began to prepare my second pipe" (81), or again, later in the novel, "This was the hour when Phuong always set about preparing my evening pipes" (101). One indication of the strangeness of "May I make your pipe" as a translation of Phuong's question can be found in the French edition of *The Quiet*

American, published soon after the novel appeared in English: translated “back” into French, her question appears as “Veux-tu que je te *prépare* une pipe?”¹⁷

Readers familiar with French slang will understand that “May I make your pipe” must be a mistranslation, because if *Phuong* had used the verb “faire” (to make)—if she had said “Veux-tu que je te fasse une pipe?”—it would have meant something entirely different, since “faire une pipe” (make a pipe) is a vulgar French expression that refers to the practice of fellatio. In the early decades of the twentieth century, “faire une pipe” referred to the hand-rolling of cigarettes with loose tobacco, but after it was picked up and resignified, initially by sex workers, the phrase’s new meaning became so commonly understood that it began to be used in the sexual sense in literary texts as early as the mid-1940s.¹⁸ As a narrator who knows his way around a French colonial brothel, Fowler would certainly be aware of the gap between *Phuong*’s question and his translation of it. As if to remove any doubt, he signals his familiarity with vulgar French slang on at least two occasions: first, during a cabaret performance, when he goes out of his way to differentiate his experience from that of *Pyle*, who is unable to follow the obscene “argot” of a comedian (45), and, second, when he discusses the “sexual jargon” used by the French police when they play a dice game (137).

I noted above that Fowler himself almost always uses the phrase “prepare my pipe” when referring to the opium ritual. The very few times he uses the verb “make” in this context occur either in imperative commands issued directly to *Phuong*, as in “Make me another pipe” (14), or when opium and sex are explicitly juxtaposed or become virtually indistinguishable: “she made my pipes, she gently and sweetly laid out her body for my pleasure” (140); “I lay down on the bed while *Phuong* made my pipe” (81). Within the colonial imagination, the image of the native woman preparing the European man’s pipe is always positioned within a field saturated with sexuality, and this is certainly true of Fowler’s descriptions of *Phuong* in general, whatever words he uses. But I would maintain that his mistranslation of her speech in the context of these scenes amounts to a significant narratorial intervention, one that further obscures her own subjectivity by making her say one thing and mean another, and by causing her own words, as he represents them, to make explicit the underlying sexual symbolism of the opium ritual. As a narrator, Fowler utilizes translation as a form of violence through which “the power of discursive and hierarchical structures become[s] clearly visible.”¹⁹

When I began this discussion of *The Quiet American*, I mentioned the possibility of an opening through which we might glimpse a different staging of *Phuong*’s subjectivity. This possibility may seem remote, particularly after such an exhaustive and possibly exhausting catalog of the various discursive and linguistic strategies Fowler takes up to fix her in relation to his own

desires. One might argue that it is in part the sheer effort involved in his project of “inventing” her that gestures toward its shaky foundations, as if his inability to capture fully her fugitive identity within the frame of imperial nostalgia drives him to ever greater narrative excess. But I would also like to consider a specific passage from the very beginning of the novel, when Phuong runs into Fowler on the street in front of his apartment and speaks for the first time:

“Phuong,” I said—which means Phoenix, but nothing nowadays is fabulous and nothing rises from its ashes. I knew before she had time to tell me that she was waiting for Pyle too. “He isn’t here.”

“Je sais. Je t’ai vu seul à la fenêtre.”

“You may as well wait upstairs,” I said. “He will be coming soon.” (11)

While Rebecca Kumar is certainly correct to note that “the French being spoken by Phuong . . . is still filtered through Fowler,” I would argue in light of the preceding discussion that it is nonetheless significant that her first words are presented to the reader in untranslated French.²⁰ Even more striking, her first word is the first-person subject pronoun *je*, and that *je* is repeated twice, while in Fowler’s direct speech on either side of hers we find “Phuong,” “He,” “You,” and “He,” but never “I.” Unsurprisingly, Fowler’s subjectivity is asserted in his own first-person retrospective narrative voice, through his repetition of “I said,” his dismissive translation of Phuong’s name, and his claim to have known the motivation behind her reappearance even before she speaks. In the context of their spoken exchange, however, he appears not as a subject but solely as the object of her gaze: “I know,” she tells him, “I saw you alone at the window.”

The image of Phuong watching Fowler through his window, and producing a form of knowledge by doing so, is fascinating in part because it echoes a crucial event that took place earlier the same day but that Fowler will not recount until the end of his narrative: the moment when he holds a book at his window to send the signal that will result in Pyle’s death. Unlike that scene, in which Fowler moves to the window with the intent of transmitting information to an observer of whom he is aware, here we learn that Phuong has been watching him, and that he has served as the object of her interpretive gaze, entirely without his knowledge. That these two moments are chronologically proximate even as they appear at opposite ends of Fowler’s narrative only serves to underscore the extent to which his choices as narrator work to contain the unsettling recognition that he is also being looked at, interpreted, and invented. As readers, we occupy a different position and can sense here another configuration of Phuong’s subjectivity: if Fowler goes on to cast her as the object of his desire through his recitation of “L’invitation au voyage,” Phuong’s first utterance might be read in relation to Baudelaire’s

prose poem “Les fenêtres,” in which the poet watches people through their windows and remakes their stories through his own powers of poetic imagination. For a brief moment, before she follows Fowler up the stairs and back into the sphere of his narrative control, it is Phuong and not Fowler who occupies the position of the poet.

Love, War, and Mr. Johnson’s Johnson

Anna Moï’s *Le venin du papillon* was published to considerable acclaim in France, where it received the *Prix Littérature-monde* in 2017. It is not a rewriting of *The Quiet American* in any direct sense, although Greene is mentioned in the novel and Moï has written elsewhere about her appreciation, as a native speaker of Vietnamese, of the staccato rhythms of Fowler’s English.²¹ The novel opens a few years after *The Quiet American* closes, following the defeat of the French, the partition of Vietnam, and the escalation of the American War.²² Moï does engage, in creative and darkly humorous ways, with elements central to Greene’s novel: the representation of military and foreign intelligence circles, for example, as well as a fundamental concern with the power of visual and textual narratives to frame historical experience. She also echoes Greene’s sly commentary on a certain French desire to understand the present through seventeenth-century literary points of reference, as evidenced in *The Quiet American* by Vigot’s ever-present copy of Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* and in *Le venin du papillon* by a French character’s quest to mount a production of Molière’s *Dom Juan* in Saigon. This shift from Pascal to the figure of Don Juan is itself a direct link back to *The Quiet American*, which opens with an epigraph from Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, but it also signals Moï’s particular interest in exploring questions of sexuality and power. Indeed, the novel overflows with scenes of sexual predation of every sort, from the exploitation of prostitutes to incest to pedophilia, and it situates these scenes within the economy of violence that structures life in Vietnam during the American War. In the second part of this essay, I will discuss the multilingual nature of Moï’s writing as well as the relationship between *Le venin du papillon*’s narrator and the novel’s central Vietnamese female character. I will then consider two key scenes involving this character’s interactions with foreign men, one American and one French.

Anna Moï was born Trần Thiên Nga in 1955 and grew up in what was then South Vietnam. After studying at the Lycée Marie-Curie in Saigon, she received a scholarship that allowed her to travel to Paris in 1973 to continue her education.²³ Following the end of the American War and the reunification of Vietnam, she remained in France and pursued a number of intersecting career paths, living for periods of time in Thailand, in Japan, and,

beginning in the 1990s, in Vietnam, where she began to publish literary texts in French. In interviews, Moï frequently comments on her own multilingualism, and *Le venin du papillon* is infused with an often playful insistence on the coexistence of Vietnamese, French, and English in the world of its characters. The Vietnamese protagonist, for example, is named Xuân, a Vietnamese word meaning “spring,” the season. At a certain point in the novel, however, we learn that her parents gave her this name because its pronunciation evokes the English word *swan*, which is in turn bound up with their memories of the swans on the shores of Lake Geneva, where they held hands for the first time.²⁴ In a further metanarrative twist, Moï gestures here to the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel, since her own given name at birth—Thiên Nga—is the Vietnamese word for swan.

It may seem odd for this linguistic link between character and author to be routed through the English word *swan*, given the context of a reference to the francophone space of Lake Geneva in a Vietnamese novel written in French. In fact, as Moï has discussed, the novel was initially written in English and only later reworked into French for publication.²⁵ With this in mind, we might think of *swan* as a residue of the prior, English-language version of the text—a Vietnamese-English homophony that can’t quite be carried over into French. But I believe that we can also understand this moment in relation to Moï’s efforts throughout the novel to maintain traces of both English and Vietnamese within the largely French linguistic structure of the narrative, so as to destabilize any sense of a naturalized or seamless correspondence between the primary language of representation and the multilingual history of Vietnam. For example, because the Vietnamese word *xanh* can mean either blue or green, the narrator frequently introduces ambiguity around the color of certain items: *vert* (*ou bleu*), *bleue* (*ou verte*), *bleu marine* (*vert forêt*), and so on. Another example appears during a scene in which Xuân reveals her ignorance by asking two French men who have been trading antisemitic jokes who “the Jews” are. One of the men responds by saying, “ce sont pas des gens comme nous” (they are not people like us), and the narrator goes on to note that he fails to specify whether this “us” refers only to himself and the other French man, or if it also includes Xuân, to whom he is speaking (192). Readers familiar with Vietnamese will immediately recognize that this ambiguity would be avoided in Xuân’s native language, which would differentiate in this situation between two forms of the first-person plural pronoun: *chúng ta*, referring to both speaker and listeners, and *chúng tôi*, referring to a speaker and those who share the position of the speaker but excluding other listeners. I would argue that moments like this are distinct from the kind of “literary dubbing” Fowler engages in when writing over Phuong’s speech with the English of his narrative; rather, we might understand Moï’s novel to be narrated in a form of French that is inhabited by other languages, even as

those languages are not equally available to all characters within the text, or to all readers of the novel.

At the same time, it's also important to note that translation and linguistic difference take on more sinister qualities within the story of Xuân and her family. Her father's investment in his daughters' multilingual training—in addition to Vietnamese, they speak French, English, and German—stems from his belief that foreign languages save lives, and, in his case, this was literally true: having been arrested as a young man for his anticolonial activities, he was saved from death by crying out, “Vive la liberté!” as the firing squad took aim. By a stroke of luck, the French lieutenant who had ordered his execution needed an interpreter, so hired him instead of killing him (33). As the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that this form of instrumentalized translation-for-hire, inextricable from the context of the war and imperial violence, also shapes the experiences of Xuân.

Shifting toward the question of the narrative representation of these experiences, I will begin by noting that the precise relationship between the narrator and Xuân is complex. Somewhat enigmatically, Moï has described the voice of the novel as being at the same time that of a third-person narrator *and* of Xuân, who is of course a character represented by that third-person narrator.²⁶ Certain passages do suggest that an older Xuân may be narrating events from her childhood, but at no point does the narrative shift into a retrospective first-person voice. Furthermore, the narrator moves in and out of the minds of other characters and, for long stretches of the novel, recounts scenes in which Xuân does not appear. In making these observations, my intent is not to argue against Moï's own description of the novel but rather to underscore its peculiarity, which I take to be a challenge to the reader to dwell in the gap between Xuân's experiences and the narrative and linguistic forms within which these experiences are recounted.

Moï may be especially attuned to the stakes of narrative form in part because of a lawsuit she faced following the 2004 publication of her first novel, *Riz noir* (*Black Rice*).²⁷ *Riz noir* is based on the story of Thiều Thị Tân, a famous South Vietnamese female dissident who, as an adolescent, was held and tortured in the notorious Poulo Condor (*Côn Đảo*) prison camp during the late 1960s and early 70s, and who had been, like Moï, a student at the Lycée Marie-Curie in Saigon. In the years leading up to the publication of *Riz noir*, the two women had several conversations in which the former dissident spoke at length about the period of her imprisonment. On the basis of these conversations, as well as historical research and her own memories and imagination, Moï wrote the novel in the form of a relatively straightforward first-person account, narrated by a character modeled on the young Thiều Thị Tân. Soon after the novel appeared, she was sued by her former friend, who accused her of having appropriated without authorization details of her life

and demanded financial compensation and recognition as co-author of the work. The Paris tribunal that heard the case did not agree, and ultimately ruled in favor of Moi's right to be considered the sole author of what the court recognized as a work of fiction, even if many parts of the novel were grounded in historical fact. Significantly, the ruling was based in large part on the judgment that the plaintiff had failed to prove that she had contributed to the *mise en forme*, or formal construction, of the work. Even though Moï won her case, it's hard to imagine that the experience of the lawsuit did not lead her to reflect on the relationship between narrators and characters in ways that inspired her to experiment with more complex narrative framing in her subsequent writing.

Keeping in mind all of these thoughts about language, narrators, and characters, I will now turn to two scenes of sexual contact between the teenage Xuân and older men, in one case American, and in the other French. Again, it's important to acknowledge that Moï writes the novel in such a way as to make it impossible ever to pull apart the narrative of Xuân's sexuality from the violence of the war in which it is embedded. This is true from the irreverent, even vulgar, opening sentence, in which the narrator links together the deeply personal, private moment at which Xuân first sees her breasts begin to grow and the world-historical, highly mediatized event of the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in Saigon in 1963.²⁸ As this jarring juxtaposition demonstrates, even Xuân's most intimate experiences are always under threat of being overwhelmed by the machinery of war that produces warped versions of her—at times literally, as when she sees her own distorted reflection in the monstrous "eyes" that are the cockpit windows of an American helicopter (13).

For Xuân, one of the most traumatic moments of contact with an alienating gaze occurs just after she has gotten a job as a translator for the unfortunately aptly named Mr. Johnson, an American who runs an association for disadvantaged children.²⁹ She goes to his room in the Caravelle Hotel, where she soon realizes that what she believed would be a linguistic transaction in which she would be paid to translate is assumed by Mr. Johnson to be a sexual transaction: he begins to disrobe, pulls out his penis, and tells her, "Vas-y, mets-la-toi dedans" (Go on, put it in). This scene of sexual violence is disrupted when Xuân grabs a glass of ice water and throws it on "la bite de Mr. Johnson" (Mr. Johnson's dick) (61). Ultimately, Xuân is paid neither for translation nor for sex but rather in exchange for her promise not to speak about what happened.

Part of what is remarkable about this scene is the intensity of its narrative focus. The third-person narrator presents the scene entirely from Xuân's perspective, closely following her attempts to interpret the threat posed by Mr. Johnson by figuring him first as a carnivorous plant, then as something

less vegetal and more animal, “une grosse masse amibienne un peu visqueuse” (a thick and slightly viscous amoebic mass) (59–60). But the issue of language that introduces the scene in relation to the supposed offer of employment returns in a complex and troubling way at the end of the passage, when the narrator reveals that Xuân does in fact remain silent about what happened with Mr. Johnson, not so much because of his economic coercion as because—despite her abilities as a translator—she is unable to find a language in which to tell her story. “Peut-être qu’il lui manque du vocabulaire. *Bite* n’est pas un mot qu’on entend couramment” (Perhaps she lacks the vocabulary. *Dick* is not a word in common usage) (63), the narrator remarks, and I would underscore the striking effect of that “perhaps,” which introduces an element of uncertainty within what is otherwise a fully omniscient narrative perspective. The narrator goes on to note that while Xuân had heard vulgar slang terms for “penis” in both English and French—words like the French *bite*—they didn’t really circulate in her own linguistic universe, and she had never heard the word in her own language. The narrator continues:

Elle a consulté un dictionnaire. Le terme n’existe pas. À la place, elle trouve une métaphore: l’*Être solaire*. Et le vagin est la *Voie de l’Obscurité*.

Et comment aurait-elle pu parler de Mr. Johnson à Mae? Voyons:

Mr. Johnson a brandi son Être solaire et m’a demandé de le *mettre dedans*.

Non, cela ne passe pas.

[She consulted a dictionary. The term did not exist. In its place, she found a metaphor: the *Solar Being*. And the vagina was the *Path of Darkness*.

How could she tell her mother about Mr. Johnson? Imagine:

Mr. Johnson brandished his Solar Being and told me to *put it in*.

No, that would never work.] (63)³⁰

The fact that the narrator uses the vulgar French slang *bite* to designate Mr. Johnson’s *johnson* while recounting the scene, and then tells us that the word is inaccessible to Xuân herself, forces us to confront the gap between Xuân’s experience and the narrative we receive of that experience.³¹ Unlike *The Quiet American*’s Fowler, whose representations of Phuong work overwhelmingly to “invent” her in accordance with his desires, even going so far as to put his words—his translations and mistranslations—into her mouth, Moï’s narrator takes up a very different position, focusing intensely on Xuân’s affective responses while at the same time gesturing toward a certain limit beyond which the merging of the narrative voice and Xuân’s consciousness begins to break down. There is a recognition here of the complexity of speaking in the place of Xuân, a recognition of the need both to tell her story *and* to hold open the negative space that marks it as a story that Xuân herself is unable to

tell, because in the time of the narrative the conditions of possibility that would allow it to be told do not yet exist.

I will offer a few concluding observations in relation to another key scene, appearing almost exactly at the midpoint of the novel. Here, a slightly older Xuân is, as the back cover copy puts it, “initié au sexe par Edgar, un énarque membre des services de renseignement français” (initiated into sex by Edgar, a French civil servant and intelligence officer). Although it takes up a relatively small portion of the novel as a whole, the relationship between Xuân and Edgar figured prominently in the marketing of the novel, which was cast by the publisher as a wartime love story: “la jeune fille, la guerre, l’amour” (the girl, the war, love).³² In a canny bit of cross-promotion, Moï herself has linked *Le venin du papillon* to a book she published the same year, in which she wrote about Vietnam as a literary space she shares with Marguerite Duras.³³ Indeed, Moï has described the relationship between Xuân and Edgar as a reflection and reversal of the relationship between the teenage Duras, then living in colonial Indochina, and an older Chinese man.³⁴

All of this would seem to suggest that the novel will offer the reader access to Xuân’s experience, reversing the racial dynamics of Duras’s love story without entirely abandoning the colonial nostalgia it enabled. Considered from this perspective, what is remarkable about the scene itself is the extent to which Xuân’s subjectivity is completely absent. Over the course of a passage that covers almost three pages and several weeks of sexual activity, culminating in postvirginal blood on Edgar’s sheets, never once does Xuân appear as a grammatical subject. Instead, the narrator refers to her as a series of body parts acted upon by Edgar, as “son jouet vivant” (his real live toy) (149). Edgar, on the other hand, appears no fewer than twenty-nine times as a grammatical subject; he also speaks several times, and at one moment even places his hand over Xuân’s mouth to silence her. As the passage unfolds, the narrator supplies many details about Edgar’s past and future: that he is thirty-three years old, that he had a stormy childhood, that he will go on to become an ambassador, and that the call of virginity has always secretly thrilled him (148–50). In short, as the scene of sexual initiation begins, the narrator veers sharply away from the close identification with Xuân that has characterized all of her scenes in the novel up until this point, and replaces it for the duration of the passage with an exclusive focus on Edgar.³⁵

What might be at stake in this radical shift? If we think again about the gap between Xuân’s experience and the narrative we receive of that experience, we might view this passage as the opposite of the earlier scene with Mr. Johnson: there, the narrator told us a story about Xuân while reminding us that she was herself unable to tell it; here, the narrator refuses to represent Xuân’s psychic experience, but leaves open the possibility that this experience might be recounted in a different narrative context. At the same time,

the brief but intense focus on Edgar might be read as a gesture that undercuts any curiosity on the part of a largely French readership about the “truth” of the Vietnamese girl’s sexual pleasure—*la jeune fille, la guerre, l’amour*—and instead forces that readership to confront the pedophilic desire of the post-imperial French civil servant.³⁶ Moreover, Edgar could hardly be considered the opposite of Mr. Johnson; indeed, the narrator draws our attention to their similarity by noting that they both pay to maintain secrecy around their sexual crimes: Mr. Johnson pays Xuân, while Edgar pays his servants “un salaire forfaitaire pour la cuisine, le ménage et le silence” (an all-inclusive salary that covers cooking, cleaning, and silence) (149). A further connection is established when Xuân ends up employed by Edgar to work—as she was meant to work for Mr. Johnson—as a translator. As she sits in a room “qui n’existe pas officiellement” (that doesn’t officially exist), translating radio broadcasts for the French Intelligence Services, she seems to be pulled back into an earlier frame of representation: “Assortis à cette non-existence, les meubles sont des stéréotypes des films d’espionnage des années 50” (Matching this nonexistence was clichéd furniture right out of 1950s spy movies) (179).³⁷

This evocation of the world of *The Quiet American* brings me back to Phuong and to one final way in which we might consider the scene of Xuân’s sexual initiation: as a moment where Edgar, like Fowler standing in his window, is both in the position of subject and situated as the object of a gaze that frames *him*, that makes of him an object out of which knowledge may be produced. Fowler, of course, leaves little room in his narrative for a recognition of the possibility that Phuong may be inventing him as much as he is inventing her. The narrator of *Le venin du papillon*, in contrast, serves as a different sort of proxy in the representation of Xuân’s experience: both Xuân and not-Xuân, Moi’s narrator conveys her story but does not always speak for her, instead holding open spaces for her silence and reorienting our narrative attention to the broader contexts of power and violence in which she finds herself.

Notes

1. Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York, 1996), 94. Subsequent page references will be given in the main text.
2. For a compelling reading of the novel as a proleptic critique of later American military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, see William Spanos, “Who Killed Alden Pyle? The Oversight of Oversight in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*,” in *Critical Zone 2: A Forum of Chinese and Western Knowledge*, ed. Q. S. Tong, Wang Shouren, and Douglas Kerr (Hong Kong, 2006), 11–45.

3. Edward Said analyzed this literary history in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993). Viet Thanh Nguyen has reflected specifically on the tendency of American literary and cinematic narratives of war in Vietnam to minimize, if not entirely erase, Vietnamese experience. See Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 103–28.
4. On the homosocial in *The Quiet American*, see Suzanne Kehde, “Engendering the Imperial Subject: The (De)construction of (Western) Masculinity in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* and Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*,” in *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*, ed. Peter F. Murphy (New York, 1994), 241–54.
5. Jennifer Yee has written extensively on colonial-era stereotypes of Vietnamese women, including the figure of the *congai*. In addition to *Clichés de la femme exotique* (Paris, 2000), see her “Recycling the ‘Colonial Harem’? Women in Postcards from French Indochina,” *French Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004): 5–19. Among others, see also Wanrug Suwanwattana, “Decadent Indochina and French Colonial Literature, 1880s to 1920s,” PhD diss. (University of Oxford, 2019), 123–32.
6. Kehde, “Engendering the Imperial Subject,” 251; Richard West, “Graham Greene and ‘The Quiet American,’” *New York Review of Books*, May 16, 1991.
7. See, for example, Douglas Kerr, “*The Quiet American* and the Novel,” *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 95–107.
8. Zadie Smith, introduction to *The Quiet American*, by Graham Greene, Kindle edition (London, 2004), loc. 113.
9. The most famous version of this song was recorded in 1930 by Josephine Baker, who had her own complex relationship to the circulation of French colonial stereotypes.
10. Douglas Kerr describes this moment as one in which “Baudelaire’s lyric seems to activate in Fowler a metaphorical power which is the only way language—a Western language, at least—can adequately represent the experience of Vietnam.” “L’invitation au voyage,” he argues, acts as a model for Fowler’s own “essentially poetic sensory inventory” of Vietnam, “vouchsafed only to the experienced, and . . . collected only at first hand”; Kerr, “*The Quiet American* and the Novel,” 99. This is an intriguing claim, but it seems to me only indirectly to address the question of what it might mean for Fowler to cite Baudelaire’s poem as *itself* a representation of his experience in Vietnam—as a kind of primary text in relation to which his narrative is less about first-hand experience than belated citation.
11. All translations are my own. To clarify: I do not mean to suggest that “À une Malabaraise” corresponds more directly to the situation in relation specifically to Phuong’s identity as a Vietnamese woman. Françoise Lionnet has argued convincingly for the importance of considering “the geographic and symbolic places that constitute the relevant frames of reference” for Baudelaire’s poetry (in this case, his Indian Ocean travels). The present discussion, however, is not intended to be a reading of Baudelaire so much as a reading of Fowler’s somewhat haphazard attempts to locate his relationship to Phuong within a tradition of exoticism that he understands Baudelaire to represent. See Françoise Lionnet, “‘The Indies’: Baudelaire’s Colonial World,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 733.
12. As Barbara Johnson puts it, the land the poet dreams of “is not in reality a land that is just like the lady, but a description of what the speaker wishes the lady were like”; Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore, 1980), 27.

13. The lines forgotten (or suppressed) by Fowler read as follows: “Songe à la douceur / D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble!” See Charles Baudelaire, “L’invitation au voyage,” lines 2–3, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1968), 72.
14. For a thorough analysis of the importance of opium within normative as well as potentially subversive aspects of the French colonial imagination of Vietnam, see Suwanwattana, “Decadent Indochina and French Colonial Literature, 1880s to 1920s,” 42–117.
15. Kerr, “*The Quiet American* and the Novel,” 100.
16. Ben Tran, “The Literary Dubbing of Confession,” *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (2018): 414.
17. Graham Greene, *Un Américain bien tranquille*, trans. Marcelle Sibon (Paris, 1956), 6 (my emphasis). Every appearance of the verb “make” in relation to the preparation of an opium pipe is translated using the French verb “préparer” (6, 8, 9, 113, 115, 176, 214).
18. Claude Duneton, *La puce à l’oreille: Anthologie des expressions populaires avec leur origine* (Paris, 1990), 98–99. The expression is still used, along with the later variant “tailler une pipe.”
19. Moira Inghilleri, “Translation and Violence,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics*, ed. Fruela Fernández and Jonathan Evans (London, 2018), 147.
20. Rebecca Kumar, “Quiet Colonialism: Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*,” in *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art*, ed. Mark Heberle (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 34.
21. Anna Moï, *Espéranto, désespéranto: La francophonie sans les Français* (Paris, 2006), 24.
22. Many elements in the novel make clear that the action takes place in Vietnam during this period, but Moï chose not to have the narrator name the setting explicitly so as to maintain her creative freedom and remain unconstrained by specific historical detail (though one character does name Vietnam in passing). See “Anna Moï—Le venin du papillon,” video by Librairie Mollat, February 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUUqtp8Q3RQ>.
23. Anna Moï, “Anna Moï, l’odyssée des souvenirs,” interview by Catherine Fruchon-Toussaint, *Littérature sans frontières*, Radio France Internationale, February 27, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/littérature-sans-frontières/20210227-anna-moï-l-odyssée-des-souvenirs>.
24. Anna Moï, *Le venin du papillon* (Paris, 2017), 200. Subsequent page references will be given in the main text.
25. According to Moï, the decision to write first in English came about because she experienced difficulty writing about sexual matters in French (“pour des raisons de difficultés d’expression sémantique à exprimer des choses sexuées en français”). As I will discuss, Xuân experiences a similar linguistic difficulty with Vietnamese. See Alice Develey, “Anna Moï prix littérature-monde,” *Le Figaro*, May 24, 2017.
26. “Le récit est à la troisième personne, mais c’est la voix de Xuân.” See “Anna Moï—Le venin du papillon,” video by Librairie Mollat, February 25, 2017.
27. For a fascinating analysis of this lawsuit and the questions it raised about authorship, narrative form, and history, see Tess Do, “L’Affaire *Riz noir* d’Anna Moï: Autour d’une confusion de genres et de voix narratives,” in *Genre, Text and Language: Mélanges Anne Freadman*, ed. Véronique Duché, Tess Do, and Andrea Rizzi (Paris, 2015), 453–75.
28. “L’année où Xuân a vu ses nichons enfler, le moine s’est foutu le feu” (13). As Alexandra Kurmann has noted, this event also figures prominently in Moï’s *Riz noir*; Alexandra Kurmann, “The Transdiasporic Turn Toward Multiplicity in

- Contemporary Francophone and American *Việt Kiều* Literature,” forthcoming in *The Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, ed. Nathalie Nguyen.
29. In what may be a nod toward *The Quiet American*, the cousin who introduces Xuân to Mr. Johnson is named Phuong.
 30. The Vietnamese terms are *đương vật* and *âm đạo*. Drawing upon Rey Chow’s concept of “coercive mimeticism,” Lily V. Chiu has argued that “certain narrative effects” found in Moï’s early writings, “such as replicating the literal translation of Vietnamese names [and by extension, words],” can be understood to prolong “an exoticizing translation technique often found in colonial texts by French authors.” For Chiu, Moï engages in this practice because “she needs to represent herself as overly exoticized and ‘native’ to encourage a French readership keen to read about the formerly colonized subject.” Chiu’s points are well taken, but I would argue that Moï is attempting to do something more complex here by explicitly staging Xuân’s fraught position as she struggles to find language capable of representing the violence of Mr. Johnson’s exoticizing desire. As will become clear, I would certainly agree that Moï remains highly attuned to the demands of a French readership, even if her textual negotiations with these demands have become more subtle. See Lily V. Chiu, “The Return of the Native: Cultural Nostalgia and Coercive Mimeticism in the Return Narratives of Kim Lefèvre and Anna Moï,” *Crossroads* 19, no. 2 (2008): 107.
 31. In an essay on chromatism in *Le venin du papillon*, Alexandra Dărau-Ștefan makes interesting observations about the narrator’s use of color in the Mr. Johnson scene. She also discusses Xuân’s attempt to find a Vietnamese language equivalent for *bite*, but oddly refers to “le mot que Mr. Johnson utilise pour parler de son sexe” (the word Mr. Johnson uses to talk about his penis). In fact, the only word he uses in this context is “it,” or *la* (“Mets-la-toi dedans”); it is the narrator who uses *bite*. See Alexandra Dărau-Ștefan, “Chromatisme de l’amour et de la guerre dans la *novella* ‘Tempête’ de Jean-Marie Le Clézio et le roman *Le Venin du papillon* d’Anna Moï,” *TRANS – Revue de littérature générale et comparée* 28 (2022), ¶ 52, <https://journals.openedition.org/trans/8087>.
 32. The minimalism of the unillustrated cover of the Gallimard edition is offset by a bright red banner with this tag line, printed in a larger font than the title of the novel itself.
 33. Anna Moï, *Le pays sans nom: Déambulations avec Marguerite Duras* (La Tour-d’Aigues, 2017).
 34. See “Anna Moï – Le venin du papillon,” video by Librairie Mollat. Duras famously wrote about this relationship multiple times over her long literary career, including in the novels *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950), *L’amant* (1984), and *L’amant de la Chine du nord* (1991), as well as in the play *L’Éden Cinéma* (1977).
 35. Dărau-Ștefan makes the important point that this scene does not in fact recount Xuân’s first sexual experience, which occurs while she is being bathed by a female servant. While Dărau-Ștefan is interested in the ways in which this moment might be understood to “prepare” Xuân for her later encounter with Edgar, what I find intriguing in comparing the two scenes is that in the earlier one the narrator maintains a partial focus on Xuân as a grammatical subject in relation to the sensations of her body, even as sexual response alters her relation to that body: “Xuân sent son corps trépider à la sensation nouvelle. . . . Jusqu’à ce que, tout d’un coup, Xuân se sente saisie par quelque chose comme un rire en cascade” (Xuân felt her body vibrate at the new sensation. . . . Until suddenly Xuân was gripped by something like a rush of laughter) (53–54). This is in stark

- contrast to the later scene with Edgar, where Xuân's subjectivity is elided completely; instead we find "les seins de Xuân . . . la peau nubile de Xuân . . . le corps de Xuân" ("Xuân's breasts . . . Xuân's nubile skin . . . Xuân's body"), all of which are acted upon by Edgar (148–50). See Dărău-Ștefan, "Chromatisme," ¶ 12.
36. Dărău-Ștefan makes a similar observation in relation to another aspect of the narrator's representation of Xuân's "love" for Edgar: an extended metaphor of bodily occupation that ensures that the reader's attention is focused not on her affective state but rather on the violence imposed upon "chaque os du squelette de l'adolescence" (every bone of [Xuân's] adolescent skeleton); "Chromatisme," ¶ 16.
37. The narrator notes explicitly that Xuân "est payée pour transcrire les émissions de Radio Libération" (paid to transcribe Liberation Radio broadcasts), but she appears also to translate them, as Edgar tells her to stay away from "les autres traducteurs" (the other translators), who are not engaged in this clandestine work (180).