

KIM LEFÈVRE

White Métisse.

Translated by Jack A. Yeager. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 270 pages. \$62.00 (hardcover), \$24.99 (paperback). Originally published as *Métisse blanche*, Editions Phébus, 2008 (1989).

As an account of the author's voluntary migration to France in 1960, Kim Lefèvre's *Métisse blanche*, as it is called in the original French, belongs to the era of pre-1975 literary production of the Vietnamese diaspora. Yet the book arguably marks the beginning of post-colonial Vietnamese-Francophone writing in France published from the late 1980s onward, for its retrospective reflections on French colonization in Vietnam are from the author's vantage point of thirty years of self-exile in the land of the former colonizer. Lefèvre's first volume in a duology of memoirs—*Retour à la saison des pluies* [Return to the Rainy Season] was published by B. Barrault the following year—brought the personal trauma of Indochina's colonialization to the attention of the wider French public for the first time, thanks in part to the author's appearance on a popular television program, *Apostrophes*. A comparable forerunner in his own field, Jack A. Yeager, translator of *Métisse blanche* as *White Métisse* in 2018, inaugurated the discipline of Vietnamese Francophone literature in the English-speaking world with his seminal monograph, *The Vietnamese French Novel: A Literary Response to Colonialism* (University Press of New England, 1987), published two years prior to Lefèvre's debut. It is thus more than fitting that Yeager should gift a vast Anglophone readership some thirty years later what has become a text of great significance in Vietnamese Francophone studies for its first-hand historical account of suffering under late French colonial rule and in early post-colonial Vietnam.

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White Métisse recounts the traumatizing life experiences from childhood through young adulthood of Kim Lefèvre, formerly Lâm Kim Thu (126), the child of an unmarried Vietnamese woman and an absconded French soldier, born into poverty in North Vietnam as the anti-colonial struggle took hold. Rupture and transience come to define Lefèvre's upbringing. She was abandoned at the age of six to a catholic orphanage by a mother whose new husband could not forgive his wife for her illegitimate daughter's existence (136); here Lefèvre would lose her Vietnamese identity for a time when assigned the French name Eliane Tiffon (27). She would spend two further lengthy sojourns in a French catholic and a convent boarding school (isolating ordeals that would in some ways fortuitously allow her to leave her homeland before the American War in Vietnam with a scholarship for graduate study in Paris) interspersed with returns home as her blended, often broken, family became internal exiles, progressively fleeing south as the colonial war ensued.

The translation choice in the title of *White Métisse* sets the tone for the general approach adopted by Yeager, one that seeks to remain true to the predominant theme of the memoir: the fraught nature of negotiating an in-between cultural identity in a nation where those identities are pitted against each other in colonial and civil war. Indeed, nary an incident in Lefèvre's highly eventful first twenty-five years of life in Vietnam (1935–1960) is unaffected by the experience of her mixed heritage, for which she is either shunned or exoticized by her compatriots. Keeping the titular French word for what might be translated as “mixed-race” or “biracial” and using it consistently throughout the text is explicitly explained by Yeager in the memoir's preamble: having no English equivalent that is free from problematic connotations, “*métis*” or “*métisse*” in the feminine, he eloquently writes, is retained in the French to “convey the idea of cloth woven (*tissé*) from two threads” (vii; all foreign words in italics in the original).

Yeager has also undertaken a double cultural translation of sorts in this rendition due to the need to portray to the common English language reader not only Vietnamese but also French cultural perspectives manifest in the book. It could be said regarding the latter that he retranslates for a second audience a Southeast Asian culture already translated into a colonized role. To make the colonial French context clear, Yeager highlights specific instances of unwelcome cultural intervention by the French administration

in Vietnam. One such example lies in Yeager emphasizing the imposition of the French catholic education system on autochthonous children, which operated as an integral part of the “mission civilisatrice” [civilizing mission] of the colonial empire, through his repeated use of the French term “couvent” [convent] in the chapter entitled “The Couvent des Oiseaux” (201–236). Here, with support from a wealthy Vietnamese benefactor, Lefèvre completed her “*baccalauréat*” [high school graduation] (195), equally retained in the French, alongside middle-class “Frenchified” Vietnamese adolescents (xv), whose juxtaposition with the narrator underscores the stark class divisions created in a nation under colonial rule. Vietnamese language inclusions on the other hand often concern culinary, geographical, and sartorial vocabulary, which Yeager defines in a concluding glossary. Retaining Vietnamese vernacular in the memoir also plays an important role in indicating to the reader family status, through terms of address, and social class, with particular regard to the exclusion of those seen to have transgressed ethnic and traditional boundaries by having relations with the colonizer. Lefèvre’s mother for instance, whose “withered life” the narrator carries with her like a “wound” (54), is denigrated as a “*con gái*” [“concubine”] (xii, xviii) and “*nhà-quê*” [“peasant,” “bumpkin”] (219) and introduced as an “Annamite woman”—a pejorative term referring to all Vietnamese during colonial times (1).

The provision of such terms helps the reader to understand the narrator’s frequent reflections on both societies from the standpoint of an in-between observer who is “painfully aware of [her] otherness” (97). Equally, the careful attention to providing footnotes that annotate and detail cultural and linguistic practices, geographical sites, and historical persons and events contributes to the significance of this publication. In the English, this memoir-cum-novel is a personal witness statement of three decades of a turbulent “relationship between colonizer and colonized, between master and slave” through the eyes of the product of their union, repudiated by both (191). The second devastating foreign intervention in Vietnam being that with which the country still is associated in North America, *White Métisse* is an illuminating historical document on French colonialism in Indochina, complementary, and of great benefit to, the flourishing field of Vietnamese American studies.

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