

INTERTEXTUAL
WEAVING IN THE WORK
OF LINDA LÊ



IMAGINING THE IDEAL READER



Alexandra Kurmann

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After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France

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"Scholars have recognized the vast intertextual network that subtends Linda Lê's fiction, but Kurmann is the first to give it the sustained attention it deserves. Engaging and deeply researched, her book is a welcome addition to a growing body of criticism that sees Lê's work as mediating between postcolonial and modernist literatures, allowing for fruitful reinterpretations of both."

—LESLIE BARNES, The Australian National University

Intertextual Weaving in the Work of Linda Lê: Imagining the Ideal Reader uncovers the primary textual relationship that Linda Lê (1963–), the most prolific Francophone author of the Vietnamese diaspora, fosters with a literary precursor of Austrian descent: the feminist writer-in-exile, Ingeborg Bachmann (1926–1973). This study offers an overdue exploration of the notably European roots of Lê's writerly formation. It traces an unexamined feminist import in her work to a sixteen-year inter- and intra-textual engagement with Bachmann and positions the latter as an imagined ideal reader of Lê's oeuvre. Intertextual analyses of Bachmann's postwar novel *Malina*, with Lê's literary essays, early fiction, and trilogy, reveal that to overcome the challenges of writing in exile Lê adopts an alternative literary forebear of the European tradition.

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LEXINGTON BOOKS
An imprint of
Rowman & Littlefield
800-462-6420 · www.rowman.com

ISBN 978-1-4985-1486-6



9 781498 514866



Cover image: "Weaving" by Trần Xuân Bình

KURMAN
INTERTEXTUAL WEAVING
OF

SE-13-0128
B0000888661



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LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kurmann, Alexandra, author.


Title: Intertextual weaving in the work of Linda L?e: imagining the ideal reader / by Alexandra Kurmann.

Description: Lanham : Lexington Books, 2016. | Series: After the empire: the francophone world and postcolonial France | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015041839 (print) | LCCN 2015048646 (ebook) | ISBN 9781498514866 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781498514873 (Electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: L?e, Linda—Criticism and interpretation.

Classification: LCC PQ2672.E1113 Z78 2016 (print) | LCC PQ2672.E1113 (ebook) | DDC 843/.914—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041839>

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgements

The financial assistance of an Australian Postgraduate Award supported the research undertaken for this study, and the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne funded a research trip to Europe during which I was able to interview the author, Linda Lê. Additionally, a Faculty Early Career Researcher Grant from Macquarie University supported the preparation of the manuscript. All of this support has been gratefully received.

My deepest gratitude is expressed to Tess Do and Birgit Lang, whose expertise in Vietnamese-Francophone writing and German exile literature respectively, not only provided me with invaluable insights and guidance over the course of this project, but also fostered in me a love of comparative literature research. I wish to thank Sara Lennox and Jane Bradley Winston for their invaluable readings of the research, as well as the anonymous reader of the manuscript for Lexington Books for their astute observations.

At its core this book is about relationships, real and literary. In my turn I would like to thank those who have helped bring this project to fruition: Kerryellen and Neil Vroman, for their support in all of my academic endeavours; Duane Duncan, for his patience and unfaltering friendship; and my father, Eugen Kurmann. Finally, my wholehearted thanks to Eric Lau for his loving constancy throughout.

Parts of chapter 4 appear under the title, "Returned to Sender: Writing Back to a Literary Precursor," in *Mélanges pour Anne Freadman*, edited by Véronique Duché, Tess Do and Andrea Rizzi, forthcoming from Éditions Classiques Garnier.

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Introduction: The Weaving of an Intertextual Web

For Linda Lê, a forced migrant with a personal history of cultural and linguistic loss, “être le fils de personne, d’aucune patrie, c’est pour [elle] la seule attitude possible” (being the child of no one, having no homeland, for [her] is the only possible attitude) to take as a writer.¹ Correspondingly, Lê denies her Vietnamese origins while maintaining an ambivalent relationship with the French language. As if to compensate, her repeated intertextual engagement with a predominantly European cohort of writers points towards the substitutive construction of an imaginary home in literature. In fact Lê admits as much, conceding that “[l]es autres auteurs [...] forment [s]a patrie d’élection (other writers [...] constitute [her] chosen homeland).² Many of these chosen compatriots appear in an intertextual context in Lê’s four volumes of literary essays, each containing a selection of short tributes dedicated to the wordsmiths who have inspired her.³ Taken from a list that is as diverse as it is extensive, some of the most recurrent and researched names in these essays include the Romanian philosopher, Emil Michel Cioran,⁴ and the Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva.⁵ What draws these writers together and connects them to Lê is their condition of exile,⁶ or to be more precise, their having written in a foreign tongue when in exile. Lê discloses that a desire to understand a fracture in her own linguistic history leads her to admire “les écrivains qui ont trahi leur langue natale” (writers who have betrayed their native tongue).⁷ Indeed the majority of the authors populating the aforementioned collections are exiles, expatriates, and émigrés. In this way, Lê’s essay writing can be seen as a project of self-identification, which involves her seeking out similar company to house within her own texts. Adopting Cioran’s dictum—“[o]n n’habite pas un pays, on habite une langue” ([o]ne does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language)⁸ —Lê claims *literary lan-*

guage as a substitutive home for writers like herself, who seek to renounce the past so as to discover a new “port d’attache” (home port).⁹

One of the strongest voices of rebellion in the intertextual chorus of Lê’s work is that of Ingeborg Bachmann. Providing Lê with a textual point of anchorage, the Austrian born poet-turned-writer in voluntary exile stands out from Lê’s other textual kin due to the longevity of the distinctly literary relationship Lê fosters with her. While Bachmann’s “parfaite maîtrise” (perfect mastery) of French and Italian certainly aligns her with Cioran and Tsveltaeva,¹⁰ she wrote in her native German, suggesting that above and beyond an exilic affinity, a writerly kinship motivates Lê’s sixteen-year intertextual commitment to the writer. During this long-term literary relationship Bachmann becomes the only writer to appear explicitly in both Lê’s fiction and nonfiction. As a transmutable in-text figure, her presence emits a conspicuous discursive influence. Specifically, my analysis reveals that an Antigonean rhetoric in Lê’s oeuvre is nourished by her readings of Bachmann’s feminist fiction. Furthermore, while Lê isolates herself from fellow Vietnamese Francophone authors, through Bachmann she enters into a textual alliance with a cohort of politically engaged post-war exiled writers with whom Bachmann kept company. As well as illuminating unexamined discourses of social engagement in Lê’s work, the unearthing of a deep intertextual rootedness in the literature of a canonized European writer supports contemporary readings of Lê’s identity politics. That is to say, her stance as “neither French nor Vietnamese” may indeed prove tenable for the very reason that she establishes a substitutive home in the landscape of literature.¹¹

In a broader sense, the example of the influence of a European, rather than a French or Vietnamese, literary tradition on Lê encourages researchers of migrant literatures to look further afield for literary connections. Further, that the complex hybridity of Lê’s work is largely the result of her engagement with writers at the margins of European literatures suggests that hybrid writing extends outside the bounds of postcoloniality or subalternity. Thus, while this study intends to provide a key narrative in the multi-layered story of Lê’s writerly “becoming” as fundamentally intertextual in nature,¹² it also seeks to provide an illustration of what can be gained by adopting a deterritorialized approach to comparative literature research.¹³

As arguably the most prolific writer of Vietnamese origin working in France today, Lê enjoys a flourishing critical appreciation of her oeuvre. Scholarship has focused predominantly on the postcoloniality of Lê’s writing, addressing the recurrent subject of exile and its related themes of guilt, paternal loss, and trauma in her texts. Although Lê has written across the genres since her literary debut in 1987, having published short stories, novels, a play, and literary essays, her novels and in particular her trilogy—*Les trois Parques* (1997) (*The Three Fates*),¹⁴ *Voix: Une crise* (1998) (*Voices: A*

crisis),¹⁵ and *Lettre morte* (Dead letter) (1999)—have received the most critical attention. Lê describes the novel-cycle as a work “sur le deuil et l’exil” (on mourning and exile), for the reason that it works through autobiographical material concerning the death of her father in Vietnam.¹⁶ Scholars have responded by reading these texts in three distinct manners: through the lens of psychoanalysis, by deconstructing the alterity of the exiled narrator, and from within a framework of postcolonial theory.¹⁷ While I too engage with these approaches, my primary purpose here is to seek out new lines of enquiry in the burgeoning area of intertextuality studies in Lê’s work. In a chapter of her book entitled *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*, Leslie Barnes argues that the textual connections found in Lê’s literary essays work to displace her texts in space and time, mimicking the cultural and linguistic displacement of Lê’s literary production.¹⁸ Similarly, Jane Bradley Winston draws attention to the explicit intertextual references to *King Lear* and the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik in *Parques*, which she writes are marked by a narrative distancing and differentiation from the source texts.¹⁹ Bradley Winston considers that Lê’s “citational practice” in the trilogy reflects a Bakhtinian double-voicing or dialogism,²⁰ in that each borrowed word emits an echo of a pre-existing text;²¹ as such she contends that Lê’s writing is in constant dialogue with precursory works.²² Correspondingly, it is the aim of this intertextual study to reveal the reverberations of the private conversation beneath the public interchange that Lê maintains with her principal literary precursor.

Lê takes seriously her stated “obligation morale de rendre hommage à ceux qui ont été des soutiens pendant toute [s]on existence” (moral obligation to pay homage to those who have supported [her] throughout [her] existence) by explicitly dedicating three of her texts to treatises on Bachmann.²³ Firstly, in a well-cited interview conducted by Catherine Argand in 1999, Lê admitted that the last novel of her trilogy, *Lettre morte*, was influenced by Bachmann’s celebrated novel *Malina* (1971)²⁴—the first and only complete novel of a novel-cycle known as *Todesarten* (Ways of Dying).²⁵ Further to this avowal, in *Tu écriras sur le bonheur* (You will write of happiness), a collection of literary essays also published in 1999, Lê devotes an essay to Bachmann’s life and work entitled simply “Ingeborg Bachmann.”²⁶ Finally, in the year 2000 Bachmann appears as herself under a pseudonym in chapter 7 of the novel *Les aubes* (Dawns). To Lê’s general reading public, her explicit intertextual relations with Bachmann appear to stop here. Perhaps for this reason, only two critics have made brief mention of these episodes without making analyses of the intertextuality: the North American scholar, Michèle Bacholle-Boskovic, and the expatriate American writer of French expression, Nancy Huston.²⁷

My textual analysis, however, has uncovered evidence of intertextuality in ten of Lê’s publications and has given cause to revise the date of Lê’s

initial intertextual engagement with Bachmann. While the treatise in *Tu écriras* appears to be the first reference to Bachmann in Lê's public corpus, the textual relationship in question was in fact inaugurated one decade earlier in 1989, when Lê published an article entitled "Ingeborg Bachmann, un brasier d'énigmes" (Ingeborg Bachmann, an inferno of enigmas) in a now defunct quotidian Parisian newspaper.²⁸ In addition, the literary essay in *Tu écriras* was in fact first published in 1991 in the form of the essay, "J'écris sur la nature du feu" (I write on the nature of fire),²⁹ in the literary journal, *Critique*. Just as noteworthy, subsequent to these publications Lê's writing career turned a significant corner. To elaborate, Lê refuses to acknowledge her first three texts published by *Table ronde* (Round table): the novel, *Un si tendre vampire* (1987) (Such a tender vampire), and the short story collections, *Fuir* (1988) (Flight) and *Solo: Nouvelles* (1989) (Solo: Short stories), all of which are now out of print. Instead, today Lê considers her first work of fiction to be the collection of novellas, *Les évangiles du crime* (1992) (The crime's evangelists),³⁰ which is in fact her fourth. The reason Lê gives for this abnegation of her earliest work is the discovery of her writerly voice during the composition of *Évangiles* and its successor, *Calomnies* (1993) (*Slander*).³¹ Revealingly, in the interview I conducted with Lê in 2010, she stated that both of these texts were influenced by Bachmann.³² That Lê suggests her writerly rebirth was affected by her reading of a writer to whom she had already dedicated two literary essays indicates that Bachmann's work had a powerful impact on Lê's literary formation.

It follows that 1989, the year in which Lê published "Brasier d'énigmes," and the year 2005, when Lê last refers to her predecessor's writing community in an essay in *Complexe* entitled "Antigone dans un paysage de cris" (Antigone in a landscape of screams),³³ serve as the temporal parameters of the present investigation. Textual analysis of Lê's fiction in the interim period between the publication of *Évangiles* in 1992 and *Tu écriras* in 1999 reveals intertextual connections with Bachmann's novel, *Malina*. Of particular significance is evidence in Lê's texts during this time of a new ethical engagement born of these intertextual interactions. Reading Lê's trilogy (1997-99) as a transformative re-presentation of Bachmann's post-war feminist novel, written from the point of view of a Francophone postcolonial narrator, discloses an intimate dialogism that incites a reciprocal rereading of Bachmann's text. Correspondingly, I posit that Lê, who is well known for her aversion to entering into any form of contemporary debate,³⁴ learns strategies of social engagement from Bachmann that provide *Malina* with answers to an enigma of its own. That is to say, Lê seems to answer the debated question of female resistance in *Malina*, a text ending in a woman's death, by offering up an Antigonean interpretation of the novel. Forthwith, Antigone becomes a motif of sorority and resistance from beyond the grave in Lê's relations with Bachmann.

Indeed the intertexts under discussion here concern relationships. I argue that the key function of the intertextuality employed by Lê is to facilitate a sense of belonging in the absence of traditional cultural and linguistic attachments. It follows that while this investigation into Lê's writerly formation exposes a European influence, it is moreover the discovery of a web of literary connections woven into the fabric of Lê's oeuvre that is most instructive. Intertextual findings uncover concealed networks that bring seemingly disparate literatures into fruitful dialogue with one another. Furthermore, through the present study we are reminded that intertextual practice is not a unidirectional process. In this instance, the discovery of Bachmann intertexts in Lê's oeuvre effects a dialogism that allows for rereadings of a European modernist text within the frame of postcolonial discourses on hybridity. Inversely, we are afforded the opportunity to read Lê within the context of European Modernism. Because the dialogical process necessarily produces new readings, it bridges the gap between diametrically opposed factions in the debate on the merit of intertextual analysis. At the one end, source studies are perceived as perfunctory, and at the other, intertextual readings appear meaningless if one considers all texts to be intertexts. Here, however, identifying textual sources that connect Lê to Bachmann and beyond leads to a specific, yet wide-reaching, conversation. Beginning with the intimate, the Bachmann intertext is shown to follow a trajectory that leads to the expression of the universal in Lê's oeuvre.³⁵

INTERTEXTUAL WEAVING

The Latin term, *intertexto*, signifies to "weave in," "to place inside" or to "join."³⁶ Thus, intertextuality can be seen as the act of weaving one or multiple texts into another to effect degrees of textual interaction.³⁷ In an interview conducted in 2010, Lê admits a predilection to such textual intertwining by disclosing: "J'ai l'impression que la littérature m'aide à tisser des liens avec mes semblables" (I have the impression that literature helps me to weave connections with my kind).³⁸

Juvan makes a connection between the term *intertexto*, and an allegory about artistic rivalry written by the Roman exiled poet, Ovid, in the latter's rendering of the myth of Arachne in *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's telling, Arachne, a talented weaver, proudly challenges the goddess of art, Pallas Minerva, to a weaving contest without first acknowledging the skill of her divine teacher. Minerva is so enraged at both the arrogance and superior talent of the impious mortal that she strikes Arachne, whose wounded pride drives the younger weaver to punish herself by an attempted hanging. Finally overcome by compassion, however, the goddess turns Arachne into a spider as the name suggests. This narrative of artistic rivalry between a master and

her student, involving the spinning of a yarn, invokes Harold Bloom's proposition of the agonistic rivalry between the eminent precursor and the apprentice writer. Ovid's tale, however, challenges Bloom's view by standing as a warning to the young writer who dares not show their predecessor due indebtedness and respect.³⁹

According to Daniel L. Medin, one of the faults in the Bloomian model of intertextuality is that it does not account for "subtler, even reverent, effects of influence."⁴⁰ Lê is anything but an irreverent writer, as can be seen in her numerous deferent literary essays, and particularly in the connection she has with her "grande sœur très admirée" (greatly admired elder sister), Bachmann.⁴¹ One of the ways in which Lê expresses this admiration is by weaving Bachmann's words into her own texts. A particularly significant example in relation to the current discussion is Lê's borrowed image of a spider's web from Bachmann's poetry, which she relates to the protagonist in Bachmann's novel fragment, *Requiem für Fanny Goldmann* (*Requiem for Fanny Goldmann*).⁴² In her homage to Bachmann in "J'écris," Lê refers to the latter's poem, "Psalm," when describing the female protagonist's confrontation with patriarchal authority as an encounter with what she calls "les tragiques araignées de la réalité" (tragic spiders of the present).⁴³ It may be a coincidence that Lê conceives of this as an "apprentissage du pouvoir" (apprenticeship in power relations),⁴⁴ but the echo of an ancient warning in her intertextual borrowing nonetheless stands as a reminder of the potential peril in Lê's training with a master weaver of words.

The image of a spider's web is also deployed by Michael Riffaterre to allude to the pattern of intertexts within any given text.⁴⁵ Following his example, and Juvan's allusion, I use the same symbol to illustrate the intertextual connections linking Lê's work not only to Bachmann's, but also to a network of associated writers. Built for capture and containment, the spider's web is appropriate here for the reason that it is at one and the same time fragile, and yet, being made of silk, of immeasurable natural strength. As such, it alludes to the delicate yet durable relationship that Lê weaves out the texts of her precursor, who, seemingly after the lesson learnt by Arachne, is revered as Lê's formative teacher.

Intertextuality is a neologism coined in 1966 by the Bulgarian-French intellectual, Julia Kristeva.⁴⁶ The term was first used in a lecture and then in an essay on Mikhail Bakhtin entitled "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman," which was later translated into English as "Word, Dialogue, Novel" in *Desire in Language*.⁴⁷ Reflecting the "'everywhere and nowhere' status" of literary influence,⁴⁸ what Kristeva calls "l'intertextualité" refers to the discursive "process of reading and writing" that can be applied to texts of all mediums.⁴⁹ "Any text," Kristeva writes, "is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."⁵⁰ Taken to an extreme by Roland Barthes, in his apparent lifting of Kristeva's notion of