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Marina la Malinche: Writing across Cultures

Harry Aveling

ABSTRACT Tulisan ini membahas karya pengarang perempuan Prancis, Kim Lefèvre. Lefèvre dilahirkan di Vietnam dari ayah Prancis dan ibu Vietnam – ia sendiri kini tinggal di Prancis. Karya-karya autobiografinya berkenaan dengan kompleksitas identitas campurannya. Dalam karya novelnya *Marina la Malinche*, ia menyajikan kehidupan seorang wanita penerjemah, Malinche, selama invasi Spanyol di Meksiko. Malinche saat ini dianggap oleh orang Meksiko sebagai pengkhianat bangsa. Dalam novel itu Lefèvre menggunakan tokoh Malinche sebagai cermin problem identitasnya. Penerjemah hanyalah seorang “pengkhianat” ketika ia menjadi korban kekuatan di luar dirinya.

KEYWORDS Francophone literature, Kim Lefèvre, translation.

In this paper I wish to explore the role of foreign “fathers”, and of father-tongues, the tongues of translation, in the work of the Vietnamese born Francophone author Kim Lefèvre. My discussion will focus on two autobiographical works, *Métisse Blanche* (White Métisse, 1989) and *Retour à la saison des pluies* (Return to the Rainy Season, 1990), and particularly on her third book, *Moi, Marina la Malinche* (I, Marina la Malinche, 1994), which is based on the life of the woman who was Cortés’ local-born interpreter during the Spanish invasion of Mexico in 1519 – and the mother of his son, Martin, often considered the first Latin American mestizo.

THE MARK OF THE FATHER

“I was born, it seems, at Hanoi one Spring day, a little before the Second World War, from an ephemeral union between a young Annamite woman and a Frenchman”.¹ So begins Kim Lefèvre’s story of her childhood. The book, written in French and published in 1989, is entitled *Métisse Blanche*, a difficult title to translate, because there is no exact equivalent to the word “métisse” in English. “Mixed race” is perhaps the most neutral term. The word is gendered, as is almost inevitable in French, and indicates a woman of mixed race. The adjective “white” is chosen in place of the possibly more predictable “yellow”, and emphasises the ethnicity of her birth father.

¹ Kim Lefèvre: *Métisse Blanche*, Paris: Editions de l’Aube, 2003, p. 13. Further references to this book will be included within my text. All translations from French are my own

The book is dedicated to her mother and says little of her father. After a second paragraph on the indifference of Vietnamese society to precise birth records, Lefèvre continues: "I don't know what my progenitor looked like. My mother has never spoken to me about him. In my sombre days, it amused me to think of a legionnaire, not 'my handsome legionnaire' as the local song says, but an arrogant colonist, detestable, a man from the other side of the world. I have nourished a violent hatred towards my unknown father, such as only severely bruised children are capable of" (13–14).

The burden of her métissage is constantly present. "I was," she continues, "properly speaking, a monstrosity in the very nationalist environment in which I lived ... Everything in me offended those around me: my mixed race physique, my unpredictable character, so difficult to understand, which was, in a word, so scarcely Vietnamese. People attributed everything bad in me to the French blood which ran through my veins. It was that which stopped folk feeling any real affection towards me. I understood that. I approved of it. I too detested the blood I carried. As a little girl, I dreamed on some providential accidents which might drain me of my accursed blood, leaving me a purely Vietnamese woman, reconciled with my family and myself. Because I loved this country, these rice-fields, the green bamboo hedges, the pools where I waded about in the company of other children of the same age as myself" (14–15).

Lefèvre, in fact, receives two documents attesting to her possible father during her childhood. The first comes when she is about to be "returned to her race" (14), by being placed in a French orphanage in Hanoi at the age of six. For this, a letter from a French officer who knew her true father suffices. The paper declared: "In effect ... that my father really was French, that he had been forced to follow his regiment, leaving my mother with a child whom she was incapable of raising properly", and that "the poor woman desired to make a gift of her daughter to the French state, which would be able to prepare the girl for her future better than the mother could" (48).

The second comes at the age of fifteen, as a legal pre-requisite to her enrolment at the only school in Nha-Trang, where her family chooses to relocate to be together with her step-father's family. At the insistence of the principal of the school, Lefèvre's mother arranges for a birth certificate to be issued. "I was reborn," Lefèvre states, "under the name of Lam-Kim-Thu, the legitimate daughter of a Chinese man, Lam-Khe, and a Vietnamese woman, Tran-Thi-My. A stamp had been placed near the official seal which had added to the signatures of two witnesses testifying to the truth of my identity" (200). The document is sufficient for her to be admitted to the Vietnamese school, but the usual bureaucratic response to the document tended to be "an ironic smile" when they compared the paper with her face (200).

Such situations reappear later in the book: "I often found myself in a situation where I was required to pass myself off as something I was not. 'So your father is Vietnamese?' I would often be asked maliciously. 'No, he is Chinese,' I would reply coldly." Lefèvre further comments: "Behind this

banal question, I could well see that my mother was being judged. I thought that I could save her honour by insisting on a Chinese father. Not that mixed marriages between Chinese and Vietnamese were any more encouraged; at least they were not tainted by the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, the master and the slave. With a Chinese as her equal, my mother regained her dignity" (297).

In *Métisse Blanche*, Lefèvre is moved, without her consent between two linguistic worlds: the world of her mother, speaking Vietnamese, and the French-speaking world of the orphanage and some of the elite schools she was able to attend thanks to various scholarships and benevolent sponsors. However, much of the last third of *Métisse Blanche* is also a passionate description of her (barely) "platonic" (207) relationship with the music teacher at the school to which her new birth certificate admitted her – "He is thirty-five, he could have been your father", as her friends tell her (207). The teacher is reputed to be a "a famous spoiler of young virgins", as they further warn her (207). But she is "hungry, thirty, desirous" (228) for love, and nothing, it seems, can stop them finding comfort in each other's arms. Despite this fixation, Lefèvre never learns anything about her real father: "I was a very romantic young woman", her mother tells her, he was "a person of no account" (270). At the end of the book, her skill in the tongue of her absent birth-father allows her to train and become a qualified teacher of French; thanks to these qualifications she is able to depart for higher studies in France.

THE MOTHER'S STORY

Lefèvre arrived in France in 1960. She married within a few years, gave birth to a son, taught and later turned to the stage as a comedian. She did not return to Vietnam. Henceforth, she avoided contact with other Vietnamese and lived an exclusively French existence during which her mastery of the Vietnamese language steadily declined. The publication of *Métisse Blanche* in 1989, however, led her to decide to return to the land of her birth, at least for a short visit.

Announcing the decision to her family in Vietnam led to the renewal of correspondence with her mother, and hence the renewal of her Vietnamese language skills as well. In one of these letters, written "so that you will not live the rest of your life without ever knowing anything about me" (71), the mother speaks of the events surrounding the conception of her daughter. The mother's father was rich; her mother, "his first wife, was loved by her husband and respected by his concubines" (72). As a child, she had played in the rice-fields (as her daughter was later to do after leaving the orphanage) and been educated in a nearby town, until called home to help manage her father's business affairs. Following the death of her own mother, and the hostility of her new step-mother, the now attractive and self-assured young woman was sent to live with her cousin at Son Tay in the far north of the country. Son Tay was also a garrison town. She met young French officers there, was entranced by their uniforms, their gaiety and authority, and, after

sharing a bottle of champagne, accepted the “theatrical” marriage proposal of “a certain Tiffon”, (79), being immediately installed in his room within the military camp. Although he had wanted to marry her, so the mother believes, the army disapproved of “mixed marriages between Annamite women and French officers” (80).

One morning, “he solved the problem in his own way: in the easiest possible way. He set out on a mission one morning, just as he had done on other mornings, and never returned. No farewells, no explanations. That was it” (81). The mother returned to her family, realising that she was pregnant, and was sent away. She moved to Hanoi and settled with a second officer (“she didn’t love him – her heart was already taken – but she did respect him”, 82), to whom she bore a son. The second officer returned to France in 1938: he was willing to take the woman and their son with him, but not the girl. The mother refused. Eventually she married the step-father, “seven years older than her, harsh and cold, who was in love with her ... and could offer her the security she needed.” She accepted, despite her continuing affection for her first love, sacrificing herself for her daughter (88).

Other than in these few pages, the birth-father is absent from *Retour à la saison des pluies*. We do meet the figure of the step-father, now grown older and more kindly disposed to his step-daughter, as well as Lefèvre’s three sisters from this second marriage. We pursue the music teacher into “the shady kingdom of my adolescent loves” (206), and learn that he has died. “Professor Duc was 34 years old, the same age as my father,” she reflects, “Today he would be sixty four, why shouldn’t he be dead?” (216), as the father indeed is. Perhaps significantly, there is no reference to Lefèvre’s own husband anywhere in this second book.

MARINA LA MALINCHE

We have so far noted in Lefèvre’s two autobiographical books the absence of the birth-father, the conduct of passionate relationships between unequal and very different partners (a girl-child and a mature man), and the segmentation of languages between specific geographical locations. In *Retour à la saison des pluies*, Lefèvre relearns Vietnamese, but the book is nevertheless still written in French, for a French audience; there is a mingling here too, but no union.²

Lefèvre’s third book, *Moi, Marina la Malinche* is, in some ways, less sophisticated in its style than these two autobiographical works and may possibly have been written before them. It provides her with an objective character, Marina (her Spanish name) also called *la Malinche* (a Mexican-derived name), onto whom Lefèvre can project and resolve some of these personal psychological concerns. For its historical details, the story particularly draws on the book *the Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain),³ written by Spanish soldier

² Compare the advice given to the young child by her grand-mother: “You are an alloy, neither silver nor gold, your life will be difficult. But whoever searches for your uniqueness will be happy when they find you” (*Métisse Blanche*, 38).

³ English translation by J.M. Cohen: *The Conquest of New Spain*, London: Penguin, 1963. Further references will be included within my text.

and land-holder Bernal Díaz de Castillo (1492 – c.1580) in his late seventies.

In Díaz's book, Doña Marina appears soon after Hernando Cortés has won an early victory on the Mexican mainland. At a date given as 15 March 1519⁴, Díaz writes, "many Caciques [nobles] and important persons came from Tabasco and the neighbouring towns, and paid us great respect." The party offered Cortés a small amount of gold and some rough cloaks. "These gifts were nothing, however," Díaz continues, "compared to the twenty women whom they gave us, among them a most excellent person who when she became a Christian took the name of Doña Marina" (80). In a few short sentences, Díaz soon notes that: "She was a truly great princess, the daughter of Caciques and the mistress of vassals, as was very evident in her appearance" (82). Cortés himself had recently married "a lady named Catalina Suarez, La Marcaida" (45); at any rate, "[he] gave one of [the women] to each of his captains, and Doña Marina, being good-looking, intelligent, and self-assured, went to Alonso Hernandez Puertocarrero, who, as I have already said, was a very grand gentleman, and a cousin of the Count of Medellin. And when Puertocarrera returned to Spain [a few months later, on Cortes' orders], Doña Marina lived with Cortes, to whom she bore a son named Don Martin Cortes" (82).

Díaz next devotes a whole chapter to Doña Marina. He tells the story of her birth in "a town called Paynala, which had other towns subject to it". Her parents were both Caciques, but her father died while still young and the mother remarried "another Cacique, a young man, to whom she bore a son". Desiring that the son should succeed to the Caciqueship after their passing, "they gave Doña Marina to some Indians from Xicalango", and these gave the child to the people of Tabasco, and the Tabascans gave her to Cortes" (85). Thanks to her residence in these two places, Marina spoke both the languages of Tabascan ("Mayan", the language of the Yucatan peninsula) and Mexico (Nahuatl, "Aztec") (86). She served as one of Cortes's interpreters, and "without Doña Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico" (87). Although Doña Marina bore Cortés a son, after the Conquest was over, "she subsequently married a gentleman named Juan Jaramillo at the town of Orizaba" (86). Anna Lanyon, author of a wonderful book known as *Malinche's Conquest* (Cortes was called Malinche by the Aztecs), suggests that Marina was born about 1500, that she was sold into slavery about 1510, was given to Cortés in 1519, gave birth to Martin sometime early in 1522, married Jamarillo about 20 October 1524, bore him a daughter in 1526, and is last mentioned in council records in 1528 (Lanyon 1999).

Bernal Díaz records in detail many examples of Doña Marina's quick-thinking and determined service during Cortes' campaign to capture Montezuma. The highlight of the chapter specifically entitled "Doña Marina", however, is Marina's meeting with her mother and brother in 1523 and her forgiving them for their actions in disposing of her, for "they had not known what they were doing".⁵ (86). Díaz adds to the scriptural overlay of this

⁴ Cohen questions this date, p. 80.

⁵ Compare Luke 23: 34.

scriptural quotation when he concludes: "What I have related here I know for certain and swear to. The whole story seems very much like that of Joseph and his brethren in Egypt, when the Egyptians came into his power over the wheat" (86).⁶

The story of Malinche's life has subsequently been told in many different ways. For many Mexicans, she has been seen as: "an infamous emblem of female transgression and treachery ... a whore, the mother of a bastard race of mestizos, and a traitress to her country" (Mirandé and Enríquez 1979: 24). Paz (1985: 79) has harshly characterised her in terms of the title, *La Chingada*, "the Mother forcibly opened, violated, or deceived", a figure "representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards". And", Paz (1985: 86) continues, "as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven Malinche for her betrayal."

In recent years there have been attempts to restore her reputation. Mirandé and Enríquez (1979: 24–31), for example, note that Malinalli had little control over her sexual relationships or her social position that she nevertheless maintained her noble dignity even while she was a slave; that many other Indian women had also given children to Spanish men; and that Mexico was highly divided and constantly at war well before the arrival of the Spanish (Mirandé and Enríquez 1979: 30). They see Malinche as "an active, intelligent and sympathetic mediating force in the conquest ... an almost organic entity in which two languages, two cultures, and two races, met and merged." Todorov (1982: 101) describes her as:

the first example, and thereby the symbol, of the cross-breeding of cultures; she thereby heralds the modern state of Mexico and beyond that, the present state of us all, since if we are not invariably bilingual, we are inevitably bi- or tri-cultural. La Malinche glorifies mixture to the detriment of purity – Aztec or Spanish – and the role of the intermediary. She does not simply submit to the other (a case unfortunately much more common: we think of all the young Indian women, "offered" or not, taken by the Spaniards); she adopts the other's ideology and serves it in order to understand her own culture better, as is evidenced by the effectiveness of her conduct (even if "understanding" here means "destroying").

LEVÉFRE AND MARINA LA MALINCHE

Kim Lefèvre romanticises Malinche, whom she presents as a proud, independent and powerful young woman, the contented wife of Juan Jamarillo, but most importantly as Cortés' interpreter, and most especially his lover, who has received tenderness and compassion from him. The opening note to the book is one of defiant equality: "I have learned this morning that the marquis Hernan Cortés is preparing to marry Dona Juana de Zuniga." It soon continues: "As to nobility, I cede nothing to Dona Juana. I was born the daughter of cacique, and I am married to a gentleman captain" (Lefèvre 1994: 7).

This equality extends back to her years with Cortés. She insists:

⁶ Genesis, chapters 37–48.

At that time, no one pronounced Cortés' name without thinking of mine: Dona Marina - Malintzin in my nahuatl language. ...

I accompanied him in all his conquests, with the title of intermediary it is true, but in the secret space of my heart, with the title of lover, and I dare to say, travelling companion. ...

I was present with him at all his battles, I assisted him in all his discussions, particularly those, which were decisive, when he met with Montezuma II, called Xocoyotzin, "the courageous one", ruler of Tenochtitlan-Mexico. (7-8).

The key-word in her own self-understanding is "love", repeated over and over again throughout the book. "Do they reproach me for having collaborated with Cortés, or with having loved him?" she demands in her self-defence (8).

The feeling of love is there from their first night together. Malinche describes their union in these terms:

She was waiting for a master, she found a lover; this disarmed her. She gave herself to him. She discovered her own image in the eyes of this man, a glorified image which she had never known before. She did not know if he loved her. He had never said that he did. But the look he bore her consumed her like a fire ... (108)

His feelings for her are equally ardent:

He loved women then he forgot them: his ambitions lay elsewhere.

But this one, he wanted to search her soul, to know her most secret thoughts....

He could not give a name to this relentlessness but it pursued him into the heart of their frolics, to such an extent that when they made love he was unable to stop himself taking her with a pagan, cannibal fury which at first astonished him. (111).

A few pages later, in caring for the exhausted and ill Cortés, she insists;

I knew that I would love him, no matter what happened. He slept in a restless manner and, when he woke, his hand immediately reached out for mine. "Marina, my Lady of the Sea," he murmured as his look expressed an infinite sorrow. This was a man whom only I was to know, a man made for the love of a woman, and I believe that in these moments he really did love me. (116)

Almost to the end of the novel, he remains her sole passion: "I have vowed my love to Cortés," she tells Dona Luisa, "a love which has covered me like the cloak of night after the sun dies, and against which I can do nothing" (257). Unfortunately, this state is not destined to survive. After the final fall of Mexico, Cortés assumes the same arrogance and greed as those around him. Then: "He is no longer her captain, the god who has come from elsewhere, the man with the seductive voice, whom to look at is like an arrow wounding her heart." Instead, he is, finally: "another ... a stranger. She did not know him" (288).

Despite the romantic sentimentality of the love story, the book allows for some extraordinary psychological realignments within Lefèvre's experience of the nuclear family.

Firstly, *Moi, Marina la Malinche*, provides the heroine with a range of wholly admirable fathers. One is her birth-father, a man who is master of his own town and surrounding villages, who is "loved, respected, and who submits to none but the authority of the very redoubtable Montezuma, whom he serves" (11). He celebrates the birth of his daughter lavishly (12). His house is "the most beautiful in the whole country" and surrounded by lavish gardens (13). Her childhood is happy and her father, when he is not working, "loves to tell her stories of how the gods created the moon and the sun, how our radiant Quetzalcóatl, the 'Plumed Serpent', disappeared into the 'celestial water' because of the black magic of Tetzcatlipoca who ruled over the night sky, and how he predicted, before he went, that he would return again and reign anew" (13).

Although her birth-father dies early, causing her future troubles, she later finds his same dignity, care and gentleness in the expression of other men: Montezuma (171, 223, 242), Dona Luisa's father, Xicotencatl the Elder, and Maxixcatzin (238, 244–7).

Cortés himself briefly becomes the idealised absent father as well. As Malinche is in the early stages of unconsciously falling in love with Cortés, "she opened her heart to him, she gave him the place of her absent father" (96). He also worries, as her father did, when he is unable to find her (105–7).

As a sexual being, however, he more appropriately becomes the noble husband of her mother. Malinche gains great status by being his interpreter. In her relationship with Cortés, she is "our general's lady" ("la dame de notre général", 158), his "other half" (80), and even his "double" (243). This permits Lefèvre to identify with and elevate her mother, the socially condemned barrack-room woman.⁷ In fact, there is explicit reference to her mother's enclosure when, after their first night together, Cortés is suddenly called to battle. He insists that Malinche stay in his room. When she runs, naked, to "hold him back, keep him prisoner", he stops in response to her footsteps, then says: "Do as you did yesterday, hide yourself while you wait for me to come back and find you" (112).

The story as a whole provides a romantic insight into what a loving admiring husband might have been like at his best. "Apart from the fact that I loved him," Malinche says, "I had become his only confidant and this consideration, born of a life shared together, had created unbreakable bonds between us that were as tight as the warp and woof which held the feathers in a piece of cloth" (127). The phrase "Cortés and I" occurs as late as p. 279.

At the same time, in claiming the good husband, there is also the opportunity to undertake otherwise impossible rejection of the "bad mother", the one who expelled Malinche from the home and sent Lefèvre to the orphanage. Malinche's forgiveness of her mother and brother finds

⁷ See Lefèvre (1992 : 111–119).

no place in *Moi*, *Marina la Malinche*. The mother in the other two books is admired and loved, while the child takes on herself the mother's "shame" as exclusively her own fault, written on her body and her every gesture. Here the self-punishing act is rejected. The "unnatural mother" (100) is repeatedly condemned for having callously sold her child. The child is innocent and her sufferings, though sad, are aggressively justified because they have provided her with the opportunity for a far better future than she might otherwise have received.

Finally, the birth of her own new child allows *Malinche* to be hailed, by an Indian, as: "the foundation of a new race [the phrase also occurs earlier on 207], one which will ally the power of the Teules [the Gods, Europeans] and the wisdom of the Indians" (256). This "child of the New World" (251) is surely the fulfilment of an old dream: "a new land, peopled by *métisses*". In this land, the young girl once dreamed, "I would have a *métis* father, a *métisse* mother, and even my teacher would be a *métisse*. No one would notice me because I would be the same as everyone else" (*Métisse Blanche*, 41).

MALINCE AS INTERPRETER

Like *Malinche*, *Kim Lefèvre* has also been shaped by her relationship with language. As we have seen, specific languages have entitled her to occupy certain specific social and even geographical locations, and on occasion to move easily across boundaries. Both have profited by their ability to speak the languages of their fathers.

Historically, *Lefèvre* and *Doña Marina* are exemplary of the issues which face postcolonial translation theory. *Robinson* (1997: 11), captures these issues well when he writes about *Malinche's* "difficult position in the middle of power politics, a woman among men, a multilingual among monolinguals". He asks: "What power do translators and interpreters have in the political realm? And how is that power complicated by factors like membership in a despised gender, race or class?"

In *Lefèvre's* eyes, *Malinche* had little power. The proud first chapter concludes:

Those who say that I betrayed my people are ignorant of the facts which I am about to tell. The whole of Mexico was then shaken as if by an earthquake and the very powerful emperor *Montezuma* was unable to resist it. Do you think that a young girl, completely torn away from her family and several times sold to strangers, would have been able to stop of the flow of events? (10).

Perhaps *Lefèvre's* control over French language provided her with a safer haven:

What Vietnam refused me, France has given me; she has received and accepted me. When I weigh everything up, I am not disappointed. If I say that I am Vietnamese, people accept me as such; if I say that I am French, people ask me where I have come from, nothing more (*Métisse Blanche*, 407).

Her books, written in French by a woman born in Vietnam, link a series of global empires: France and Vietnam, Spain and Mexico. They are part of a wider, non-English speaking Southeast Asia and beyond, and are eminently worthy of our attention.

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