QUEERNESS, *MÉTISSAGE*, AND EMPIRE IN MARGUERITE DURAS'S *L'AMANT* AND KIM LEFEVRE'S *MÉTISSE BLANCHE*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for Departmental Honors in

the Department of Modern Language Studies: French

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 2, 2022

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ABSTRACT

This thesis employs an intersectional framework that considers the interplay between *métissage* (mixed-race-ness; ethno-cultural syncretism), gender, queerness, and coloniality in *L'amant* [The Lover] (1984) by Marguerite Duras and *Métisse Blanche* [White *Métisse*] (1989) by Kim Lefèvre. Both texts' protagonists can be classified as ethno-culturally hybrid or "*métisse*" because of their in-between positionalities vis-à-vis the French and the Indigenous Indochinese populations of the colony. Each girl's *métisse* identity, combined with her decision to pursue a sexual relationship with an older man, results in her marginalization, ostracization, and abuse. Additionally, both girls pursue a queer, homosocial relationship with another woman in order to survive and to escape their societal and familial dejection. These queer relationships occur within the context of each girl's educational journey, which are impacted not only by the influence of the French Empire, but also by the influence of their mothers, with whom each maintains a complex relationship. The thesis advances an epistemological link between queerness and *métissage* in which *métissage* becomes a queer(ing) structure that mobilizes affective relations in such a way that two bodies converge within a socioculturally marginalized space. This space also is mirrored within the epistemological realm of the protagonists as they seek to stabilize their agencies and liminal identities. Amid social and familial milieux that reject them because of their perceived transgressions against societal boundaries, both Marguerite and Kim pursue education as a means of creating a stable future for themselves while turning to their queer relationships to escape abuse and ostracization.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Benjamin Ireland, my thesis supervisor, professor, and mentor. It is thanks to his generous encouragement, guidance, and feedback that I have been able to complete this honors thesis. Dr. Ireland's incredible scholarship, mentorship, and engagement with students have inspired me to pursue a career as a professor of French and Francophone Studies after I graduate and complete my PhD. I hope to achieve even a portion of the positive impact on students and global communities that he has had through his teaching at TCU and through his research in the South Pacific in my own teaching and research.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Marie Schein and Dr. Randa Tawil, for their insights during the process of writing and revising the thesis. I am grateful to the Department of Modern Language Studies, the AddRan School of Liberal Arts, and Texas Christian University for giving me the opportunity and support to pursue this project.

I am extremely grateful to all my fellow students, faculty, and colleagues at TCU for their friendship and instruction. My experience as a student, my plans for the future, and my personal growth have been indelibly shaped by my interactions and connections here over the past four years.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering belief in my potential as a scholar, researcher, and future professor. Their support has been a constant throughout my academic career, from first grade through my college graduation and beyond.

Introduction

This thesis employs an intersectional framework that considers the interplay between *métissage*, gender, queerness, and coloniality in *L'amant* (1984) by Marguerite Duras and *Métisse Blanche* (1989) by Kim Lefevre. In this study I consider these two autofictional texts, both written by authors about their childhoods and coming-of-age in French Indochina, to examine how queerness and marginalization operate in differing sociocultural milieux, as well as in colonial(izing) educational spaces. The first of these texts, *L'amant*, centers around the adolescent Marguerite Donnadieu, a white, impoverished French girl raised in French Indochina during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The second text explored in this thesis, *Métisse Blanche*, follows the life of Lam Kim Thu, a half-French, half-Indochinese girl raised by her Indochinese mother during the First Indochina War. Both protagonists can be classified as *métisse* because of their in-between positionalities vis-à-vis the French and Indigenous Indochinese populations of the colony. Each girl's *métisse* identity, combined with her decision to pursue a sexual relationship with an older man, results in her marginalization, ostracization, and abuse. Amid social and familial milieux that reject them because of their perceived transgressions against societal boundaries, both Marguerite and Kim pursue education as a means of creating a stable future for themselves while escaping abuse and ostracization. Their educational environments and journeys are impacted not only by the influence of the French Empire, but also by the influence of their mothers, with whom each maintains a complex relationship. Additionally, both girls pursue a homosocial relationship with another woman in order to survive and to escape their societal and familial dejection.

Methodology

This study engages the complex interplay of *métissage* and queerness that Marguerite and Kim experience within their social contexts in twentieth-century French Indochina. When referencing *métissage*, I am applying Srilata Ravi's definition of the term as "cultural cross-braiding" that positions *métis* individuals as "valuable border crossers, negotiators and mediators not only between races but also between nations, cultures and linguistic communities" (301). Marguerite and Kim both exist between Indigenous and colonial French spheres of their respective communities. This in-between status manifests in every aspect of their daily lives: from their interactions with their heterosexual and homosocial partners to their relationship with their family members and educative environments. Each girl exhibits a sociocultural or ethnoracial *métissage* that causes her to be pushed to the margins of a society molded by the French Empire. The Empire's compulsion to maintain its control over the colony through strict definitions of ethnoracial and sociocultural identity necessitated the marginalization and eventual removal of individuals, including Marguerite and Kim, who did not fit neatly within those definitions. This Empire-influenced mindset of distrust and exclusion of the ethnoracial or sociocultural *métis* individual was promulgated widely within white and Indochinese society. In *L'amant* and *Métisse Blanche*, this dissemination results in the marginalization of Marguerite and Kim not only by peers, neighbors, and strangers, but also by their own families.

The racial exclusionism and liminality inherent in Marguerite's and Kim's experience of *métissage* is mirrored by their experience of marginalization as a result of their queer relationships. My application of the term "queer" is informed by David Halperin, who defines "queer" as "not a positivity but a positionality vis-a-vis the normative--a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels

marginalized because of her or his sexual practices" (62). Marguerite and Kim both pursue an illicit heterosexual relationship with an older, Asiatic man—relationships that are colored with queerness because of their transgressive nature going against the established social rules of Indochinese society. Simultaneously, each girl leverages a homosocial bond with another woman that becomes a significant factor in Marguerite's resilience and Kim's access to education. These queer relationships, both affective and physical, position Marguerite and Kim within a liminal space outside of the normative. Paradoxically, however, the choice to enter these queer relationships also results in the revivification of both girls' agencies, rendering them fluid, queer figures traversing cultural boundaries.

The overlap of marginalization, liminality, and exclusionism that occurs at the intersection of Marguerite's and Kim's *métisse* and queer identites creates a new epistemological space in which queerness becomes *métissage* and vice versa. This theoretical concept is supported by Benjamin Hiramatsu Ireland's definition of *métissage* as "an interiorized, epistemological channel through which affective or emotive linkages connecting one body to a network of bodies and minds can proliferate" (27). Through the channel of sociocultural and ethnoracial *métissage*, these affective or emotive linkages take the form of marginalized heterosexual and homosocial desires. Likewise, in the queer and homosocial relationships that Marguerite and Kim pursue, the *métissage* of one partner travels through the affective bond to overlay the other partner and the relationship itself with *métissage*. Based on Ravi's and Ireland's definitions of the term *métissage*, my analysis posits that *métissage* becomes a queer(ing) structure that mobilizes affective relations in such a way that two bodies – (1) one white or mixed-race and the other Asiatic or (2) two bodies of the same gender – converge within a socioculturally marginalized space. This space also is mirrored within the

epistemological realm of the protagonists as they seek to stabilize their agencies and liminal sexual and ethnoracial identities. Within this realm, desirous gazes proliferate: originating from and penetrating into *métisse* bodies, these gazes are also queer(ed) by the affective structure of *métissage.*

Both girls are continually penetrated by the desirous gazes of others, including their heterosexual and homosocial partners. These gazes are filtered through a lens of *métissage*: both girls' presentation as *métisse* heightens and alters the desire into a queer expression of scopophilia and consumption of Other. When Marguerite and Kim participate in these exchanges of desire with their own gazes, their *métisse* positionalities qualify their own desires as queer. The intersection of *métisse* and queer positionalites, mapped onto the contrasting experiences of both girls, result in their simultaneous exclusion from the normative in multiple dimensions: that of sociocultural and ethnoracial identity and that of sexual practices and desires. Yet, through their *métissage*-qua-queerness and queerness-qua-*métissage*, both protagonists find resilience amidst the social and familial instabilities with which they are confronted. Their queer relationships aid them in pursuing an escape from those instabilities through their Empire-influenced education to which they have access because of their distinctive *métisse* positionality.

Métissage* and Marginalization in *L'amant

Marguerite Donnadieu exists on the edges of socioeconomic boundaries that, although invisible and intangible, are vital to the subsistence of French authority over and control of French Indochina. In *L'Amant*, Duras inverts the typical colonial dynamic through her unique positioning of Marguerite that defies traditional boundary definition. Marguerite's social status becomes ambiguous and interstitial as a result of her intersecting identities as impoverished, white, female, and colonizer. As a white French adolescent growing up in French Indochina, she is nominally part of the ruling elite; however, due to the death of her father and poor monetary decisions of her mother, she finds herself, along with her family, in a state of relative poverty compared to other white colonists in her immediate circle. For Marguerite, the lack of a clearly delineated position within society means that she is pushed to its fringes, claimed by neither party of the racial binary of colonial society. She sits in the front of "the native bus… in the section reserved for white passengers"[1] while crossing the Mekong; her very presence in the vehicle is a microcosm of her physical and social separation from both sides of the supposed racial binary in French Indochina (Duras 9). She takes the public bus out of financial necessity, which isolates her from others of her own socio-racial background that can afford to hire their own cars, yet she is prevented from associating freely with those of a similar economic standing—namely, the Indigenous Indochinese—due to the socially insurmountable barrier of race.

Marguerite's ambiguous and ever-shifting place within the social hierarchy of French Indochina represents an enduring problem for imperial powers--that is, the natural blurring and renegotiating of boundaries and the resulting danger of "indifferentiation" between colonizer and

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[1] All forthcoming quotations from *L'amant* are adapted from *The Lover* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), translated by Barbara Bray.

colonized (Cooper 145). As Nicola Cooper explains in the context of Francophone Indochina, "the hierarchical configuration of the colonial relationship, and the erection of differentiating boundaries… are necessary to the maintenance and perpetuation of colonial rule" (Cooper 145). Marguerite, unable to fit neatly into either category, is rejected and marginalized by both sides of the colonial power struggle, as is her family. As Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler further note in their work on colonial identities, "The criteria used to determine who belonged where underscored the permeability of boundaries, opening possibilities for assertion among interstitial groups of 'mixed bloods' and 'poor whites' as well as those more squarely identified as 'the colonized'" (Cooper and Stoler 6). Marguerite's status as a "poor white" inherently threatens the fragile status quo of French Indochina, but her choice to enter into a relationship with a Chinese man increases her marginalization and ostracization to an even greater degree.

Marguerite thus assumes a *métisse* identity which is characterized by social, rather than racial, *métissage*. Literally, she is "incontestablement blanche, fruit de l'union d'un couple franco-français" (Drissi 271). Marguerite's white, French heritage represents her status as a white colonist in Indochina, a visible barrier between herself and the Indigenous Indochinese. However, her poverty places her and her family in a social context apart from the rest of the white population in the colony. As "l'institutrice de l'école indigène," Marguerite's mother's social status, and thus that of her children, is "au dernier rang de la hiérarchie de l'Indochine blanche," a fact of life that results in their geographic and social separation from other white colonists (Winston 66). Because of this distinction from both the white and Indigenous populations in Indochina, Marguerite occupies an interstitial, constantly shifting "*métisse*" positionality. Her *métissage* is further reinforced by her relationship with an Asian man, the Lover, who is similarly pushed to the margins of the racial boundaries of the colony. Even

though the Lover is Chinese and thus identified somewhat with the Indigenous Asian population, his wealth places him on the socio-economic level of the white colonists, a level which Marguerite cannot access. Additionally, he cannot be completely classified as Indigenous: he is a Chinese immigrant, and thus does not exist on the same social plane as the Indigenous Indochinese.

The burgeoning relationship between Marguerite and the Lover thus augments the status of each as *métis*. Through their breaking of social barriers that would impede the interracial relationship, they further blur their assigned racial identities (Fälldin 10). During one of their sexual encounters, the Lover describes how he sees Marguerite's body as *métis*:

> He says all the years she's spent here, in this intolerable latitude, have turned her into a girl of Indochina. That she has the same slender wrists as they, the same thick hair that looks as if it's absorbed all its owner's strength, and it's long like theirs too, and above all there's her skin, all over her body, that comes from the rainwater stored here for women and children to bathe in. (Duras 98)

Marguerite's *métissage* is thus enhanced by the active gaze of the Lover, which adds a dimension of perceived racial Indigeneity to her *métisse* identity. In the Lover's presence, Marguerite's body--including her build, hair, and skin--is figuratively transformed into that of an Indigenous Indochinese girl. This imagined transformation is a visual representation of the way in which the relationship between Marguerite and the Lover increases the functional *métissage* of both individuals. When Marguerite is with the Lover at his residence in Cholen, away from the disapproving eyes of both sides of the constructed racial binary in the colony, the assigned roles and identities of gender, race, and economic status of each member of the relationship become increasingly nebulous.

The relationship between both socioculturally *métis* individuals in *L'Amant* thus becomes a place of solace for each, where they can escape the judgements and expectations of society due to their respective races. However, this escape is transient: both Marguerite and the Lover

experience repercussions for their sexual transgressions in the form of the rejection and punishment received from their families, their social peers, and from French Indochinese society at large. The Lover is rejected both by Marguerite's family and by his own father, who swears that he would "sooner see him dead" than see him as the Lover of a white girl (Duras 83). Marguerite's family and peers express their disapproval of the relationship through physical punishment and ostracization, a topic that will be explored later in the paper. The negative reactions to the illicit liaison between a white girl and a Chinese man stir the anxieties that are agitated by the violation of social rules in Indochina. Even though these social rules are in large part unspoken, they are essential to the maintenance of the fragile balance of colonial French authority, which is why their violation is violently dissuaded through physical and social consequences.

The literary diegesis of Duras's autofictional novel is greatly informed by the historical and social contexts and boundaries of her childhood in French Indochina. These constructed boundaries included prescribed rules and identities tied to gender as well as to race, rules and identities which informed the structure, balance, and hierarchy of French colonial society. While French men represented the "superior power" of France through their colonial authority over local Indigenous populations, white women were encouraged to emigrate alongside their husbands as a "stabilizing force" necessary to keep Frenchmen from "going native" by becoming too attached to their Indochinese mistresses (Cooper 159). Sexual relations between white men and Indigenous women were referred to as *encongayement*, a French word derived from the Vietnamese *con gai*, meaning the female concubine of a white male.

Encongayement thus symbolized the conquest of Indochina by France, with the female body being sexually dominated by the white male colonizer, but also represented the dangerous

physical and moral influences tempting white males to reject French culture and homeland in favor of the "native way of life" (Cooper 154-8). If the French colonizers represented the colonizing power of France abroad, and Indigenous women represented the colonized territory, then white women symbolized the stability and dignity of the Metropole. Thanks to the colonial presence of white women, "[le colon Français] retrouve son 'home', les joies du foyer […] la dignité de l'Européen se trouve ainsi rehaussée" (quoted in Cooper 159). White women, added to the colonial equation as a preventative measure against these dangers, served as a reminder of the dignified culture of metropolitan France and as a pressure to keep encongayement more discreet. They filled this role by dissuading public, indiscreet displays of encongayement through their passive presence.

Duras notes in *L'Amant* that the white women in Indochina "don't do anything, just save themselves up… for Europe… some are deserted for a young maid who keeps her mouth shut" (Duras 19). The female colonizers in Duras's text are for the most part inactive, forever longing for and dreaming about the qualities of Europe. Even if they are "deserted," they can still fulfill their socially determined role: as long as the Indigenous woman "keeps her mouth shut," the infidelity of their husbands does not interfere with the task of white women to forestall the danger of Frenchmen "going native". Furthermore, in discouraging sexual relations between whites and Indigenous individuals, the presence of white women results in some measure in the avoidance of the creation of *métis* children. During the colonial period, these children were seen as a threat which could destabilize French control of the colony through their interstitial positioning that highlighted the "permeability of boundaries" (Cooper and Stoler 6). The presence of white women in French Indochina was therefore meant to discourage prolonged interracial entanglements in an attempt to reduce this threat.

Marguerite, however, directly and deliberately rebels against her assigned role as a white woman in French Indochina as she consents to becoming the prostitute of the Chinese Lover. While "amorous relationships between Indigenous women and white metropolitan males [were] a significant feature of many fictional works concerning the colonies," fictional representations of colonial relationships featuring white women and nonwhite men were much less common, and much more controversial (Cooper 156). White women were discouraged from compromising their respectability through mixing with the Indigenous population because in doing so, they symbolically compromised the dignity of France herself. Even though Marguerite occupies an interstitial, *métisse* positionality through her poverty and social status, she remains a white girl. Therefore, according to the rules of Indochinese society, she must uphold the expectations of white women in the colony.

In beginning a sexual relationship with a Chinese man, Marguerite violates these expectations and further connotes the menace of *métissage*. In this sense, the threat manifests not in her interstitial positionality, but in the implicit possibility of becoming pregnant with a *métis* child. Hamida Drissi explains how *métis* children were seen as dangerous to French control of Indochina:

> [L]e métissage est, pour le système colonial, une honte. De fait, le métis incarne concrètement, dans l'Indochine des années 1920, la contamination des Blancs par les Annamites. Il est, dans l'imaginaire colonial, la preuve vivante de l'échec de la société coloniale dans sa vocation à préserver l'intégrité physique et identitaire de la minorité blanche contre l'altérité jaune, perçue comme une menace pour sa pureté et son hégémonie. (274)

The *métisse* "contamination" of Marguerite, as a white, female colonizer who represents the influence of the Metropole, would thus symbolize the "contamination" of France herself. Since this symbolism could threaten the entire structure of power in Indochina, French colonial society must discourage it by any means. The different dangers presented by sexual relations

between white men and Asian women and white women and Asian men necessitated different societal responses: while the indiscretions of white men could be ignored, the scandalous relationships of white women had to be controlled and forbidden.

The difference in societal reactions to the two forms of interracial relationships can be seen in the ostracism that Marguerite faces as a result of her relationship with the Lover at her boarding school and at the all-white high school she attends. Because she is a white girl, her relationship with an Asian person of the opposite sex is shamed rather than accepted, as it would be if the genders or races in the relationship were reversed. Instead, Marguerite is shunned by the other girls as well as the teachers: at the boarding school, she is known as "the little slut [who] goes to have her body caressed by a filthy Chinese millionaire" and at the high school, the interference of the teachers ensures that "none of the girls will speak to her." (Duras 89-90). The only exception is Marguerite's best friend, Helene Lagonelle. This exception is notable because Helene, like Marguerite, lives at the boarding school: they are the only two white girls among the others, most of whom are illegitimate *métisse* children that were "abandoned by their [white] fathers" (Duras 70). These *métisse* girls are familiar with the marginalization and suffering that is their societal fate as *métisses*, but they still follow the social obligation of ostracizing Marguerite for disrespecting the unspoken laws of colonial society. Ostracization thus becomes Marguerite's social punishment for defying the colonial and social boundaries that restrict her agency as an interstitial individual.

Métissage* and Marginalization in *Métisse Blanche

The implied threat of a *métis* child present in the relationship between Marguerite and the Lover is fulfilled in *Métisse Blanche* through the protagonist Kim, the daughter of a Indochinese woman and an absent French soldier. Like Marguerite, Kim exists within the margins of Indochinese society, unable to fully integrate into Indochinese society or the French Empire-influenced environments of the various boarding schools she attends. Kim's marginalization differs from that of Marguerite in that she primarily experiences ostracization from the Indigenous Indochinese rather than from the white colonizers. This ostracism occurs in the contexts of Kim's Sino-Indochinese family, Indochinese friends and neighbors, and her *métisse* and Indochinese classmates at various schools she attends. Kim's marginalization due to her *métissage* therefore manifests differently than Marguerite's because it is primarily shaped by the Indochinese perception of *métissage*, rather than the white colonizer perspective.

Much as the white, colonizer perception of *métis* individuals in French Indochina was shaped by the French Empire, the lasting history of colonialism in the country shaped the Indochinese perception of *métis* children. Christina Firpo notes that "[f]rom the Vietnamese point of view Eurasians represented either collaboration with colonialism or, in the case of rape, colonial dominance" (589). In the eyes of the Indochinese, Kim, the product of a fleeting relationship between her Indochinese mother and a French soldier, is the incarnation of decades of French colonial violence against the country, its people, and especially its women. Kim finds herself on the receiving end of vitriol that is impersonal yet pervasive throughout her life, beginning from her childhood: "[Kim's first school teacher] ended up punishing [her] at every opportunity, with an almost patriotic conviction, as if by lighting into [Kim] she were saving the

entire country from the venom of colonialism"[2] (Lefevre 19). Kim, still a child, is neither responsible for the colonialism of the French Empire nor yet fully cognizant of its impact on her native country. However, by virtue of her French heritage that is written plainly in her *métisse* appearance, she becomes a target of suspicion and ostracization among her Indochinese neighbors and friends, as well as her immediate and extended family.

Kim's experience of marginalization ranges from smaller instances of ostracization to moments where she is in real danger because of her racial heritage. She states that "during the time [she] lived in Viet Nam, [she] didn't encounter a single defender of the métis. The most tolerant attitude consisted of pretending not to have noticed their difference" (Lefevre 263). Kim deems this overlooking of her visible *métisse* appearance "tolerant" because it also amounts to an overlooking of the connotations of her *métissage* in Indochinese society. She describes her *métissage* as "the mark of immorality, an atavism [she], too, believed in" (Lefevre 247). This immorality is tied not only to Kim's illegitimate status from extramarital relations, but also to Kim's mixed-race Franco-Indochinese heritage. In effect, this heritage is doubly emblematic of colonialism and of her mother's perceived betrayal of her country through her sexual relationship with a French officer. Lefevre writes that "[t]he suffering brought on by colonization, constantly invoked in public, aroused an anger that risked being harmful for me, as a métisse, as well as for my mother, guilty of having had a physical relationship with the enemy" (58). Kim's *métissage* is thus a sign of shame and immorality that is assigned both to Kim and to her mother, the one who is "guilty for having had a physical relationship with the enemy" (Lefevre 58). Unlike her ethnically Indochinese mother, however, Kim is unable to escape the negative responses provoked by the visible proof of her *métis* heritage.

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[2] All forthcoming quotations from *Métisse Blanche* are adapted from *White Métisse* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984), translated by Jack A. Yeager.

These negative reactions became more pronounced and more dangerous to Kim's safety in her Indochinese milieu after Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence in 1945, during the months preceding the official First Indochina War between French forces and the Viet Minh. At this moment, Kim lives with her mother and stepfather in her mother's ancestral home of Van Xa, where she was previously accepted by adults and children as an interesting oddity:

> For days on end they harassed me with questions [...] The children talked about me with their parents, who also encouraged me to recount my little slice of life with the French. My hosts showed me the same interest they would have given to a duck found in the midst of a brood of baby chicks. (Lefevre 51-2)

With anti-French sentiments increasing after the declaration, however, the village's attitude towards Kim takes a turn for the worse. In response, Kim's mother takes the precaution of "hid[ing] [her] as soon as any outsider set[s] foot in the village" (Lefevre 58). This fear for her daughter soon proves to be warranted, as Lefevre's narration of a particularly dangerous moment demonstrates:

> One day, a Viet Minh cadre from the city proclaimed his indignation at the massacres perpetrated by the French in Hanoi [...] Above my head, voices swore to wipe out all the French people who still remained on Vietnamese soil [...] Images of French people with their throats cut at the time of the Japanese attack [earlier that year] came to mind. Could it be that they would cut my throat, too? (Lefevre 58)

Though Kim was born and has lived her whole life in Indochina, her French heritage is proof of her questionable loyalty to her birth country in the eyes of the Indigenous Indochinese. Her *métissage* marks her as a potential traitor living in their midst, a constant reminder of the threat of continued French colonialism in the country.

The general uneasiness and suspicion of the Indochinese community regarding *métis* individuals finds a target in Kim. This suspicion heightened as anti-colonial and anti-French sentiments proliferated among the Indochinese. After the burning of Tuy Hoa forces Kim's family to travel to the village of Quan Cau, the adults of the village plan a "dress rehearsal" to

prepare for a potential French invasion (94). One adult suggests that instead of participating with the other children on the side of the Viet Minh, Kim

> should be on the side of the French [...] the one responsible promised to keep [her on the side of the Viet Minh] on the condition that [she] show that [her] patriotism was even more impassioned than the others. It was up to [Kim] to dispel the distrust that others had of [her]; that was normal when all was said and done. (Lefevre 94-5)

The burden of proof of Kim's loyalty to her Indochinese family and community is placed on the shoulders of Kim herself, a burden that she accepts as her own because of her *métissage*. During the simulated invasion, Kim is targeted by the community members playing the roles of French soldiers and subjected to a real torture session designed to make her reveal "where the [Viet Minh actors] were hiding" (Lefevre 95). After enduring several rounds of the "officer[s']" slapping her and forcing her to drink a bitter white liquid, Kim decides that maintaining her role in the simulation is not worth the continued abuse, noting that "[a]fter all, it was only pretend, a game" (Lefevre 95). Unfortunately, the suspicious adults interpret this fictional capitulation as undisputed proof of Kim's untrustworthiness: after their decision that "they shouldn't [trust] her from then on," the physical abuse continues, this time as a punishment for her betrayal (95). Thus, Kim's *métissage* is treated as a self-fulfilling prophecy of her assumed natural disloyalty to her Indigenous Indochinese community.

The communities of Van Xa and Quan Cau believe unquestioningly that Kim's loyalties in the anticolonial movement lie with her French heritage of her absent father, rather than with her mother's Indochinese influence. This assumption hurts Kim, who only thinks of France as "the image of the father who abandoned [her]" (263). Kim feels no emotional connection to Officer Tiffon, her biological father, or the French genes that are her only tangible link with him. The influence of these genes on her physical appearance, however, is enough to mark her as a perpetual outsider within the various Indochinese communities where she lives with her mother,

stepfather, and half-siblings throughout her life. Her *métisse* identity is immediately obvious to everyone around her, but as a young girl, Kim does all she can to ignore her appearance, "[avoiding] all mirrors, and [passing] over puddles of water without looking at [her] reflection" (Lefevre 73). Lefevre links Kim's refusal to look at herself to her desire to erase her French heritage and become fully Indigenous as in her fantasies where she "[is] the child of two parents of Vietnamese origin" (75). This imagined history is a solace from the suspicion of others due to her *métissage* and a reflection of her own desire to be fully accepted within her mother's family and the Indigenous communities of Indochina.

As Kim grows, however, she is unable to deny her difference from the Indigenous Indochinese around her, and this unwanted recognition begins to shape Lefevre's "narrative [that] displays a clear consciousness of her bodily difference from others around her" (Nguyen 115). Kim's visible distinction from her friends, neighbors, and family is a recurring theme in the novel. As a child, Kim tries not to acknowledge her own image, the undeniable proof of her *métisse* identity, in order to preserve her fantasy that shields her from the truth of her *métissage*: "I fiercely wanted to forget that I was métisse. Above all, I wanted to make others forget it" (Lefevre 73). This strategy of self-denial is ultimately ineffective, as the only person from whom Kim is able to temporarily hide her *métissage* is herself. Notwithstanding Kim's determination to forget her French blood and its manifestation in her appearance, her *métisse* heritage is immediately obvious to everyone else.

Eventually, Kim is forced to accept her identity and appearance as *métisse*. After her family's flight to Quan Cau, she stumbles upon a photograph of herself as a child among her mother's belongings. Lefevre describes this image as

> an identity photo of a little girl with a round face and short hair with bangs. I couldn't believe that it was me [...] She seemed so unusual, so different from the others! She had

> neither the same appearance nor the same expressions as those who were familiar to me. (97)

This discovery is deeply unsettling to Kim, whose mental image of herself is shattered by the incontrovertible proof of "otherness" in the photograph (Lefevre 97). Most distressingly, Kim realizes that she is not only different from her Indochinese neighbors and friends: she is also distinct from the other members of her family. Previously, "[she] thought of [herself] as Vietnamese, and [she] saw [herself], in every way, as intimately resembling [her] mother and sisters" (Lefevre 97). Kim's concept of her cultural and physical inheritance is entirely formed from her Indochinese mother and half-sisters, the family members to whom she is closest. Her realization that she is inherently different even from them forces her to "become painfully aware of [her] otherness [...] From then on, [she] knew that [she] was not like the others" (Lefevre 97). Kim's recognition and acceptance of her own *métisse* image signals an end to her denial of her French heritage and to her desperate fantasy of being the same as everyone else in her Indochinese community. The shattering of this fantasy, which had been a form of protection against her ostracization, exposes Kim to the abuse she experiences not only from her neighbors and community but also from her family.

Familial Abuse and Rejection in *L'Amant*

Marguerite also experiences abuse and ostracism from her family: in her case, this rejection is a result of her illicit relationship. For her, these consequences are not shocking: Marguerite recognizes that, upon entering into the relationship, "she's excluded from her family for the first time and forever" (Duras 35). Even at 15 years old, she already knows that as a white girl, to accept a sexual relationship with an Asian man is to willingly provoke criticism and shame. These consequences are equally applied by society to the members of her family, even though Marguerite experiences abuse from them as well. Importantly, Marguerite receives this familial abuse because of the taboo nature of her relationship in terms of the racial difference between herself and the Lover, not because of her choice to enter a relationship with a wealthy man. In fact, the poverty of the family made it necessary that Marguerite would need to prostitute herself to a rich man in order to keep herself, her mother, and her brothers afloat financially. Duras explains that

> That's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute. And that's why the child already knows how to divert the interest people take in her to the interest she takes in money. That makes her mother smile. Her mother won't stop her when she tries to make money. (Duras 24-5)

Marguerite, though still a child, feels a responsibility to help her family survive financially, which she achieves by exploiting the looks and desires of older, richer men. If Marguerite had chosen to begin a relationship with a white man because of his money, neither her family nor society would have cried foul. It is the fact that she instead fulfills this duty to her family through a man who is rich but is Asian, "not white," she finds herself rejected by all, which she knows will happen from the moment that she chooses her path.

Despite their disgust for the Lover's race, Marguerite's family desperately needs his financial help that Marguerite receives transactionally through their relationship. Her family,

however, cannot admit or accept the fact that they are beholden to an Asian man. When the Lover invites Marguerite, her mother, and her brothers to dine at expensive Chinese restaurants, the entire family is rude to him: her brothers and mother eat "without saying a word to him. They don't look at him either. They can't. They're incapable of it […] [they] will never say a word to him" (Duras 50-1). This rudeness includes Marguerite herself, who is deeply affected by the cold reaction of her family to the point that "in [her] elder brother's presence [the Lover] ceases to be [her] lover […] he's no longer anything to [her]. He becomes a burned-out shell" (Duras 52). Though the coldness of Marguerite and her family hurts the Lover, he does not experience any physical harm due to their disapproval. They cannot react against him except through their rude treatment because they need his financial support. Instead, Marguerite's mother and older brother take her as a victim, forcing her to endure physical abuse when she returns home from school and from the Lover's house. Their violent reaction demonstrates the dangerous repercussions for individuals who violate colonial boundaries. Her mother "hits her as hard as she can" behind locked doors while her older brother listens outside and gives encouragement, hoping for it to "go on and on to the brink of harm" (Duras 58). In response to the familial abuse she experiences, Marguerite shifts her interstitial positioning as a "poor white" girl to a poor, *queer* white girl. She thus embraces the protection and solace associated with her friend Helene with whom she forms a desire-based homosocial bond to replace the affective emptiness she receives from her family.

Familial Abuse and Rejection in *Métisse Blanche*

In *Métisse Blanche*, Kim's family treats her negatively because of her *métissage.* This negative treatment ranges from merely pointing out Kim's difference from native Indochinese to insisting that her French blood marked her as innately evil. The least harmful relationships Kim nourishes in her familial environment are with her mother, who is a semi-constant figure in her life, and her grandmother, who Kim only has the opportunity to live with for a short period of time during her early childhood. Though the grandmother loves Kim and does not want to hurt her, she is worried for her granddaughter's future, explaining that her status as "an alloy, neither gold nor silver," portends a difficult life (Lefevre 18). This assessment, though kindly meant, "wounded [Kim] like the edge of a knife. [...] [She] didn't want to be a mixture. [She] didn't want to be different from her [grandmother] or from the ones [she] loved" (Lefevre 18). This soft rejection is one of Kim's first signs that she will never be fully accepted by her Indochinese family or community, at least not in the way that a non-*métisse* girl would have been.

Despite the unease provoked by her grandmother's words, the love and attention Kim receives from her give the girl a sense of security, encouraging her to dream of a simple and happy future. She imagines a life working alongside her grandmother and caring for her in her old age, a future that "would be like a river that had hollowed out its bed. All that was left for [Kim] to do was to follow it to the end" (Lefevre 19). Unfortunately, these dreams are upended by the return of Kim's Uncle Tri to her grandmother's home. Uncle Tri, a vehemently anti-French member of the Viet Minh, is immediately suspicious of Kim's intentions towards their family and community because of her French heritage. Lefevre writes that

> [Uncle Tri] had the deep conviction that, given [Kim's] heritage, [she] was a tree that would never bear fruit. 'Believe me,' he would say to [Kim's] mother before [she] was born, 'a snake is growing inside your body, and her French blood will win out no matter how much good you do. She's a bad seed and she'll betray you.' (15)

Uncle Tri's distrust of his young niece begins even before her entry into the world: the mere knowledge that her father's French blood runs in her veins calls her loyalty and character into question. Even though Kim's father is not present to influence her through his French culture or character, his blood running through her veins is enough, in Uncle Tri's mind, to poison her entire being against her Indochinese mother, family, and community.

Unfortunately for Kim, Uncle Tri's unyieldingly negative perspective proves to be more representative of the rest of her extended family's reaction to her *métissage* than her grandmother's more neutral position. Lefevre's narrative reveals Kim's awareness of her family's distaste for her from an early age:

> [e]verything about me offended my relatives: my physical appearance as someone of mixed race, and my unpredictable character, difficult to understand—in a word, not very Vietnamese. They attributed everything that was bad in me to the French blood circulating in my veins. [...] I agreed with them. I also detested the blood inside me. (2)

Kim's family expects her to behave badly because of her *métisse* blood, and when their expectations are met, the blame is always placed on Kim's *métisse* French heritage. This simple explanation for any of Kim's misdeeds is not a chance for her to escape the blame, as it only serves as further proof of her general untrustworthiness and inability to grow into a functioning member of Indochinese society.

Uncle Tri, the most vocal of these disapproving family members, holds the belief that "only a snake can come from the womb of a snake" (Lefevre 19). With this statement, he is referring to Kim herself as the snake from whom only more snakes can be created, as he does not believe that she will ever amount to anything positive in life. When he discovers Kim skipping school, Uncle Tri doesn't attempt to send her back or force her to attend more frequently in the future. Instead, he sends her back home, saying: "What a deceitful race! I knew we couldn't trust you" (Lefevre 21). With these words, he dismisses Kim's disobedience as something inevitable

because of her French heritage. As punishment, he whips her and demands that her mother "[get] rid" of her, saying that "[i]t was up to the French to take responsibility for the bad seeds its army had sown all over the country. The independent Viet Nam of the future would not need its bastard children" (Lefevre 22). Uncle Tri's physical abuse is thus followed by the ultimate rejection: Kim's complete removal from the familial milieu.

When Kim's mother returns to collect her daughter, Kim still finds herself in a situation where she is abused and rejected by a family member. During this period of her life, it is her stepfather that fills this role. Though he himself, as a Chinese man, is an outsider to Indochinese society, he is not any more understanding of Kim's struggle as a result. Instead, he "harbor[s] a cold hatred toward [her]" because she is a constant reminder of the previous shameful and illegitimate relationships of his wife, Kim's mother, with French officers (74). While the family is living in his hometown of Tuy Hoa, he completely ignores Kim and speaks only to her mother, her stepsisters, and his children from a previous marriage. In a desperate attempt to force him to acknowledge her, Kim steals money from his wallet: rather than giving her attention she craves, even through punishment, the stepfather simply "let out a cold laugh [and] gave [her] a look that expressed all the disgust he felt for [her] bastard race" (Lefevre 74). He, too, treats Kim's deliberate misbehavior as something to be expected because of her *métisse* French-Indochinese blood.

Later, Kim experiences physical abuse at the hands of her stepfather in addition to the emotional abuse and rejection she continues to receive throughout her time in his household. Upon discovering Kim's sexual relationship with Duc, a teacher at her school in Nha Trang, her stepfather "[foamed] with rage, brandishing a whip that struck [her] immediately across the back" (Lefevre 164). This physical punishment is accompanied by verbal abuse from Kim's

mother and stepfather. Both parental figures' words echo sentiments expressed by Uncle Tri: Kim's mother "moan[s] loudly [about] 'letting a viper grow within her body like that'" while her stepfather admonishes her mother, reminding her that he had always said that Kim was "deceitful and vicious" (Lefevre 163). The repetition of Kim's description as deceitful and as a snake growing within her mother's body create a clear link from her punishment for pursuing a sexual relationship with an older man to the persisting expectations for her to behave badly, even evilly, because she is a *métisse*. This instance of abuse is particularly harmful for Kim because even her mother is participating in her rejection by revealing her agreement with Uncle Tri's identification of her own daughter as a malicious *métisse* snake.

While Kim experiences constant rejection from most of her family because her French blood prevents her from being completely Indochinese, there is one branch of the family for whom her Indochinese heritage means that she is not French enough. This branch, composed of Kim's great-aunt Ba Tu and her four *métisse* children, each from a different father, takes Kim in as a young girl and attempts to raise her with an eye to her French heritage. These women, in contrast to the rest of Kim's family, revere French culture and beauty. After watching the *métisse* daughters apply French makeup and nail polish and looking at the photographs of French women on their walls, Kim feels for once that she is not French enough to meet expectations:

> I found myself ugly. I hated my straight hair, and by extension all Vietnamese hair [...] I, too, dreamed of being French. Well, I was French, in fact, but only half: still, enough so that people could tell the difference between me and a Vietnamese girl but not enough to take me for a European. In any case, not enough to find me beautiful like the extraordinarily attractive images that stared down at me scornfully from their frames high up on the wall. (Lefevre 13)

Like the imagined scorn that Kim senses from the photographs of French women, the reactions of Ba Tu and her daughters to Kim's attempts to meet their standards of beauty and culture are overwhelmingly negative. When Kim does not immediately succeed at their lessons on French

table manners and comportment, one daughter complains that the family is "wasting [their] time with [her], [she]'ll never be anything more than a little Annamite!" (14). The implication in the daughter's statement is that being "annamite," a term Lefevre's translator explains as a pejorative reference to Indigenous Indochinese, is a character trait to avoid (Lefevre 1). Instead, in the eyes of Ba Tu and her daughters, Kim should strive to cultivate her French side over her Indochinese heritage. Kim later finds that this attitude is shared by the nuns, teachers, and even some of the students at the boarding schools she attends, themselves representatives of the French Empire in Indochina.

Mother-Daughter Relationship and Education in *L'amant*

Within the context of their larger family environments, Marguerite and Kim each experience a significant relationship with their mother. In both texts, the mother is the primary or only parental figure in the life of the young girls due to the absence or death of their biological father. In Kim's case, her stepfather is present, but his coldness towards her precludes the formation of any strong father-daughter bond. The relationships between each girl and her mother are complex and multi-faceted. The interactions of each pair cannot be characterized within expected dynamics of maternal love and protection and daughterly obedience and respect. In both relationships, the unwillingness or inability of the mother to protect her daughter from the abuse of the controlling male presence in the household proves to be a source of distrust and distance between the two women.

Marguerite's relationship with her mother, Marie Donnadieu, is defined by its duality of love and hatred. Speaking in the voice of her older self, author-narrator Duras notes: "I think I wrote about our love for our mother, but I don't know if I wrote about how we hated her too" (25). Using the first-person plural, Duras expresses the complex feelings of Marguerite and her brothers towards their mother: even though the eldest brother himself becomes an abuser and tormentor of his younger siblings, all three grew up in the shadow of their mother's poverty and mental illness. This mental illness, exacerbated by the death of her husband and the fallout of her poor financial decisions, consumes Marguerite's mother and prevents her from properly parenting her children:

> My mother didn't foresee what was going to become of us as a result of witnessing her despair… But even if she had foreseen it, how could she have kept quiet about what had become her own essential fate? How could she have made them all lie—her face, her eyes, her voice? Her love? She could have died. Done away with herself. Broken up our intolerable community. Seen to it that the eldest was completely separated from the

> younger two. But she didn't… She just went on living. And all three of us loved her beyond love. (Duras 55)

This love "beyond love" translates into a familial environment and relationship with her mother that is toxic for Marguerite. Beyond the physical abuse that she experiences from her mother and older brother, the responsibility of supporting the family financially falls on her shoulders from a young age. Duras writes that Marguerite willingly chooses to prostitute herself to the Lover because she "knows what she's doing is what the mother would have chosen for her to do, if she'd dared, if she'd had the strength, if the pain of her thoughts hadn't been there every day, wearing her out" (25). Marguerite enters the relationship to support her family when her mother could not: the young girl satisfies him sexually, and in return, he provides her and her family with financial stability. Marguerite thus becomes a conduit through which this transaction flows and experiences trauma on both ends as a result: from her family, she receives ostracization and physical abuse, and during her sexual encounters with the Lover, she sacrifices her childhood innocence.

The traumas that Marguerite experiences as a marginalized member of Indochinese society, as a victim of abuse in her own family, and as the sexual provider for the Lover prompt her to search out chances to escape and find solace. In the short term, she finds solace in her queer relationships with the Lover and with her friend Helene, a solution she uses to fortify her resilience that will later be discussed in greater detail. Marguerite's permanent escape from her abusive and traumatic childhood environment, however, is achieved through education—specifically, through a colonial education influenced by the French Empire in Indochina. Marguerite's education does not take the shape expected for other white, French girls in Indochina: she is one of "the only two girls in [the] state boarding school," a school which is primarily composed of *métisse* girls who have been "abandoned by their [white] fathers" (Duras

69-70). The fact that Marguerite lives in this environment surrounded by racial *métisses* emphasizes her own status as a sociocultural *métisse*: her association with these girls, who would normally be in a social class below her own, is facilitated by her family's poverty, which precludes her education in a more traditional environment for white colonial children.

However, Marguerite's sociocultural *métisse* identity does not allow her to blend in seamlessly with the other girls in the boarding school. She is granted special privileges because of her status as a white girl:

> [the teachers of the boarding school] let [her] do as [she] like[s] in the evenings, not [checking] the time [she] comes in, not [forcing her] to go out with the other girls on Sunday excursions […] The head agrees because I'm white and the place needs a few whites among all the half-castes for the sake of its reputation. (Duras 70-1)

Thus, the pattern of marginalization from Indochinese society that Marguerite experiences alongside her impoverished family continues. Even as Marguerite is separated from other girls of her race because of her poverty, she is still ostracized from her socioeconomic peers, the other *métisses* in the boarding school, because of her whiteness. Within the confines of the boarding school, there are two levels of *métissage* operating in Duras's diegesis: Marguerite's sociocultural *métissage* and the racial *métissage* of the other girls. The overlap between these levels serves to highlight Marguerite's marginalization as a poor, white, queer girl, which endures even within the *métisse* space of the boarding school.

Marguerite's mother also exemplifies this sociocultural in-between-ness in her relationship to the educational system of Indochina. As "headmistress of the girl's school" in Sadec, she worked in close proximity to Indochinese children in the colonial schooling system (Duras 9). This position reflects that of Duras's own mother, who held one of the "colonial teaching positions [that] were marketed to less privileged but educated and ambitious sectors of French youth" (Winston 64). The autofictional and historical versions of Marie Donnadieu both

display the same *métisse* positioning as Marguerite: the racial positionality of a white colonist in French Indochina, yet impoverished and living and working in close proximity to the Indigenous Indochinese. Marguerite's mother, however, does not want her children to grow up to live the same life as hers. She sees education as the tool to set them on a path out of poverty, and she has specific plans for each of her children, including her daughter Marguerite:

> My mother is a teacher and wants her girl to have a secondary education. 'You have to go to high school." What was enough for her is not enough for her daughter. High school and then a good degree in mathematics. That was what had been dinned into me ever since I started school. It never crossed my mind that I might escape the mathematics degree, I was glad to give her that hope. (Duras 5)

Marguerite's mother's ambition for her daughter is the reason for which Marguerite attends a French high school with other white girls, unlike the other *métisse* girls in the state boarding school. Contrary to Donnadieu's imagined future for her daughter, Marguerite views her mother's plans with the same despair with which she views her unsafe and toxic family environment, a mentality underlined by the use of the word "escape." Marguerite's own plans for her escape from the poverty and abuse of her familial environment, however, still rest upon her French colonial education in that she envisages pursuing a career in French literary writing.

This career is inspired by Marguerite's prowess in French, a language that she has the opportunity to study and excel in at the white high school. Duras describes Marguerite's passion for writing, a career that she "wanted more than anything else in the world […] nothing else but that, nothing" (Duras 22). Marguerite's desire goes beyond a mere inclination towards an area she has a talent for in school, or a way to spite her mother and strike her own path. It is a passion, one that she wishes to pursue even though she knows it will end her mother's "hope" for her future. Despite her daughter's success in the language, Donnadieu still stubbornly clings to the idea that Marguerite's future and path out of poverty lie in mathematics:

> "[T]he headmaster of the high school tells [my mother], your daughter's head of the class in French, madame. My mother says nothing, nothing, she's cross because it's not her sons who are head of the class in French. The beast, my mother, my love, asks, What about math?" (Duras 22).

Marguerite's deviance from the plan her mother has laid out for her becomes a source of discord between the two. When Marguerite informs her mother about her idea for a future career as a writer, Donnadieu expresses her displeasure: "When you've got your math degree you can write if you like, it won't be anything to do with me then. She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense. Later she says, A childish idea" (Duras 21). The disapproval of Marguerite's mother is rooted in her daughter's rejection of her guidance, a forewarning of her unavoidable "escape" from the familial environment and the abusive grasp of her mother and older brother. Duras writes that Donnadieu recognizes that "[f]or the sons there's nothing to fear. But this one, she knows, one day she'll go, she'll manage to escape. Head of the class in French" (Duras 22). Again, "escape" is used in connection to Marguerite's skill in the French language, a word that connects her French colonial education in the colonizer's language to her need to break free from the marginalization, abuse, and loss of innocence she experiences in various settings in French Indochina.

Mother-Daughter Relationship and Education in *Métisse Blanche*

In *Métisse Blanche*, Kim's relationship with her mother is similarly complex. The mother shows her eldest daughter Kim more maternal affection than that shown by Marguerite's mother toward her only daughter. However, positive development in Kim's relationship with her mother is often stunted or prevented by the abusive presence of her stepfather, as well as by the complicated nature of the relationship. Though Kim's mother loves her, she does nothing to prevent Kim's stepfather from abusing and rejecting her. Yet, she still cares for her daughter and wants to secure her future in the best way she knows how: through the French education that Kim's mother feels is her daughter's birthright.

In her earliest years, Kim is not close to her mother. Before Uncle Tri convinces her mother to relinquish her *métisse* daughter to the care of a French orphanage, Kim is shunted from family member to family member. Throughout this period of her life, Kim is isolated from her mother. She does not realize that it is her mother's influence that makes a space for her in each new familial setting however brief that space is available: "I didn't know that people got rid of me every time my mother stopped sending the money they needed to support me" (Lefevre 7). Even at this time, when they are separated and have not formed any emotional bonds, Kim's mother is the person most responsible for Kim's security and care, if only financially. As Kim grows, however, her mother becomes the family member with whom she has the most intimate and loving connection. Lefevre writes that Kim's mother "was the only person who had shown [her] some affection. [Kim] loved her" (163). Kim latches onto this affective bond. This bond represents the only lasting familial love she is shown throughout her childhood—-a place of solace amidst the constant rejection and ostracization she receives from the rest of her family and community.

However, the affection of Kim's own mother towards her eldest daughter is always tempered by the pervasive, negative influence of her stepfather. There is a brief moment in Kim's early childhood where she lives with her mother and her new stepfather, an unfamiliar man Kim is connected to not by blood or love but by her mother's marriage. During this stay with her mother's new husband, Kim does not nourish any lasting bond with her mother, who is too "completely turned inward upon her own pain" to interact with her daughter (Lefevre 9). Her mother's sadness stems from the fact that

> she got stuck in a loveless marriage out of a need for social recognition and material security [...] [S]he soon realized her error. As the days passed, she took the full measure of the lingering grudge of the man who had been wounded by her initial indifference. (Lefevre 8-9)

Thus, the stepfather's disapproving and antagonistic attitude towards her mother impacts Kim's relationship with her mother, even though Kim only knows him as "a periodic and hostile presence" (Lefevre 9). The mother's depression is heightened by her isolated existence within the community. Though she is not a *métisse*, she experiences reactions of hostility and mistrust because of her Tonkinese origins that differentiate her from the Cochinchinese community where she and her husband live. Lefevre explains that the cultural differences between Kim's mother and the other members of the community create a barrier that Kim's mother cannot overcome:

> She had retained the accent of people from the North, wore a turban instead of a chignon—so many handicaps in a context where regional hostilities were alive and well. In Cochinchina, in the south, people thought that northerners were stingy and lived only for their representation in society, for face. (8)

The shared experiences of isolation from their larger communities that Kim, her mother, and her stepfather face--Kim as *métisse*, her mother as Tonkinese, and her stepfather as Chinese--do not result in tighter bonds between the three individuals. Instead, all three subjects suffer their marginalization largely on their own, finding little comfort in their nominal family unit.

Once Kim is reunited with her mother after her time in the orphanage, the mother-daughter bond between the two women strengthens. When their family is living in Van Xa, the mother's home village, her Chinese stepfather's isolation from the Indochinese community decreases his power within the familial environment. It is only after the family moves to the stepfather's "fiefdom" of Tuy Hoa that his hostility towards Kim becomes a larger presence in the family's life (Lefevre 70). In Tuy Hoa, the family dynamic that existed in Van Xa is reversed: Kim's mother, who formerly enjoyed a stable position in the community where she grew up, is once again relegated to the status of a Northern outsider. Her stepfather, on the other hand, is in his element among his family and community. In his new position of power, the stepfather chooses to ignore both Kim and her mother, who "he lived with [...] as a stranger, hardly speaking to her" (Lefevre 71). This emotional abuse takes a toll not only on Kim, who has known only disgust and disapproval on the part of her stepfather, but also on Kim's mother, who finds herself once again isolated within her community and at the mercy of her cold, distant husband.

The mother's treatment of her daughter begins to mirror that of her husband: "My mother, in [my stepfather's] presence, behaved with me as if I were a stranger in order to win him back. I fervently wished to see her, if only once, stand up to him. But she never did" (Lefevre 74). This chain of abuse is similarly present in *L'amant*. In the presence of her family, Marguerite acts as though she is not romantically involved with the Lover. The disapproval of her family infects her own actions and thoughts toward him. Her relationship with the Lover is the source of their abuse towards her, and she shunts this abuse onto him in their presence. In both novels, the final individual in the chain of abuse experiences abuse not only from the original abuser but also from the intermediary who is both abused and abuser. In *L'amant*, the

Lover experiences hostility and rudeness from Marguerite's family and Marguerite herself; in *Métisse Blanche*, Kim is mistreated by her stepfather, and her mother does nothing to intercede. Kim's mother does love her and shows that she wants the best for her daughter despite her *métissage* and "ungratefulness" (182). However, in the presence of her husband and in the face of his abuse of her child, she falls silent.

Kim's own feelings for her mother are not easily defined. While she is hurt by her mother's deliberate choice to turn a blind eye to her stepfather's abuse, she still loves her because she is the only member of her family who returns that love. Kim's narration reveals her internal conflict:

> I loved her without ever knowing how to show her my affection. She reproached me for my harshness, and without doubt she was right. My feelings for her were complex; sometimes I was ready to do anything to make her happy, other times I had only one desire, to run away and erase the failure of her life from my memory. (Lefevre 182)

In expressing her feelings for her mother, Kim evokes the "failure" of her mother's life, a reference to her mother's shame as a woman who had a sexual relationship before marriage—a shame intensified by the fact that that relationship was with a French soldier. Kim's mother is determined to ensure that Kim will not go down the same path, telling her:

> 'Don't make the same mistakes as your mother' [...] [S]he told [Kim] the awful stories of those girls repudiated by their husbands, because they were no longer virgins. The only thing left for them was prostitution or a life of misery. (Lefevre 76)

The mother's own misery due to the disdain of her husband serves as inescapable proof of these admonishments to Kim. In the same way, Kim's existence as a *métisse* child is inescapable proof of her mother's transgression: with Kim by her side, the mother can never hope to escape her shame and disgrace. This mutual tie of shame and misery adds a further dimension to the complex relationship between the two women. Taken as a whole, as Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen notes, Kim's bond with her mother is primarily positive:

> Despite the conflicts Lefevre […] experienced with regard to [her] Vietnamese mothe[r], [her] survival is also an acknowledgment of the love and support [her] mothe[r] provided [her] with despite difficult circumstances and abuse from others within the wider Vietnamese community. (119)

Kim is able to make her way in the world because of her mother's support, both material and immaterial. Her mother provides financial support to the family members who care for Kim when she is younger, and her unwavering dedication to her daughter's education ensures Kim's access to a brighter career and future. Thus, the mother's influence plays a major role in Kim's development that goes beyond maternal affection.

The mother's insistence upon Kim pursuing her education is a constant theme throughout the novel and an example of how she raises Kim differently than her other daughters. These other daughters—the products of the mother's marriage with Kim's Chinese stepfather—are not Eurasian *métisses*. In the eyes of Kim's mother, her daughter's French heritage sets her apart from her other children not only because she is visually *métisse* but because her French blood predestines her for a better future. Kim's mother laments her inability to provide her daughter easily with the material and immaterial benefits that she believes are Kim's birthright as the daughter of a Frenchman: "My poor child! [...] A girl of your race is not a peasant! [...] If you were being raised in France, you would receive an education instead of living like the people here!" (Lefevre 58). In the mother's words, there is a distinction between the Indochinese "peasant[s]" and the educated French. The phrasing of this distinction clearly demonstrates that Kim's mother holds Kim's French blood in higher regard than her Indochinese heritage even though the Indochinese blood, culture, and language that Kim has grown up in all come from her mother. The mother's perseverance in ensuring Kim has educational opportunities is a direct result of her belief that Kim deserves to be educated as befitting a French child:

> [My mother and her Eurasian aunt Odile] both agreed that they could not leave me in ignorance like other Annamite children. It would be unworthy of the French blood

> circulating within me. As a consequence, Aunt Odile agreed to take care of me for a while in order to introduce me to a lifestyle more in line with my nature [...] my mother [...] consented to leave me at my aunt's only on the condition that she give me an education [at a French institution]. (Lefevre 109)

Just as Kim's stepfather and Uncle Tri believe in Kim's innate French "nature," Kim's mother believes that Kim's heritage must define her education, lifestyle, and future. Even though Kim's mother's interpretation of this French "nature" is much more positive than the dark predictions of Uncle Tri, it is still a manifestation of the way in which Kim is set apart from her siblings and the other children in her community.

Kim receives her first opportunities for French education through Uncle Tri. After he discovers her truancy from the local Indochinese school, he summons her mother and demands that she "'give [her] back to [her] race'" (Lefevre 2). Kim's mother sadly agrees to Uncle Tri's plan. She brings Kim to a French orphanage and signs a statement affirming

> that [Kim's] father was indeed French and that [he left] my mother behind with a child she was unable to raise properly on her own. The document also stated that my mother wanted to give her daughter to the French government, which would [prepare her much better] for the future [than her mother could]. (Lefevre 25)

This statement is significant because it reveals the response of the French Empire towards *métis* children during the pre-war period. It is in French-sponsored educational environments such as the orphanage where Kim is exposed to the French perspective on *métissage*. This perspective differs from the Indochinese reactions that she experiences in her family and community with regard to her mixed raceness. The French reactions to *métissage* in Kim's time contrast with those experienced by Marguerite due to the differing historical contexts of Lefevre's text. Kim's coming-of-age takes place during the middle of the twentieth century, as Indochinese rebellious sentiments were stirring. This sociocultural upheaval prompted French officials to search for ways to solidify their control of the colony, and one mechanism of colonial harness was through

the creation of government-sponsored educational camps for mixed race Franco-Indochinese children, including orphanages (Pomfret 274-5).

In the time of *Métisse Blanche*, French and Indochinese are in agreement on the *métis*'s potential for malice: "Dr. Rene Martial's *Les métis*, for example, published in Paris in 1942, states that *métis* are unstable and are characterised by a 'vulgarity that tends towards bestiality' [...] They were judged to inherit the worst of both races" (Nguyen 111). However, where Kim's family and community see no way to prevent her bad behavior because it is inherent in her "nature," the French Empire sees *métis* children as an opportunity to solidify their own control in the colony. Christina Firpo explains that

> [b]eing part white, the Eurasian children occupied the margins of whiteness [...] if francified and thus "whitened" in the protection societies, they could bolster declining white population numbers, thereby assuaging French anxiety about white depopulation. In short, abandoned Eurasian children's position at the margin of whiteness made them the first line of defense in the protection of the empire. (589)

Thus, the French Empire leverages *métis* children like Kim to preserve its own interests in Indochina by weaponizing their marginalized positionalities. A key component in this weaponization is the extraction of *métis* children from their Indochinese milieux, after which the process of indoctrination into French culture and language can begin.

The removal of Eurasian *métis* children from their Indochinese families and culture is of prime importance to the French:

> [M]any French colonists believed that the combination of a supposedly debauched Vietnamese mother and a Vietnamese cultural environment put Eurasian children at risk for social deviance [...] These children [...] were considered a threat to white prestige. (Firpo 587)

The corrupting influence of a *métis* child's Indochinese mother is of particular concern. Given her assumed amorality due to her willingness to pursue an often-extramarital sexual relationship with a French man, the French fear that the mother's influence would contribute to "[*métisse*

girls being] pushed by fate towards the dire predicament of the kept woman" (Ha 75). The specific language of the document Kim's mother signs reflects this fear: it affirms that the mother believes herself to be incapable of raising her *métisse* daughter "properly" and for this reason wants to "give her daughter to the French government" (Lefevre 25). In the language of the statement, the French Empire literally takes ownership of Kim, pledging to raise her "properly" and "prepare her for the future" (Lefevre 25).

The orphanage where Kim first receives a French education is an example of the French Empire's indoctrination of *métisse* children: "[a]ssuming French cultural practices to be morally corrective [...] French colonists placed abandoned Eurasians in French-run orphanages, where they were raised to be culturally French and loyal to the colonial government" (Firpo 588).[3] The necessary moral correction of Eurasian *métisses* through French education implies the immorality of Indochinese influences, which must be rooted out. Kim's experience in the orphanage underlines this practice: she is assigned a new name and number, 238, that become her new identity as a ward of the French Empire (Lefevre 27). Kim's new name, "Eliane Tiffon," combines a French first name with the last name of her absent French father, effectively erasing her Indochinese identity.

The orphanage's requirement that all the *métisse* girls speak only French is also a tactic designed to eliminate any remaining Indochinese cultural influences. Its efficacy is evident in the primary language of the other girls in the orphanage. As Kim acclimates to her new life and begins to learn basic French, she is permitted to speak her native language; however, while

[3] Notably, this form of indoctrination for *métis* children was localized to Indochina and North Africa. It was not the case in the South Pacific, as demonstrated in Benjamin Hiramatsu Ireland's research on Eurasian and Indigenous-Japanese *métis* individuals in New Caledonia and Tahiti. On the legal status of Eurasian and Indigenous-Japanese *métis* individuals in the French Pacific under French Empire colonialism, see Benjamin Hiramatsu Ireland, "Nippo-Kanaks in Post-War New Caledonia: Race, Law, Politics and Identity."

"some of [the other girls are able to speak to her] in Vietnamese [...] the rest remembe[r] only a few words" (Lefevre 30). The loss of the girls' native language in favor of French, the language of colonization and Empire, symbolizes the success of the effort to reeducate and "whiten" *métis* children. Later, when Kim is studying at the prestigious Couvent des Oiseaux, the other students display the effects of cultural indoctrination. This indoctrination is more insidious than the forced name changes and French acculturation in the orphanage: at the Couvent des Oiseaux, the boarders are grateful to be allowed to keep their original names and eat Indochinese cuisine (Lefevre 204). However, according to Kim's friend Dô, the other students "have nothing in common with [Kim and Dô]. They know nothing about [Indochinese] history or [Indochinese] literature. They are incapable of citing the name of a single [Indochinese] poet," instead concerning themselves with the fashions and society of France (Lefevre 206). These students are different from the *métisse* girls of the orphanage: they are fully Indochinese, the daughters of Indochinese families wealthy enough to send their children to expensive, prestigious boarding schools. At the Couvent des Oiseaux, Kim's *métissage* reveals itself to be not only racial but also cultural: unlike the other girls, she has benefited from French and Indochinese educational environments, resulting in her ability to traverse both cultures and her familiarity with both cultures' literary canons and histories.

The significance of language is a theme that continues throughout Lefevre's text. In Van Xa, before the arrival of the Viet Minh cadre, Kim leaves the the Indochinese villagers "open-mouthed, eyes wide with amazement" at "the French language [she] knew how to speak," the language that she was forced to learn in her time at the orphanage (Lefevre 51). This positive reaction shifts, however, after the talk of rebellion: Kim's French heritage and ability to speak the French language becomes something to be hidden and not proudly displayed (Lefevre 59).

Later, Kim has the chance to study Indochinese literature and language at the school in Nha Trang. She is unable to pursue this course of study further, however, due to her decision to leave Nha Trang and enroll in a French religious boarding school in Saigon. At the Saigon boarding school, where Vietnamese literature is not taught, Kim has no choice but to pursue French as her language of study. Though in the eyes of some Indochinese, studying French is tantamount to "serving colonialism," Kim feels that it was not a conscious choice but the only path available to her (Lefevre 175). This path defines the rest of her educational career, from the Saigon boarding school and the Couvent des Oiseaux to the university in Saigon and her highly competitive scholarship to teach French in Paris.

For Kim, this path through various French educational environments represents her chance to create a stable and autonomous future for herself. After succeeding in the entrance examination for sixth grade and being awarded a seat in the class, she has the sense that "[she] had just put [her] foot up on the step that would lead [her] toward a new destiny" (Lefevre 126). This destiny is different from the simple life she imagines as a child living with her grandmother or the destinies her mother or stepfather imagine for her. She tells her mother that she "want[s] to succeed on [her] own. Marriage doesn't interest [her], and a family doesn't either" (Lefevre 229). Kim's mother's example of a loveless marriage filled with misery and the anxiety and danger of pregnancy is enough to convince Kim that she wants her own life to be different. Though her mother's ambition for the fruit of her daughter's education is to see Kim become a midwife, Kim has bigger dreams: "I already saw myself with a *baccalauréat*, a master's, and a doctorate *ès lettres*. I would be known and admired; I would be someone to be reckoned with. No one would dare mention my *métissage* anymore" (Lefevre 195). Kim sees education,

specifically French education, as a way to negate the stigma that surrounds her as a *métisse*, as well as her own internal shame about her heritage.

This wish partly comes true: after Kim returns from the Couvent des Oiseaux, her stepfather's attitude towards her is changed to a degree. Kim expresses her pride in knowing that "he accepted me enough to call on me [...] he had thus been forced to recognize my merits; his prejudices would reveal themselves as unfounded. 'People of my race' were not all as 'wretched' as he thought [...] I knew that he could never make me suffer again" (Lefevre 226). Even though her stepfather's attitude is only marginally more favorable towards Kim and his mood shifts once she reveals that she wants to return to the Couvent des Oiseaux to continue her studies, Kim's greatest liberation comes in the knowledge and security that she was free of his terrifying influence. By going away to boarding school, Kim gains not only a temporary escape from her abusive familial environment but also the opportunity to forge a path towards a permanently safe future. It is also within her educative environments, both French and Indochinese, that she pursues two queer relationships that allow her to benefit from affective emotional bonds she does not receive from most of her family and to secure her educational future.

Queer Relationships and Queerness in *L'amant*

Marguerite's fluidity across permeable boundaries problematizes the line between colonizer and colonized and results in her ostracization even within her own family. This fluidity lies not only in her sociocultural status, but also in her sexuality, which is qualifiable as "queer" and which also becomes a source of agency and protection. Marguerite's sexual relationship with the Lover is strictly against the rules of French Indochinese society because of the difference in race between the two paramours, as well as their assigned gender roles with respect to race. The Lover is aware that as a Chinese man, his romantic and sexual advances towards the white, female Marguerite would be harshly punished if she were to cry foul, a knowledge and a fear that is reflected in his mannerisms: the very first time he speaks to her, "his hand is trembling. There's the difference of race, he's not white… that's why he's trembling" (Duras 32). Duras writes that Marguerite "knew that he was afraid. From the first moment she knows more or less, knows he's at her mercy" (Duras 35). The boundary to which both are drawing dangerously close is almost palpable in the physical tension and subversive power dynamic between them wherein "he is at her mercy" (Duras 35).

Marguerite is the white colonizer, but she is also the adolescent and thus the younger member of the relationship. Through her control over the "trembling" and submissive Asiatic body, Marguerite reorients her vulnerability toward a means through which she can regain an agency that she has lost, given her marginalized socioeconomic positionality and familial dejection in Indochina. Through this illicit relationship wherein she maintains control over the male body by virtue of her sexuality and sexual advances to which her Chinese lover submits, she not only obtains financial stability through him but also, transactionally, sacrifices her adolescent innocence in order to survive another day in a society that has marginalized her.

The loss of her childhood innocence due to her newfound role as a sexual provider for the Lover becomes a new trauma for Marguerite. To regain some part of that innocence, she turns to her bond with her friend Helene Lagonelle, the only other white girl at her boarding school that does not ostracize her for being poor or for engaging in a sexual relationship with a Chinese man. With Helene, Marguerite finds acceptance and friendship that she is regularly denied in her family and in society. Duras's exploration of this female homosocial relationship provides insight into Marguerite's reliance on her queerness in order to regain lost innocence and validate her culturally in-between place within society. By "homosocial," I am referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of the term as not only representative of a social bond between two people of the same sex, but as existing on a "continuum" between platonic social bonds and erotic bonds of sexual desire (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1). Marguerite's sexual awakening through the relationship with the Lover sparks a simultaneous awakening of her same-sex desire for Helene's maturing body. As author-narrator, Duras writes that "the most beautiful of all things given by God is this body of Helene Lagonelle's... nothing could be more extraordinary than the outer roundness of those breasts proffered to the hands… I'd like to eat Helene Lagonelle's breasts as [the Chinese Lover] eats mine" (Duras 72). Marguerite's fantasies about exploring Helene's body in the same way that the Lover explores Marguerite's own reveal her internal connection between her awakened attraction to Helene and her sexual encounters with the Lover.

It is through the channel of Marguerite's queer attraction to both of her partners that *métissage* is transmitted from the Lover to Helene. Helene, like Marguerite, exists in a sociocultural in-between: she is white, yet she attends the *métisse* boarding school instead of living among her racial peers, granting her a *métisse* positionality. Marguerite's internal connection of her two relationships augments Helene's *métissage*: "I see her as being of one

flesh with the man from Cholon… Helene Lagonelle is the mate of the bondsman who gives me such abstract, such harsh pleasure, the obscure man from Cholon, from China. Helene Lagonelle is from China" (Duras 74). It is Marguerite's queer(ing) gaze that connects her sexual interactions with the Lover with her blooming desire for Helene, transferring *métissage* from one queer(ed) body to another. Marguerite's desire is heightened by her perception of Helene as *métisse*: she links her fantasies of a homosexual relationship with Helene to her real heterosexual relationship with the Lover, increasing her attraction to Helene not only as an object of sexual gratification but also as another queer, *métis* body.

Equally attractive to Marguerite is Helene's innocence and obliviousness to Marguerite's sexual desire for Helene's body. Duras describes Helene's ignorance of her body's sexual nature, a fact that grants Marguerite a position of power in the relationship: "She's immodest, Helene Lagonelle, she doesn't realize, she walks around the dormitories without any clothes on… she still doesn't know what I know" (Duras 72-3). Rachael Criso contends that Marguerite is "in awe of Helene's body and mesmerized by her innocence, often comparing her own sexual knowledge to Helene's chasteness" (Criso 47). Marguerite's fascination with Helene's obliviousness to her own sexuality sharpens her unrequited, voyeuristic desire for Helene's body. Duras's depiction of the voyeuristic tendencies of Marguerite's bond with Helene plays into the novel's larger undercurrent of scopophilia, the pleasure of being looked at, especially as applied to women and girls. Laura Mulvey explains this phenomenon thus:

> There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at… In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 59-62).[4]

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[4] Mulvey's exploration of scopophilia and *to-be-looked-at-ness* is predominantly oriented towards the cinematic male gaze. Here, however, I apply her work to support my intersectional

In *The Lover*, scopophilia can be read in Marguerite's relationships with the Lover and with Helene, but it is also found in the simple fact of Marguerite's existence as a white girl in French Indochina: "people do look at white women in the colonies… for the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets" (Duras 17). Marguerite and other white women in Indochina cannot escape the constant voyeurism that defines their existence. Even when they are alone, not subject to the male gaze, "[t]hey wait, these women… they look at themselves. In the shade of their villas, they look at themselves for later on" (Duras 19). In this way, Marguerite becomes her own voyeur, a habit she has learned from the example set by other white colonist women and from her treatment, beginning from the age of twelve, by white men.

Duras writes that Helene Lagonelle managed to escape this perpetual state of self-objectification and scopophilia due to the fact that she "was a child still" (Duras 19). Again, through Helene, Marguerite is able to access an innocent, childlike mentality that she utilizes to shield herself from the awareness of her own "to-be-looked-at-ness," to use Mulvey's wording. This escape, however, is only temporary. As previously discussed, Marguerite soon falls back into scopophilic habits as she looks at Helene's nude figure, unconscious of its own sexuality, taking even more pleasure in Helene's obliviousness: "[T]hose flour-white shapes, she bares them unknowingly, and offers them for hands to knead, for lips to eat… without any knowledge of them and without any knowledge of their fabulous power" (Duras 73-4). Mulvey warns that this voyeuristic version of scopophilia, "at the extreme… can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs… whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an

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analysis of Duras's quasi-visual, literary treatment of similar concepts to those engaged by Mulvey due to the highly photographic and visual nature of Duras's writing style in *L'Amant.* This is caused by the organization of the novel around two photographs of Duras's life in Indochina, one real and one imagined (Cohen 58-61). On Duras's photographic framework of *The Lover*, see Susan D. Cohen, "Fiction and the Photographic Image in Duras' *The Lover*."

active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey 60). In this way, Marguerite derives a certain power and control through her one-sided desire for Helene's body, a desire that is heightened by Helene's innocence--an innocence to which Marguerite no longer has access.

Marguerite is thus torn between two strong, yet incompatible desires. On the one hand, she is obsessed with her desire to sexually consume Helene's body like the Lover "eats" her own (Duras 72). For Marguerite, the initiation of Helene into the world of sexuality and pleasure would be to mix her sexual experience with the Lover with her homosexual and scopophilic desire for Helene's body. On the other hand, Marguerite must preserve the voyeuristic, one-sided characteristic of her relationship with Helene in order to maintain her access to innocence and youth through the other girl.

Marguerite chooses not to act physically on her sexual desire, allowing her relationship with Helene to remain purely in the realm of the homosocial. This homosociality becomes a refuge from her unstable and damaging familial circumstances, from her need to resolve her family's financial instability, and from the ostracism of others in her socioeconomic circle due to her decision to prostitute herself for a wealthy Chinese man. In this way, Marguerite's relationship with Helene protects a part of her adolescent innocence by allowing her to structure an affective friendship with a girl within the same age range and, perhaps most importantly, serves as a conduit, triangulating Marguerite's relationships with Helene, her impoverished family, and the Lover. Marguerite's connection with Helene thus places in contiguity a queer, homosocial bond with an illicit, cross-cultural relation, allowing her to forge a path to stability and survival by tacking between both non-normative sexual modes while maintaining a protective distance from her own family.

Duras explores physical and scopophilic pleasure throughout the novel through her visually powerful prose that constantly guides the gaze of the reader. This gaze is queered when looking at the verbal images of queer relationships and desires in the text, which are represented in the illicit sexual relationship between Marguerite and the Lover and in the scopophilic, voyeuristic relationship between Marguerite and Helene. There is, however, another example of scopophilic desire in Duras's text: the desire that the author-narrator creates for the imaginary image of the younger Marguerite's body as she stands "on a ferry crossing the Mekong River" (Duras 5). The entire book centers around this image, which holds the power of the moment when Marguerite and the Lover first met, when she decided to permanently alter her place in society by entering into a relationship with him. Duras affirms that even if "[the image] might have existed […] it couldn't have been otherwise—the image doesn't exist. It was omitted" (Duras 10). The image thus exists only in the mind of the narrator, who can shape it as she wishes to create an image that is simultaneously literal—an image that "might have existed"—and symbolic, an image with representative power.

Describing the image that "doesn't exist" offers Duras the opportunity to visually introduce the younger Marguerite to the reader and at the same time introduce them to the themes of scopophilia that will permeate the text. Duras, as the narrator, demands that the reader gaze at her fictionalized younger self: "On the ferry, look" (16). Through her painstaking description of the young girl that lasts for three pages—her dress, her hat, her hair, her manner, and finally her body—the narrator directs the gaze of the reader around the imagined scene. The girl doesn't sense the eyes of her future self, or those of the reader, but she is cognizant of an intradiegetic gaze all the same. This is how the Lover is presented for the first time in the text: "there's a very elegant man looking at me. He's not a white man […] he's looking at me. I'm

used to people looking at me" (Duras 17). As the scene unfolds in Duras the author's imagination, her younger self is now the object of the gazes of the Lover and the people of her immediate surroundings as well as those of the readers and the author-narrator herself. Thus, Marguerite Donnadieu and Marguerite Duras take part in the feminine tradition of colonial Indochina of looking at oneself. As the white women in Indochina "look at themselves for later on," Marguerite Duras gazes at the younger version of herself in an action of self-scopophilia.

The gazes registered by Marguerite provoke scopophilic pleasure in the girl, a pleasure that the narrator receives similarly through the gazes of the readers and the retrospective gaze of Duras herself as author. "Queer" scopophilia applies simultaneously to Duras and to the readers, who are implicated in the exchange of pleasure and gaze by their implicit participation in the trans-temporal, discursive space. The reader is thus queered by their engagement and by association in the scopophilic penetrations of the bodies of Marguerite and Helene. Voyeuristically, the reader gazes alongside the narrator, the Lover, and Marguerite into the amorous trysts between Marguerite and the Lover; the homosocial bond between Marguerite and Helene; and the imagined, constructed image of Marguerite during the crossing of the Mekong. The queering of the reader thus assumes that the queer quality of the textual-visual space is a participatory one: one in which the reader traverses boundaries and times to gaze voyeuristically and collaboratively into Marguerite's human-to-human relations. Queerness thus transcends diegetic boundaries to operate not only within the story-worlds between protagonists and deuteronomists, but also outside the story-worlds. In this logic, the overlaps of queer(ed) and queer(ing) gazes reach readers who become both active and passive agents of this queerness. As agents of queerness, readers are found in between the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds – Marguerite's story-world and their own world outside – wherein signifiers of queerness and

métissage interact and intertwine. The readers' queer(ed) gaze into the marginalized relationships between Marguerite and the Lover and Marguerite and Helene solidifies the existence of this liminal diegetic/extradiegetic space in which readers are potentially confronted with the signifieds of marginalization and liminality.

Queer Relationships in *Métisse Blanche*

In *Métisse Blanche*, queerness is represented in the desirous gazes that Kim experiences as well as in the queer relationships in which Kim is an active participant. Like Marguerite's relationship with Helene in *L'amant*, Kim's queer relationships take place in educational settings. One of these relationships is with Duc, Kim's literature, math, and music teacher in Nha Trang who is more than fifteen years her senior. The other is a homosocial bond with Sister Aimee, an Indochinese nun at Kim's boarding school in Saigon. Kim willfully pursues each relationship to gain some benefit in her life, a benefit that is especially transactional in the case of her relationship with Sister Aimee. Kim is also frequently an object of the heterosexual desire of Indochinese men, a desire that becomes queer(ed) because of her *métissage*.

From her "earliest stages of adolescence," Kim's *métisse* appearance provokes desire in her schoolmates as well as in adult Indochinese men (Lefevre 73). Far from negating her feelings of ostracization due to her *métissage*, their desirous gazes leave her feeling even more alienated:

> I had discovered that the flame that lit up their eyes was destined for the métisse […] [T]heir attentions left me cold. I had the feeling that they were lusting after some forbidden fruit, like some strange object that they would like to possess once, just to see. It would never enter their minds to put me on the same level as their mothers or sisters." (Lefevre 73)

Their desire is stimulated and shaped by Kim's *métissage*; it is not simply her maturing body but her maturing *métis* body that is the object of their desirous gaze. Kim describes herself as a "forbidden fruit": her "forbidden" nature, in the eyes of the men who "[lust] after" her, is due to her *métissage* rather than due to her youth, especially in the case of her same-age schoolmates (73). Because she is *métisse*, any sexual or romantic pursuit on their behalf with the intention of starting a serious relationship is out of the question, precisely because these men view her as inherently different and separate from non-*métisse* Indochinese women.

This perspective is emphasized by the unwelcome attentions of the "live-in husband" of a friend of Kim's mother whom she refers to as Aunt Tha. Kim's family briefly stays with Aunt Tha and her partner while they are searching for a more permanent home near the stepfather's new job as a foreman. During this period, Kim is frequently cornered and assaulted by Aunt Tha's partner:

> Often, seeing me alone, he would take advantage of that to come up behind my back and immobilize me with his two hands. I would feel his warm mouth against my ear, murmuring about his taste for métisses like me, 'so much more desirable than Vietnamese women.' The fact that I was métisse added some spice to the attraction he had for me. It was like a disability I was suffering from and which awakened in him some sort of perverse inclination. (Lefevre 108)

The live-in husband's words reveal his differentiation between Kim, a *métisse* girl, and non-*métisse* Indochinese women like Aunt Tha. Kim's interpretation of his attraction to her as a "perverse inclination" underlines the queer nature of his desire. Beyond the fact that she is only thirteen at the time of his assaults, his interest in her is against the social rules of Indochinese society because she is a *métisse*, a "forbidden fruit." The live-in husband's desire is not just altered but is in fact *defined* by Kim's *métissage*. It is something that sets her apart from other Indochinese women and makes her "so much more desirable" in his eyes, precisely because his desire for her goes against the unspoken social norms of his Indochinese community, thus becoming queer(ed) through the conduit of her *métissage*. Kim is a powerless, objectified victim of his assault: his only attraction is to her *métisse* appearance, and she has no protection against him.

Kim is aware that when Indochinese men turn their desirous gazes on her, they are not directing their attention at her entire being; rather, they are only interested in her as an exoticized novelty. She also discovers that their attraction to her varies according to which side of her heritage she emphasizes through her clothing, makeup, or behavior:

> [Indochinese men] liked me as a 'yellow' métisse and not as a 'white' métisse. To sharpen their interest, I had to be Vietnamese first, with a certain French je-ne-sais-quoi, a certain something that made me exotic in their eyes. I was no longer attractive when I took on the appearance of a white woman." (Lefevre 110)

The queer(ed) attraction of Indochinese men to Kim's *métissage* comes with a caveat: they want to perceive her primarily as Indochinese, not as French. As Indochinese, Kim is more accessible: even though Indochinese men deem her different from non-*métisse* Indochinese women, she is still adjacent to them, a partial member of their same cultural and ethnic background with an "exotic" twist. When Kim presents as French, she becomes an inaccessible, foreign figure, perceived as a representative of colonization and of the colonizing Empire. This presentation repulses the desire of Indochinese men who would otherwise be attracted to her as an Indochinese *métisse*, thus demonstrating that their desire was never for Kim herself, but always for her tantalizingly forbidden *métissage*.

While Kim is a passive object in the queer exchanges of desire that occur through the gazes of the Indochinese men attracted to her *métissage*, she takes a more active role in each of the queer relationships that she nourishes after her move to Nha Trang. These relationships are similar to the ones Marguerite pursues in *L'amant* in that one is with an older Asian man and the other is a homosocial bond with another girl. They differ from Marguerite's relationships, however, in that the homosocial bond is the more transactional of the two while her illicit relationship with Duc, her teacher, becomes an affective haven for Kim. Kim's relationship with Duc goes against the rules of her community because of its sexual nature and because of the difference in ages of the two participants. In Indochinese society, girls are forbidden to have sexual relations before marriage: Kim's own mother warns her that if she were to lose her virginity, or even worse, to become pregnant, "[her] life would be ruined forever" (Lefevre 155).

It is partly because of this social norm that Kim and Duc must conceal their decidedly sexual relationship from her family and from the larger community.

While Kim does derive physical pleasure from her relationship with Duc, her primary benefit comes from the affective nature of her attraction to him and his actions towards her. While she acknowledges that “he [does]n’t love [her], not as much as [she] love[s] him,” the romantic side of their illicit relationship is what compels her to continue pursuing him (Lefevre 156). After their encounters, Kim finds herself “[r]eliving over and over the marvelous moments that [she] had spent in his arms [...] [she] had the brutal revelation of having lived with a complete lack of love” (Lefevre 151). Before this relationship, Kim’s only experience with love is through her bond with her mother, whose affection is liable to disappear completely in the face of her stepfather’s disapproval. As a teacher at the school in Nha Trang, Duc exploits his position to prey on his young female students, and Kim’s presence in his class makes her a target for his advances. Inexperienced and innocent, she is overwhelmed by Duc’s reciprocation of her schoolgirl crush on him and is easily persuaded to fulfill his desire for a sexual relationship because of her craving for his love and attention.

Duc’s own interest in the relationship, however, is primarily driven by his sexual desire for Kim. Lefevre describes Duc’s and Kim’s diverging wishes for the secret relationship’s direction as it continues:

> The letters he would slip under the covers of my books became more urgent. They would speak of my ‘languid body overcome with sleep,’ of ‘tortured desires, difficult to express.’ This new tone, laden with innuendo, heightened my worry although I had no idea what he might be feeling, except that it must have been something reprehensible [...] as for me, I was satisfied with our kisses and caresses [...] I wanted nothing more. (157)

The distinction between Duc’s markedly sexual desire for Kim and her more innocent attraction towards him highlights the difference in age between the two. Like the other Indochinese men who are attracted to Kim, Duc’s desire is increased by her *métissage*: he tells Kim that she “[is]

Vietnamese without being Vietnamese; that's what's attractive about [her]" (Lefevre 162). Thus, Duc's desirous gaze represents the same queer(ed) attraction that Kim has experienced from Indochinese men since her adolescence. The difference in this situation is that Kim reciprocates Duc's desire and actively pursues a relationship with him after he expresses his interest.

After Kim's relationship with Duc is discovered by her family and the community of Nha Trang, Kim becomes an outcast. Her parents and siblings abuse and ignore her, and in public, "girls [shoot] [her] sly looks, then burst out laughing behind their handkerchiefs [...] A gang of kids, lying in wait behind a tree, jumped out, yelling [...] 'The teacher's whore!'" (Lefevre 168). Though she was already marginalized in her family and community because of her *métissage*, it is her deliberate choice to break the social rules through her illicit relationship with Duc that results in her definitive ostracization. To help her escape the constant judgment and shame, Kim's mother persuades her stepfather to send her to a French boarding school in Saigon. It is at the Saigon boarding school that Kim takes the opportunity to enter a homosocial relationship.

The boarding school itself, along with the Couvent des Oiseaux and the orphanage of Kim's childhood, is a space of *métissage* where French and Indochinese cultures collide. All of the students and most of the nuns are Indochinese, yet the structure of the boarding school is French and Christian. When she meets the nuns who run the boarding school, Kim is surprised to find that

> [a]side from the mother superior, who was French, the others came from South Viet Nam, their origins given away by their dark complexions and the roundness of their faces […] For the most part from the working class, they had temperaments inclined to laughter and jokes, retained from an education that had not been very strict. (Lefevre 170)

The race of the nuns, along with their more friendly and relaxed behavior with each other and with the boarders, is vastly different from Kim's only other experience with nuns, which was during her time at the French orphanage. Kim is able to visualize the Saigon boarding school as

an educational environment somewhere in between the strict French Empire orphanage and the Indigenous spaces where she lived among her Indochinese family and friends. The nuns thus represent a cultural *métissage*, one marked by their acceptance of French culture in a religious educational space. Included in this characterization is Sister Aimee, who has chosen a new French name to replace her Indigenous birth name and who now lives the ascetic life of a Christian nun in a French boarding school. Through the channel of their homosocial relationship, Sister Aimee's cultural *métissage* interacts and converges with Kim's racial and cultural *métisse* identity, creating a queer(ing) link of *métissage* between the two women.

Kim's homosocial relationship is similar to that of Marguerite in *L'amant* in that it is characterized by a one-sided sexual or romantic desire. It is different, however, in that in Kim's relationship, both partners are fully aware of each other's feelings and intentions. At the all-female Saigon boarding school, Kim notes that "some couples formed, and some girls were in love with each other [...] upon whom else were we to shower our overflowing emotions? The nuns themselves had their preferred ones for whom they declared a forbidden passion that did not rule out the sensual" (Lefevre 178). Kim's words cement the Saigon boarding school as a homosocial space where same-sex desires proliferate, and though these relationships are not quite encouraged, they are also not persecuted. Lefevre describes Sister Aimee as "the nun who preferred [Kim]," but makes no indication that Kim returns her feelings either sexually or romantically (178). Kim is certainly aware of Sister Aimee's feelings, however, due to the nun's own admission: "She confessed the difficulties of being a nun to me, the temptations and the pitfalls to overcome. Her love for me gnawed at her, filling her with remorse" (Lefevre 179). Though Sister Aimee freely admits her feelings of love to herself and to Kim, she refuses to act on them out of respect for her religious vows. Thus, the relationship between the two women is

shaped by the homosocial bond between them, a bond characterized by romantic love on Sister Aimee's side but only by friendship on Kim's.

Although Kim does not participate romantically or sexually in her relationship with Sister Aimee, offering only companionship, she encourages Sister Aimee's preference and receives several benefits in return. First, when Kim's health suffers, it is Sister Aimee who

> became alarmed at [her] condition and forced [her] to go see a doctor [...] [Kim] could do what [she] wanted on the condition that [she] stay in bed to rest. For months on end Sister Aimee tenderly took care of [Kim], combining the devotion of a mother with the zeal of a lover. (Lefevre 178)

Sister Aimee's love for Kim ensures that the girl receives special attention and medical treatment, resulting in a positive impact on her health and greater freedom than normally would be allotted to students at the boarding school. Sister Aimee's preference also helps Kim access opportunities for higher education. Lefevre states that the nun "had taken a vow to give [her love for Kim] up [...] 'But not before helping [her] pursue [her] path in life'" (179). Sister Aimee's plan to help Kim on her "path in life" is to connect Kim with one of her friends, a wealthy and charitable woman. Kim immediately begins imagining how she can leverage this relationship for her own benefit, vowing that "[she] would succeed: the bac, the master's, maybe even the doctorate" (Lefevre 179). Because of her stepfather's inability and unwillingness to fund her increasingly expensive higher education, Kim is dependent upon the potential of financial assistance from Sister Aimee's friend. To secure this assistance, she must also continue to nourish her homosocial bond with Sister Aimee, which causes their relationship to take on a transactional dimension despite the genuine feelings of love or friendship on each side. Eventually, Kim's investment in her relationship with Sister Aimee pays off: the nun's friend, Madame N., becomes Kim's godmother and pays her tuition at the Couvent des Oiseaux, paving

Kim’s way towards multiple degrees and a career that helps her obtain financial stability and personal autonomy.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this thesis that the protagonists of Duras' *L'amant* and Lefevre's *Métisse Blanche* exist at a unique intersection of queerness and *métissage* that simultaneously marginalizes them and empowers them to forge a path towards an autonomous future of their own choosing. Marguerite and Kim live in different eras of French colonialism in Indochina and correspond to different ranks in the colonial hierarchy: according to racial colonial boundaries, Marguerite, as a white girl raised by her French mother, should exist in a completely separate sphere from Kim, a true racial *métisse* raised by her Indigenous Indochinese mother. Each protagonist's ostracization and *métissage*, however, result in both girls' remarkably similar experiences and positionalities in colonial French Indochinese society.

It is their location at the margins of their respective sociocultural milieu that frames each girl's interaction with the educational system of the French Empire in Indochina. This educational environment exists to control and indoctrinate *métisse* and Indigenous populations, as this study has demonstrated. For both girls, French colonial educational systems paradoxically offer a means of escape from toxic and unsafe familial environments and in fact represent a path towards an autonomous future, despite the systems' intentional design as tools of colonization and subjugation. Marguerite and Kim also align in their decisions to pursue queer relationships in the form of illicit heterosexual relationships with older Asiatic men and homosocial bonds with other women. These relationships provide each girl with transactional benefits, including financial security for Marguerite and educational opportunities for Kim and affective solace and protection. Both Marguerite and Kim leverage their queer relationships to endure and escape societal ostracization and familial abuse.

This project links queerness and *métissage*, advancing a theory of *métissage* as a channel through which queer relationships and bonds can travel and connect individuals. Each protagonist experiences marginalization simultaneously due to her cultural or ethnic *métissage* and as a result of her conscious choice to enter illicit and queer relationships. Thus, queerness and *métissage* also interact and converge in the liminal space in which each protagonist exists at the margins of her society. Marguerite's queer sexual relationship with the Lover heightens the *métissage* of each partner because of the way in which their relationship further complicates the permeable boundaries of race and class in colonial Indochina. Meanwhile, Kim's relationship with Duc is an example of how her *métissage* queers the attraction of Indochinese men to her *métisse* body: though their desire is heterosexual, it is amplified and queered by the knowledge that Kim is Other and thus forbidden by the rules of Indochinese society.

Each girl's affective homosocial bond is also impacted by their cultural *métissage*: in both texts, the homosocial bond occurs in an educational space that is characterized by its existence between French and Indochinese cultures. Marguerite's voyeuristic, one-sided homosocial bond with Helene takes place in the context of the boarding school for *métisse* children where they are the only white girls. Similarly, Kim's transactional relationship with Sister Aimee is made possible through their connection in a French religious boarding school for Indochinese girls. Each homosocial relationship is indelibly marked by the *métissage* of one of the participants, a *métissage* that travels through the queer(ing) channel of the relationship to impact the other woman – and readers – as well.

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