ARTICLE

Ru by Kim Thúy: A Transcultural Tale of Mother-Daughter Lineage and Maternal Legacy

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SUMMARY

Vietnamese-Canadian author Kim Thúy's first award-winning novel *Ru* (2009) charts the transformative journey that takes its protagonist and narrator, Nguyễn An Tịnh, from Saigon, as a refugee of war, to Québec, where she realizes her "American dream." Thúy's poetic and fragmented narrative brings out new interpretations of the common themes of cultural roots, maternity, and mother-daughter relationships in women's migrant literature. Tracing An Tịnh's transformation, two tasks – her pursuit of independence and acceptance of responsibility – are integral in the mapping of her transcultural becoming. These tasks remain in conflict until she recognizes the importance of preserving her Vietnamese cultural heritage. Focusing on the portrayals of several major female characters in the book, this essay seeks to prove that the emergence of transculturality in the protagonist's identity is premised on the appreciation for her cultural roots, the maintenance of which is a collective effort by these women.

KEYWORDS: Kim Thúy, *Ru*, Vietnam War, migration, mother-daughter dyad, refugee, exile, cultural legacy, transculturality, gender in war

Ru, Kim Thúy's first semi-autobiographical novel, published in 2009, distinguishes itself from conventional migrant narratives by focusing on the identity construction of a transcultural individual named Nguyễn An Tịnh in the conditions of war and diaspora. Winner of the prestigious 2010 Governor General's Award, the novel is described as an attempt to "réinventer complètement le récit migrant traditionnel, le rendant à nouveau intact et extraordinaire." The jury's praise corresponds to the narrative's hopeful ending with an image of rebirth and renewal: "un phénix renaissant de ses cendres" (138), referring to the collective resilience and success of the Vietnamese diaspora in the book. Such a triumphant final note is an emblematic example of Thúy's writing, which takes an unconventional approach to exploring common themes of migrant literature, such as intense struggle, loss, trauma, and death.

In his insightful discussion of questions of transculturalism and *écritures migrantes*, Gilles Dupuis asserts that the discourse of transculturalism takes place when two or more cultures take antithetical positions in a dialoguing process leading to "continuous reassessment of identity" (500). He further stresses the ultimate goal of this process, which is "to transform each other's identity through a long, arduous, and sometimes painful negotiation of Otherness" (500). In other words, identity-construction is predicated on transformation, through which the self becomes an assemblage of others. Targeted by the communist regime for their upper-class status in postwar Vietnam, An Tịnh's family is forced to embark on a brutal voyage and endure months in a

Malaysian refugee camp before rebuilding their lives in Québec, Canada. During her return to Vietnam as an adult, An Tịnh quickly comes to realize that "je n'avais plus le droit de me proclaimer vietnamienne parce que j'avais perdu leur fragilité, leur incertitude, leurs peurs" (84). At the same time, she is reminded by her employer of the cruel reality that she would never truly be part of the "nation québécoise" (85) because of her Asian descent. On one hand, the narrator's inability of fully identifying herself with either culture confirms Dupuis' argument that becoming transcultural is a "painful negotiation of Otherness" (500). On the other hand, in navigating cultural flows, memories, and worlds, the protagonist has experienced a series of transformations at both external and internal levels, a process that eventually results in her openness to the Other. Her decision to "aimer tous, sans appartenir à aucun" (85) illuminates her constant search for a new sense of the self that is not bound by a single culture or worldview. In light of Dupuis's argument, this article considers *Ru* as a text that translates the actual process of becoming transcultural through the extraordinary adventure of the narrator-protagonist and particularly, the vital influence of several female figures on this process throughout the book.

Above all, *Ru* is not an epic of war heroes but a lullaby of maternal legacy. In his article "*Ru* de Kim Thúy ou l'alchimie de l'épreuve," Anthony Soron notes that Thúy favors anecdotes over epics, forming a "anti-épopée [dans laquelle] il n'y a pas de héros" (6). For example, by means of compelling portrayals of several female characters, the author pays special homage to the women that have influenced her identity quest, first as an immigrant, and, later, as a mother. During an interview, Thúy claims that rather than being a spokesperson of the Vietnamese history, she wants to be "une admiratrice ou quelqu'un qui a une grande gratitude envers elles [ces femmes]" ("Habiller le vécu" 171). The author's intention is clearly reflected in her choice of the word "ru" as the book's title for its dual interpretation: "petit ruisseau, écoulement (de larmes, de sang, d'argent)" in French, and "berceuse, bercer" in Vietnamese.

While the first interpretation highlights the founding experiences of the book: exile and migration, the second connotation, evoking a mother's assuaging gesture, reveals the central issues of maternity and mother-daughter relationship that shed light on the protagonist's self-(re)discovery. The two meanings create a balance between loss and uncertainty on the one hand and hope and assurance on the other. Such a dichotomy also corresponds to the two sides of the narrator's transoceanic journey, during which "le paradis et l'enfer s'étaient enlaces dans le ventre de [leur] bateau" (13). In the book, the motif of "lullaby" and the gesture of "lulling" are associated with the essential stages of the protagonist's transforming experience. The word "berceuse" first appears in its literal sense, referring to the soothing melodies that the narrator heard a Vietnamese mother sing to calm her child during the boat journey. Paralyzed by immense fear, the protagonist tried to sleep "au rythme de la berceuse chantée par [sa] voisine" (17). It appears again when An Tịnh recalls her impression of the French words enunciated by Marie-France, her first French instructor in Canada: "j'étais bercée par un nuage de fraîcheur, de légèreté, de doux parfum" (19). At the end of the book, lullaby is used metaphorically to define the narrator's understanding of a country, which "n'est plus un lieu, mais une berceuse" (138). Over the course of her journey, An Tịnh's mother, as well as several motherly figures, plays a crucial role in the process of her transformation, following the path "from riches to rags to riches" (Bartley 1). While some of them remind her of the importance of reconnecting with her Vietnamese heritage, others inspire her to adopt a different set of cultural values and look far ahead amidst tribulations. The recurring use of "berceuse" also refers to the narrator's own maternity and her relationship with her mother, which has irrevocably changed after their departure from Vietnam.

According to Marie-Hélène Urro, in order to understand An Tịnh's inspiring metamorphosis, one should focus on the discourse of transculturality in Thúy's writing. While "la misère de l'exil est racontée," Urro argues, "Il [le récit de Thúy] parle d'une double appartenance identitaire et culturelle plutôt que d'une ambivalence, ce qui le rattache davantage à la transculturalité qu'à la migrance" (13). In the narrative, such a "double sense of belonging" is interpreted as a hybrid condition – "moitié ci, moitié ça, rien du tout et tout en même temps" (131) – that the protagonist recognizes in herself. The hybridity of her identity allows An Tịnh to observe each culture from a certain distance instead of adhering to one without reservations. As Jeanette den Toonder observes, diverse cultural values "intersect within the protagonist" without taking over (52). This essay sheds light on how the formation of the protagonist's transcultural self is presented and shaped by the relationships that she has developed with several women, especially her mother, during her migratory journey. In the following sections, I will present a variety of examples regarding how these relations are intertwined with questions of history, memory, and identity. I will first discuss how An Tịnh discloses the history of Vietnam by means of powerful images of wartime mothers, whose love and suffering instill a renewed understanding of motherhood in her. The second section focuses on the relationship between the protagonist and her mother, which, oscillating between affinity and aversion, contributes significantly to the daughter's transformation. My analysis in the last section illuminates how the heroine copes with her transcultural identity while partaking in the building and the preservation of the maternal legacy within her community.

Rediscovering the stories of Vietnamese (m)others

In the introduction of their comparative study of *Les pieds sales* (2009) and *Ru*, Christophe Premat and Françoise Sule state that migrant writing is characterized by its frequent use of (auto)biographical elements (137). As a fictionalized memoir, *Ru* is contextualized by significant historical events; however, instead of focusing on the course of these events, the narrator is more interested in restoring the stories of the anonymous. Throughout the book, the individual experience is interlaced with the collective through shared memories and emotions. It is undeniable that *Ru* is an antithesis of History – "l'Histoire du Vietnam, celle avec un grand H" (12) – which is oblivious to the boat people's suffering and survival. "Il y a une maison d'édition [au Vietnam] qui m'a demandé d'enlever les passages sur les *boat people* enfin de publier *Ru*," the author states in an interview, "mais dans ce cas il ne reste plus rien de mon livre" ("De rescapée" 183). In addition, the boat people's tumultuous experience is highlighted by the novel's fragmentary structure. Instead of presenting a chronological account, the narrative is composed of 114 vignettes, interconnected with sensory fragments (i.e., a sound, a visual, a scent) that trigger the narrator's memories. Throughout the book, An Tịnh recounts her experience during the Vietnam War by lending voice to those whom political propaganda attempted to mute. Many of them are women remembered for their pivotal role in building and embodying the dignity and the spirit of their country.

It is essential, when examining issues of motherhood and maternal legacy in the text, to frame them in the context of the Vietnam War. In her book *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (2001), Hue-Tam Ho Tai draws an analogy between Greek mythology and the Vietnamese word for commemoration: *tưởng niệm*. Inspired by the dual roles of Mnemosyne, the goddess of both memory and imagination, the ancient Greeks defined memory as "imagining the past" (166). The same belief is found in the Vietnamese term "tưởng niệm,"

which combines "imagining" (tưởng) with "remembering" (niệm). "In Vietnam, memory has no name," Tai posits, "but it has many faces, and, like that of Mnemosyne, they are faces of women" (167). In *Ru*, the imagery of Vietnamese womanhood shifts from exhausted peasants to resourceful housewives, to vigorous prostitutes, to street vendors of vermicelli soup. Absent in the country's official documents, they are central to the creation of the novel. Revisiting their experiences with gratitude and admiration empowers An Tịnh, as Vinh Nguyen notes, "to piece together the broken shards of selfhood" (34). Among all the female characters, it is the impact made by those who are or resemble mothers that I am most interested in analyzing in order to illuminate the protagonist's self-reinvention.

According to the narrator, regardless of their contributions, many women share the same fate of being "éteintes ainsi sous cette lourdeur, dans le silence" (46) in wartime Vietnam. Depicting women's sufferings as "silent endurance" denotes a gendered perspective in the author's representations of wartime hardships. As Helle Rydström claims, depending on their genders, individuals' wartime experiences are construed in different ways: "(W)hile men's sacrifices were associated with a fictive brotherhood of arms, women's suffering was related to their kin position as mothers of enlisted sons" (275). An emblematic portrayal of endurance in the novel is that of brokenhearted mothers who lose their children in the war. The nation's devastated land and wounded pride pressures women to prioritize the merit of patriotism over their personal losses. To console the mothers whose sons died defending the patriotic cause, in 1994, the government created the title of "Vietnamese Heroic Mother," an honorary mechanism that grants these mothers social security and allowance. According to Ho Tai, women-as-mothers became the dominant representation of female war heroes, which "vastly outnumbered depictions of women's war-related activities" (179). The scheme of recognition is based on the conviction that the value of maternity is officially acknowledged only when it is beneficial to the nation's cause.

Ru focuses on the mothers whose children are dead because of the war, but not for the revolutionary cause. These mothers are not heroic according to the official criteria used to gauge women's sacrifices.[1] However, their stories allow the narrator to stay connected with her past as a political refugee while reflecting on her own motherhood as an immigrant in the adopted country. After becoming a mother, the narrator is more sensitive to their afflictions. Memories of wartime mothers are usually triggered by her personal experiences as a mother. For example, after seeing Pascal, her elder son, save his little brother Henri from an impending car accident, An Tịnh's bursts into tears of relief. With both sons in her arms, she immediately immerses herself in the painful memory of a young Vietnamese mother who watched her innocent son being brutally executed by a soldier in a paddy field:

> Sa mère a couru à travers cette rizière où les traces des pieds de son fils étaient encore fraîches. Les jeunes pousses de riz continuaient à être bercées par le vent, impassibles devant la brutalité de ces amours trop grands, de ces douleurs trop sourdes pour que les larmes coulent, pour que les cris s'échappent de cette mère qui recueillait avec sa vieille natte le corps de son fils à moitié enfoncé dans la boue. (129)

This memory is another example of the blending of personal memories with the history of a people. With the contrast between the peaceful natural surroundings and the atrocious crime, the description underscores the mother's anguish and despair in a sensitive and powerful voice. The metaphor of "jeunes pousses de riz" evokes the vulnerable child cut down too young, before he is

"mature enough" to die in war. The word "bercées" highlights the tenderness of the wind caressing the rice shoots like a mother's hand on the cradle, which serves as a foil for the slaying of a child. The mother's use of a worn-out mat to cover her son's dead body evokes a similar scene of swaddling a new-born baby. Although An Tịnh now lives in a different time and space, her maternity enables her to connect with the Vietnamese mother and to grieve over her son's murder.

In addition to sympathizing with women's "silent endurance" in the face of violence and deprivation, the narrator is thankful for the lessons of resilience and love taught by several mothers, including her own, in extreme conditions. Born and raised in a prominent family, the narrator's mother used to live an affluent life: "elle passaist ses après-midi à se coiffer, à se maquiller, à se vêtir pour accompagner mon père à des soirées mondaines" (23). While such a life allows her to have many dreams for her children, it never blinds her to the unpredictability of life. Hence, she prepares her children to face "la chute" (23) with lessons of resilience and diligence. For instance, she repeats to them a proverb recited in Vietnamese grade schools: "Life is a struggle in which sorrow leads to defeat" (12), which imparts the notion of resilience to their young minds. "Ma mère a livre ses premiers combats tard, sans tristesse" (23), as the narrator recalls, by working as a cleaning lady and as "ouvrière dans des usines, des manufactures, des restaurants" (13) to support her family in Canada. Moreover, she teaches her children the importance of "s'agenouiller comme les domestiques" to accommodate themselves to unforeseen situations in life.

Furthermore, many Vietnamese mothers in her memory play a special role in An Tịnh's discovery of her own identity as a mother. In the act of reflecting upon their anecdotes, the narrator continues to expand and renew her understanding of maternal love. She admits not experiencing "le sentiment naturel de la maternité" (13) immediately after her sons were born. Rather, her maternal instinct is gradually gained through her daily chores of taking care of them. Only then did she understand the love of a mother who holds her baby "dont la tête était couverte de croûtes de gale puantes" (13) in her arms on an overcrowded boat roaming in endless darkness. The image of that mother persists in the narrator's memory, rendering her unflinching in her love for Henri, who suffers from autism. Further, becoming a mother herself allows An Tịnh to appreciate other demonstrations of maternal love, such as a mother's voluntary act of giving away her child to a stranger in the hope of a better future. The mother made the difficult choice because "elle préférait pleurer l'absence de son enfant que de la voir courir après les touristes pour leur vendre des nappes qu'elle avait brodées" (44). The narrator describes the mother's act as a reflection of "l'amour infini" (44), which, in circumstances of poverty and war, is not uncommon. By sharing this heart-wrenching story with her elder son Pascal, the protagonist hopes that her children will also be open-minded to different manifestations of love, which sometimes are fraught with contestation and contradiction.

For the narrator, remembering and repeating the stories of many ordinary Vietnamese women – their struggles, traumas, and gestures of love – is a way of reconnecting with the many parts of her old self buried in a past that, to borrow from Khatharya Um, "is familiar even in its painful reveal, and inspiring *because* of its painful reveal" (847, emphasis added). The "painful reveal" is usually triggered by moments of self-reflection in the heroine's current life, urging her to critically examine how she, in the process of recollecting and understanding, has evolved from the past.

Renewing the mother-daughter bond

In her analysis of exile in *Ru*, Toonder underscores that a juxtaposition of two types of exile – one exterior and one interior – strongly determines the trajectory of the protagonist's transculturation (41–42). An Tịnh's relationship with her mother, in particular its development, is a major thread that unite the two exiles. From the initial state of estrangement and conflict to the emergence of appreciation and solidarity, the evolution of the mother-daughter dyad is presented in parallel with the course of the daughter's internal journey, characterized by her relentless pursuit of independence and self-confidence. In this sense, *Ru* raises the question of how it is possible for a daughter to successfully negotiate new identities by renewing the bond with her mother in a sequence of turbulent incidents.

It is generally the mother whom the child identifies as his/her first Other. In her article "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," Nancy Chodorow asserts that in terms of the forming of a child's gender identity and individuality, unlike the mother-son relation defined by "separation or differentiation" (7), the mother-daughter bond is marked by both "separation and connectedness" (9); thus, it entails more ambivalence and struggle. In *Ru*, this argument is reified with the pronounced parallel between the daughter's name and her mother's name. As the narrator points out earlier in the book, their names – Nguyễn An Tịnh and Nguyễn An Tĩhn – are almost identical, indicating an evident lineage. Nevertheless, she stresses on the microscopic differences regarding the shared letter "i" between their names, which "[la] différencie d'elle, [la] distingue d'elle, [la] dissocie d'elle" (12). On one hand, their almost interchangeable names suggest that An Tịnh was supposed to extend her mother's life: "ma mère confirmait que j'étais une suite d'elle, que je continuerais son histoire" (12). On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the words "différencie," "distingue," and "dissocie" marks the narrator's strong wish to break free from patriotic duties and her mother's influence. In addition, the use of the French imperfect tense to describe the relationship – "j'étais une suite d'elle" – foreshadows a rupture or, at least, underlines her intention of deviating from her mother's footsteps.

The family's expatriation results in a life full of peril and hardship, but at the same time grants the heroine a rare opportunity to explore her individuality. In the novel, exterior exile is associated with liberating personal development. An Tịnh is grateful for her departure from Vietnam, which frees her from her mother's plans so that she can develop herself differently. For example, she is able to establish a different relationship with her own children: "mes enfants n'ont jamais été des prolongements de moi, de mon histoire" (13). Her point is proven with the sons' names, Pascal and Henri, as well as their western looks characterized by "les cheveux clairs, la peau blanche et les cils touffus" (13). The contrast between the mother-daughter bond and the mother-son relation is emphasized through the stories behind their names. Considering that most Asian names have meanings that often demonstrate the parents' expectations for their children – for example, An Tịnh means "intérieur paisible" (12) – the protagonist's choice of two common French names for her sons implies her resolution to not impose her wishes on them. It is also a way to revolt against her mother by challenging the filial traditions embodied in their names.

In fact, even before the physical exile takes place, the narrator already lives an internal exile. As a child in Vietnam, she is shy and self-effacing, holding grudge against her mother's high demands. Their relationship is initially determined by restraint and fear, as the daughter states, "Pour nous tous, incluant mes tantes et mes cousins, ma mère faisait seulement peur" (68). As the

eldest daughter in her family, the narrator's mother is in charge of domestic affairs and represents "la figure d'autorité de la plus haute instance" (68). She is extremely strict with her daughter and forces her to step out of her comfort zone, for example when she sends her to a military garrison to learn English. The experience of abrupt uprooting aggravates An Tịnh's self-effacement. After her arrival in Canada, for a long time, she is unable to adjust herself to the new society: "Je n'avais plus de points de repère, plus d'outils pour pouvoir rêver" (18). Nonetheless, her mother still pushes her to transcend her limits, for instance, by ordering her to get sugar alone at a convenience store in Granby even though she barely spoke French at that time.

Moreover, the tension in the mother-daughter relation is accentuated in comparison to the narrator's relationship with her mother's elder brother Uncle Two, whose good sense of humor, chic manners, and extravagant lifestyle fascinate the young girl. The narrator admits that "pendant toute [s]on enfance, [elle a] souhaité secrètement d'être la fille d'oncle Deux" (55). She is particularly envious of the way her uncle treats his children: raising them like royalty. Uncle Two's daughter, Sao Mai, is depicted as a "prima donna" who "possède une force intérieure" (55) as a result of her father's attention and encouragement. It is worth noting that the protagonist's interior exile manifests itself via the imbalanced relationship between her and Sao Mai when they are young. Compared to her cousin who is "du côté clair," An Tịnh considers herself to be Sao Mai's shadow, existing "du côté de l'obscur, de l'ombre, du silence" (56). She believes it is the disparate familial cultures created and perpetuated by her mother and her Uncle Two that has caused the differences between her and her cousin. Her mother manages the household in an orderly manner: "les repas étaient toujours prêts, les bonnes présentes, les devoirs surveillés" (57); whereas in her uncle's home, there is neither rule nor order to prevent the family from enjoying the moment.

The geographical displacement serves as a turning point in the mother-daughter relationship as it not only offers the daughter an opportunity to choose her own path, but also compels the mother to reinvent herself. The novel indicates that restoring a mother-daughter relation requires collaborative efforts from both sides. Chodorow points out that the daughter's achievement of a "fully developed subjectivity" depends not only on a separation of self from (m)other, but also her perception of the "subjectivity and selfhood" of the (m)other (6–7). As their journey proceeds, the narrator gradually realizes the necessity of transforming her role as a daughter to focus on her mother's subjectivity as a woman, instead of just a harsh and demanding mother. In her book *I Love to You* (1990), Luce Irigaray states that one important way of renewing a broken mother-daughter bond is that both women must assert and develop their plural identities by giving "her (the mother) a new life, new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us" (42). One of the first examples of the mother's subjectivity appears during an impromptu inspection by the communist soldiers in the family's grandiose mansion in Saigon. Returning home from a tennis game, the mother is stopped by the inspectors at the door: "Ma mère a été la première à apparaître derrière la porte vitrée en fer forgée. Elle portait sa minijupe blanche plissée et ses souliers de course" (37). The mother's athletic, bourgeois appearance suggests that she has a life outside the domestic realm, with which the daughter is not familiar.

The family's resettlement in Canada allows the narrator to witness her mother's success in rediscovering herself. While still defying her destiny of being her mother's extension, the daughter starts to reflect on her own metamorphosis in light of her mother's successful efforts to "se réinventer" (70). As an immigrant, the mother started working low-wage jobs for the first time at the age of thirty-four. As a wife, she became less hesitant to be affectionate with her husband in

public: "(E)lle cherche la main de mon père au cinéma et son baiser sur la joue devant les appareils photo" (70). Furthermore, she discovered the joys of dancing and replaced her regular exercise with lessons of tango, cha-cha-cha, and paso doble. On the one hand, even before starting life anew in Québec, the mother, raised in an upper-class southern family, had access to western culture, but her authoritarian role as the eldest daughter prevents her from exploring her interests. As the narrator notes, "au nom de la pudeur" (69), her mother lost the fun of childhood and her younger sibling's affection while she was forbidding them to dance. On the other hand, the narrator explains that her mother decided to take dancing class after being convinced by her friends that "ils [les danses occidentales] sont dénués de sensualité, de séduction, d'ivresse" (70). It is important to clarify that the mother's self-reinvention does not entail a rift with her previous values and beliefs; rather, it enables her to view herself and the world with curiosity and openness.

Lastly, An Tịnh's own maternity also plays a key role in reviving the mother-daughter lineage in *Ru*. The protagonist's determination to be different from her mother is clearly expressed at the opening of the book, and over the course of their journey, she rebels constantly against her mother. However, becoming a mother herself enables An Tịnh's to rediscover their relationship by placing herself in the mother's position. When she was young, the narrator believed that her mother enjoyed putting her in situations of "honte extrême" (30), for example by sending her alone to get groceries in a language that she dreaded speaking. However, after becoming a mother of two sons, she realized that, behind the closed door, "les yeux [de sa mère] collés au judas" (30) were watching over her. She finally understood her mother's insistence that she equip herself with survival tools, such as mastering French, to put down roots in order to "recommencer à [s']enraciner, à rêver" (30) in the adoptive country.

What is particularly significant regarding the renewed bond is that the narrator voluntarily passes on the values taught by her mother to her own children. The protagonist's mother considers sharing as an indispensable lesson for her children's education. To avoid sharing foods, the daughter would rather eat dry rice at her cousin's home. However, she understood the importance of such a practice while raising two sons, including one that is autistic:

> J'ai voulu devenir très différente de ma mère, jusqu'au jour où j'ai décidé de faire partager la même chambre à mes deux fils, même s'il y avait deux autres pièces vides dans la maison. Je voulais qu'ils apprennent à se soutenir l'un l'autre comme mes frères et moi l'avions fait. Quelqu'un m'a dit que les liens se tissent avec les rires, mais encore plus avec le partage, les frustrations du partage. (58)

Drawing on her own experience with her brothers, An Tịnh's primary goal is to reinforce the bonds between her sons "encore avec le partage." The narrator further explains, in a following passage, that sharing the same room allows her autistic son to finally become aware of the presence of his big brother, and thus step out of isolation. The act of maintaining a familial tradition indicates that the daughter has become aware of her responsibility for preserving the Vietnamese cultural legacy within her own family. Therefore, through the mother-daughter lineage, the protagonist has gained new insight into herself as she, to borrow Anne Caumartin's remarks, begins to "orienter son rôle d'agent au sein de sa filiation" (176). In *Ru*, the protagonist's identity-construction is delineated through a thorough examination of two leitmotifs: the search for subjectivity and the acceptance of responsibility. The mother-daughter dyad serves as an integral string in the mapping of the two tasks.

Maternal legacy and transcultural becoming

In his reflections on the issues of identity and transculturality in *Vice Versa*, the first transcultural magazine in Québec published between 1983 and 1996, Alessandra Renzi identifies two essential concepts around which the process of transculturation revolves. The first one requires acknowledging the Other as both a "fundamental reality" and an existence "as part of the self." The second concept refers to the idea of "continuous transformation" (111). In *Ru*, the heroine, situated in the confluence of different cultural influences, goes through a series of transformations as she interacts with her family, communities, and strangers that she encounters at different stages of her journey. To embrace her transcultural becoming, the protagonist must be capable of representing other cultures within her own and her own within others, without facing the "deux solitudes" (85) that Vietnam and Canada have to cope with.[2] Apart from her family and the anonymous Vietnamese women from her past, the hospitable locals in Canada have also enriched An Tịnh's understanding of the self-other dynamic. Among them, she is particularly grateful for Marie France, her first French teacher in Canada, who made a major impact on her self-reinvention by inspiring her to embrace her own otherness.

A vignette dedicated to Marie France appears early in the book, following the passage describing her arrival as a refugee in a "white void" represented by the endless snow at the Mirabel airport. The narrator emphasizes that it was Marie France who guided her to "traverser le pont qui [l']emmenait vers [son] present" (19) from a past destitute of security and stability. To young An Tịnh, she represents a motherly other. Maternal metaphors and images permeate the descriptions of Marie France and Granby, which is the protagonist's first destination in Canada, a small town like "[un] ventre chaud qui les a couvés durant [leur] première année au Canada" (31). The parallel between the words "ventre chaud" and "couver" conjures the French expression "veiller sur sa couvée," which is usually used to depict maternal care and protection. It is in such a homely environment that young An Tịnh crosses paths with Marie France, in whom the girl recognizes her own otherness for the first time. Above all else, it is Marie France's looks that impress the narrator:

> Elle veillait sur notre transplantation avec la délicatesse d'une mère envers son nouveau-né prématuré. Nous étions hypnotisés par le balancement lent et rassurant de ces hanches rondes et de ses fesses bombées, pleines. Telle une maman cane… Aucun Vietnamien de notre groupe ne possédait cette opulence, cette générosité, cette nonchalance dans ces courbes. Nous étions tous angulaires, osseux, durs. (19)

In this passage, the word "transplantation" evokes the context of exile and immigration. Further, the term "né prématuré" underscores the fragility of the Vietnamese immigrants, which stimulates even stronger affection in their motherly teacher. By means of lyrical depictions of her teacher, such as her graceful image as "une maman cane," the narrator shifts the focus of her experience from the traumatic reality of uprooting onto an exciting opportunity for self-rediscovery. An Tịnh's admiration for Marie France epitomizes a two-folded quest for identity: as a young girl, she is fascinated by the feminine features of a mature woman's body; additionally, as an immigrant from Vietnam, she wishes to approach and even to "become" the Canadian Other. At this stage, the protagonist is struck by the contrast between the Self, represented by a group of "angulaire, osseux, durs" Vietnamese, and the Other, embodied by Marie France's plump and curvy figure. In retrospect, the narrator admits that she will always be grateful for her French teacher for instilling in her "[son] premier désir d'immigrante, celui de pouvoir faire bouger le gras des fesses, comme

elle" (19). Her gratitude is premised on the awareness of the differences between Marie France and herself. Adopting an open attitude towards the otherness in herself enables her to take a further step in in her transculturation.

It is noteworthy that Marie France also frees the heroine from her interior exile – the state of self-effacement discussed in the previous section – by introducing her to the beauty of French, a language that caused her distress in the early phase of her immigration. An Tịnh is mesmerized by the way her teacher speaks French, which makes her feel "bercée par un nuage de fraîcheur, de légèreté, de doux parfum" (19). The soothing characteristics of the language resonates with the Vietnamese meaning of *Ru*: "berceuse." In line with the teacher's protective and loving image, the depiction of her language accentuates a maternal impact on An Tịnh's adaptation to her new identity. While her mother tongue Vietnamese has become "non pas dérisoire, mais inutile" (29), there is a pressing need for the narrator to learn French. Yet, French means more than a skill for survival to An Tịnh. Her acquisition of the language is a voluntary act, on the one hand, propelled by her love and gratitude for "les rencontres, les amis, les autres" (80) like Marie France who guided her family to rebuild their life in the adoptive country. On the other hand, learning French is a way to battle against her condition of "deafness" and "muteness," which prevents her from "regarder loin, loin devant" (20).

In the narrative, the protagonist's otherness is explored from both the immigrant and the emigrant perspective. Culture shock is experienced not only in the adoptive country, but also in the country of origin as it becomes more and more "foreign" with An Tịnh's return as a grown woman. After years of living abroad, she is no longer regarded as a native in Vietnam. At a local restaurant in Hanoi, a waiter is astonished that despite her "foreign" looks, she can speak Vietnamese: "Il [le serveur] m'a dit candidement que j'étais trop grosse pour être une Vietnamienne" (84). His humorous remark forces An Tịnh to confront her state of otherness in a place that she used to call home. She later realizes that what makes her too "grosse" to look Vietnamese is the weight of her American dream that grew on her "comme une greffe, ou une excrescence" (77). It made her believe that she could "tout avoir" until the waiter's accidental remark unveils the truth that in the pursuit of this dream, she no longer has the "right" of being Vietnamese because she has lost "leur fragilité, leur incertitude, leurs peurs" (84). With the expression "n'avais plus le droit," the narrator conveys a tinge of regret. Back in Québec, An Tịnh's employer shares with her an article from a Montreal newspaper proclaiming that her slanted eyes exclude her from "la nation québécoise [qui] était caucasienne" (85). These incidents attest to the duality of otherness that the protagonist faces as a migrant person, simultaneously detached from her cultural roots and rejected by the society where she currently lives.

In telling her protagonist's story, the author addresses the condition of "in-betweenness" that individuals like An Tịnh cannot avoid. Nevertheless, the focus of her writing is on the possibility of liberating oneself from such a dilemma with a, as Dupuis posits, "continuous reassessment of identity" (500). In that sense, each occurrence that reminds the narrator of her otherness also offers her an opportunity to (re-)examine her current self and thus, progress in the becoming of a transcultural person. Her return to Vietnam makes her see the necessity of reuniting with her cultural roots, for example, by motivating her to make more of an effort to master Vietnamese, the native language that "[elle] avai[t] abandonée trop tôt" (85). The improved relationship with her mother has convinced her that it is possible to remain independent while taking on familiar responsibilities and preserving the cultural legacy created by the women inside

and outside her family. To build such a maternal cultural legacy, in Irigaray's opinion, women need "words, images, symbols which represent the significant events in their life, and which allow to build them in the feminine" (*Why Different* 32). Several objects in the book, such as a pink acrylic bracelet, a blue-and-white porcelain bowl, and a stack of Vietnamese recipes, embody what Irigaray describes as a "culture féminine" and a "histoire féminine" (*I Love* 44). The ways An Tịnh interacts with these objects demonstrate her participation in the maintenance of the maternal cultural legacy within the community.

The night before their boat journey, An Tịnh's mother made her a pink acrylic bracelet out of the gums of a dental plate. She hid the family's last riches, some diamonds, in the bracelet and made the daughter wear it on their way to the refugee camp. Unlike most refugees, An Tịnh and her brothers did not have gold in their teeth because their mother insisted that "les dents et les cheveux sont les racines, ou peut-être la source originelle, d'une personne" (72). By equating "teeth" and "hair" with "roots," the narrator highlights her mother's commitment to preserving their cultural origin. Trapped between a perilous present and an unpredictable future, her mother knows that her children will only be fulfilled in a foreign land if they retain their cultural roots. After their arrival in Québec, the acrylic bracelet plays a special role in reconnecting An Tịnh with her past, which periodically escapes her remembrance. While enjoying her better-off life as a successful immigrant, she suddenly thinks of the bracelet that was stolen by a burglar many years earlier:

> Quand nous réussissons à flotter en l'air, à nous extirper de nos racines - non seulement en traversant un océan et deux continents, mais en nous éloignant de notre état de réfugiés apatride, de ce vide identitaire, nous pouvons aussi nous moquer du sort improbable de mon bracelet en acrylique de prothèse dentaire dans lequel mes parents avaient caché tous leurs diamants en guise de trousse de survie. (136)

The dual function of the acrylic bracelet: a carrier of wealth and eternity, and a symbol of roots, illustrates the mother's conviction that preserving one's cultural legacy is as imperative as survival. The jewels' eternal essence also manifests her faith in protecting her children's Vietnamese heritage from perishing in the ebb and flow of life. Although the family eventually loses the bracelet, An Tịnh is confident that the diamonds inside will be unearthed one day just like the stories of her family and of the boat people.

An Tịnh takes a further step as she decides to take part in the revival of the Vietnamese cultural heritage within her family. Passing on the culinary traditions is a powerful vehicle in the book for reestablishing important familial values. She becomes another knot on the cultural braid, handed down on the female side, when she tells her sons the story of the blue and white porcelain bowl that her aunt would use to serve food to her grandfather. By using the same bowl at their dinner table, she pays tribute to her aunt's filial piety. An Tịnh also expresses her respect and gratitude for the anonymous wartime women by repeating their recipe of "viande rissolée (thịt chà bông)" (43). In order to "préserver, de répéter, ces gestes d'amour" (43), she often serves the dish to her sons. In memory of the female street venders who crisscross the alleys in Hanoi selling traditional soups at dawn, she insists on serving vermicelli soup at breakfast to her family after their resettlement in Canada. Through the act of preserving ordinary Vietnamese culinary customs, the heroine not only communicates her nostalgia for her long-lost childhood in Vietnam, but also bridges the gap between her children and their cultural roots. To sate the identity void that

transcultural individuals often experience, An Tinh is aware of the significance of retaining her cultural legacy. Her mother, along with many other female characters in the book, constructs a solid anchorage for her to grasp by passing on their cultural heritage through the female lineage.

Conclusion

The encounter between past and present, between here and there, often results in – as in the case of An Tinh – a renewed identity transcending geographical, national, and cultural boundaries. The narrator's experience shows that her becoming a transcultural individual is driven by her affiliations with many inspirational women that she encountered over the course of her migratory journey from Vietnam to Canada. According to Lucie Lequin, one's ability to reinvent a personal identity, either by internalizing various cultures or by legitimizing different values, is a collective skill instead of a solitary one (215). An Tịnh follows the footsteps of many ordinary women from her distant motherland as she moves forward to reconcile her old self with her new identity: a dynamic that eventually becomes transcultural. Her transcultural identity keeps her from settling down on a fixed or reducible cultural identity. Instead of feeling upset at the labels people put on her, she decides to "les aimer tous, sans appartenir à aucun" (88).

In Thúy's literary universe, although the misery of exile is discussed with profundity, the story teems with hope, optimism, and recompensed efforts. The author's therapeutic and poetic writing proposes a place of attachment against diaspora, a search for hope amidst tribulations, and a call for identity-(trans)formation in cultural collisions. While the narrator is mindful of the dark moments integral to war and exilic experiences, she aims chiefly to build bridges between now and then, her native and new homelands. She lends voice to the women who have for a long time been absent from the official reports of Vietnamese history. Recognizing their roles as bearers of history and preservers of culture, An Tịnh strives to pass on their legacy by spreading their stories. Furthermore, the narrator's renewed bond with her mother plays a decisive role in her transculturation. The family's abrupt departure from Vietnam enables the daughter to recognize and appreciate her mother's resilience to hardship and openness for self-reinvention. Even though An Tịnh will never be an extension of her mother, she gladly assumes the responsibility of preserving a lineage of cultural and familial values. The heroine's heartwarming story shows that, regardless of the restrictions and stereotypes traditionally imposed on women by a patriarchal history, the mother-daughter dyad is capable of creating a narrative of its own, a story that incorporates the idea of a positive Other in the circumstances of war and displacement.

The book ends with the narrator reflexively drawing attention to the power of storytelling: "Quant à moi, il en est ainsi jusqu'à la possibilité de ce livre" (138). Documenting stories is a strategic way for An Tịnh to trace and to follow "le sillage de ceux qui ont marché devant [elle], pour [elle]" (138). The act of writing enables her to preserve the link between those living in the old and new countries and to gather moments of self-emergence and self-(re)invention. In other words, in *Ru*, the mise-en-abyme of writing reflects the narrator's method of self-construction through the citation of others' stories. Taken together, these stories chart the trajectory of a transcultural individual whose boundaries are fluid and whose identity is built upon profound love and gratitude for others.

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Notes

[1] In his article listed above, Mahoko Kyouraku lists four criteria applied in order for mothers to be selected for the title. The word "martyr" appears in all the criteria, excluding those whose children were civilian causalities. In addition, the mother's Communist political stance is another requirement for the title, which proves that the purpose of the policy is to promote patriotism and to expand the influence of the Communist Party.

[2] The issue of "deux solitudes" is discussed explicitly in two vignettes. The first one is an anecdote about two brothers who built a wall in the house they cohabited, which implies division of North Vietnam and South Vietnam (1954–75). The anecdote serves as another case of blending the individual experience with the collective. The issue is addressed again when the narrator draws a parallel between the histories of Vietnam and Canada with an emphasis on their shared condition of "two solitudes," embodied in linguistic variations (79–80).