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Mekong Review

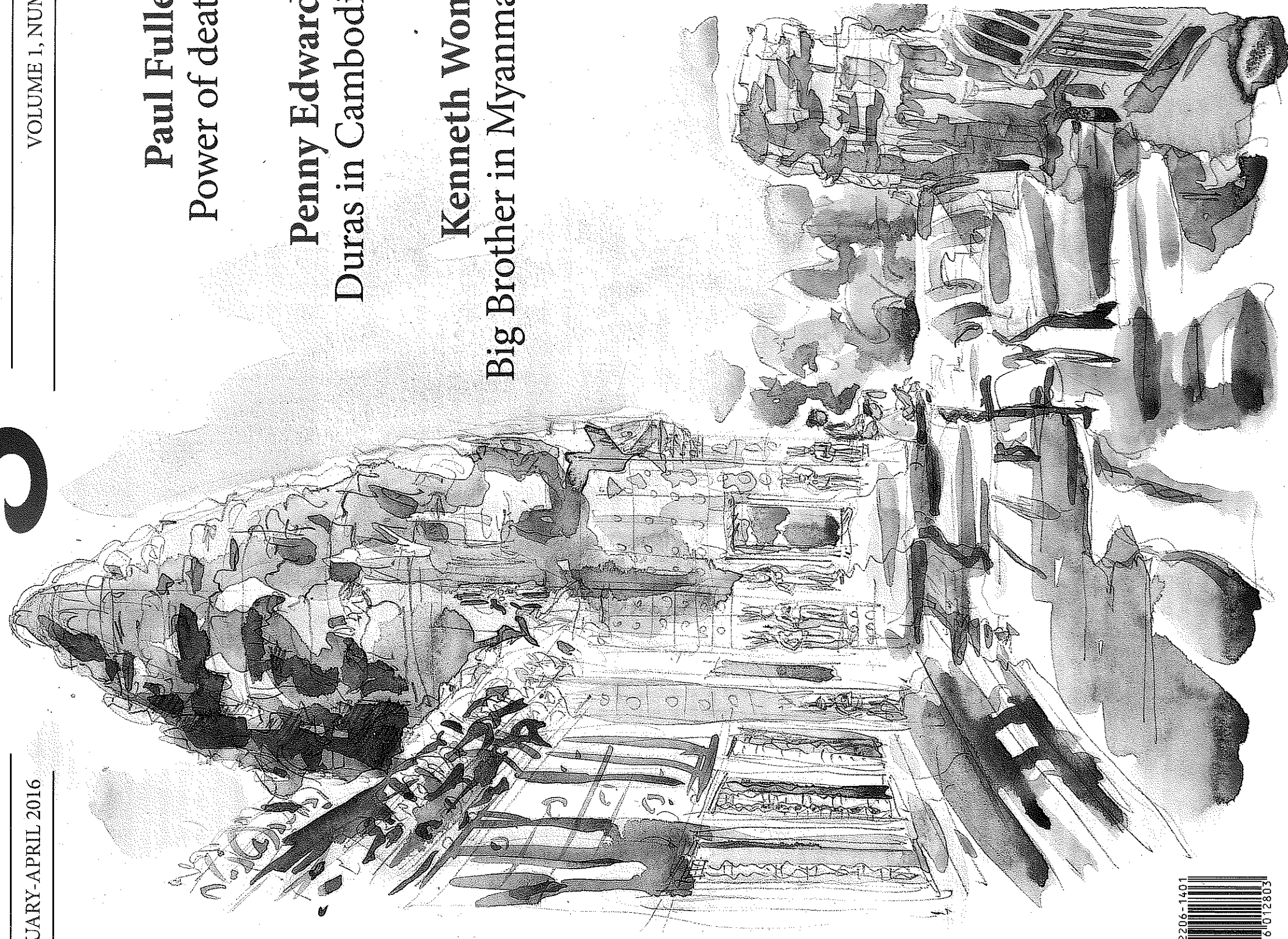
FEBRUARY-APRIL 2016

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Duras, Mother and Cambodia

Penny Edwards

"The only imaginative discourse today is the discourse of women."

Marguerite Duras, 1993

In a 1993 interview, Marguerite Duras described misogyny as a "good ... positive" force that allowed women to "remain on the margins, to not take part in the game of the male, a game of power." Elsewhere, she spoke out against the discrimination she faced in the French literary establishment. A glance at reviews in the 1960s French press indicates that she was more often compared with women writers, such as Colette (whose work was seen as more "pure") and Nathalie Sarraute (with whom Duras was bracketed in "the feminine camp of the new school") than with Camus, Gide or Malraux. When male writers were invoked, the gist was negative: Duras's world was the "antipodes of Proust".

Born Marguerite Donnadiéu in Saigon in 1914, Duras spent long stints of her adolescence in the present-day Cambodian provinces of Sihanoukville and Kampot. She left Saigon for Paris on finishing her baccalaureate in 1933, never to return to Indochina. Recipient of the Prix Goncourt in 1984 for her novel *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), her work overturned literary conventions, and reverberates with the imprint of Indochina, and especially Cambodia, whose terrain forms the main setting for her first critically acclaimed novel, *Un barrage contre la Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*). Three female figures link her Cambodian opus: Duras's fictional alter-ego, Suzanne; her mother — invoked as *la mère*, never the affectionate *maman*, and a nameless beggar-woman.

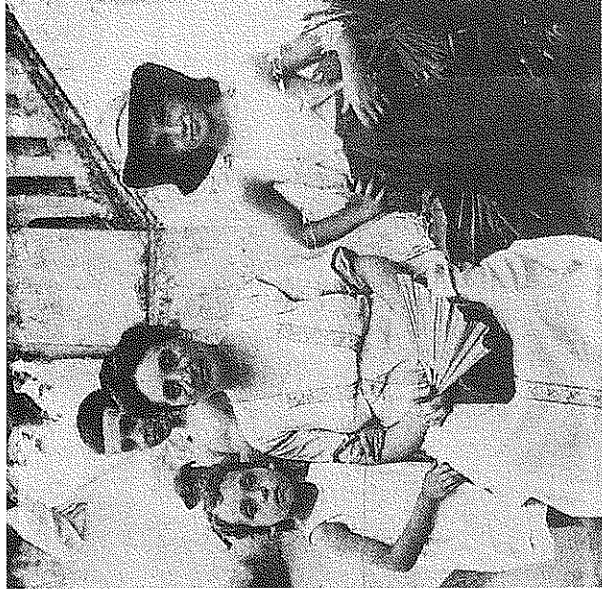
"The story I wish to tell is [my mother's]," wrote Duras in the 1940s while drafting sketches for *The Sea Wall*, "that astonishing mystery, never fathomed ... My mother was for all of us a vast plain ... that plain is not a memory. It is a vast march that has never ended." That march would continue through Duras's life, looping back to her adolescence in Prey Nop, in southern Cambodia.

It is a walk embodied in a nameless beggar woman, who leads us from Duras's wartime jottings on her Indochina childhood in a private notebook, into *The Sea Wall* (1950), through *The Vice Consul* (1966), and *Eden Cinema* (1977). *The Vice Consul* opens with a description of a beggar woman from Battambang, whose "ritual encirclement" of her village in Cambodia, like Duras's perpetual circumambulation of her mother's journey, is a form of "self-deception."

The nameless persona of the beggar-woman, whose mantra is the word Battambang, conflates the history and journey of Duras's own mother, her vexed relationship with her daughter, and her perpetual quest, with her "large feet, with their toughened soles, like tire-treads," and her flashbacks to her mother's harsh admonishments of her teenage self. Duras has contrasted her mother's state of "exile" in Indochina with that of her children. Indochina was "our country" she declared in the 1980s, claiming that "France isn't my country ... I can't call it my homeland." Duras experienced a sort of reverse exile, investing her writer's income in houses whose upkeep she could ill afford, a pattern begun with the purchase of her first Parisian home from the sale of rights to the 1950s film adaptation of *The Sea Wall*, and which she interpreted as "an attempt to regain the house in which I was born."

The figure of the mother/*la mère* embodies a rural topography enveloping both rural France and the plains of Cambodia. Introducing *la mère* in *Eden Cinema* — Duras's theatrical adaptation of *The Sea Wall* — Duras details not her dress or demeanour, but her origins in the "endless plains" of French Flanders, between the ... mines and the sea.

Duras's mother, Marie Donnadiéu, née Legrand,



Marie Donnadiéu with her family, 1906

was a widowed school-teacher from rural France, who journeyed to the colonies at the height of a campaign encouraging French women to emigrate, marry French men and so save their nation from the perceived moral degradation of inter-racial liaisons. Duras's biographer, Laure Adler, has identified a cousin working in Cochinchina as the possible gateway to her colonial odyssey. Soon after arriving in Saigon, Legrand struck up a romance with Henri Donnadiéu: their marriage only months after his first wife's death incited speculation about adulterous liaisons, the circumstances of his wife's death, and rumours of a premarital abortion.

Marie Donnadiéu survived both slander and her husband, who, several years after earning a promotion to Director of Education in Cambodia, perished while in France on medical leave. Joining the ranks of the "petits blancs", as a widowed mother in one of the most undervalued vocations of the colonies, Duras's mother struggled to support her children as a school-teacher, and launched a tenacious battle for her rights to a pension which eventually earned her temporary rights to the concession in Prey Nop. It is here, in a struggle against a corrupt land registry, marshalling labourers in her project to stave off the relentless encroachment of the ocean, erecting walls of mangrove that are then eaten away by crabs.

And the mother nurtures. She allegedly adopts and nurses a child left in her care by an impoverished mother, making it a cradle and clothing. The baby dies in three months. This itinerant, indigenous mother will appear and disappear in *The Sea Wall*, and later morph into the Battambang beggar of *The Vice-Consul*.

Duras's mother shares her stories of colonial corruption with the villagers and her workers, winning their affinity only to discover that their loyalty has limits. She is assisted by a deaf Malay (oral histories describe a Vietnamese headman), but also works her land barefoot. She rules her roost with an iron and uneven heart and fist, beating the young Suzanne while lavishing love on her son.

Duras lamented the lack of legend in her childhood. Instead of fairy tales, her mother fed her stories of convict labourers buried up to their necks on the road to Bokor. And her mother suffered from a condition so stigmatised that Duras had good reason to hide it, glossing her mother's comas, but naming them as epilepsy in her private notebooks. During her fits, Duras wrote, the staff would evacuate the house, fearful she would die, leaving them penniless, but perhaps also afraid of spirit possession. Duras maintained that her

mother kept up a nocturnal dialogue with her deceased husband, who counselled her on all things. *Le barrage* is not only a wall against the relentless encroachments of the sea and an edifice to the mother's rebellion. It also represents the precipice of France's colonial hold on Southeast Asia, in the far reaches of Cambodia, on the remote perimeter of Indochina.

For decades, Duras's critics, scholars, and biographers confused that topography, placing her work in a nebulous "Indochina", her childhood in Vietnam, and even assigning Cambodian figures in her novels an Indian or Vietnamese identity. Scholars have even coined a word for this mys-topia: *Durasité*. This longstanding erasure of Cambodia is unsurprising: Vietnam was the powerhouse of the Indochinese economy. The world evoked in her novels reflects Duras's experience of place, and reflects her own *leger-de-main* with cartography.

Duras admitted in the 1970s that she had "fabricated an India" for *The Vice-Consul*, conceding that the geography was wrong "from an academic standpoint" but that this haphazard compote of Colombo, Calcutta, Nepal, and Lahore was "absolutely inevitable" and essential to her work. The word "Cambodge" is almost entirely missing from her early oeuvre. Only in *Eden Cinema*, Duras's 1970s theatrical adaptation of *The Sea Wall*, does the "indigenous" language described in *The Sea Wall* become "Cambodian" and "Kam" becomes "Kampot." This new specificity accompanies a new language of race — the "blacks, yellows" of the 1950s novel become "Indians, Chinese from Cholon".

Ramona — Fred Gouin's 1928 remix of the Hollywood hit — and not the Reamker (Cambodian Ramayana), is the songscape of the land inhabited by Duras and her characters in both *The Sea Wall* and its literary after-lives: *Eden Cinema*, *The Lover*, and *The North China Lover*. But it is the landscape and language of Cambodia that most persistently permeate her novels and from which, like her mother's iron grip, Duras never escapes.

Cambodia recurs in the undulation of the landscape, and in the ululation of a nameless beggar woman. The woman first surfaces in a 1940s piece unpublished in Duras's lifetime, and appears in print in 1952 in *The Sea Wall*. She later wends her way from her Battambang origins via the Mekong, the Irrawaddy and the Ganges to the streets of Calcutta and Duras's own best-loved novel, *The Vice Consul*, looping from Prey Nop to Pursat, via the improbable itinerary of Phnom Penh, Kampong Chhnam (sic), Chaudoc, Sadek, Vinh Long, Udong and thence to Savannakhet, Mandalay, Prome, Arakan and Chittagong.

The only work by Duras set entirely and explicitly in *Cambodge* is the essay, "Cambodian Dancers." Written in the first-person, it is set in "Bantei", a realm located by Duras's erratic compass "in that part of Upper Cambodia caught between mountain and sea, near the Siamese border" along the "Gulf of Ream". Published posthumously in 2006, the essay is described as one of Duras's "first literary exercises" and "autobiographical in inspiration" by editors Sophie Bogaert and Olivier Corpet in their volume *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (translated by Linda Coverdale as *Wartime Writings 1943-49*).

Lacking the grace and nuance of Duras's later work, *Cambodian Dancers* records the visit of a young, lone "Iokhon" dancer who performs in a straw hut, to an audience assembled from neighbouring villages in a forest clearing, to the "monotonous" and "staccato" chant of an ugly hag. "This memory has always remained a vision for me," Duras wrote, "Thanks to her

performancé I understood Khmer dancing, which for centuries has nourished people with its magic”.

This last sentence hints that the story sprang as much from the Parisian milieu of the Intercolonial Office of Information, where Duras worked from 1937 to 1940, as from *les lieux de mémoires* of her Indochina adolescence. Duras’ stint as copywriter for the colonies culminated in *L’Empire Français*, a grandiloquent tome co-authored with Philippe Rocques, extolling France’s colonial policy as a work of educational uplift and hygienic salvation that allowed natives to “keep their own language, culture, traditions” while “exploiting the riches of their country in a methodical way” for their own good, and at France’s expense. Here, Duras honed her talent for fiction. The book’s closing lines cast France as a noble benefactor.

Duras remembered her first day at the Ministry of Colonies as “the most important day of my youth,” one that returned her to “the same old colonial shit”. Always assuming she would leave, Duras was still there at the onset of the Vichy régime. This collusion with the imperial enterprise, whose corruption undid her mother, may well have fuelled the angst, anomie and venom of Duras’s pen in her repeated vents against the corrupt colonial land registry.

Duras has described *The Sea Wall* as a “political” novel, in which the emotion she gave free reign in later novels such as *The Lover*, was stymied by a Manichean lens on capitalism. *The Sea Wall* at once documents the abuses of the land registry, and maps for us Indochina as seen through the eyes of a “petit blanc”. While the French who settled in Indochina never earned the sobriquet *piéds noirs* applied to settlers in Algeria, Duras’s mother’s and brother’s feet are described as caked in mud.

In *The Sea Wall*, the young Suzanne’s world is mapped primarily through the points of Kam (Kampot), Ram (home of a small restaurant where people congregate to dance, sip Pernod, and wait for the mailboats from Siam), “la ville” (Saigon), and “la plus grande ville des colonies” (Hanoi) and Paris. Of all these place-names, Paris is at once the most abstract and the centre of tangible cultural practices, which live in Suzanne and her brother’s imagination through French gramophone records, and whose “reality” is mediated in the novel by Paris’s most recent returnee, M. Jo, the son of a plantation owner from the North — ghosting for Duras’s Chinese lover, as he is eventually depicted in *The Lover*. Ramona is no longer in vogue in Paris, M. Jo tells them.

Against a Parisian dreamscape, the Cambodian landscape depicted in *The Sea Wall*, *Vice-Consul* and *Eden Cinema* is a cruel counterpoint to colonial narratives of benevolent development. Instead of nurturing, it fomishes: crabs are not food-sources but harbingers of destruction that wreck the sea-wall. Stray, rib-raw dogs scavenge on the shit of starving children. Drowned peacocks wash up in floods; and tigers prowl. Where the mythology of empire celebrates colonial roads as the arteries of material and moral uplift in such works as colonial administrator George Groslier’s 1925 novel *La route du plus fort* (*The Road of the Fittest*), the roads to Ram (Ream) are plied by corrupt officials, diseased women, worm-infested children and contraband. The young Suzanne, Duras’ fictional alter-ego in *The Sea Wall*, finds escape in the live “cinema” of birds and buffalo, and further afield, in Saigon’s Eden Cinema, whose “vast”, “artificial and democratic night” dims the reality of segregated seating. Duras shares with her Indochina cohort a tendency to blur indigenous peoples with the landscape. But she breaks rank with the heroes of Groslier and Andre Malraux by dehumanising both colonial bureaucrats (reduced to “dogs” in the mother’s invective), and businessmen (who she describes as “the great vampires of the colony”).

Ironically, it was Paris that shattered for Duras the illusory divide between the cinema and reality. She later claimed that her first day at work in the Ministry of Colonies had taught her “in one fell swoop what the cinema had not taught me, to know that life is not always beautiful.” And in April 1945, after the fall of

Berlin, when searching for her husband Robert Antelme, a poet and resistance member who had been arrested and deported to Dachau, she visited the Gaumont Cinéma, now a “transit centre.”

Still later, in the garden of the first house she bought in Paris, ugly history resurfaced in an archaeology of luxe, when she uncovered the garbage pits left by occupying German officers, containing oyster shells and empty jars of *foie gras* and caviar. Duras never succeeded in laying the spirit of her mother to rest any more than that of her brother, who perished in Japanese-occupied Saigon in December 1942. Bereavement permeates Duras’ essay “The Death of the Young British Pilot”, which compares the ritual remembrance of an English orphan in France in May 1944 with the death of her brother, who “died without any grave at all. Thrown into a mass pit on top of the previous corpses.” The theme of inhumanity’s shallow grave recurred in Duras’ work, leading, in part, to critics hailing the publication of *The Vice Consul* in 1966 as the end of the “colonial novel”, praise in which Duras delighted. “Exoticism must be killed off. French literature has carried that millstone for long enough,” she declared.

This verdict was premature. While her novels laid bare the hypocrisy of colonial life, her broad-brush

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depictions rendered Cambodians anonymous, whether in mass as the “indigenes” of the plains, or in the singular, as the “beggar” woman. Perhaps Cambodian authors will follow the cue set by Algerian writer Kamel Daoud in *The Meursault Investigation*, in which he speaks back to the colonial anti-hero of Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*. “There I was,” writes Daoud’s narrator, “expecting to find my brother’s last words ... his feature, his face, his answers ... instead I read only two lines about an Arab ...” Marie Donnadiéu is also nameless in Duras’s work, but she is conjured in a kinship term (albeit one inflected by distance), and her character is etched with a specific history and features. Only in 1984, on publication of *The Lover* (and later in *The North China Lover*) did Duras elaborate the character of an Asian, remaking M. Jo as Léo.

Duras’s legacy shares with her compatriot, Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano, a skein of faces, names, and places that recur across diverse and seemingly discrete works to create an at once inchoate and connected universe. Modiano’s translator Mark Polizzotti, whose credits include two of Duras’s works, has described Modiano’s landscape as a “self-contained world in which figures move and evolve but remain fundamentally similar.” The same could be said of Duras.

Modiano was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2014 for “the art of memory.” Duras’s writings pivot as much on the art as on the artifice of memory in their evocation of her own life-world and by extension, that of colonialism. Convincing gems emerge in her interviews, such as her mother’s tip that the going rate for the Legion of Honor was eighteen thousand piastres, and that the decoration was held by the “biggest crooks in Indochina.” But her fusion of fact and fiction has left live-writers at a loss. As Duras told her biographer Laure Adler: “The story of my life does not exist.”

Luc Mogenet’s new book *Marguerite Duras en Cambodge* strives to distinguish fact, fantasy and fiction and resists the temptation to romanticise Duras’s life, focusing instead on reconstructing a particular sector of that life. I strongly encourage all Duras fans, and all those interested in understanding the different voices and visions at play in colonial Cambodia, to buy it. It is the first book to map comprehensively Duras’s Cambodia experience, combining archival material, including letters that are at the heart of *The Sea Wall*, with relevant excerpts of Duras’s works, and oral histories with helpful maps.

A minor criticism is Mogenet’s choice of illustration, notably of the bare-breasted Suzanne in a still from Rithy Panh’s film of *The Sea Wall*, which continues the vein of exoticism and voyeurism with which Duras strove to break. In Panh’s elegant film, this image is embedded within a cinematographic narrative that conveys the texture and cadence of Duras’s prose. Why has Mogenet chosen to isolate an image that leaves little to the imagination? In *The Sea Wall*, the young Suzanne decides to open the door of her shower to M. Jo, before he announces that he will buy her a gramophone. It is at this critical point in the novel that Suzanne becomes a prostitute, not through volition or decision, or even economic circumstance, but by an accident of timing. The power of Duras lies in what is left unsaid or unseen: the reader experiences Suzanne’s satisfaction with her own body and later M. Jo’s reaction at its revelation, but never an explicit description.

The vast retrospection of Duras’s corpus veers from hagiography verging on necrophilia to postcolonial invective critiquing her authenticity. Mogenet’s book, like Adler’s seminal biography, is a refreshing departure from this trend. Was Duras a subaltern, or a subalterniser? Can a dead white female be allowed to speak for other voices and places? And does it matter? We may deconstruct or embalm Duras, sharpen our scholastic scalpel on her oeuvre, or put her on a pedestal, but few writers can match the beauty of her prose, and no other offers Duras’s raw lens on the precarious margins of Indochina. The barrage crumbles, but the towering, ferocious monument of her mother endures. □