

**Nelcya Delanoë et Caroline Grillot. Casablanca-Hanoi. Une porte dérobée sur des histoires postcoloniales. (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020, 162 p. ISBN 978-2-343-22175-5)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## COMPTE-RENDUS/REVIEWS

Nelcya Delanoë et Caroline Grillot. *Casablanca-Hanoi. Une porte dérobée sur des histoires postcoloniales*. (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020, 162 p. ISBN 978-2-343-22175-5)

How many of us have had a chance encounter with a market woman or a server at a refreshment stall in a far-off land? Chances are many of us, but how often did this chance meeting spiral into a book, one with several fascinating intertwined stories? (“Chance” also happens to be one of the book’s motifs.) One restless, troubled metis Vietnamese woman was the catalyst for the meeting and collaboration by two French women scholars, which in turn altered her life and expectations as it eventually did for ten others. It was a kind of rescue which encompassed a long forgotten monument.

The Story. One of the authors, Caroline Grillot, an ethnologist, was in a Chinese border town on the Chinese-Vietnamese frontier, when she began a discussion with a street vendor, a Vietnamese woman named Dung. Learning that Grillot was French, Dung remarked she was too! Already long interested in Vietnam, embroiled in the longstanding conflicts with French and Americans, and herself a student of Chinese society, Grillot became interested in the lives of the numerous Vietnamese women who had crossed illegally into China seeking the better life. This is how she came to meet Dung. Grillot did not let that remark pass without seeking to learn how this could be. Dung pronounced in a Vietnamese way the name for her father which, to Grillot, suggested he was Algerian.

Mystified, Grillot’s research began on the Internet in a cyber café in 2006 in the border town of Hekou, by plugging in a few words. They led her directly to the work entitled “Poussières d’empires” by Nelcya Delanoë with its shocking revelation for Grillot. In 2002 this French historian had published a book recounting the desertion from the French army in Indochina of soldiers from the colonies, men from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. They opposed this French colonial war and deserted, joining the Viet-Minh. When the war ended in 1954, these foreign soldiers were repatriated except for a “handful” of Moroccans, due to Cold War tensions

between the two countries. This was not to happen for 18 years, not until 1972.

One of the many attractive features of the book is that the story follows chronologically the discoveries each author gained from the knowledge of the other. By embedding their emails to each other within the narrative, we learn not only how they pieced together the evidence but, equally as interesting, their thoughts and reactions to what they were learning. Grillot was determined to find Dung's father while Delanoë was initially in pursuit of information about a monument, the Morocco Gate, that the deserters had built of stone and in the Moroccan style in the years leading up to 1972. The Moroccans, several hundred, were provided farmland close to Hanoi by Ho Chi Minh where they married, had children, farmed and produced dairy and other products consumed by the Europeans in Hanoi. Most opted to return to Morocco, some with their wives and their metis children, who were considered by the Moroccans as "Chinese" and suspected communists, given their affiliation with the Viet-Minh. Having seen the Morocco Gate in 1998, Delanoë was anxious to see it repaired and protected. Only after the restoration of relations in 2005-06 between Vietnam and Morocco and thanks to the interest of the new Moroccan Ambassador, urged on by Delanoë and Grillot, was this accomplished, finally in a ceremony in 2018. The two scholars learned of this event via the media.

The book though, centers on the destiny of Dung. Her story begins when her mother chose in 1972 not to accompany her Moroccan husband in his repatriation and to remain with her child among her own relatives. He left, taking Dung's proof of Moroccan descent with him. Thus it is a study of Dung's relations with her mother, her quarter Moroccan Vietnamese son (left to be raised by his grandmother) and her desire to establish her Moroccan nationality. Thanks to the great efforts of the two authors, Dung's Moroccan ancestry is recognized and a position for her is found at the new Moroccan Embassy in Hanoi. However, her fortunes do wax and wane; it was a "yo-yo" life, we are told. We do not learn if her metis status in Vietnamese society had any bearing on her troubled life or was due to bad decisions.

Reading this engaging book provides multiple gains. Its chronological order and interchange between the authors almost assigns it to the genre of mystery, as each new clue appears and is discussed. The authors themselves, with their individual discursions on their motivations, understandings, even central events in their childhood, offer the reader challenging

and important insights. As well, a host of characters, Vietnamese and Moroccan, appear in these pages, and the authors disclose details of their lives and perceptions. The postcolonial life in Vietnam is thus kept in sight. Not least, we are importantly reminded of the French and American wars in Vietnam as well as the great destruction in Cambodia. To almost everyone's edification, we learn of the desertion from the French army in Indochina and the eighteen-year sojourn of the Moroccan soldiers in North Vietnam. The writing is engaging and often times poetic. It is a happy collaboration of an historian and ethnologist, each very capable of applying the tools of each other's discipline. I highly recommend this captivating work to all interested in the region, the history and the society. Or just for a "good read."

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