

Casablanca-Hanoi: Caroline Grillot and Nelcy Delanoë on intertwined histories and the coincidences that shape research

Paramita Paul

Dr. Caroline Grillot, a social anthropologist and independent scholar affiliated with the Lyon Institute of East Asian Studies, and Prof. Nelcy Delanoë, an ethnohistorian and formerly professor of American history at the Université Paris Nanterre, are the authors of the book *Casablanca-Hanoi: une porte dérobée sur des histoires postcoloniales* ("Casablanca-Hanoi, an historical side-door onto postcolonial stories"). Published in 2021 by Editions L'Harmattan, with a preface by François Guillemat, *Casablanca-Hanoi* is a story that spans decades and takes place across nations. It traces the history of Moroccan-Vietnamese families in mid 20th-century Vietnam – and their descendants in the 21st century – across the planet. Through these individuals' life trajectories, it is also an exploration of questions of postcolonialism, citizenship, globalization, and Asia-Africa relations. Equally, the book is the story of the process of conducting research itself: of how two researchers meet and connect, and of circumstances and coincidences that shape investigation and inquiry.

Our conversation was originally featured as an episode of *The Channel* podcast. In the following excerpt, Caroline and Nelcy take us back to beginning of their research project, discuss the material remains of a Moroccan-Vietnamese cooperative, and elaborate on mapping and representation.

Caroline and Nelcy, in 2006 your lives connect when Caroline meets Dung, a woman of Moroccan-Vietnamese descent. Dung is a central figure in your book: she doesn't just act as the catalyst of a series of events, but her persona also represents the complexity of intertwined histories that form the core of your work. Caroline, I am interested in your first meeting with Dung. Can you describe how that meeting took place? What were your first impressions of her?

Yes of course. I met her in April 2006. At that time, I was conducting research on Vietnamese marriage migrants in China, and I was staying in Hekou, a small Chinese border town, just next to Vietnam. One afternoon I was sitting at a Vietnamese street stall drinking lemon juice when I noticed a Vietnamese woman whose face was quite unusual. She was also looking at me and she asked me where I was from, the usual questions, and when I replied that I was French, she smiled and she said that she was French too. A conversation followed in Chinese, in broken Chinese, and she ended up writing her French name in my notebook. Only it looked like an Arabic name rather than a very classic French one. She then told me that her father had abandoned her when she was young, and that she wished to find him, and that was the starting point of an unexpected new research topic.

Who is Dung and what questions did she inspire you to pursue?

Dung and I quickly became friends, because I started to see her on a daily basis, and we became friends very naturally, because of our "French" connection, even though at that time I didn't really know what that meant, but it certainly meant something for her, and she gave me access to her personal life. She described herself as the wife of a Chinese worker, and she was one of those women I was



Fig. 1: Morocco Gate, Hanoi, built between 1956-1964 by a Moroccan-Vietnamese settlement, and inspired by the 1732 Bab Al Mansour Gate in Meknes, Morocco (Photo courtesy of Nelcy Delanoë).

actually looking for in that place, one of those marriage migrants whose life choices I wanted to understand. In fact, she was a poor worker, she was surviving in this place in very poor conditions, without any plans for the future. She was in her thirties, she had a son back in Vietnam, her mother was in Vietnam, and she was alone in this part of China. She slowly told me about her life's trajectory, and I found out that it was full of drama, which [took] her to where she was in the Spring of 2006. It was really out of curiosity for her life that I started to look further into her past, including a search for her father.

How did you decide to contact Nelcy?

At first, Dung's identity did not make any sense to me, but I was curious to understand how she could have an Arabic name and who could be her father. I knew she was telling the truth because she looked quite different, so there was something of mixed blood in her. So I simply went to an internet cafe and I googled a few key words, and miraculously the algorithm of Google provided me with the name of Nelcy Delanoë, a French historian who wrote a book that connected Vietnam and North Africa. Since I had no other leads and no access to the book, and I had nothing to lose, I just decided to write to Nelcy and ask for her advice.

Nelcy, you explained that your specialization is in native American history. Why were you drawn to Dung's story in particular?

I wasn't exactly drawn to Dung's story in the beginning. I was amazed, and I didn't know exactly what was amazing. I had spent four years documenting and then writing my *Poussières d'Empires* [Presses Universitaires de France, 2002]. When published in France and in Morocco in 2002, the book had created quite a surprise and lots of interest. Why? Because the story of Moroccan soldiers and many others from other origins in the French Indo-Chinese army during the so-called Indo-China War, who had transgressed, deserted, and rallied to the Viet Minh, was unheard of, and I had found it out. Even more intriguing, these men, had eventually been stuck in Vietnam, until 1972, in a prison camp turned into a cooperative, for almost 20 years. Why [had they been] stuck there? The causes are various: the war, the Cold War, the history of Morocco, the history of Vietnam, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the unification of

Vietnam, the American war, the postcolonial world. Eventually I knew I was going to know more about my work.

After the French retreat from Vietnam in 1954, Moroccan soldiers in the French army who had rallied to the Viet Minh, such as Dung's biological father Houmanne Ben Mohamed, remained in Vietnamese cooperatives, together with their Vietnamese wives. As an art historian with an interest in Visual Culture, I am fascinated by the material remains of these cooperatives, and particularly a monument made by a cattle-raising Moroccan-Vietnamese settlement. I am talking about a gate, inspired by the 1732 Bab Al Mansour Gate in Meknes in Morocco. This gate features on the cover of your book and in your title, and is concrete, tangible evidence of the existence of a Moroccan-Vietnamese community between past and present, between countries, and between lives "here" and "there." Nelcy, can you describe the monument to us and elaborate on when, how and why it was made?

It was made between 1956-1964 with sand, earth, cement, white paint, and that's it. They had a picture though, to help them. Their commissioner brought them a French dictionary, a Larousse, and there was a picture of the Meknes door. So that helped them with decoration and proportion. He supported their decision to do that because he liked them, he was really a warm guy, but he was very worried about repetitive unruly demonstrations, because by then they still had no inkling of when they would go back. And his superiors were getting very nervous about his incapacity at ruling them. So he gave them his support with material, with this picture, and with encouragement, and they built it. At the same time, they were working on the premises. They had to clear the jungle that had invaded the property that had belonged to a French farmer, who had cows, and they found the cows that were wandering around. They planted vegetables and raised chickens. They became popular because they were producing butter and milk that was sold in Hanoi to the European Red Cross. And the Vietnamese wives who they had married were unusual, because why would you marry a Moroccan guy who in Vietnamese would be called a "black European"? It was not very popular. They were outcasts for one reason or another. With the Moroccans, they had children and founded families.

Now the life they had while doing all this hard work was unusual for these men from the

The Channel is the flagship podcast from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). Each episode delves into a particular Asian Studies topic from across the social sciences and humanities. Through a mixture of interviews, lectures, discussions, readings, and more, *The Channel* is a platform to connect scholars, activists, artists, and broader publics in sustained conversation about Asia and its place in the contemporary world. Listen and subscribe at <https://shows.acast.com/the-channel> or on your preferred podcatcher app.



countryside, because they were paid for it, and not a bad pay. The families could see doctors if and when necessary, the children went to school, everybody spoke Vietnamese. So gradually everybody, and particularly the men, they were proud of themselves, because of the dignity that they were given, and which they had never experienced before, was such that they were grateful forever. Even when I interviewed them, and despite the fact that they were angry at their "hosts," they still respected the dignity they gave them. As they wanted to go home, but couldn't for reasons incomprehensible to them, and pending that, they insisted they would finish that door, a Moroccan door with three arches. The arch in the middle is taller and larger. The two arches on the side are not as tall and they are sculpted with flowers, leaves, a small crown. [The gate] has strong pillars. In fact, it was very strong because when I found it in 2000, it was still there. It had not been destroyed, and was just looking great, with cobwebs and moss and rain stains, but it just needed polishing and it was just there, gorgeous. According to me, it symbolizes national pride and their declaration of sovereignty as Arabs, as Moroccans, as Muslims, with a king and a country they were going to go back to. For me, 50 years later, it has become a stone archive.

In addition to the gate, to which we will return once more at the end of our conversation, your book includes two other figures. This is a map of Morocco and a partial map of Vietnam. you have captioned the maps "Map of 'their' Morocco" and "Map of 'their' North Vietnam." Caroline, can you explain the captions? What does "their" mean?

"Their Morocco" shows the cities or regions where most of them originated from, including the capital and the places that symbolize their country, their kingdom. Not all of them were literate, so they probably didn't know much about their own country, also because they left quite young and they were from rural areas in Morocco, but at least they knew a few places, a few important cities. We didn't want to use a regular map of Morocco or Vietnam because that didn't make sense: you can find that everywhere. We wanted something that shows what Morocco represented to them and what Vietnam represents to them, because also they didn't know the whole country of Vietnam, only the places where they had fought during the war, where they had stayed after the war, the different camps where they had settled, and that was their Vietnam.

This transcript has been heavily edited and abridged. The original interview includes a wealth of further details and discussion. To hear to the full conversation, listen and subscribe to *The Channel* podcast: <https://shows.acast.com/the-channel>

Paramita Paul is Chief Editor of *The Newsletter*.