

# Nearly naked

## The sociologist and the school trip

Anna-Louise Milne

*University of London Institute in Paris*

**Fabien Truong, *La Taille des arbres* (Paris: Rivages, 2022), 160 pp. €16.**

Is there always a moment in a school trip when teachers become three-dimensional people for their pupils, and so much more interesting than the sights they have travelled around the globe to see? In Fabien Truong's deeply engaging adventure into the strange refractions and reframings of narrativized sociology, or sociologically leaning narrative, this moment occurs out at sea, off the coast of Poulo Condor, today known as the Island of Côn Sơn in Vietnam and previously the location of a notorious French prison. Having walked the ruins of colonial rule in Indochina, the group of pupils from Saint-Denis, one of the poorest *communes* in France, plunge noisily into the sheer blue bliss of the sea, encouraged by the reassurances of the motorboat skipper. The moment is joyous, like many that Truong recounts, but for all its dazzling radiance, several images come into sharp focus. First, the tattoo on the back of Clarence Albertini, the only adult woman on the trip and whose role seems to be the 'surveillante' or 'la vie scolaire', whatever the setting.<sup>1</sup> For the gaggle of teenagers in the water with her, the glimpse of her 'tatouage tribal'<sup>2</sup> is far more fascinating than anything lurking in the depths of the South China Sea. And second, the three young black men – from the Comoros, Guinea, and DRC, respectively – who sit nervously on the deck, equipped with lifejackets because they have never learnt to swim. Two quite quickly take to the water, bobbing around in their buoyant orange garb. The third, Bart, hangs back. Truong, 'juste le sociologiste de service'<sup>3</sup> in this situation, observes 'à bonne distance'.<sup>4</sup> He can see that Bart would rather everyone forget he's there at all, frozen in the tropical heat by his fear.

But what is the right distance for a sociologist along for the ride, without any particular responsibility to the intended learning outcomes

1 Fabien Truong, *La Taille des arbres* (Paris: Rivages, 2022), p. 20.

2 Ibid., p. 76.

3 Ibid., p. 77.

4 Ibid., p. 76.

or the safe delivery of this extraordinary school trip? Especially when the trip has taken you back to the country of your own paternal origins and the sedimented violence of postcolonial exile? Truong starts *La Taille des arbres* with the claim that the journeys he recounts in the book should not have happened. They're against the grain of 'L'Education nationale',<sup>5</sup> for a start, because organized according to practices and affinities that would be difficult to generalize. Insubordinate. Some might even say – and no doubt did – irresponsible. And Truong's role in these off-beat *randonnées* is all the less clear: he worked for a year as a young teaching assistant in the high school in question, but since that time has moved on, completed a PhD in sociology, written a few books. And as much as, if not more than, their acquaintance from the school staff room, it was reading those books that prompted the maverick history teacher to invite Truong to join the group.

Though lightly indicated in the introductory pages, this weaving together of lived association and transmission through the medium of books is a recurrent and deeply significant aspect of Truong's work, not only reflective of the place he has taken in the renewal of Bourdieusian sociological enquiry in French, but also of how his modes of attention plot vectors of connection that unsettle our maps of the social. His first long study from 2015 – entitled *Jeunesses françaises. Bac+5 made in banlieue*, recently reissued in *poche* format – which also drew from his experience as a high school teacher in Seine-Saint-Denis, laid the groundwork for this remapping.<sup>6</sup> Through its detailed descriptions of the post-18 trajectories of a group of his former pupils, he revealed complex patterns of movement across and around various presumed divides: between the *banlieue* and Paris, between the university and other forms of tertiary education, between sacrosanct 'general' education and technical or 'professional' training. Though still close in approach to urban sociology as practised particularly in Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis, this work already allowed the words of the subjects under study to thicken on the page and slow the propensity towards sociological generalization. And it was no doubt for this reason that its own circulation would mean that Truong encountered it again, coming back at him, so to speak, from the bookshelf of one of the 'mauvais garçons' who people his later study of radicalization and masculinity, published in English to widespread acclaim by Polity in 2018 as *Radicalized*

5 Ibid., p. 10.

6 Fabien Truong, *Jeunesses françaises. Bac +5 made in banlieue* (Paris: La Découverte, 2022 [2015]).

*Loyalties: Becoming Muslim in the West.*<sup>7</sup> For this subsequent study, too, his own ‘jeunesse’ and savvy movement across the class-race frontiers that link and distinguish the music venues, libraries, university lecture halls, bars, and social centres of the Greater Paris region enabled an experience of distance that is both social and geographical. At the same time, it activates a plasticity in expression that speaks to and for a more porous world below the social identifications that condition a certain legibility.

This doesn’t mean to say that Truong’s work is naïve about the weight of social identities in our encounters with the world. *La Taille des arbres* is replete with them, even allowing them to sediment typographically into collective identities. So the proto-Surrealist poet Paul Eluard, whose name is redeployed as so many are by the consecrating forces of institutional appropriation, becomes *pauleluard*, the first group of young people who go to New Caledonia, as well as being the second group – only men this time for the putatively obvious reason that they are all registered in technical education – who go to Vietnam. Between *pauleluard* 1 and *pauleluard* 2, the differences are both slight and real, and this is one of the initially perplexing, intriguing aspects of the work, which moves short chapter by short chapter between these two separate journeys without giving the reader a firm orientation. As the book progresses, the ‘same same but different’<sup>8</sup> structure takes on its full resonance, managing not to collapse the radical differences in history between postcolonial Vietnam and the disputed but continued dependency on metropolitan France of New Caledonia, while throwing across a number of bridges between them. Football, in particular, is one such bridge, in matches between *pauleluard* and *julesgarnier* in Nouméa – the high school where pupils study for the same national exams as the visitors from Saint-Denis, named after the colonial engineer who discovered nickel and founded some of the most profitable mines of mid-nineteenth-century France. And between *pauleluard* and *vinhchâu*, in the remote town of Vinh Châu, 250 km south of Ho Chi Minh, where everything needs to be rebuilt, the school premises to start with, and goodwill too. Football, then, as a way of staging the confrontations that contain the messy configurations of these encounters,

7 Fabien Truong, *Loyautés radicales: l’Islam et les ‘mauvais garçons’ de la Nation* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017); Fabien Truong, *Radicalized Loyalties: Becoming Muslim in the West Polity*, trans. by Seth Ackerman (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

8 Truong, *La Taille des arbres*, pp. 135, 193. Truong encounters this phrase in the field, offered as an explanation in English, and uses it as the section titles to the second two parts of the volume. It is also the final phrase of the work.

but only as one interlude among many, which include scenes of listening, watching, walking, and swimming, lifejacket or not.

Because the sociologist does manage to get Bart into the water. And in so doing, Truong negotiates his own *dérive* from the practice of ‘enquête’<sup>9</sup> to writing literary narration which states the violence of the social world as it is manifest in this young man’s inhibition, while also allowing his text to break into the inchoate moment of their conjoined, nearly naked immersion in the clear blue water:

*Vas-y, on y va tous les deux.*

*Vas-y, me lâche pas.*

*Vas-y, promis.*<sup>10</sup>

When Bart finally lets go of his grip on Truong’s back, 40 metres or so away from the boat, the sociologist is catapulted back to Sunday mornings in the local pool with his young children. Their smiles, Bart’s smile. Himself as shark or whale. Their shared fears and excitements. And in the buoyancy of this moment, his children, this beleaguered teenager, himself as father and as sociologist are held in an extended embrace. It’s a beautiful passage in a deeply felt book, which Truong allows himself to underscore as if he were spitting on the ‘bitume’ of Saint-Denis: ‘le reste n’est que foutaise’.<sup>11</sup>

There is no ‘right distance’ in the choppy shifts between worlds and words, between terse tonality such as this and bursts of linguistic exuberance. And if the title’s allusion to the scale but also the pruning of trees – ‘la taille des arbres’ – is mirrored in the description of how the mighty *hopea odorata* of Hô Chi Minh have withstood the violence of multiple conquests, it is on paper that Truong finds something like roots, more specifically in the form of long-forgotten Vietnamese treatises written in a language that was his father’s but is not his. In the volatility of writing, then, which opens new possibilities in his work while it also resurfaces in its incredible but redundant proliferation, meaningless today to all extents and purposes and yet also what allows Truong to mediate between there and here, between ‘same same but different’, his family’s tribulations and the rewards of transmission.

9 Ibid., blurb.

10 Ibid., p. 77.

11 Ibid., p. 78.