

This article first appeared in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*. (co-editor Françoise Massardier-Kenney). Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press. 1994.

DURAS, RACISM, AND CLASS

About twenty five years after the publication of *Mirza* by Germaine de Staël, another novel about a black person *Ourika* (1823) was published in Paris by another woman, the Duchess Claire de Duras, who had the most prestigious salon of the Restoration. However, if, as women, Staël and Duras shared a particular sensitivity to the plight of people of color, they differed to a significant extent in their assessment of the issue of race. The utopian cosmopolitanism of Staël and her open endorsement of translation was replaced by Duras's pessimistic description of the inevitable alienation of the colonized and by her skepticism of translation as a viable cultural paradigm.

This shift from optimism to pessimism is understandable in light of the changes in historical circumstances. During the years separating these two works, Napoleon had reestablished slavery (1802) and the Black rebellion of Santo Domingo (Haiti) (1791) fueled racial prejudices in France. It was not until the period of the Restoration in the 1820s that the question of slavery and of people of color in general attracted interest once again. In 1826 Victor Hugo published *Bug Jargal*; in 1822 the subject of the poetry prize offered by the conservative governmental institution l'Académie-Française was the abolition of the slave trade. In 1821, Duras told the story of *Ourika* to the members of her salon and published it in 1823.

Ourika was one of the four novels that the famous salonnière would compose at the age of forty-five during 1821-22. While *Ourika* would see publication, the others would remain unpublished until well after her death. Although the publication history of *Ourika* suggests that the novel was quite popular: it saw two reeditions the year of publication; nine reeditions between 1826 and 1878; two almost immediate translations into Spanish (1824 and 1825, both published in Paris); it was adapted for the theater and into the world of fashion in the form of a hat; admired by people as different as Sainte-Beuve, Chateaubriand, Talleyrand, Goethe, and von Humbolt; it was virtually ignored for much of the twentieth-century. It was only in 1979 that a reedition of *Ourika* by Editions des femmes made the text accessible and sparked a renewal of interest about the author, about the reasons for the success of the novel, and about what it reveals concerning nineteenth-century French attitudes toward race.

It may seem surprising that an aristocratic woman, wife of the Chamberlain of the court of Louis XVIII, host of the most prominent royalist salon of the Restoration, would write works uncovering the prejudices which characterized the class to which she belonged. As *Ourika* exposes race prejudices, *Edouard*, written the same year, describes class prejudices. However, if, by marriage, the author Claire de Kersaint became a Duras, her father Guy de Coëtnempren, Count of Kersaint, had been an advocate of political and social reforms and was considered by conservative members of the nobility as a traitor to his class. He was a liberal, author of *Le bon*

sens, a pamphlet attacking privileges and the rigid class distinctions marked by the three orders. A Girondin who supported the revolution, he was guillotined in 1793 after having voted against the death sentence of Louis XVI and resigned from the assembly. Thus, in denouncing the privileges and abuses of her class, Duras was following the tradition of her father.

Her interest in the fate of people of color, besides the fact that it was an interest widespread at the time, can also be linked to her mother, a creole born in the French colony of Martinique. Through her mother, Claire Louise Françoise de Paul d'Alesso d'Eragny, Claire de Kersaint had direct access to knowledge about the economic and political situation in Martinique, i.e., a world of sugar plantations worked by slaves and owned by Europeans. Moreover, while the slave trade was the enterprise of the bourgeoisie and, as such, could be the target of opposition by the nobility, the Kersaints had great financial interests in Martinique and were, like members of the bourgeoisie, economically linked to it. Claire de Kersaint, whose parents had separated, and then divorced during the revolution, heard in the street about her father's death on June 12, 1793 in Bordeaux as she was ready to embark for Martinique with her mother to recover "a great fortune she had inherited" and she later managed this fortune herself in Martinique, her mother "being sick and weak of mind." (1) One cannot help speculate about the nature of this fortune since the major source of income in Martinique was land (sugarcane fields), and thus slaves.

Through both her parents, Duras found herself both implicated in and distanced from the other members of her class. This distance was felt particularly acutely in London where Duras had to face the sneers of the other émigrés who shunned the daughter of the Girondin Kersaint.

Duras's personal family life also reflects this distancing from the conservative positions of her own class. She married the Duc de Duras, a staunch royalist, in 1797, and soon gave birth to two daughters Félicité (1797) and Clara (1798). Motherhood was to be the passion of her life, but, unlike other passionate mothers in literary history like Mme de Sévigné, a thwarted passion. Her favorite daughter Félicité married at the age of fifteen into an ultra royalist family, that of the Prince of Talmont and soon switched her allegiances to her mother-in-law. Not only did she abandon the literary and artistic education that her mother had established for her, adopting hunting and horseback riding, but she also took on the ultra conservative views of her husband's family. Félicité's political and emotional estrangement was extremely difficult for her mother who wrote "Sorrow is to have seen a foreign influence progressively alter the tastes, the feelings, the opinions that I had placed in this heart which is no longer the one which understood mine." (2) Her estrangement from her daughter indicates how far she was from reactionary aristocrats.

Her sense of estrangement was also heightened by the vicissitudes of her friendship with Chateaubriand, who used her influence as a woman of position to further his career but who did not consider her own need for intense and long lasting commitments. Duras's "dear brother," as she would call him, treated her as her character Charles would treat Ourika: as a necessary, but ultimately invisible and dismissible other.

Duras's relation to writing was marked by an ambivalence about language and identity, and the very way in which she perceived translation underlines this ambivalence and her concern with the problematics of dealing with another culture. She wrote most of her works in one single year after a series of illnesses which left her weakened and depressed, but her coming to writing was

not sudden. She was a very active correspondent (and most of what we know about her is based on her correspondence with Chateaubriand, Mme Swetchine and her childhood convent friend Rosalie de Constant). She was also known as a fine conversationalist and she would tell her stories to the members of her salon before she actually wrote them; she would rewrite them after hearing the reactions of her circle. Her writing, either mediated through the oral responses of the members of her salon or through the written replies of her correspondents, emphasizes her uncertainty about identity and her experiencing of language as a process in which several subject positions meet. Her paradoxical attitude toward translation allows us to understand this conception of language as an unstable site of differences. Although she would reject translation, she both read translations (for instance Tacitus in Dureau de la Malle's translation), about which she commented that she had read it "with a keen feeling for the beauties of this author" (3); she quoted and thus must have read major works of Italian literature; she read English authors; and more importantly she translated them as she did Horace.

Translation is a kind of writing or rewriting which transfers the foreign into a different culture and, in a very modern way, Duras perceived the risks and the losses involved in attempting this kind of transfer. Her "translations" are a kind of creative writing, as was still customary among many translators at the time. When she translated *Glenarvon*, she deleted a number of passages and added many of her own composition. It is as if translating saved her from the anxiety of authorship while giving her the opportunity to write fiction. Thus what she calls translation, and later rejects, is an activity she has used as a substitute for writing. She judges translation harshly because she fears that she herself has not respected the "original genius" she would allude to when she wrote to Rosalie de Constant: "I am against translation. One must not attempt what is impossible to do well. What is beautiful in a work is precisely what is least translatable, what bears the mark of the original genius, of nature, and of language; strength weakens, gracefulness is lost, subtlety disappears. A translation is like a disguise through which one attempts to recognize someone of one's acquaintance." (4) Her ambiguous relation to translation is linked to her pessimistic view that what is foreign cannot successfully be transposed into another culture, a theme that she will pick up with a different emphasis in *Ourika*, in which her black character is a "translated" being.

Duras's rejection of translation as in the letter just quoted appears in the context of the rejection of authorship. After her disquisition against translation, she explains "I am not guilty of the translation of *Eliza Rivers*." (5) In many letters Duras is concerned about being the presumed author of works she has not written. Her concern is a real one. She did not write to be published, and when she first wrote *Ourika* she had it printed in a luxurious edition by the *Imprimerie Royale* of only fifty copies destined for her friends. It is only when rumors about *Ourika* started circulating that she had it published and sold by the commercial publisher *Ladvocat*. This public edition appeared without her name, and the proceeds went to a charity.

Duras's ambivalence about language and identity is expressed by her rejection of authorship and her refusal to be implicated in the commercial circuit of publishing. Similarly, she published *Edouard* the following year after having it printed in fifty copies. Before the publication of this novel she loaned a proof to her friend Rosalie de Constant, but requested that she loan it only to trustworthy people because she "fears nothing more than a counterfeit edition and publicity against my will." (6) In an attempt to shun the gossip and the sneers brought on after she read it

in her salon, she would never print, let alone publish for the public, Olivier, written the same year as *Ourika*. (7) Similarly, *Ourika* may have been appreciated by her fellow authors (Goethe, Sainte Beuve, von Humbolt), but the novel was a source of notoriety and ridicule in the salons of the Faubourg Saint Germain. Actually, the crowd of the other salons nicknamed her *Ourika* (and in this, they were perhaps more perceptive than they knew), and her two daughters Bourgeonika and Bourika. (8) The Faubourg Saint Germain's ridicule is a reminder to the modern reader that, for all its objectionable characteristics (a novel with a protagonist who, although Black, has adopted all the prejudices of the aristocratic world, and who is almost abject in her self-hatred), *Ourika* was a radical work that uncovered the foundations of the racist prejudices of the aristocracy.

This ideological complexity of *Ourika* reflects, in some ways, the complexity of the times; it mirrors more specifically the complexity of the real anecdote that was the basis for Duras's narrative. *Ourika* was the name of an actual young black girl who died at sixteen of a mysterious illness and who had been "given" to the Princess of Beauvau by the Chevalier de Boufflers, governor of Senegal, who has been called one of the most enlightened administrators in the French colonies. (9) His enlightenment, however, went hand in hand with the kind of unconscious prejudice displayed in his correspondence. On one hand, he could write about a child "I feel moved to tears when I think that this poor child was sold to me like they would a lamb" (10) while also writing to Mme de Sabran in 1788 "I still have a parakeet for the queen, a horse for the Maréchal de Castries, a little captive for Mme de Beauvau, a sultan hen for the Duke of Laon, and an ostrich for M. de Nivernois." (11) The little captive in question was *Ourika*, whose story Duras was to tell. It is precisely this contradictory position (sympathy but inability to really treat the Africans as equal human beings) that Duras was to describe and question in *Ourika*. The Boufflers's letters were read in Mme de Sabran's salon, and the anecdote repeated in aristocratic circles, so that by the time Duras told the story it must have been common knowledge.

The reason why the story of *Ourika* drew Duras's interest is both historical and personal. It described a common pattern of gifts from Africa exchanged among the members of the nobility and came from Boufflers, who was very informative about Africa. On the personal side, the theme of an isolated individual excluded by society because of race or class was to be a constant in her work, and the depression of the character seems to have reflected Duras's own state as it is documented in the accounts of the times.

David O'Connell has recognized that *Ourika* is the first novel in French to describe the effects of racism on a black person and that the psychological disintegration of *Ourika* (her depression and self-hatred) corresponds to the stages described by Frantz Fanon in his seminal *Peau noire masques blancs*. (12) At first *Ourika* lives in the world of childhood where her color is of no significance. She is "fussed over" and loved by her benefactress and her grandson: "my black color did not prevent him from loving me." When *Ourika* first realizes that she can only have a life of solitude (actually, not quite, only a life without husband or child), she becomes very depressed and attempts to hide from herself the signs of what she comes to call her "mal" (her illness, her disease). "When I caught sight of my black hands, I thought I saw those of a monkey, I exaggerated my ugliness to myself." However, as Chantal Bertrand-Jennings has argued, the

alienation felt by Ourika is characteristic of women in general, who adopt the values of the group that oppresses them. (13)

This overlap of race and gender is present from the beginning of Ourika's story. A girl (Ourika) is given by a man (the Chevalier de B.) to a woman (Mme de B.), and for all of its ambiguities, Ourika's integration into the world of the French aristocracy is facilitated and encouraged by her patron in a way possible only in a gynécée. It is noticeable that there seem to be no adult males in the entourage of Mme de B., who claims that she loves Ourika like a daughter and has her educated as other aristocratic young women would be: reading, painting, dancing, foreign languages.

The feminine world of Mme de B. allows a cohabitation of two worlds, and the effects of colonization (a patriarchal process), the alienation and erasure of the collective memory of the colonized, are suspended. As long as Ourika is young enough to remain in the maternal haven of Mme de B., she is protected from racism. Ourika's rejection of her color and her self-hatred are a rejection of her "difference" as it is defined by the white male European world; whereas this same "difference" was accepted and valorized by Mme de B. Ourika later recounts with bitterness the ball organized by Mme de B. to allow her talents to shine and, if the incident can be read as an example of the patronizing European attitude toward black Africans, it can also be seen as an attempt to learn about Africa, to appreciate it, and to bring it in contact with the Parisian world of the salon. Mme de B. organizes a dance where the four parts of the world are represented, and Ourika represents Africa. To prepare for the ball, "we consulted travelers, we poured over books of costumes, we consulted scholarly works on African music, finally we chose a Comba, the national dance of my country." The desire to give Ourika an opportunity to be herself, i.e., someone of African origin, proud of the country of her birth, by consulting serious documentation about Africa, is the positive aspect of the incident, and reveals a more enlightened attitude towards Africa than the interest tainted with the disdain of Boufflers. (14)

However, the maternal world of Mme de B. is a fragile one, and it may not be accidental that the eruption of racism in Ourika's life takes place shortly after the ball, the most pronounced example of symbolic attempts at integrating different cultures. When Mme de B. is confronted by the anonymous marquise (whom we presume represents public opinion) with the fact that Ourika has no future, Mme de B. shows her anxiety, but also her hope, that Ourika will keep living "in her intimate circle."

The outside world represented by the marquise, however, states the matter bluntly, "Who will ever want to marry a negress"? The revelation of white racism is intimately connected with patriarchal values: the reproduction of economic interests through marriage. Mme de B., like the Chevalier de B., may have saved Ourika from the terrible fate of slavery, but she cannot achieve her integration into the French world. The message is pessimistic: there is no place where Ourika can live; the white world can only accommodate her as long as she does not reproduce. We are now back to Duras's pessimistic view of translation: the foreign text (or the foreign body) cannot be transferred to and integrated into the dominant culture without being distorted or smothered.

The impact of white prejudice on Ourika is all the stronger because she, as well as the other characters in the novel, can only conceive of herself as a woman in the most traditional sense of

the word, i.e., as a supporting spouse and mother, roles which inevitably place women in the realm of the circulation of property within specific classes.

Thus Mme de B. can protect Ourika only as long as she is not yet a woman, but, once Ourika does become a woman, Mme de B. cannot ensure her a place in her class system. Ourika's race is also linked to social class. Not born an aristocrat, she cannot join the ranks of aristocracy. What Duras shows is that whatever the reason, class or color, it is not the semantic content that is central; it is the sign, the fact of the difference existing between the class that wants to protect its purity and the rest of the world. However, color figures a difference that is ineradicable. Black Ourika discovers that she is alone, and, in a sense, so would any member of the working class alienated from his or her own culture, yet forbidden to be part of the aristocracy. But although it is conceivable that a class difference could be erased, color cannot, and the class barriers described by Duras, unlike color, are all the more impenetrable that they are part of the unconscious ideology of the aristocratic class. Mme de B., who has enlightened views, cannot even conceive of marrying Ourika to her grandson, for instance. Although it is not clear that she knows of Ourika's feelings for him, she would have certainly considered them if Ourika had been an aristocrat who belonged to her circle. Charles's marriage is presented like a strategic alliance, and the possibility that Ourika could have feelings is never considered.

This presentation of class and racial prejudices by Duras is accompanied by a very modern description of what Joan Scott calls "the process of subject construction." (15) Duras shows how Ourika's very experience of her own identity as a black woman is mediated by a white male world. First, the story of Ourika is framed by the narrative of a young doctor who visits her at the convent and who will tease out her story by asserting that her "illness" lies in the past and that "the past must be cured. I can't cure it without knowing it." This scientific version of Ourika's "malheur" (misfortune), as she herself first calls it, will be adopted by Ourika, who will then call her color an "ill," a "disease." The very experience of telling her story is thus already mediated through the discourse of science, a bourgeois discourse in the process of displacing the concept of normality from the social realm to the more inescapable realm of the physical. The doctor's confidence in his ability to "cure" Ourika by treating her physically ("my treatment seemed to be effective") is, of course, belied by the last lines of the narrative, "unfortunately they [my cares] were useless; she died at the end of October." Science cannot cure social prejudice.

Secondly, Ourika's sense of herself comes to her mediated as well. Her origin and her history as a captive become known to her well after she is enculturated as a member of Mme de B.'s entourage. "It is only later that I learned about the history of the first days of my childhood." Although she starts the narrative of her story with the scene where she is rescued from slavery, she, in fact, has no memory of the experience; it is only because she has been told the circumstances that she can recount them.

Likewise, until the age of fifteen, she does not experience racial prejudices. What she calls her "blindness" to her color is suddenly revealed to her (indirectly again) by the anonymous marquise, but her own realization of the significance of her color is limited by the terms of the marquise. Like her, Ourika does not see that racial and social prejudices are intertwined. As Mme de B. and the marquise discuss Ourika's predicament, it is evident that her color is a problem because she is not a "common person"; because of her education she is like an aristocrat

and would be happy only in a refined environment. Unfortunately, this aristocratic world is defined by the strict rules of exclusion that protect its members from grafts from the outside world. Ourika latches onto the fact of her color because it is the most visible marker of her rejection, but it is very far from being the most significant one.

Far from diminishing the importance of race, Duras links it to a whole system of exclusion based on the difference, the "otherness" of those excluded. She takes racial equality as a given. Her heroine has all the qualities and the defects of a young aristocratic woman; it is only her color that marks her as different. Although considering equality as a given may not seem much nowadays, we must remember that it was an extraordinary achievement. At the time, American abolitionists were still fighting against the notion of the racial inferiority of Africans by showing that they could be as educated and intelligent as white Americans. That Ourika is intelligent and educated (in fact critics have faulted Mme de Duras for the fact that Ourika talks like a *salonnière*) is obvious. Duras shows that prejudice is not rooted in the belief that a race is superior or inferior to another, but that it stems from the desire to exclude what is different.

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NOTES

1. See Claire de Duras, Olivier, ed. Denise Virieux (Paris: Corti, 1971), 63.
2. Quoted in G. Pailhès, *La Duchesse de Duras et Chateaubriand* (Paris: Perin, 1910), 266.
3. Quoted in Pailhès, *La Duchesse de Duras*, 364.
4. Letter to Rosalie de Constant, dated January 14, 1824, quoted in Pailhès, *La Duchesse de Duras*, 280.
5. *Eliza Rivers ou la favorite de la nature*, roman de Mme Burnton traduit de l'anglais par Mme S. (i.e., la Comtesse Molé), letter quoted and reference documented in Pailhès, *La Duchesse de Duras*, 280.
6. Letter quoted in Virieux, Olivier, 35.
7. Ironically an anonymous Olivier was published on January 21, 1826 by the editing house of Urbain Canel. The counterfeit novel's author was in fact the journalist Hyacinthe de Latouche. To make sure that the book be attributed to Duras, and thus benefit from the interest it had created during its reading in her salon, the author of the hoax had it printed on the same paper with the same format as *Ourika*. Duras reacted quickly by publishing a disclaimer in the *Journal des débats* on January 24, and in *Le moniteur universel* on January 25, 1826.
8. i.e., "bouriquet" pronounced almost the same but meaning "ass, donkey." Duras could not escape her authorship and neither could her family.
9. See Roger Mercier, *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française* (Dakar: Publication de la section de langues et littératures, 1962), 162-165, for a description and an evaluation of his tenure as governor of Senegal.
10. Mercier, *L'Afrique noire*, 165.
11. Mercier, *L'Afrique noire*, 513-514.
12. For a summary of the psychological effects of racism, see David O'Connell, "Ourika: Black Face, White Mask," *French Review* 47 (1974): 47-56 and Grant Critchfield, *Three Novels of Mme de Duras* (Le Hague: Mouton, 1975), 54-55.
13. Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, "Condition féminine et impuissance sociale: les romans de la Duchesse de Duras," *Romantisme* 18 (1989): 43.
14. For instance, when he describes the religious ceremonies of the king of Podor; "he makes daily about eight to ten ridiculous prayers on a sheepskin." Boufflers, *Correspondance*, 457, quoted in Mercier, *L'Afrique noire*, 165.

15. Joan Scott, "Differences," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan C. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40.