

In Search of Duras's Ourika

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“The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter,
is the essential female tragedy.” - Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

Ourika, the French novelette by Claire de Duras has been a point of avid discussion from its publication in 1823 to the present. By 1824 the story had been reprinted in second, third and fourth editions, adapted for the stage, and lauded by such nineteenth century luminaries as Chateaubriand, Goethe and Sainte-Beuve. A likeness of the protagonist, a slave girl raised as a French aristocrat, was commissioned by Louis XVIII. In her introduction to *Ourika*'s 1977 English translation, literary critic Joan DeJean writes, “In a few months, the anonymously and privately printed novel had evolved from a story Duras entertained her friends within the privacy of her popular salon¹,” to “one of the most widely circulated novels of the day” (Duras viii). In his foreword Fowles distinguishes the book as the “first serious attempt by a white novelist to enter a black mind” (xxx). DeJean concurs, “Duras [has] created an African character who is truly an individual and not simply a type...a heroine designed more than anything to make the experience of prejudice as it is endured by its victim...a reality” (Durasxi, xii). While DeJean's conclusions reflect a pervasively shared view, they are, like Duras's rendering of her protagonist, highly problematic. Contrary to Fowles's assertion, *Ourika* signifies stock character: the maltreated Negress who is inexorably impelled to hate herself because she is black. Rather than inspiring deeper understanding, the portrait elicits pity.

In this essay, I will examine how Fowles, DeJean and others proliferate the centuries old perceptions of Black women as raw materials useful for “altruistic” purposes.

The plot of *Ourika* adheres to the sentimental conventions of its era. Duras tells the story of a two-year-old Senegalese slave girl who, while mourning the death of her mother, is “rescued” from boarding a slaver after being purchased by the colony's governor as a gift for his aunt, French aristocrat Mme la Maréchale de B. The child is raised by Mme de B. as an aristocrat which many critics argue creates a veil between her and her “otherness.” The veil falls a decade later when Ourika inadvertently overhears a private discussion between Mme de B. and a friend. Together they lament the girl's marriage prospects as a slave turned cultured Black woman in French society and conclude that she is condemned to a life of solitude. Devastated, Ourika succumbs to “un long et violent chagrin” [a lengthy and violent grief]² from which she never recovers. The incident raises fundamental issues about the impact of social conventions, in this case deeply grounded in racial typecasts.

Duras modeled her protagonist after the “real-life” Ourika who was born in Senegal in 1780 and purchased in 1786 by the chevalier de Boufflers, governor of Senegal (1786-87) as a gift to his uncle's wife, Mme de Beauvau (De Raedt57). The gifting of African children was not unusual at the time. In her essay “Representations of the Real-Life Ourika,” Thérèse De Raedt describes the practice:

Slave children (in French usually called *petits nègres* or *petit pages*) were very fashionable in high society in the seventeenth and especially eighteenth centuries. European families found them pleasing as servants and entertainers. They represented a status symbol, a sign of wealth and luxury, and an adornment (58).

Once in France, Ourika was raised by Mme de Beauvau in high society. Although Beauvau had other *petits nègres* -- ignored in Duras's tale, Ourika's “lack of affectation” reportedly fascinated her. To Beauvau, Ourika “recall[ed] the innate nobility and purity of mind that Jean-Jacques Rousseau attributed to ‘noble savages’ (59).

When Beauvau's husband died in 1793, Ourika is said to have mourned openly, a display that touched the madame: “ellem'avoit inspire la tendresse d'unevéritable mere” ‘she made me feel the tenderness of a real mother’ (59).

¹ Invented in 16th century Italy, the French salon was hosted by a French aristocrat as a gathering of the likeminded for the purpose of discussion and entertainment. Topics included philosophy, literature, politics and the Fine Arts.

² Fowles translates “chagrin” as “melancholy,” In *Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud identifies “melancholy” as the state of being unconscious of the loss of an object and “mourning” as being conscious of the loss. Since Ourika is able to recall her objects of sorrow, her “chagrin” is clearly conscious and therefore indicative of mourning rather than melancholy.



In this “*Portrait d'Ourika*” by 18th century French painter Sophie de Tott, Ourika kneels next to a memorial of M. de Beauvau holding a crown of flowers over his head, caressing his chin and smiling serenely.

Unlike Duras’s fictional account, Mme de Beauvau does not pretend to be Ourika’s mother, but rather expresses a more generalized benevolence triggered by Ourika’s placid demeanor.

In the novel, Ourika, raised in the idyllic setting of Mme de B.’s salon, becomes as enamored of her benefactor as she believes Mme de B. of her:

Mes plus anciens souvenirs ne me retracent que le salon de Mme de B...elle voulut que j’eusse tous les talents...j’y passais ma vie, aimée d’elle, caressée, gâtée par tous ses amis, accablée de présents, vantée, exaltée et comblée d’affection par l’enfant le plus spirituel et le plus aimable (Ourika 7, 9).

My first memories are of Mme de B.’s drawing room...she wanted me to be accomplished at everything...I spent my life there, loved by her, fondled, spoiled by all her friends, loaded with presents, praised, held up as the most clever and endearing of children (Ourika 7, 9).

It is the rupture of this bond that pains Ourika so deeply when she overhears Mme de B. exclaim to her socialite friend, the Marquise, “Pauvre Ourika! Je la vois seule, pour toujours seule dans la vie” (12) [“Poor Ourika! I see her alone, forever alone in life”] [my translation].³

According to DeJean, it is during this clandestine conversation that Ourika learns she is Black. “[Ourika] believes herself to be like the aristocrats who raised her until she discovers racial difference and racial prejudice” (ix). Waller echoes DeJean’s sentiment, ““Ourika discovers in one searing moment that her blissful integration is an illusion” (xvi). These two perspectives require readers to accept that Ourika, born an African slave in an expansive French colony, would not have had an inkling of the difference or import of her skin color and Mme de B.’s. In this context, Waller’s use of “integration” seems anachronistic, pointing to a racialized mode of reading that makes it nearly impossible to a “real” Ourika. As I will demonstrate, DeJean and Waller’s portrayal of Ourika’s “discovery” stresses race at the expense of fundamental psychological patterns that are better explained in terms of loss and grief. Already mourning her dead mother, Ourika’s grief is intensified by Mme de B.’s shape-shifting.

In *Coping with Loss* (1999) Drs. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and Judith Larson present the results of the “Bereavement Coping Project,” a long-term study of several hundred people who have lost loved ones. The fifth chapter, “Children and Grief,” describes the “secondary losses” children experience after a parent dies in ways that illuminate Ourika’s character better than the invocation of race. “When children lose a parent...they lose their future with them, and secondary losses can surface over the course of a lifetime” (Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson 130). For non-bereaved children, losses resulting from changes in the life cycle such as moving to a new neighborhood or graduating from high school require short-term adjustments. However, bereaved children experience these same changes as recurring “grief, sadness, and longing for the deceased person” (131). Memory of the dead parent can also be a source of prolonged injury, particularly in toddlers-- as Ourika was when her mother died:

For children who are bereaved at a very young age, they will have fewer memories of the person who died... the absence of memories and the missed opportunity to ‘know’ the deceased person can be painful for years to come, and *may resurface in adolescence and adulthood* [my italics] (131).

Studies have reported evidence, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson add, that “although a parent has died, the child’s relationship with that parent does not die, and is, in fact, reformulated constantly as the child ages” (112). This would explain Ourika’s severe reaction to Mme de B.’s “Pauvre Ourika!” comment; a comment which Ourika likely experienced as a renunciation of their presumed inseparable bond. The secondary loss of her adopted mother triggered the original separation from her biological mother and forced separation

³ Fowles: “I see the poor girl alone, always alone in the world” (Ourika 12).

from her communal family. This reformulation of losses caused Ourika psychological trauma throughout her young life; perhaps was even aggravated by Mme de B's ignorance.

Taking her grief as solemnly as one would any child's loss of her mother helps elucidate Ourika's gradual decline. In *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (1994), Edelman criticizes the traditional perception of grieving as a cycle of progressive, parallel stages: "When a mother dies, a daughter's mourning never completely ends"(Edelmanxxi). For Edelman, the spiritual, physical and psychological bonds between mothers and daughter are never destroyed even after the death of one or the other. This suggests that years later Ourika would still have been deeply bonded, spiritually and psychologically to her deceased mother. Duras and her admirers consistently overlook these key fundamentals. When Waller writes, "For Ourika, it is society that imposes her marginalization...Ourika derives her sense of self from her value as an object of social exchange and from the tenuous identity she creates for herself as a subject (Ourika xv), she reduces Ourika's struggles and existence to functional racism rather than expressions of individuality.

Likewise, Waller misses the experiential point when she compares Duras's protagonist to the traditional Romantic hero who "flees society and roams aimlessly in search of a home he will never find" (xv). Like this hero, Waller maintains, Ourika "lacks the prerogative of mobility. Her social exclusion wreaks havoc not only on her soul but also her body" (xv). Waller's preoccupation with race excludes other reasons for Ourika's suffering and, subsequently, overlooks key indicators of agency in Ourika's behavior; for instance, her decision to leave Mme de B.'s home and reside in a convent.

The problem with DeJean's and Waller's racialized readings of the narrative is not that they are entirely implausible, but rather that they play to the old stereotype that within every person of African descent is the seed of self-hatred that blooms when the individual encounters whiteness; e.g., that Ourika's psychological troubles are caused by social inequities. For all of Mme de B.'s so-called altruism, the truth is she employed Ourika to serve her purposes and played the girl into believing their relationship was substantial. Instead of revealing Mme de B.'s moral flaws, Duras turns Ourika into a tragic victim lacking will or depth to understand she has caused her own undoing. "She has entered society without its permission. It will have its revenge" (14).

The tragic misstep, Duras proffers and the critics confirm, is that she dares to love a white man, thereby conjuring the curse of an unrequited love, doomed by her race. "[Ourika] believes herself the equal of the French and even dares to fall in love with one of them" (x). Again, Duras's disconnection with the reality of the era is striking. A glance at *métissage* between Africans and Europeans during 18th century France troubles Fowles's assertion regarding Ourika's lack of choices. In "Mulattoes and Métis: Attitudes toward Miscegenation in the United States and France Since The Seventeenth Century," historian George M. Frederickson observes that like miscegenation in America, the French practice of *métissage* endorsed the concept that people differ in temperament and capability based on skin color and/or ancestry. However, while some French intellectuals such as racial theorist Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau held that *métissage* caused the degeneration of the superior group, that opinion was not uniformly accepted (Frederickson 103).

The French attitude towards intermarriage was much more fluid than in America. Under certain circumstances, intermarriage between Africans and Europeans was recognized. In others, *métissage* was neither publicly encouraged nor outlawed. Even where intermarriage was banned, the decrees were often not enforced. It was precisely the prevalence of interracial coupling which led Gobineau to declare that "European *métissage* had already passed the point of no return...civilization was doomed" (103). Although slavery was reinstated in 1802 after Bonaparte returned to power, intermarriages certainly occurred during the preceding nine years when Duras's story takes place. In fact, while Mme de B. and the Marquise were damning Ourika to a life of loneliness, opportunities to meet and marry eligible bachelors, African or European, were common in metropolitan France where they resided. Furthermore, in the colonies opportunities for African women to marry European men were even more common.

Perhaps the oddest facet of Mme de B's assent to her friend's denouncement of Ourika's marriage prospects is her ostensible ignorance of intermarriages in her native Paris and indifference to Ourika's helplessness. In "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France," historian Jennifer Heuer writes, "Liaisons between white European men and nonwhite women were far more common than the reverse (Heuer 8). Surely, Mme de B. could have used her influence to help Ourika find a suitable mate. She certainly would have been aware, as an aristocrat with a popular salon in Paris and a fervent advocate of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' that interracial marriages were occurring in the metropole and the colonies. Dismissing these realities, Duras created a plot that hinges on Ourika's social isolation while ignoring her individual circumstances.

Ourika is raised to be as educated, articulate and charming as any other aristocrat. She is prime marriage material. But rather than following that natural course of courtship and marriage with an appropriate, eligible bachelor, Duras opts for a racialized fantasy in which her African protagonist is set on an impossible liaison with a European

man who is already spoken for. In fact, the depth of kinship Ourika feels towards Charles stems from the fact that Mme de B. raised her in social isolation. "I saw very few other children. I had only one friend of my own age" (Ourika 9). Charles was Ourika's constant companion, they were close in age, and he protected her like a baby sister:

Élevé avec moi, il était mon protector, mon conseil et mon Soutine dans totems petites fautes (9).⁴

Raised with me, he was my protector, my counselor and my supporter in all my little missteps [my translation].

When Ourika learns Charles is going away to school, she laments:

Charles était charmé de partir; et moi, je ne fus affligée qu'au dernier moment; car j'étais toujours bien aise de ce qu'il me faisait plaisir. Je ne lui avais rien dit de toutes les idées qui m'occupaient; je ne le voyais jamais seul, et il m'aurait fallu bien du temps pour lui expliquer ma peine...son départ, d'ailleurs, était une distraction, et je crois que cela me faisait du bien de m'affliger d'autre chose que de ma douleur habituelle" (Duras 17-18).

Charles was delighted to be leaving; and me, I was distressed at the last minute; for I was always comfortable with that which gave him pleasure. I never told him about all of the ideas that occupied me; I never saw him alone, and it would have taken a long time for me to explain my pain to him...his departure, by the way, was a distraction and I believe it did me good being distressed about something else than my usual pain [My translation].⁵

This passage reveals the depth of Ourika's affection for Charles and the comforts he received from being needed by him; a sentiment she had hitherto felt for Mme de B.:

Before then I'd always believed I loved him as a brother, but since my illness it seemed to me that I'd grown old; and my feelings for him had grown maternal. I think only a mother could have had that passionate desire for his happiness and success in life. I would willingly have given my life to spare him a moment of pain (29).

Likewise, when she learns Charles has received a marriage proposal from a young lady with "birth, fortune, and upbringing on her side" (30), Ourika does not withdraw her support for him:

She was physically attractive, but without coquettishness. Another charming quality was a modesty so unassuming that one knew she could only have been born with it. Charles...soon fell head over hills in love. He told me how his passion grew, and I was impatient to see this beautiful creature, who was destined to bring so much happiness to him (30).

During the meeting between fiancée and "adopted" sister there is no indication that Ourika is distraught over her presence or the impending marriage. It is only when Charles confides to Ourika that he intends for his marriage to mirror their friendship that Ourika becomes distraught. Speaking of his bride-to-be, Charles tells Ourika, "she shall know my every thought, every secret feeling of my heart. I want a trust between us *exactly like yours and mine*" (31) [my italics]. Rather than feeling grief-stricken that another woman stole her intended husband as the critics suggest, Ourika is struck by the realization that Charles never asked about the source of her despair. He has been contentedly ignorant of what troubles her at the base of her soul. She responds, "*Exactly like yours and mine!* That phrase cut deep. It reminded me that Charles ignored the solitary secret of my life. At the same time it took away my longing to tell him of it" (31).

Ourika collapses after this revelation. Whereas before she could carry her burdens with resignation, now "they had become too strong for me" (Ourika 34). Not only does Duras and the critics overlook this psychological tragedy, they shift its cause to Ourika's race. After Charles and Mme de B. leave the country for his wedding in Paris (leaving bed-ridden Ourika behind with caretakers), her sorrow turns into bleakness:

Je voyais se réaliser cette situation que mon imagination s'était peinte tant de fois; je mourais loin de ce qui jamais, et mes tristes bemusements ne parvenaient pas même à leurs oreilles: hélas! Il seussent troublé leur joie. Je les voyais, s'abandonnant à toute ivresse du bonheur, loin d'Ourika mourante (Duras 35).

⁴ Fowles: "Brought up beside me, he was my champion, adviser, and defender in all my small misdemeanors" (Duras 9).

⁵ Fowles: "Charles was delighted to be going, and I wasn't sad until the last moment – whatever pleased him had always pleased me as well. I'd said nothing of all the ideas that obsessed me. I never saw him alone, and it would have taken too long to have explained my wretched problems to him...in any case, his going away was a kind of distraction. I think it did me good to have something besides myself to be sad about (Duras 17-18).

I saw come true this situation that my imagination has painted so many times; I was dying far away from that which I loved and my sad moaning never even reached their ears: Alas! They had disturbed their joy. I saw them indulging in all the drunkenness of happiness, away from dying Ourika [My translation].⁶ Ourika's use of "they" and "them" proves her disenchantment is not limited to Charles. Similarly, the fiery exchange regarding Charles between Ourika and the Marquise towards the end of the novel underscores this point:

"I've come to have a little chat with you, my dear Ourika. You know I've always been fond of you, ever since you were a child. And it makes me very sad indeed to see what a low state you've got yourself into...tell me your secret, my poor Ourika. Open your heart. Nobody is more concerned for you than I am. And perhaps I can help you" (41).

When Ourika reminds the Marquise of the damning slight she overheard in Mme de B.'s parlor--"You know very well what my problems are. My social situation. And the color of my skin" (42)--the Marquise lashes out at her, "Nonsense. You can't deny that locked away inside you is some deep trouble. One can see it at a glance" (42). As the Marquise swings away at an already enervated teenager, Ourika fights back, "What could I tell you, madame—you of all people? You predicted long ago the hell I now know. I have nothing to add to your prophecy" (42). The Marquise counters, "that is one thing you will never convince me of" (42). At last, she wrangles Ourika into submission:

Since you refuse me your trust, since you pretend there's no secret at the bottom of all this, very fine—I shall take it on myself to inform you that there is. Yes, my child. All your misery, all your suffering comes from just one thing: an insane and doomed passion for Charles. And if you weren't madly in love with him, you could come perfectly well to terms with being black. I wish you good day, Ourika. I'm going now. And make no mistake, with far less sympathy for you than when I entered this room (42).

What is so contemptible about the Marquise's "advice" is that it baits an innocent girl, already suffering the loss of two mothers and a best friend, into losing her *self*, as well. Ourika's anger at the unfairness she has endured is, albeit enervating, a thread of authenticity she can have faith in. She knows what she knows because of what she has experienced and she is who she is because of what she knows. The Marquise, with her underhanded claims, seeks to cut that thread of self-identity. Perhaps the Marquise wants to cure Mme de B.'s distress over Ourika's misery; perhaps she envies Ourika's strength of character. Whatever her motivations are in the end she succeeds on at least one count. "She left my room as soon as she had spoken those last words," Ourika says. "I stood there as if struck by lightning...was it impossible to love anything beyond one's own existence innocently" (43)? The question is, of course, rhetorical. Ourika knows her heart and the innocuous love she has felt for Charles. In an act of defiance, Ourika, bedridden, leaves Mme de B.'s home and moves to a nunnery. Her health continually deteriorates. Shortly after, she makes confession to her priest, and dies. The forced immigrant from Senégál is finally free.

The critics who praise Duras's portrait of Ourika as a stereotypical self-hating Black person, an allegorical dark-skinned woman who pines for a white lover, perpetrate the pattern set by the text. Why has it been so difficult for critics to approach Duras's protagonist without the obligatory race props? Why is a two-year old girl called "a woman" (xi)? The answers to these questions require a broader view of the historical pressures on women of the African diaspora. De-named by slavers and subsequently mis-named as Mary, Clare, etc. according to captains' whims, Black women have fought to self-identify ever since. In "*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*" critical theorist, Hortense J. Spillers examines the Black woman's identity burden:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented (Spillers 57).

Spillers's articulation of how identity has historically been assigned to African women in the Diaspora and how their voices and attempts to self-identify have been silenced speaks directly to Ourika's subjectivity and its dismissal and distortion by Duras and the critics who extol her novel. Duras's protagonist functions as a channel for attitudes rooted in Duras's lack of experience. As Yale professor, Christopher L. Miller observes, "When [Ourika] involves itself in a socio-historical problem like slavery, and when it turns out that the author herself had interests in slavery that were more than intellectual, questions of biography are hard to avoid" (Approaches 51). Even before her marriage to well-heeled Amédée-Bretagne-Malo de Durfort (later duc de Duras), Claire de Duras, born in Brest, Northern France on March 22, 1778, was set to inherit a sizeable inheritance from her father, Armand Guy Simon

⁶Fowles: "I saw the possibility I had so often imagined become certainty. I was dying, cut off from everyone I loved. They couldn't even hear the sobbing that would have troubled their joy. I saw them drowned in their own intense happiness, remote from me as I lay on my death bed" (36).

de Coëtneupren, compte de Kersaint, a French naval officer and politician, and her mother, Claire Louise Francoise de Paul d'Alessod' Eragny who was born in the French colony of Martinique.

Armand and Claire each held substantial holdings in the slave trade and combined their assets by marrying in 1772. Armand served on his father's ship and steadily rose through the ranks. An early supporter of the French Revolution, he criticized feudal privileges in a pamphlet entitled "Le Bon Sens," and drafted a formal plan for reorganization of the French navy which he presented to the Constituent Assembly. Although his plan was rejected, Armand gained influence and entrance to France's political arena when he was appointed to administer the naval department of the Seine and serve as a substitute deputy to the liberal Legislative Assembly. Determined to see his discarded plan passed and afraid that it never would without substantial political reform, Armand played both sides of the political factions – the liberals in the Legislative Assembly who demanded an end to the monarchy, and the conservatives who upheld the king. He initially sided with the Assembly, denouncing Louis XVI and voting to depose him. However, less than two years later, he supported the conservatives' kinder, gentler "appeal to the people," which was a veiled campaign to win support for the monarchy against the encroaching liberals. Consequently, when the liberals took control of the Revolution, Armand was charged with conspiring to restore the monarchy and beheaded in December of 1793. His daughter, Claire de Duras, was fifteen years old.

The historical record contains little information about Duras's mother, Claire d'Eragny. Waller and Fowles make no mention of her. What is known is that she was born into one of Martinique's most renowned, slave-holding families. Her grandfather was *Gouverneur de la Martinique* and held prestigious positions in the French Royal Army. D'Eragny's father, also of Martinique, married Angélique Rose Cornetin 1740. It is interesting to note that ten years before he married Angélique with whom he had three daughters, he allegedly fathered two sons out of wedlock with a Martinique woman, albeit of unspecified lineage (*Généalogie des Berruyer*).

D'Eragny's birth and interaction with Africans in Martinique might have allowed her daughter, Claire to "enter a black mind," as Fowles wrote in his introduction. But the scant details about d'Eragny's life do not indicate she shared her experiences with her daughter.

It is likewise unclear whether Duras ever interacted substantially with African slaves. By the widely-accepted 1834 account of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Claire spent time in Martinique with her mother managing her plantations before they traveled to Europe - all in the year 1794 when Claire would have been sixteen years of age. Critic Doris Y. Kadish describes Duras as "one of very few women writers who "lived in the colonies and responded favorably to African women in their literary works" (*Approaches* 52). However, Miller takes exception with Kadish's claim:

For starters, Martinique was in the hands of the British at the time when [they] are supposed to have gone there. They are documented in Philadelphia in June 1794; and there would have been little time for the daughter to 'manage' a plantation in Martinique and then be in Switzerland and England later that same year or in 1795. Neither of the two most significant biographical sources about Duras says that [she] went to Martinique. Agénor Bardoux's narrative strongly suggests that mother and daughter went only to the United States. Not to Martinique. Gabriel Pailhès's work places the two women in Philadelphia, then in Switzerland, then London; he makes no mention of Martinique (Miller 53).

If Miller's counter-claim is correct, the absence of intermingling with colonized Africans likely fueled Duras's romanticized narration. The opening passages of the novel plant the seeds, "My mother had died and in spite of my cries I was being carried to the [slave] ship" (*Ourika* 7). This loss is exacerbated by the probability that *Ourika* was an only child of a single parent. No mention is made of a father, siblings, other kin or extended family; no evidence of anyone wishing her well or otherwise providing emotional support. *Ourika* seems to have been abducted on a whim: she was seen, favored and taken. That scenario coupled with the Marquise's condemning words during her discussion with Mme de B. suggests psychological injury to *Ourika*'s young mind:

To whom do you propose marrying her? With her intelligence, with the education you've given her? What kind of man would marry a négress? Even supposing you could bribe some fellow to father mulatto children, he could only be of low birth. She could never be happy with such a man. She can only want the kind of husband who could never look at her" (13).

As the conversation continues, the Marquise reveals her deep-seated bigotry by blaming *Ourika* for her own misfortune and relieving her aristocrat colleague of responsibility:

La philosophie nous place au-dessus des maux de la fortune, mais elle ne peutriencontre les maux qui viennentd'avoirbrisél'ordre de la nature. *Ourika*n'a pas remplisadestinée: elles'estplacée dans la société sans sa permission; la société se vengera.

Reason may help people overcome bad luck. But it's powerless against evils that arise from deliberately upsetting the natural order of things. Ourika has flouted her natural destiny. She has entered society without its permission. It will have its revenge.

Ourika is devastated and betrayed by the revelations she has overheard:

Quand je revins chez Mme de B., tout le monde fut frappé de mon changement; on me questionna: je dis que j'étais malade; on le crut. Mme de B. envoyachercher Barthez, qui m'examina avec soin...et dit brusquement que je n'avais rien. Mme de B se rassura, et essaya de me distraire et de m'amuser...[cependant] mon âmes'était commensurée en elle-même...les bienfaits qui sont doux à recevoir sont ceux dont le coeur s'acquitte: le mien était rempli d'un sentiment trop amer pour se repandre au dehors (14-15).

When I returned from Mme de B's room, everyone was struck by my transformation; they questioned me: I said I was ill; they believed it. Mme de B. sent for Doctor Barthez who examined me with care...and abruptly declared that I didn't have anything. Mme de B. was reassured and tried to distract and amuse me...[but] my soul was as if tightened within itself...the benefits that are easiest to receive are those that the heart expels; mine was filled with too much bitterness to extend itself outwardly [my translation]. Ourika resigns herself to a convent where the doctor, within moments of their meeting, diagnoses her with having "les marques d'un long et violent chagrin" (4) 'the signs of a lengthy and violent sorrow' [my translation].

Critics steadily attribute Ourika's demise to self-hatred caused by her dark skin and love for Mme de B.'s grandson, Charles who does not love her back, ostensibly because of her dark skin, too. But Ourika's own words, "I had only one friend of my own age and my dark skin never meant he did not like me" (9) weakens that summation since the friend she speaks of is Charles. More importantly, it demonstrates her awareness of race and its perceived irrelevance in her affairs. Nevertheless, the critics contend that Ourika was not racially self-aware. The awakening occurs when Ourika eavesdrops on a conversation in Mme de B.'s parlor and "comes into her knowledge of herself through a powerful confrontation with her *negritude*" (xi). Ourika suddenly awakens to her black 'otherness' and rejects it. "From this point on, Ourika lives her life primarily not as a woman but as a black woman...all essential experience reaches her through the filter of her racial consciousness" (xi). The counterpoint to this reading is Ourika's own words, "I reached the age of twelve without its once occurring to me that there might be other ways of being happy besides mine. I didn't regret being black (9).

Further citing Ourika's decision to cover her exposed skin and veil her face as evidence of self-hatred, DeJean argues that she was "driven by the constant awareness that the simple fact of her color irrevocably separates her from the French society to which she had originally felt she belonged" (xii). DeJean's conclusion that fear of social denunciation is Ourika's sole reason for covering up ignores the fact that Ourika's interaction with French society is limited to Mme de B., Charles and the regulars who visited her salon. A more plausible reason is that once rebuffed by Mme de B., Ourika turned her rage and disillusionment on herself. The traumatic effect of her discovery of Mme de B.'s deception is illuminated in this passage:

Aimer, pur moi, c'était t'être là, c'était t'entendre, lui obéir, la regarder surtout; je ne désirais rien de plus...je ne pouvais en effet me rattacher à la vie, que par l'idée d'être nécessaire ou du moins utile à ma bienfaitrice⁷...j'avais besoin de ce que j'aimais, je ne songeais pas que ce que j'aimais n'avait pas besoin de moi (8, 17, 14).

To love, for me, was to be there [with her], to hear her, to obey her -- above all, to watch her. I wanted nothing more...I could only, in effect, feel attached to life by the idea that I was essential or at least useful to my benefactor...I needed what I loved, I did not think that what I loved did not need me (my translation).

Trying to make sense of the rejection, Ourika takes her revenge on the handiest victim: *herself*:

Ma visage me faisait horreur, je n'osais plus me regarder dans une glace; lorsque mes yeux se portaient sur mes mains noires, je croyais voir celles d'un singe; je m'exagérais ma laideur, et cette couleur me paraissait comme le signe de ma réprobation⁸ (Ourika 15).

My faced horrified me; I no longer dared to look at myself in a mirror; when I looked at my black hands, I believed I was seeing those of a monkey; I exaggerated my ugliness, and this color seemed to me the sign of my reprobation (my translation).

7 Fowles: "I could feel in harmony with life only when I knew myself necessary, or at least useful, to her" (Ourika 17).

8 Fowles: "My face revolted me; I no longer dared to look in a mirror. My black hands seemed like monkey's paws. I exaggerated my ugliness to myself, and this skin color of mine seemed to me like the brand of shame (Ourika 16).

As her sense of betrayal deepens, Ourika laments, “All I had been...was a toy, an amusement for my mistress” (13). While suffering “endless permutations of the same thoughts” (15), the benefactor’s words, “I see her alone” (12) confirms for Ourika that she does not belong to Mme de B., and worse, that she never did. Mme de B., the ballast Ourika welcomed after losing her birth mother, is a fairytale.

What Duras and the critics overlook is the centrality of loss and grief in Ourika’s emotional development. Duras employs a European doctor to recount the life of her protagonist for the reader. This doctor, who treats Ourika until her death shortly after they meet, is a character with ostensibly scant experience treating African women and with stereotypical expectations as evidenced in his initial reaction to his patient:

Elle se tournaversmoi, et je fusétrangementsurprisenapercevantunenégresse! Mon etonnements’accrut encore par la politesse de son accueil et le choix des expressions dontelle se servait (4).

She turned towards me and I was strangely surprised to see a Negro woman. I was even more astonished by her charming reception and the well-chosen expressions she used [my translation].

This image of a Black woman, although channeled through a make-believe character -- just as the Black experience in seventeenth century France is channeled through the character, Ourika -- are essentially those of Duras, consciously or unconsciously.

While most critics have praised Duras’s compassion for her protagonist, Earl Ingersoll takes umbrage with Duras’s portrayal. In “The Appropriation of Black Experience in *Ourika* of Claire de Duras,” he writes:

With all it has to recommend itself...*Ourika* represents appropriations of Ourika, the Duras fictional character, as well as the actual ‘Ourika,’ or whatever her historical antecedent may have been called. Ourika may be lent the author-ity to tell her own story, but those who appropriate that story for their own purposes, however praiseworthy those purposes may be, render this text a problematical representation of black experience (Ingersoll 2).

Ingersoll argues that Duras, in effect, attempts to hide her personal convictions behind the doctor by framing the narrative—opening and closing scenes—with the anonymous doctor’s announcement to the reader that he, a doctor summoned to treat Ourika, heard the story from the woman herself. This declaration attributes the narration first from Duras to the doctor and finally from the doctor to Ourika. For Ingersoll, this veils what amounts to a betrayal of Black history and reality:

Caught in that web...is the original, historical ‘Ourika,’ or whatever was the name of the Senegalese child brought to France, knowing, as so many of her sisters have known, that her impossible love of a white ‘Charles’ is not needed for her to feel the anguish of her blackness. It is *that* ‘Ourika’ who is the real outsider, closed out by the structure of representation that has appropriated her pain to make art (12).

In “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Audre Lorde addresses the untoward effects of white women haphazardly classifying on-white women. Lorde wrote the letter privately to Daly in response to her 1978 book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. After receiving no response to the concerns raised in the letter, Lorde made the decision to “open it to the community of women” (Lorde 66).

I ask that you be aware of the effect that...dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of Color, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make Black women prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city. When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise (69).

Stereotyping Black women characters by authors and critics will continue as long as it is acceptable to do so. Critics will paddle along on the surface of meaningful analysis, and the Ourikas of, perhaps, well-meaning but naive white authors will remain the quintessential workhorses of their imaginations.

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