

From *The Sea Wall* to *The Lover* Prostitution and Exotic Parody

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The Sea Wall provides an early example of Marguerite Duras' complex relationship with Indochina, where she was born the daughter of French schoolteachers and, therefore, colonizers. The novel's evocation of Duras' first-hand experience with life in the colony, its publication during the war in Indochina, and the author's left-leaning sympathies leave little doubt that *The Sea Wall* is consciously situated within the historical and political framework of colonialism and capitalism. Nevertheless, the explicit anti-colonialist stance articulated in the novel contrasts with Duras' absence from the public debate on the Indochinese war in the 1950s—a silence that belies her presence in the French political arena as early as the 1940s (Vircondelet 199-200). The author's equivocal stance with regard to Southeast Asia is, in fact, more readily grasped in her later publications. *The Vice Consul*, for example, self-critically explores a “first-world” writing subject's manipulations and control over a “third-world” subject of writing captured as “lamentably alien” in the figure of a Cambodian beggar woman. *The Lover* also deserves our attention since this autobiographical novel rewrites *The Sea Wall*, but ambivalently brings to bear more emphasis on (the parody of) exotic themes and narratives.

In the following discussion I argue that the counterdiscourse to colonialism expressed in *The Sea Wall* also proves more complex than usually acknowledged and eventually reproduces colonizing gestures. I first examine the pervasiveness of prostitution in the novel to underline its double function and emphasize the cultural hierarchy defined by its practice. More specifically, the juxtaposition of indigenous women's sexual victimization and passivity to

the protagonist Suzanne's empowerment and self-formation within the terms of prostitution evokes what Chandra Mohanty has called the "third-world difference." Mohanty describes the "third-world difference" as a "reductive and homogeneous notion . . . that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in [the 'third world']" (63). I then focus on Duras' shift from the narrative of oppression to the exploitation of exotic vignettes and themes in *The Sea Wall* and *The Lover*. From this standpoint, the two young protagonists' construction of themselves as *femmes fatales* and prostitutes reveals a parodic relationship to exotic narratives. This relationship mitigates the cultural hierarchy endorsed (if unconsciously) in *The Sea Wall* and subverts the (Lotilian) exotic site in both novels. Yet it dismisses neither completely, as if the politics of gender and race remained at odds in Duras' fictional autobiographies. Exotic paradigms are particularly tenacious in *The Lover*, which deconstructs male fantasies of the Orient, but retains the grammar of exotica to (re-)create a female Orient.

The story of *The Sea Wall* centers on the disillusionments of a poor white family (the mother and her two children, Suzanne and Joseph) and their fight against the colonial authorities in Indochina at the beginning of the century. We learn retrospectively that, after her husband's death, the mother spent all her savings (10 years of employment as a pianist at the Eden-Cinéma) on the acquisition of swampland. Her inability to grow crops makes her family eligible for expulsion and, like many poor white and Indochinese families, easy prey for colonial agents, whose control over land distribution enables them to amass personal profits. When the novel opens, the family's meeting with M. Jo, the son of a wealthy businessman, who shows interest in Suzanne, becomes the promise of a better future through a lucrative wedding. However, M. Jo is more interested in buying sexual privileges with alluring gifts than in marrying Suzanne—a settlement that his father would probably refuse on account of their class difference.

Although Suzanne loses her virginity with her neighbor, Jean Agosti, at the end of the novel, her status as exchange value and sexual object is made clear from the opening chapters in her connection with, respectively, M. Jo and Barner. Barner, a salesperson in thread, offers 30,000 francs for the acquisition of Suzanne, who, he believes, might be the ideal bibelot he has been looking for (169). The attempted and failed transaction symbolically takes place in the "maison de passe" of Carmen, a professional prostitute.

Suzanne's relationship with M. Jo is more substantial and from the beginning establishes an ambiguous situation. Indeed, if the novel first presents a scenario in which the adolescent Suzanne is made available to the wealthy M. Jo, the young girl soon understands her position as prostitutional and exploits it to the point where roles get subverted between subject and object of exchange. Women's prostitution is in fact a recurring motif in Duras' work; yet it is nowhere so closely related to the formation and assertiveness of the (white) female subject as in *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover*, and *The North China Lover*. Paola Tabet's anthropological work on the exchange of women provides a theoretical framework to understand the paradoxically liberating effects of prostitution on women, which we find in Duras' texts. One essential point of Tabet's argument is that, in a wide variety of societies, there is no opposition between marriage, amorous relationships, and prostitution.¹ Rather, there exists a continuum between them and despite definitional differences from society to society—a continuum which spells out their ideological unity as “*un discours sur le et du pouvoir masculin*” ‘*a discourse on and of male power*’ (47).² On the basis of the existence of this continuum, from conventionally marital to prostitutional relations, Tabet underlines women's capacity to subvert the system of exchange in which they are caught as objects by driving it to its limits, that is to say, by demanding explicit and undisguised relationships of paid sexual services.

While Suzanne in *The Sea Wall* never demands financial compensations per se, the relationship between the two parties develops with the understanding that M. Jo has to pay before Suzanne gratifies his sexual fantasies. This development specifically takes place when she discovers her objectified position. The scene engaging the first signs of the young woman's resistance occurs one day when she is showering and M. Jo begs her to open the door so that he can see her naked. Suzanne's initial refusal gradually tones down as she persuades herself that, after all, it is a man's desire and that she is ready to be gazed at:

He had a great desire to see her. After all, it was the natural desire of a man. And there she was, worth seeing. There was only that door to open. And no man in the world had yet seen this body of hers that was hidden by that door. It was not made to be hidden but on the contrary, to be seen and to make its way in the world. (57)

However, Suzanne's willingness to be an available object to others' gaze, her interpellation by the ideology of male desire, is cut short. Prepared to open the door, her hand stops on the doorknob when M. Jo provides what he believes to be an incentive for Suzanne to satisfy his request: he promises her a brand new phonograph. The scarcely veiled homology between commodity and female body awakens Suzanne to her status as an object of exchange: "it was just when she was going to open the door to let the world see her that the world prostituted her" (57).

Eventually her response strikes a note of ambiguity since she opens the door and willingly steps into the prostitute's role assigned by M. Jo's scopophilic desire. She does so, however, with the knowledge of being reified and her capacity to smear the image she produces with a curse: "Take a look! I spit at you with my naked body" (57).

From this point on, Suzanne's awareness of her "prostitution to the world" allows her to turn the odds against M. Jo who "bought" her, but who gradually loses all substance: "the minute he had given the phonograph he had ceased to that extent to exist" (60). Reduced to and measured by his accumulation or remission of possessions, the wealthy lover ultimately dissolves under Suzanne's gaze as his presence adds up to the sum of luxurious items he can provide—himself, a commodity in the young woman's returning and emptying gaze:

[She] looked at him with a certain curiosity. But she began to think of other things almost at once, while continuing to look at him without seeing him, as if he had been transparent, and she was obliged to look through his face to perceive the dizzy promises of wealth. (80)

The event of the shower, which sets off the shift between object and subject positionings, is in fact the prolegomenon to a sequence of three scenes in which Suzanne further experiences and reappropriates her objectification and physical fragmentation, masquerading in the role of a *femme fatale*. The three episodes to be examined include the description of a film Suzanne watches in a movie theater—an event caught between a humiliating walk in the wealthy white district of the city (scene 1) and a fantasy scene in M. Jo's car (scene 3).

Scene 1. Following Carmen's advice, Suzanne goes to the city's rich European quarter where she unexpectedly experiences her

displacement as lower class and female. Wearing Carmen's tight dress, she suddenly feels ridicule as she progresses in an elegant crowd she perceives to resemble "queens" and "kings." She is aware of the looks converging on her and rehearses her feeling of objectification by means of a physical self-dismemberment:

[S]he would have liked to run away from everything, strip herself of everything—of the dress . . . of that straw hat . . . of this hair arranged as no other girl had ever arranged her hair. But these things were nothing. She herself, from head to foot, was contemptible. Her eyes—where to look? These heavy and awful arms, this heart, fluttering like an indecent caged beast, these legs that were too weak to bear her along. (151)

Suzanne ends the episode by seeking refuge in a movie theater.

In scene 2, the narrative voice summarizes the movie line. The main character is a beautiful and rich young woman wearing a courtly outfit. Men, victims of her indifference, fall in her wake, until she finds her Prince at the carnival in Venice. The kiss of the last shot brings the audience into communion with the screen, suggesting that the narrative focalizer, Suzanne, identifies with the characters: "You [one] would like to be in their place" (152-53). I want to argue, however, that the whole effect of Suzanne's "identification" with the young woman is postponed until scene 3 and actually records Suzanne's distance from the role of the *femme fatale*. Mary Ann Doane's work on female spectatorship helps to understand Suzanne's delayed response to the movie sequence, and her performance as a masquerade of femininity. In particular, Doane underlines that, "[t]he effectivity of masquerade lies . . . in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman" (87).

In scene 3, that distance materializes. Suzanne has by chance met M. Jo in the city and goes for a ride in his limousine. On this occasion, the car becomes the privileged ground ("The car . . . it was like the movies" [180]) where she mentally and consciously sets up her stage to perform in the role of the *femme fatale*. While pulling back together the pieces of her dismemberment in scene 1, Suzanne's "script" now replays the imaginary conditions provided by the movie sequence. The actress's and Suzanne's journeys mirror each other as men, in the one case, and the city in the other, fall

in their wake. The actress's regalia and implied status are also recouped in the car scene with the description of Suzanne's body as sovereign over the city: "her empire, over which reigned her waist, her legs, her breasts" (180). When M. Jo finally utters the same words as the actor's before the kiss—"I love you" (181), the replay of the movie situation cannot be missed, nor can Suzanne's manipulation of the scene as she ends it then.

By denying identity between woman and role, Doane argues, the masquerade resists patriarchal positioning: "[The masquerade] constitutes an acknowledgment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask" (81). Accordingly, Suzanne emphasizes role playing and staging in the car scene ("It was like the movies"), not only to reappropriate the tools of her dismemberment and reconstruct her self; but, itemizing and valorizing her breast, waist, and legs, she appropriates the gaze and keeps looking at herself (180), "a woman demonstrat[ing] the representation of a woman's body."³ Producing and enjoying her "looked-at-ness," Suzanne is able to rig herself up into a subject-position, and to threaten the stability of M. Jo's gaze (whom she ignores).

Suzanne's *mise en scène* in fact prefigures *la petite Duras*' construction of herself as a highly sexualized subject in *The Lover*. The calculated excess of the young Duras' feminine outfit (gold lamé high heels and an almost transparent dress with a very low neck) combines with her choice of a man's hat to contradict the female dress code and underline the will involved in the sartorial display. The young woman's masquerade of a feminine image is enhanced by a vocabulary intermittently invoking spectacle, and increasingly, prostitutional display: "[the mother] not only accepts this *buffoonery* . . . she likes it," she "lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute" (24), "in the clown's hat and lamé shoes" (73), "[s]he speaks of *blatant prostitution* and laughs, at the scandal, the *buffoonery*, the *funny hat*," "this child . . . emerging into the daylight and shacking up in front of everyone" (92, emphases added).

The narrative voice further stresses the young woman's control over others' gaze, over the way she looks and wants to look:

On the ferry, look at me. . . .⁴

He's looking at me. I'm used to people looking at me . . . people really do look at me a lot. I know it's not a question of beauty,

though, but of something else, for example, yes . . . mind, for example. What I want to seem I do seem. . . (16-18)

In both *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*, however, the juxtaposition of the protagonist's subjective construction as a prostitute and a *femme fatale* to indigenous women's global representation as passive and sexual victims emphasizes the cultural split and hierarchy running through the texts. In *The Sea Wall*, problematic images of conquest and empire also sustain Suzanne's sense of empowerment (180). Whereas this early novel is by no means a fiction justifying the colonial enterprise, its discourse steadily reinforces what critics have called the colonial ideology of passivity that "served as an essential legitimating tool of subjugation" (Trivedi 40). More specifically, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar point to stereotypes of "non-western" women such as "the image . . . of the passive Asian woman subject to oppressive practices within the Asian family" (9). *The Sea Wall* falls within the scope of their criticism when the narrative voice, sporadically but consistently, describes Indochinese women (in this case, Vietnamese and Malayan women) as visible *only* in their reproductive function, which they passively accept according to seasonal cycles. Women's bodies are indeed represented mimicking natural phenomena: their bellies growing "with the rhythm of plant-life," "by periodical tides, or, if you like, by crops or burgeonings." One of the few passages relating the poverty of Indochinese peasants (particularly, women's and children's predicaments) in the plain, also conveys women's submissive attitude through syntax and figures of speech. While the passive voice in "the women were naturally taken at th[e dry] season" denies them any subjective determination, the synecdochic use of "bellies" for "women" reinforces their helplessness in controlling their bodies: "And during the following months the bellies grew big. . . . This went on regularly . . . as if, in a deep, long inhalation, each year, the belly of each woman took in and swelled with child, expelled in an exhalation a child and then, in a second inhalation, took in another."⁵

The Corporal's and his wife's story is also topical in showing them caught in an unending cycle of poverty, hunger, and prostitution. (The Corporal is the mother's hired hand). For his wife, prostitution becomes a means of survival early in life. When the Corporal is hired for the construction of the road between Ram and Kam, her sexual availability conditions the availability of work for him and food for the family (194-95). In the end, prostitution and preg-

nancies encapsulate the lives of workers' wives during the years of the road construction: "As did all the wives of the recruits, the Corporal's wife gave birth to children, one after another. . . . How many times in six years had the Corporal's wife borne a child . . . ? She could not now remember. What she did remember was that she had been kept constantly pregnant by the militiamen" (195).

Except for a few other sporadic mentions of the Corporal's wife and the short episode of a woman with a dying baby (94-95), the two passages referred to above are the only ones where Indochinese women are visible.⁶ This positioning of the indigenous woman exclusively as a passive victim contributes to the production of what Mohanty has called the "third-world difference" which, she argues, constitutes a justification for paternalistic interventions from "first-world" women (63, 80-82). Within Duras' narrative, Suzanne and her mother may be misfits in Mohanty's category of "first-world" women, since they share much of the peasants' plight and existence in the same colonial context. However, the overall narrative scenario significantly suggests Suzanne's and her mother's resistances, to sexual objectification for the former, to social victimization and passivity for the latter. In the case of the mother, her role in shaking up the indigenous population out of its "millennial torpor" (23) highlights by contrast her revolutionary dimension. Her last letter to the colonial authorities is even more problematic by underscoring her position as *the* subject of a history counter to the narratives recorded in colonial archives, and the indigenous position as that of the passive victim (227-35). In her "Gender and Race in Colonial Literature: Duras and Cardinal," Marie-Paule Ha interestingly observes that:

This fetishizing of victimization . . . characterizes a great many writings on post-colonial condition by critics and writers, many of whom are themselves post-imperial subjects. Such a phenomenon results, I believe, from the inability of the post-imperial condition to situate itself in relation to its imperialist past and the post-colonial present. Hence this nostalgic move to recolonize the post-colonial space by immuring it within a narrative of oppression. (3)

Later texts such as *The Vice Consul* and *The Lover* raise some of the same issues. Corroborating the ideology of passivity and helplessness denounced by Trivedi and Mohanty, for instance, *The*

Lover features Asian women in roles of subordination or of complete alienation: the maid Dô, the lover's Chinese child-bride, and the mad beggar woman whose poverty, pregnancies, and incomprehensible shouts punctuate several of Duras' texts. It is revealing that, in relation to *The Vice Consul*, Lucy Stone McNeece contrasts the French Ambassador's wife Anne-Marie Stretter's "sexual 'openness'" to the beggar woman's "desperate prostitution" (435-36). In fact, the Cambodian beggar greatly resembles the Oriental type defined by Edward Said in *Orientalism*: "linked . . . to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien" (207). However, unlike *The Sea Wall* which easily lends itself to a realist interpretation, *The Vice Consul* self-reflexively comments on its own articulation of the colonizer-colonized relation by means of a *mise-en-abîme* structure involving the British author Peter Morgan's writing of a novel on the Cambodian beggar. *The Vice Consul*, moreover, demonstrates the instability of the colonizer's sense of identity by underscoring the counter-pressures of the colonized's presence through the haunting figure of the beggar, in particular.⁷

In the last part of my argument, I want to turn to Duras' parodic exploitation of the exotic novel and its themes. This shift in perspective not only provides another interpretive edge to the reproduction of cultural hierarchies in *The Sea Wall*; it also represents a shift in emphasis from the narrative of oppression to (a parody of) the exotic text, evidenced in the rewriting of *The Sea Wall* as *The Lover*. At the beginning of *The Sea Wall*, a flashback recounting Suzanne's parents' motivations for coming to Indochina signals an intertextual dialogue with the Loti narrative. After the reading of his novels had converted the parents to the exotic attraction of the colonies, they wanted to make a fortune there as it was also advertized on posters of colonialist propaganda: "The picture usually showed a colonial couple, dressed in white, sitting in rocking-chairs under banana trees while smiling natives busied themselves around them" (17). This retrospective account of a dreamland (for the colonizer) also illuminates the parents' contribution to the colonial enterprise and the narrative's critical perspective on the mother's ambivalent leadership against the colonial authorities years later. Like other poor whites in the plain, she now shares with her Indochinese neighbors the threat of expropriation, which contrasts with former times of happiness in the colony. Con-

juring up the exotic topoi, she recalls this better life as a dream and far-away place, a happy island (18).

It is true that, in his *Propos d'exil*, Loti articulates views on Southeast Asia quite different from the mother's in *The Sea Wall*. He declares for instance that, "[l]e premier intérêt de curiosité passé, je n'aimerai jamais ce pays [l'Indochine], ni aucune créature de cette triste race jaune. C'est bien la vraie terre d'exil, celle-ci, où rien ne me retient ni me charme" 'Once past the first moment of curiosity, I know I will never like this country, nor any creature of this sad yellow race. This land is truly the land of exile where nothing attracts or charms me' (43). The fact that Loti never exoticized or romanticized Indochina the way he did exoticize Turkey in *Aziyadé* or Tahiti in *Rarahu* (later called *Le mariage de Loti*) has little relevance for my argument.⁸ Overall, his writings contributed to a fin-de-siècle French colonial literature made up of clichés, in Emily Apter's words, "made up of . . . 'postcarded' images of native subjects indiscriminately shuffled between black, brown, métis, Asiatic, Arab, Kabylia, Moorish, Ottoman, Bedouin, Islamic, and Byzantine cultural frames" (207). Following that same logic, the mother's fixation on naming the China Sea the Pacific is not surprising and highlights her reliance on frozen pictures of the distant and exotic, encountered when she was young, reading and dreaming from her provincial Picardie: "it was of the Pacific Ocean that she dreamed and not of any of those little seas" (25).

These flashbacks on the mother's fantasy and desire for an exotic space, turned into a land of poverty for her, a land of hunger and death for the Indochinese population, constitute the first hurdle to the development of a Lotilian experience and story. Not unlike the situation in Duras' novel, *The Vice Consul*, and her play/film, *India Song*, the mother's French idea of a land of desire in *The Sea Wall* has been replaced by a land of death.⁹ However, the dichotomy between white colonizers and Asian colonized is much less absolute in the early novel where the focus on a poor white family stops short the work of nostalgia for colonial society that *India Song*, especially, makes possible for a white spectatorship. Christine Anne Holmlund argues in this vein that of all Duras' films, *India Song* is "the most sympathetic to colonialism. . . . The simple elegance of the costumes and the restrained luxury of the interior sets gratify the eye, as the slow rhythms of the voices and composer Carlos Alesia's blues, waltzes, fox trots, and rumbas enchant the ear" (12).

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This colonialist manner is clearly absent from *The Sea Wall*, in which,

on the contrary, Suzanne's few glimpses at wealth in the city's rich district (apart from her contacts with M. Jo) emphasize her exclusion which, as focalizer, she conveys to the reader.

Yet nostalgia and longing for a land of desire are not foreign to Suzanne, and entertain a parodic relationship with her mother's exotic dreams and readings of Loti's novels. While the foregrounding of Suzanne's self-representation as the understated measure of Indochinese women's global victimization cannot be dismissed, the sequence of three scenes in which she appropriates the image of a *femme fatale* also contributes to displacing the exotic site. Not unlike her mother, Suzanne constructs (in the car scene) a fantasy from which she draws power, not only in terms of subject-formation, but also through images of geographical displacement. As her mother fed her imagination on the reading of Loti's novels, colonialist propaganda, and its exoticist discourse, Suzanne (and her brother, for that matter) have fed their imaginations with stories projected on the movie screen. Closer to our argument, Suzanne's fantastic construction through the lens of a film she has just seen in a theater significantly mimics her mother fantasizing over promised exotic scenes through the intermediary of fictional writings and billboards. The daughter's exotic and erotically connoted dream has also crossed oceans, but subversively moved back to a European site—the carnival of Venice, underscoring the instability of the exotic site and de-centering the Lotilian viewpoint.

Venice, however, is not a random name in the Durassian universe. The Italian city also connotes "India" in *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, and the name of Anne-Marie Stretter or Anna Maria Guardi, a Venetian native and non-conformist character in the white society of *The Vice Consul* and *India Song*. Anne-Marie Stretter figures explicitly in the role of a *femme fatale*, and implicitly in the role of a prostitute in Duras' colonial India. The association of Suzanne's roles and her "exotic" desire with Anne-Marie Stretter, therefore, subtly summons other texts and landscapes: those of Southeast Asia where the Venetian native is somewhat mythically and nostalgically designated as "the woman of Calcutta" (*Vice Consul* 93), "the Queen of Calcutta" (*Vice Consul* 202).

The return to exoticist paradigms becomes clearer in *The Lover*, which flirts with the conflicting discourses of unbounded desire and romantic love, and cannot prevent meanings from drawing a map of old emotional dichotomies.¹⁰ The autobiographical novel indeed poses the relation to "Indochina" in terms closer to the ex-

otic narrative than *The Sea Wall* does—one could argue, in terms closer to the mother's imaginary. The destination of the young woman's masquerade of femininity shifts from the French "lover" M. Jo to the Chinese lover, and more significantly, from the absence of desire for the former to an erotics of forbidden games and multiple transgressions with the latter. It is true that Duras' intervention with *The Lover* patently upsets the tradition of (mostly) male fantasies of the Orient. First, the author interferes with the conventional male/same-female/other colonial dynamic. Second, love scenes between the young Duras and the lover deconstruct the conventions of heterosexual relations by suggesting the reciprocity of their relationship. Nonetheless, elements in the new scenario comply with features of exotic literature as best exemplified by Loti's writings. Tzvetan Todorov among other critics points to "Loti's originality . . . in the way he makes exoticism coincide with eroticism: the woman is exotic, the foreigner is erotic" (314).¹¹ In *The Lover*, the formula becomes the following: the objects of erotic desire are oriental or orientalized, and the Chinese lover is feminized.

At one level, emphasizing the feminine qualities of his body—its softness, its frailty, its absence of virility (38)—the narrative brings into question the stability of traditional gender codings (by Western standards). Leah Hewitt further notes that "Duras disturbs inflexible definitions of gender through the ambivalences of textual identity" (121):

La peau est d'une somptueuse douceur. Le corps. Le corps est maigre, sans force, sans muscles, il pourrait avoir été malade, être en convalescence, il est imberbe. . . . (*L'amant* 49)

The skin is sumptuously soft. The body. The body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he may have been ill, may be convalescent, he's hairless. . . . (*The Lover* 38)

In this passage, Hewitt observes that the first "he" discloses a gendered identity in the English translation which the French text does not reveal. "Il" (he or it) may refer to the body, and thus differs the identification of the body's gender. At the same time however, the young Duras' assertive construction of self, and the ultimate subversion of the binarism male/female which Hewitt's reading underscores, function to reinforce the image of a feminized

The lover is moreover only one actor in a chorus of Oriental(ized) bodies. Duras' Orient in fact provides the occasion for another form of off-limit sexuality which, almost a century later, recalls André Gide's initiation to homosexuality in relation to his discovery of North Africa in *Les nourritures terrestres* (1897). Although Gide's inclination for Socratic models inseparable from a Greek aesthetics underwrites the colonial power relation between the French writer and young Arab boys, the erotics of homosexuality in *The Lover* point further to a borderline between eroticism and colonialism. Entering the circulation of desire between *la petite* and the lover, Hélène Lagonelle's body becomes the site of the narrator's homoerotic desire (73-74). Hélène may be another white girl at the boarding house where the young Duras stays in Saigon, but her sensuous beauty remains unmistakably imbued with an Oriental quality: "I see her as being of one flesh with the man from Cholon. . . . Hélène Lagonelle is the mate of . . . the obscure man from Cholon, from China. Hélène Lagonelle is from China" (74). The little brother's body that arouses incestuous desire in his sister is also described to be "like [the body] of a little coolie" (72).

One may thus wonder whether the supplement of the Orient is the necessary spice for eroticism in *The Lover*. Indeed, explicitly directed towards the Chinese lover, implicitly directed towards Hélène and the brother, desire remains circumscribed by the geography of Indochina, the other culture. Conversely, when romantic love surfaces in *The Lover*, it marks the separation from the Asian continent: the young Duras is on the boat taking her to France and (she recalls) already France itself, when tears force her to realize that she may have loved him (107, 114). Romantic love is associated again with French territoriality when, years later, he calls her while visiting Paris, and asserts he will love her until death. Desire and romantic love thus leave the trace of a spatial configuration that reaffirms old exoticist paradigms.

The return to exoticism in *The Lover* is certainly subdued by the novel's discursive heterogeneity which, beyond the parody of exotic themes, involves the lovers' gender role playing, and even cultural role playing.¹² Yet we can concur with Lisa Lowe's observation that "discursive heterogeneity is not enough to destabilize a particular hegemony," that parody, in particular, is a double-edged sword (21). In the end, the heterogeneous text of *The Lover* and the more didactic *Sea Wall* converge thematically to re-inscribe the dynamic of colonial/racial relationships they set out

to dismantle: the subversion of the gender hierarchy clashes with the subversion of cultural hierarchies. The cultural other (qua a passive indigenous population in *The Sea Wall*, qua eroticized oriental(ized) bodies in *The Lover*) remains a measure of the protagonist's construction as a female subject—a measure, in Mohanty's words, of the “liberated” western woman's “discursive self-presentation” (81-82).

Notes

1. Tabet specifies restrictions in her study: the exclusion of homosexual relations and heterosexual relations in which the economic transaction happens from a woman to a man.

2. The French language does not make the distinction between “male” and “masculine.” However, the context suggests that *masculin* means “male” in the present case.

3. Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?” *New German Critique* 10 (Winter 1977): 129. Quoted in Doane (82) who further comments that “[t]his type of masquerade, an excess of femininity, is aligned with the *femme fatale*.”

4. Altered translation. “Sur le bac, regardez-moi . . .” (*L'amant* 24).

5. Altered translation. “Et dans les mois suivants les ventres grossissaient. . . . Cela continuait régulièrement . . . comme si d'une longue et profonde respiration, chaque année, le ventre de chaque femme se gonflait d'un enfant, le rejetait, pour ensuite reprendre souffle d'un autre” (*Un barrage* 117).

6. The woman with the dying baby in fact prefigures the beggar woman of *The Vice Consul*.

7. For a full discussion of the ambivalence of colonial discourse in this novel, see my “*Le Vice-consul*: Colonial Mimicry and ‘Partial Writing,’ ” *Cincinnati Romance Review* 13 (1994): 218-27.

8. See also Alec G. Hargreaves's “Loti and Indochina: A Myth in the Making,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 14. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 138-52.

9. For a reading of the exotic and its subversion in *India Song*, see Martine Loufti's “Duras' India,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 14. 3 (1986): 151-53.

10. In *Autobiographical Tighropes*, Leah Hewitt briefly discusses the apparent contradictions in *The Lover* between “the work's romantic as-

pects” and “Duras’ conception of circulating desires and identities” (125-26).

11. See, for instance, Chris Bongie’s *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991).

12. I argue elsewhere that cultural cross-dressing and appropriations also tend to shift the lovers’ positions around and to unsettle the East/West dichotomy. In “The (De)(Re)Construction of Gender and Cultural Codings in *L’amant*,” paper presented at the 10th Annual International Conference on Foreign Literature, Wichita State University, April 1993.

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