

The Ambivalence of Colonial Desire in Marguerite Duras's "The Lover"

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abstract

This paper analyses the notions of desire and *metissage* that circulate in *The Lover*, Marguerite Duras's autobiographical novel about an illicit and scandalous sexual relationship between an adolescent French girl and a wealthy Chinese man set in 1920s French colonial Siagon. Rather than celebrate *The Lover* as a tale of a young French girl's resistance to colonial sexual mores and regulations, this paper seeks to excavate how that resistance both affirms and challenges the racializing and racist dynamics of colonial society. In particular, I explore the intertwining discourses of colonial sexuality, gender, race, and Orientalism that both produced and constrained the specific forms of desire and subjectivities available to and taken up by European women in French Indochina, and that circumscribe the story that Duras is able to tell about the French girl's love affair in *The Lover*. I suggest that Duras's portrayal of the French girl as a sexually autonomous female subject – one whose erotic relations are not bound by the dictates of colonial patriarchy – is made possible only by the ambivalent structure of the girl's desire, by her simultaneous attraction to and repulsion of the racialized others of the French colonies.

keywords

colonialism; sexuality; French Indochina; gender; parody; Duras

introduction

Since the mid-1990s much postcolonial theory has focused on the mutual imbrication of politics and desire under the conditions of colonial rule (e.g. McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995; Young, 1995; Dollimore, 1997; Looby, 1997). In drawing attention to how the colonizer's violent repression, objectification, and dehumanization of the colonized actually was imbued with fantasies of desire for the colonized other, this scholarship has revealed the extent to which colonialist notions of essential racial difference were organized through an ambivalent structure of attraction to and repulsion of the colonized other, a structure that Robert J.C. Young refers to as 'colonial desire' (Young, 1995). It has also exposed those gendered and sexualized dynamics of colonialism and imperialism typically overlooked in earlier studies of colonial and postcolonial relations. Such innovations in postcolonial theory have expanded our understanding of the role played by desire and sexuality in the constitution of racialized and gendered subjects, both in the colonies and the metropolises of imperial power. However, much of this work focuses almost exclusively on the colonial desire of white male colonialists for colonized men and women. In comparison, less attention has been devoted to the colonial desire of white women.

This paper addresses this gap in postcolonial studies by analysing the notions of desire and *metissage* that circulate in *The Lover*, Marguerite Duras's semi-autobiographical tale of illicit desire and sexual liaison between a poor adolescent French girl and a wealthy Chinese man set in French colonial Saigon during the late 1920s (Duras, 1984). Written as an autobiographical novel, *The Lover* tells the story of a young French girl's defiance of the colonial sexual mores and regulations that restricted white women's sexual encounters to white men. It is thus a tale of a white girl's assertion of herself as an autonomous female subject through her sexual affair with a Chinese man, an affair that results in her exile to France where she becomes an author who retrospectively writes the story of her life in Indochina. Rather than celebrate *The Lover* as a story of feminine subversion of white colonial sexual moralities, as does much Durassian scholarship, my concern in this paper is with the ways in which that subversion both challenges and affirms the racializing and racist dynamics of colonial society. I suggest that while *The Lover*, which blurs the genres of 'autobiography' and 'fiction', cannot be read as the definitive version of Duras's life in Indochina, it nevertheless provides an account of the constitution and operation of white women's colonial desire that may be useful for understanding both the moral regulation of white women's sexuality and the possibilities for white women's subversion of that regulation under colonialism.

Drawing upon Foucault's insight into how the subject is produced through discursive practices that are also techniques of power (Foucault, 1990), my aim in this paper is to explore the intertwining discourses of colonial sexuality,

gender, race, and Orientalism that produced and constrained the specific forms of desire and subjectivities available to and taken up by European women in French Indochina. I suggest that these discourses circumscribe and inform Duras's representations of the French girl, her lover, and colonial Indochina in *The Lover*. My argument is that Duras's construction of the girl as a sexually autonomous female subject is made possible only by the ambivalent structure of the girl's desire. This ambivalence is characterized by the girl's simultaneous libidinal attraction to and racist disavowal of her desire for her lover. I suggest that the French girl's sexual autonomy from a system of colonial patriarchy that maintains white women's subordination to white men depends upon her libidinal attraction to her Chinese lover, and therefore upon the hybridization of her racial and cultural identity. Yet, this attraction to the Chinese man – an attraction that is 'perverse' because such sexual relations between white women and Asian men were forbidden in the French colonies – is rooted in the power that she has over him due to her racial privilege. Paradoxically, the maintenance of this white privilege necessitates that the girl disavow her attraction to the Chinese man, and thereby reassert the fixity of the racial boundary between herself and her lover which her desire for the Chinese man renders indeterminate. This paper outlines this ambivalence of colonial desire and racial identity in the text. I propose that while the ambivalent structure of the girl's desire is similar to that of white men's colonial desire, its operations cannot be understood apart from the regimes of sexual and gender regulation that characterized life in the colonies, and therefore from the crossing of gender, sexual, and racial boundaries that such desire permitted white women.

textual hybridization and racial *metissage* in *The Lover*

Over the last few decades there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship on Duras's work, particularly among feminists. Given the ongoing contestation within feminist circles over what constitutes not only the nature of women's oppression and the appropriate strategies for women's emancipation and resistance, but also the very category of 'Woman' itself, it is not surprising that the reception of *The Lover* by feminists has differed depending on their vision of feminist theory and practice. For instance, some feminists view *The Lover* as the 'true' story of Duras's life as a young girl growing up in colonial Saigon, in contrast to the 'false' story of her childhood presented in *The Sea Wall* (Duras, 1950). This is the position advanced by Jeffrey S. Staley and Laura Edson, who propose that *The Lover* should be read not as fiction, but as Duras's attempt to rediscover those aspects of her life in Indochina that could never be completely broached in her previous novels (Staley and Edson, 2001). Staley and Edson therefore read *The Lover* as the tale of Duras's refusal of the normative feminine subjectivity

assigned to women by patriarchal relations, and of her punishment and ostracization for this transgression by her family and the local French colonials, a punishment that results in her exile to France where she becomes an author who writes the story of her affair with the Chinese lover. In this approach to *The Lover* Duras, as exiled female author, symbolizes the paradigmatic subject of white Western feminism: the woman author with a room of her own in which she may re-write the story of her life.

Other feminists have problematized those analyses of *The Lover* that present it as an intentional, truthful, and verifiable representation of the author's life in Indochina. For instance, Madelaine Borgomano instead points to the textual hybridization characteristic of Duras's work: *The Lover* rewrites Duras's *The Sea Wall* (1950) in the autobiographical mode, but *The Lover* is also rewritten by Duras in *The North China Lover* (1992), where the lover is not only the Chinese man but also the girl's younger brother (Borgomano, 1986). As Susan D. Cohen points out, *The Lover's* intertextuality – its re-telling of the same story with a difference – prevents the text from becoming the final or 'true' version of the story (Cohen, 1993). In addition to its intertextuality, the text is marked by a constant slippage between characters that calls into question the stability of the boundaries between self and other, and hence of the subject as sovereign and self-identical; in *The Lover* Duras confuses the border that separates self and other by reinscribing the space of the lover as other with a multitude of subject positions, including Chinese man, mother, brother, friend, and self. This re-writing of the border between self and other is a defining feature of most of Duras's novels and films. Duras has therefore been acclaimed by French feminists such as Helene Cixous as the *grande dame* of *écriture féminine*, of the writing of the feminine as a space of radical otherness (Cixous, 1980).

Borgomano and Cohen rightly problematize the fundamental presuppositions of those readings of *The Lover* that present the author as an intentional and self-identical subject, the text as a truthful biography of the author's life, and hence the characters' identities as bounded and stable. However, while Borgomano and Cohen highlight the textual hybridization characteristic of all Duras's work, they overlook how *The Lover* recalls colonialist and racist anxieties about the miscegenation, contamination, and degeneration associated with hybridity in the white colonial imagination (Garane, 2000). As a result, their interpretations of *The Lover* can not account for how the subversiveness of Durassian writing remains implicated in the disources of white colonial patriarchy that it seeks to challenge. While I do not want to ignore the ambiguous nature of the text's genre (autobiography or fiction), I do think that it is important to excavate those colonialist dimensions of the text that are overlooked by many feminists, whether they read *The Lover* as a factual account of Duras's life in Saigon or as a form of *écriture féminine*. To put it another way, I suggest that certain anxieties about racial degeneration and hybridity are refracted in the text regardless of whether

it is approached as autobiography or fiction. By attending to these racist anxieties, my intention is not to resolve the text's ambiguities or to ignore what Kate Ince rightfully describes as Duras's 'gnomic and lacuna-ridden writing style' (Ince, 2000: 113). Nor do I wish to uncover the 'truth' of Duras's position on French colonialism. Rather, I propose that Duras's *The Lover* is marked and constrained by the discursive field of colonialism, and its concomitant racist anxieties. Hence, it is only by attending to these racist anxieties that we can begin to understand the ambivalence not only of the French girl's desire, but also of Duras's relationship to those discourses of colonial sexuality, gender, and race that *The Lover* both challenges and affirms.

As Young notes in his genealogy of contemporary accounts of hybridity in cultural theory, the notion of hybridity can be traced back to the racist discourse of the Victorian far Right, who appealed to hybridity – a term they borrowed from the discourses of natural history and philology – to establish the impossibility of fertile inter-racial unions and the fixity of racial difference. Yet, the fact that the very question of hybridity and thus of sexual relations between the different races could be posed, Young claims, rendered problematic the very idea of permanent racial difference. The notion of hybridity at the heart of 19th-century racial thinking thus reveals the illogical logic of racial and racist thought. In the 19th-century, racial knowledge focused fetishistically on the miscegenated offspring of inter-racial sexual relations which destabilized the boundaries between white and non-white. Yet this knowledge simultaneously drew its authority and legitimacy from the formal rationality of science (its methods of categorizing, ordering, quantifying, and calculating) in order to classify the children of inter-racial unions according to the degree of their deviation from the white norm (mulatto, mestiza, creole, etc.). This method of classification, it was believed, served as 'proof' of the inalienable differences among the races and the natural hierarchy of the racial order that assigns whites to the highest strata on the 'racial chain of being'.¹ Young proposes that this seeming contradiction of racialized knowledge, a contradiction that should demonstrate the refutability of racist logic, actually is what allows this logic to survive, to recuperate and renew itself whenever under siege. The contradictions and ambiguities inherent in racial knowledge afford to it what Ann Laura Stoler citing Foucault calls a 'polyvalent mobility' (Stoler, 2002b: 376), a mobility that allows racial discourse to be both fixed and fluid at once, for it to sediment and fix older ideas of racial difference while recasting these ideas so that they appear to refer not to race at all, but instead to culture, class, gender, sex, or hybridity.

Given Young's (1995) insights into the cultural heritage of hybridity in the politics of racial knowledge we must be cautious of feminist proclamations of Durassian writing as a space of subversive hybridization that displaces the imperialism of phallogocentrism, particularly when these feminists decline to interrogate the racist anxieties that are reflected in the text's representations of the female

¹ I borrow the phrase 'racial chain of being' from Wiegman (1995: 21). See Goldberg (1993) for a more detailed account of the role of science in the constitution of racial knowledge. Goldberg explores of how racial knowledge bases its truth-claims about racial difference in the discourse of science and how, in turn, racial knowledge itself is a constitutive feature of the natural and human sciences. He also analyses the

way in which scientific discourse on race continues to frame popular understandings of racial difference.

protagonist's cultural and racial hybridization through her sexual encounters with her Chinese lover. To examine the textual hybridization of *The Lover* separately from the notions of desire, *metissage*, and degeneration that circulate in the text is to obfuscate the Orientalist and racist discourses that circumscribe and inform Duras's telling of the story of the girl's love affair. It thus is to engage in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the 'sanctioned ignorance' of the elite feminist intellectual who may speak of female subversion without excavating the racist and imperialist grounding of that subversion (Spivak, 1999: 2).

While *The Lover* cannot be read as the definitive account of Duras's life, it is possible to uncover how Duras's representations not only of the French girl's sexual encounters with her Chinese lover, but also of the city of Saigon itself, reproduce certain colonialist anxieties about racial miscegenation and hybridity, even as they seemingly subvert them. Indeed, the 19th-century racist discourse on hybridity, with its obsessive 'fascination with people having sex – interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex' (Young, 1995: 181), is central to Duras's depiction of the young girl's life in French colonial Indochina. *Metissage* is everywhere present in *The Lover*: from the descriptions of the way the girl's mother wears her hair – 'her hair is drawn back tight into a bun like a Chinese woman's' (Duras, 1984: 33) – of her younger brother's body as 'like that of a little coolie' (Duras, 1984: 73), and of her French schoolmate, Helene Lagonelle, as a 'being of one flesh with the man from Cholon' (Duras, 1984: 73); to the depictions of the encounters of bodies and pleasures that transpire at the lover's apartment in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon. In fact, the city of Saigon provides not only the backdrop for the narrator's reconstruction of her desire for her Chinese lover, and therefore of her identity as writer in exile. Saigon itself is produced in the text as a territory inscribed with the flows of colonial desire. It is represented as a hybrid space where nations and bodies are forced together by the violence of colonial rule as 'desiring machine'.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of capitalism as 'desiring machine,' offers one way of theorizing colonialism as the social production of desire. They propose that capitalism be understood as a signifying system without author that encodes, traps, and inscribes the flows of desire on the surface of foreign lands, deterritorializing old institutions for controlling desire and reterritorializing new structures of repression. Differentiating themselves from Freudian psychoanalysis, which locates the origins of desire in the individual subject, Deleuze and Guattari provide an analytics of desire as both constituted by the social and constitutive of the social field. In other words, for Deleuze and Guattari desire is a social product that invests the social field with fantasies of attraction and repulsion, of the coupling and uncoupling of territories and bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983).

This idea of colonialism as 'desiring machine,' when applied to Duras's depictions of her mother-land, Indochina, makes visible the extent to which *The Lover*

inscribes the city of Saigon as a site of colonial desire, of racialized group fantasies of erotic desire for the exotic other. Saigon is represented in *The Lover* as a place of fantasy, pleasure, ambivalence, and their concomitant anxieties. After the first sexual encounter between the French girl and the Chinese man, the female protagonist as narrator describes the Chinese district of Cholon as 'a city of pleasure' (Duras, 1984: 41). This pleasure derives from the strangeness of the place, its foreignness, and hence its difference from the white communities in the city: '[t]he clatter of the wooden clogs is earsplitting, the voices strident, Chinese is a language that's shouted the way I always imagine desert languages are, it's a language that's incredibly foreign' (Duras, 1984: 41). As a place of desire and disdain for the foreign, the city of Saigon is represented by Duras in *The Lover* through an Orientalist discourse that constructs in the Western imagination a vision of the Orient as a place of excessive, transgressive, exotic sexuality and sensuality. As Edward Said (1978) notes in *Orientalism*, this discursive construction of the Orient does not correspond to the 'real' Orient, since the Orient does not exist apart from Orientalism as a system of Western knowledge based on the ontological and epistemological distinction between Orient and Occident. The notion of the Orient instead provides the grid for rendering the East intelligible to Western consciousness. Europeans who wrote on or traveled to the Orient after 1800, Said proposes, were incapable of extricating themselves from the discursive regime of Orientalism and hence from the quest for exotic sexual encounters thought to be unavailable in the West:

What they look for often – correctly I think – was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden; but even that quest, if repeated by enough people, could (and did) become as regulated and uniform as learning itself. In time 'Oriental sex' was standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture.

(Said in Dollimore, 1997: 24)

According to Said, this discursive construction of the Orient within Western academic disciplines and literary works as a place of inordinate sensuality and sexual pleasures propelled the Occidental pursuit for 'Oriental sex'.

Said's work therefore reveals erotic desire in the colonies to be socially organized through the structures of racial, Oriental knowledge. Following the Foucault of *The History of Sexuality*, Said's observations on Oriental sex demonstrate that desire is not innocent of power or history, but is instead discursively constituted and historically occasioned, and imbued with operations of knowledge and power. That is, different discourses and different societies allow for differing arrangements between bodies, or what Foucault refers to as 'a different economy of bodies and pleasures' (Foucault, 1990: 159). The works of Said and Foucault therefore impart an important lesson for students of colonial desire: if erotic desire is not an ontological *a priori* that exists below discourse and outside history, it cannot ever escape entirely its rootedness in the history of colonialism and white racism.

Indeed, in its remembrance of Saigon as a foreign place of Oriental sex and its attendant dangerous pleasures, Duras's *The Lover* remains caught within the circuit of Orientalism described by Said, while also working to reproduce that discourse of Orientalism. The fantasies of desire for the other that circulate in the text are discursively constituted and historically occasioned by the legacy of French colonialism, as a field of academic knowledge and a system of governance. These fantasies therefore are as much about race and racial difference as they are about sex. While *The Lover* remains complicit with certain domains of racial knowledge, its discursive deployment of Oriental desire nevertheless must be distinguished from the works of those other Europeans who wrote on the Orient after 1800 to which Said refers in *Orientalism*. As Pascale Becel notes, *The Lover* breaks with the Western discourse of Oriental sex in at least one crucial way: upsetting the tradition of mostly white male fantasies of the Orient and interfering with the male/same-female/other colonial dynamic that assigns to both white women and colonized people the status of sexually perverse objects of white men's desire, Duras elaborates a fantasy of the Orient that simultaneously ruptures and recuperates Orientalist discourse by presenting the white woman as the subject of colonial desire (Becel, 1997). As will be elaborated, it is through this simultaneous rupturing and recuperation of Orientalist discourse that the ambivalence of the girl's colonial desire and white privilege is expressed in the text.

colonial desire reconsidered

As an exceptional fantasy of the Orient, *The Lover* necessarily requires an inquiry into the operations of colonial desire for white women in French Indochina. It points to the necessity of examining how the Orientalist and racist discourses of (white male) colonial desire intersected with patriarchal discourses of colonial sexual morality to produce and constrain European women's sexual desire for the racialized others of the colonies and hence the self-constitution of European women in relation to these others. In other words, *The Lover* compels us to examine the forms of desire, identities, and identifications open to and taken up by French women in the colonies.

Stoler's anthropological and historical study of the French rule of Indochina in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* is instructive here (Stoler, 2002a). She highlights how colonial administrators' fears and anxieties about the racial hybridization and white degeneracy brought about by white male desire for colonial women often led to the heightened scrutiny and regulation of white women's sexuality, and not only the sexuality of white men. Her research reminds us that colonial desire, as an ambivalent structure of libidinal attraction to and repulsion of the other, must be understood as central to and constituted by the policing of sexual activity, reproduction, and marriage within European

communities in the colonies. Indeed, as Stoler observes, it was primarily through gender-specific sexual sanctions and prohibitions in these European communities that the French secured the racial difference between colonizer and colonized upon which the moral legitimacy of their rule relied (Stoler, 2002a).

The moral regulation of white women's sexuality, in particular, was understood by colonial administrators as crucial to bolstering white prestige, maintaining the racial purity of whiteness, and thereby fixing racial difference between whites and non-whites. While for decades French men stationed in Indochina had been encouraged by colonial administrators to take native women as concubines, European women were not entitled the same dangerous pleasures as their male counterparts. Indeed, the emigration of European women to Indochina, Stoler points out, was promoted by the French government at a time when colonial administrators were decrying the threat that the *metis* children of concubines – supposed embodiments of European degeneration and moral decay – posed to the facade of white supremacy and thus of France's racial right to govern Indochina (Stoler, 2002a). The role of French women in Vietnam was to guard the European conventions and middle class respectability of the white colonial community, promote white solidarity, and in so doing insulate white men from the cultural and racial contamination of sexual contact with Vietnamese women. The sexual economy of colonial desire was therefore fundamentally raced and gendered in the French colonies of Indochina.

That white women were called upon to perform this task of consolidating white prestige reveals that in colonial Indochina whiteness was never fully naturalized or normalized. It was always in the process of being made, remade, and actively appropriated by different subjects, and hence was highly visible and contestable. The specific history of whiteness in French Indochina highlights the locatedness of whiteness as a set of daily social practices and a site of racial privilege, and thereby displaces whiteness from its status as a universal racial category. This history also exposes how whiteness is differentially deployed in mediating social relations not only between whites and not-whites, but also within white communities, and therefore how whiteness operates as a gendered site of identity and identification.

White men and women in French Indochina engaged in distinct modes of relating to and performing the subject-position of whiteness. As we have seen, the colonial discourses of sexuality, gender, and race assigned to French women in Indochina the subject-position of the racially and sexually pure guardian of whiteness. Not only were white women forbidden from engaging in sexual relations with Asian men. They also were interpellated within these discourses as subjects in need of white male protection against the sexual aggression of Asian men. To the extent that this trope-ical figure of the French colonial woman became the mode of white women's subjectivization in the colonies, it functioned simultaneously as the mechanism of their empowerment and subjection. As

agents of empire, white women were benefactors of the racial privilege that accrued to white colonials. However, as Ruth Frankenberg (1997) notes in her discussion of the history of white women in the United States, this racial privilege came at a high price: it required white women to accept the terms of a racial and sexual contract that constrained their mobility by relegating them to the private realm of the colonial household, limited their sexual practices to heterosexual, monoracial relationships, and required them to constantly self-police and self-investigate their most intimate behaviours and desires.

This fate of white women in the colonies is symbolized in *The Lover* in the image of the 'self-betrayed white women' who 'don't do anything, just save themselves up...dress for the sake of dressing...look at themselves...in the shade of their villas, look at themselves for later on' (Duras, 1984: 18–19). These women:

already have huge wardrobes full of more dresses than they know what to do with....Some of them go mad. Some are deserted for a young maid who keeps her mouth shut....Some kill themselves.

(Duras, 1984: 19).

This 'self-betrayal of women' is also the fate of the narrator's French schoolmate, Helene Lagonelle, who doesn't want to get married but 'in the end [will] do what her mother wants' (Duras, 1984: 73): marry a rich French landowner of the countryside.

Through these figures of the self-betraying women, Duras points to how in French Indochina the colonial discourses of sexuality, gender, and race were fastened to the white female body, which served as a locus of colonial disciplinary power and surveillance. As Stoler (2002a) suggests and *The Lover* depicts, in the French colonies white women's sexual practices and libidinal attachments were the subject of much public and private scrutiny, and because these practices and attachments were constitutive of white women's self-understanding, they also were the sites of women's self-regulation and normalization. Following Foucault, we can therefore conclude that colonial sexuality and desire constituted a 'dense transfer point for relations of power' (Foucault, 1990: 103). The micromanagement of women's bodies and their pleasures in the colonies, what Foucault refers to as the anatomo-politics of the human body (Foucault, 1990), was linked to the macrosurveillance of the population, a 'biopolitics' that sought to maintain the distinction between whites and non-whites which sanctioned the colonial rule of French Indochina. In other words, it was primarily through the sexual control and disciplining of white women's bodies and pleasures that anxieties about racial miscegenation and the hegemony of colonial domination were expressed and addressed in French Indochina.

the parodic performance of colonial femininity

Even though the trope-ical figure of the white woman as racially pure and sexually chaste guardian of the boundaries of whiteness served as the predominate mode of French women's subjectivization and normalization in Indochina, not all French women equally abided by the normalizing rules of white colonial femininity and sexuality. Nor were all these women enlisted into the service of this trope. The disciplinary practices that produced the white female subject of the colonies as a docile body inscribed with and constituted by power relations also functioned as 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 2000: 326) that differentiated normal women from abnormal women, natural women from monstrous women, and permissible feminine practices from forbidden practices. For instance, poor and single white women in the colonies fell outside the colonial space to which European women were assigned, and therefore were thought to be more in danger of racial degeneracy than bourgeois married women. As Stoler observes, poor and single white women in French Indochina were seen by the colonial authorities as a threat to white supremacy since they were more likely to engage in sexual practices, such as prostitution and inter-racial sexual liaisons, that offended the racist sexual morality of the occupying power (Stoler, 2002a). Poor and single white women were considered more akin to the trope-ical figure of the woman of colour – with her supposed excessive fertility, sexual appetite, and lack of hygiene – than to bourgeois white women.² Living as they did on the borders of white colonial femininity, poor and single white women had at least two options: they could consolidate their racial privilege by appropriating for themselves the subjectivity of white colonial femininity, and thus become honorary members of the white community, or they could resist the disciplinary practices of whiteness and femininity.

Both options are present in *The Lover*. The family's poverty makes its members more racially and economically proximate to the local peasants than to the colonial bourgeoisie, and therefore threatens their white privilege. The girl's mother, however, continually attempts to reassert this privilege and thereby realign the family with the white community in Indochina. In one passage, the narrator recollects that while the family's poverty allowed the children closer contact with the local peasants, culture, and countryside, the family sought to secure its racial supremacy by strictly following the conventions of European colonial households. She recalls:

We were white children, we were ashamed, we sold our furniture, but we weren't hungry, we had a houseboy and we ate. Sometimes, admittedly, we ate garbage – storks, baby crocodiles – but the garbage was cooked and served by a houseboy, and sometimes we refused it, too, we indulged in the luxury of declining to eat.

(Duras, 1984: 6–7)

² It was not only in the French colonies that poor and single white women were seen as akin to non-white women, and thus as more prone to racial degeneration. The activities of poor and working white women were the objects of surveillance and discipline in the metropolises and colonies of other imperial powers as well. For a discussion of the convergence of the images of black women (particularly the Hottentot Venus) and white female prostitutes in the white male imagination of the 19th century see Gilman (1986). For overviews of the moral regulation of poor and working white women in British India and in Canada, Britain's

white settler colony, see Ballhatchet (1980), and Strange (1995) and Valverde (1991), respectively.

While such displays of white privilege allow the family to establish their difference from the native servants, the girl's sexual encounters with the Chinese man destabilize this racial difference between whites and non-whites and render it tenuous. Moreover, as will be elaborated, her sexual affair reveals the instability and indeterminacy of whiteness and white privilege as forms of identification that must be constantly reasserted and re-established through the maintenance and bolstering of the racial hierarchy between whites and non-whites.

As Jeanne Garane notes in her reading of *The Lover*, the girl's sexual encounters with the Chinese man constitute the ultimate infraction of the conventions of white colonial femininity – sexual contact with a non-white (Garane, 2000). Since her transgressive acts threaten to destabilize the fixity of whiteness as a racial identity, the girl is severely punished both by the local French colonials, who forbid their daughters to speak to the poor white girl, and by her family, who ship her off to Paris. In one passage, the narrator recalls how her every movement was the object of scrutiny by her fellow colonials in Saigon, a place where 'everything gets known' (Duras, 1984: 93). She recalls how they talked incessantly about her, documenting her life to the smallest detail: 'It goes on in the disreputable quarter of Cholon, every evening. Every morning the little slut goes to have her body caressed by a filthy Chinese millionaire' (Duras, 1984: 88–89). Yet, while the girl's affair with the Chinese man consecrates her racial and cultural hybridization, and thus her identity as a racially and sexually degenerate white woman, it would be misleading to present the girl's sexual encounter as an instance of absolute acquiescence to and collusion with the role of Woman assigned to poor white females in the colonies. While the body of the girl lover is the site of the colonial disciplinary gaze and normalizing practices, she is not a mere victim of patriarchal and colonial relations of power. As Foucault's agonistic model of power demonstrates, discursive regimes are not only the instrument and effect of a power that fixes identities and relations; they also may serve as the starting point for an opposing strategy and for the contestation of these fixed identities and relations (Foucault, 1990). Hence, although the poor white girl is discursively constituted as a racially and sexually hybrid, perverse, and degenerate female subject, she appropriates and mimes this subject-position in a way that allows her to resist the oppressive racial and gender identities of the colonies.

Keeping in mind Foucault's observation that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1990: 94), and that discourse therefore is both a mode of subjection and subjectivization, we can begin to explore how the girl's enactment of the subject-position assigned to poor white females in the colonies both challenges and affirms colonial discourses of white women's sexuality. In what follows, I examine how mimesis is deployed in *The Lover* by the figure of the girl lover in ways that counter some prescribed identifications while reinforcing others. That the mimetic act of the girl lover is disruptive and reversionary at once does not make it an exceptional case of mimesis. Rather, it reveals the

tension at the heart of mimicry as a political strategy: the tension between what Diana Fuss (1994) calls the 'mimicry of subjugation' – wherein the oppressed must mime the image of themselves offered by the oppressor – and the 'mimicry of subversion' – wherein the oppressed's conscious parodic performance of their roles subverts the dominant systems of representation by intentionally ironizing them. Indeed, Duras's representation of the girl lover as a site of the parodic performance of the role of Woman under colonial patriarchy is linked in *The Lover* to the girl's quest for sexual autonomy through both the hybridization of her racial identity and the reassertion of this identity as white. As we shall see in what follows, the girl's mimesis is simultaneously subversive and recuperative of the normalizing tactics of colonial discourses.

As is by now widely recognized, in *The Lover* Duras constructs the white girl as a highly sexualized and transgressive female subject. The girl is cognizant of her position as the object of white male desire within the discursive repertoire of colonial sexuality, and therefore mimes the role of white female objectification to its excess, to the point where the conventional positions of subject and object in patriarchal societies are reversed and subverted. Aware of the male gaze that constitutes her as passive object of male desire, the girl as narrator notes: '[f]or the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets, and my mother's men friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis' (Duras, 1984: 17). She refuses to be the victim of this objectifying gaze. Unlike her friend who will be passively married off to a rich French man, the protagonist constitutes herself as a desiring subject by choosing the man with whom she will engage in sexual relations, and by setting the pace and rhythm of the relationship.

On the ferry in the middle of the Mekong River, where the narrator meets the wealthy Chinese man in the black limousine, the 15-year-old girl first puts herself into circulation. When she gets off the bus on the ferry, leaving the seat reserved for white passengers, the girl refuses the gender and racial identifications assigned to her by virtue of her status as white woman. She instead chooses to constitute her identity as a sexually independent woman by consciously taking up the role of the desiring subject forbidden to white women in the colonies, especially to young girls. Not only does the girl refuse the white privilege afforded the French in Indochina by standing on the ferry alongside the other Vietnamese passengers. She also transgresses appropriate gender roles in the colonies by controlling the way she wants to look and wants others to look at her. The girl is not the passive object of the male gaze. Rather, by wearing clothes that her mother derides as an outfit suitable for a child prostitute, she controls the gaze of the male other. Indeed, As Becel observes, the narrator calls her readers to look at her – 'On the ferry, look at me' (Duras, 1984: 16) – and to notice the calculated excess of the young girl's outfit: gold lame high heels and an almost transparent dress, accented by a man's belt and flat-brimmed hat (Becel, 1997).

The girl's choice of the man's belt and hat contradicts and parodies the excessive femininity of her dress and shoes, and thereby discloses the will involved in her performative display as a gender-troubled subject.

At the Chinese man's apartment, the girl's queering of normative Western femininity and sexuality is even more pronounced. In a reversal of conventional heteronormative gender roles, the girl sets the conditions of their sexual relationship, initiates sex, and decides its orientation and rhythm. The girl tells the Chinese man, 'I'd rather you didn't love me. But if you do, I'd like you to do as you usually do with women,' a statement that makes him 'suffer' (Duras, 1984: 37). In addition, at his apartment the girl notices that she doesn't feel hate or repugnance for the Chinese man, 12 years her senior. She instead desires him, and this desire for her lover puts him 'at her mercy' (Duras, 1984: 39). Assuming the usually male role of the subject of desire, the young girl becomes the desiring subject, and the Chinese man becomes the desired object.

The girl's illicit and deviant desire for the Chinese lover, and the crossing of gender, racial, cultural, and national boundaries that such erotic practices demand, constitutes an empowering act of social critique for the girl and leads to her repudiation of and disidentification with the European conventions and cultural practices of French Indochina. In fact, her gender-troubling performance and her desire for the racialized other necessitate that she renounce the forms of normalizing female subjectivity available to French women. This renouncement brings with it a political knowledge of white women's sexual and gender oppression under the conditions of colonial patriarchy. In refusing the subject-position of the racially and sexually pure white woman, and engaging in consensual sexual relations with the Chinese man, the girl constitutes herself as 'unlike French women' (Duras, 1984: 60), and thus as different from the white colonial society of which she is a product. As Jonathan Dollimore points out in his analysis of erotic/exotic desire in the works of Gide and Genet, the search for sexual liberation in the realm of the foreign is inseparable from the subject's refusal of certain kinds of subjectivities and normative desire (Dollimore, 1997). Indeed, the girl experiences herself 'as radically different in the space of the other' (Dollimore, 1997: 26). This difference results in her disavowal not only of hegemonic forms of heterosexuality and of colonial patriarchal relations that prohibit sexual encounters between white women and colonized peoples. Her desire for her lover, and the racial and cultural hybridization of her identity it provokes, also problematizes the stability of her identity as white, and therefore prompts her to challenge the white supremacist assumptions of racial purity upon which colonial patriarchy is based. Her sexual proximity to and identification with her lover, which turns 'her into a girl of Indochina [with] the same slender wrists as they, the same thick hair' (Duras, 1984: 98), thus offers her a way to maintain the sexual autonomy and racial hybridity that she first discovered on the ferry in

the Mekong. It is this sexual and racial difference that she rediscovers as an exiled author when she is forced to leave her lover.

recuperating colonialism

It is primarily through her portrayal of the white girl's erotic desire for the Chinese man that Duras is able to construct the girl as a desiring subject that can not be fully contained by the colonial discourses of sexuality, gender, and race. In Duras's representation of the girl as sexual subject, a representation that ruptures colonial discourses of white women's sexuality, we can therefore begin to uncover how *The Lover* is circumscribed by and reproduces the discourse of Western feminism. As numerous feminists influenced by post-structuralism have taught us (e.g. Alcoff, 1988; Yeatman, 1994; Fraser and Nicholson, 1997), feminism needs to be examined not only as a theoretical project or political movement, but also as a discursive formation, constituted by certain domains of knowledge, rules of the formation of subjectivities, and modes of self-relation. As a discursive formation, feminism both produces and constrains the types of subject-positions available to feminists, and delimits which individuals can assume these subject-positions. As Chandra Talapade Mohanty (1991) observes, within the discourse of Western feminism the role of the liberated feminist subject is solely open to white women; women of the third world are not only denied this subject-position, but they actually function as the sexually subordinated foils against which white women constitute themselves as emancipated subjects.

The Lover contributes to this discursive production of third world women's subordination by juxtaposing the white girl's defiance of colonial patriarchy to representations of Indochinese women as passive victims of colonial and Eastern forms of patriarchy. The representations of Asian women serve numerous functions in the text, not the least of which is to demonstrate the affinity between the narrator's mother and the Indochinese natives. Yet as Becel and Marie-Paule Ha rightly note, in the text Asian women are featured solely in roles of sexual victimization and passivity (Becel, 1997; Ha, 2000): from the girl's housekeeper Do, 'who will never leave my mother...even when my elder brother tries to rape her...even when her wages stop being paid' (Duras, 1984: 20); to the mad beggar woman of Vinh Long whose touch threatens to throw the girl into 'a state much worse than death, the state of madness' (Duras, 1984: 84); to the lover's Chinese child-bride, the victim of Eastern patriarchy, who is forced by her family to marry a man who doesn't love her and whose marriage bed thus is haunted by the specter of 'the little white girl' (Duras, 1984: 115). Unlike the otherness of the Chinese lover, which functions as the site of the girl's desire and identification, the Indochinese woman's alterity is presented as absolute in the text. As Garane points out, citing Spivak, the Indochinese woman is coded in the

3 Spivak (1999) makes a similar point about how the native subaltern female serves to consolidate the feminist individualism of white women in celebrated feminist texts, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

text as the inchoate 'Other who could not be served,' the 'subaltern who cannot speak' (Spivak, 1985; Garane, 2000). She thus functions as the passive object in relation to which the female protagonist's performance of white female independence is celebrated and consolidated.³

Despite the girl's rejection of the disciplining and normalizing practices of colonial society, and her disidentification with white colonial femininity and sexuality, she is unable to transcend the racialized dynamic of the colonizer/colonized relation. Her subversive mimicry of the role of Woman under colonial patriarchy ends up reinforcing conventional power relations between Western and third world women rather than challenging them. But it is not only in the girl's relationship to Indochinese women that her mimicry of subversion works in the service of colonialism. The racism intrinsic to colonial relations of power is also replayed in the girl's intimate relationship with the Chinese lover. For instance, by performing the role of female objectification to its excess, and appropriating the conventionally male role of the desiring subject, the girl lover makes the Chinese man the object of her desire, feminizing him as other men have feminized her. In so doing, she forces her lover to mime the feminized image of Asian masculinity in the white colonial imagination, an image that constructs Asian men as weak, submissive, subordinate, and at times asexual. It is by forcing him to mime his subjugation that the girl asserts her sexual and racial power over him. The girl's self-constitution as desiring female subject therefore is dependent on her appropriation of the racialized gaze of the colonial that transforms her lover's body into an object (never subject) of colonial desire. Hence, while the girl attempts to distance herself from colonial society through her deviant desire for her lover and through her racial and cultural hybridization, her appropriation of the racialized gaze of the colonial that produces the Chinese man as an Orientalized and feminized other shores up the very colonial power relations from which the girl seeks to escape. Her liberation is compromised by the manner of its very effectuation.

Furthermore, one of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down, and thus to make his aestheticized and exoticized body the object of the reader's gaze as well. Indeed, the girl as woman author interpellates her readers as white subjects who are called to assume the racialized gaze of the girl lover, to 'see' his thin, hairless, vulnerable body, lacking in strength and muscle, and to recognize that there is 'nothing masculine about him but his sex' (Duras, 1984: 38). This racialized gaze thus functions as a racist interpretative schema that structures in advance our reading/seeing of the lover's body, and that therefore overdetermines his body from without, to recall Franz Fanon's famous phrase (Fanon, 1967).

In *The Lover* the Orientalized and feminized body of the Chinese man is discursively constituted through a racialized gaze that both despises its object and beholds it with desire. This discursive constitution of the lover's foreign body

as an ambivalent site of pleasure and repugnance, and thus of identification and disidentification, allows the girl as woman author to retrospectively reassert the fixity of her racial identity as white and thus her racial privilege as a white woman. Indeed, near the end of *The Lover*, the narrator tells of how she realigned herself with the Law of the (colonial) Father by denying her attraction to her lover in her family's presence:

My brothers never will say a word to him, it's as if he were invisible to them.... We all treat my lover as he does. I myself never speak to him in their presence.

(Duras, 1984: 51)

In my elder brother's presence he ceases to be my lover. He doesn't cease to exist, but he's no longer anything to me.... My desire obeys my elder brother, rejects my lover.

(Duras, 1984: 52)

Moreover, when the girl is punished by her mother for the racial impurity and scandal that the girl's relationship with the Chinese man imposes on the poor colonial family, the girl renounces her affair:

The mother hits her as hard as she can... She weeps for the disaster of her life, of her disgraced child. I weep with her. I lie. I swear by my own life that nothing has happened to me... how could I do that with a Chinese, so ugly, such a weakling.

(Duras, 1984: 59)

In confessing her repugnance for the body of her lover, the girl reclaims the white privilege of her family by reasserting the fixity of the racial boundaries between herself and her lover that her desire for the Chinese man challenged.

These passages reveal that the white supremacist assumptions of racial purity that the girl's desire for and identification with her lover challenges remain a part of her identity as 'a partial blindness' (Dollimore, 1997: 27), as a kind of melancholy or as one of melancholy's effects. In his famous essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud hypothesizes that the work of trying to live with profound loss, whether the loss of a person or an ideal, can lead to a melancholic attachment to the lost object whereby the lost object is incorporated into the ego (Freud, 1915/17, 1964). As Judith Butler notes in her analysis of Freud's essay, this melancholic incorporation of the lost object permits the loss of the object in the external world because it allows for the preservation of the lost object as part of the ego. Melancholia thus allows the subject to avert the complete loss of the object, 'to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss' (Butler, 1997: 134). Hence, while the girl's erotic desire for her lover results in the repudiation of her identity as a racially and sexually pure white woman and in her self-constitution as a hybrid subject, the girl's racist disavowal of her desire and reassertion of her white identity reveals that her repudiated identity was never completely lost; this loss was incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as her ego. Her melancholic

attachment to whiteness therefore highlights the ambivalence of both white identity and colonial desire: both constantly oscillate between identification with and attraction to the racialized other and disidentification with and repulsion of this other, between the messing up of the neat boundaries between self and other and the anxiety – provoked by this messiness – that seeks to re-establish and police these boundaries. It therefore reveals that racial identifications are always in translation, ‘caught in a system of cultural relays that make assumptions of racial identity both necessary and impossible’ (Fuss, 1994: 38)

Duras’s *The Lover* offers an exceptional fantasy of the Orient that ruptures the colonial discourse of white women’s sexuality by constructing the young French girl as the subject of colonial desire. Yet while the girl’s sexual encounters with her lover appear to offer her a way of escaping the colonial regime of sexual morality that denies sexual autonomy to white women, in the end we can see that the girl’s escape does not offer her true liberation. In fact, since the control of white women’s bodies and sexuality in the colonies was the primary means by which colonial administrators secured the boundary between colonizer and colonized, in her attempt to secure her white privilege over her Asian lover, and thus the boundary between colonizer and colonized, the girl reaffirms her commitment to the very system of colonialism that maintains white women’s sexual subordination to white men. Her quest for liberation ultimately fails because it is dependent upon the continued oppression of others, rather than their liberation. Duras’s tale of the scandalous relation between the white girl and her lover therefore reveals that while the ambivalent relation of love and hate of the colonial other that structures colonial desire may have provided white women with a way of asserting themselves as autonomous sexual subjects, it nevertheless tied them to the very system of colonial racism that construed both white women and colonized peoples as sexually perverse and racially degenerate subjects, and thus as the legitimate protectorates of white men.

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