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Duras' *Le vice-consul* and the Itinerant Discourse of Feminism

Elle, ce serait une marche très longue, fragmentée en des centaines d'autres marches toutes animées du même balancement — celui de son pas — elle marcherait, et la phrase avec elle. (Duras, *Le vice-consul*)

This paper aims at presenting a postmodern feminist reading of Marguerite Duras' *Le vice-consul*. In doing so it addresses the questions of whether or not such a reading is possible, and what such a reading might consist in. To situate these questions theoretically, the mistrust of metanarratives and the resulting crisis of legitimization associated with postmodernism will first be considered. This crisis does not, in my view, lead to the abandonment of feminism as an impossible discourse; but rather to an interrogation of the interaction between feminism and other discourses, and to a consideration of differences among women. My reading of *Le vice-consul* will focus on how both the style and structure of Duras' narrative contribute to a critical examination of the unified subject of modernist metanarratives. In addition, the discursive status of three of the novel's focal points, a Cambodian beggarwoman, Anne-Marie Stretter and India, will be discussed in relation to the psychoanalytically-informed feminism of Luce Irigaray. Specifically, the positioning of the other in the discourses of phallogentrism and colonialism will be considered as well as the way Duras links these discourses, and thus indirectly raises the question of how western feminism interacts with other discourses to limit its relevance to some women.

MISTRUST OF METANARRATIVES

The mistrust of metanarratives associated with postmodernism seems, at first glance, to pose a problem for feminism because the breakdown of metanarratives raises questions about the meaning and the legitimacy of any discourse. Current analyses of modernist metanarratives discuss how the latter explain the meaning of diverse narratives by viewing them as stages in the progression towards a goal. The legitimacy of the metanarrative is guaranteed by its relation to a subject, which is not itself subject to the condition of narration. In a discussion

of postmodernity and narrative included in his book *Introducing Lyotard*, Bill Readings identifies subjective consciousness as the guarantor of rational knowledge in modernism: "Knowledge may take the form of narrative, but it can only do this as an instrument of a subjective consciousness which is itself abstracted from the narrative, which does not itself require to be narrated" (67). The subject, as Readings also points out, is the organizing principle of modernist metanarratives: "Grand narratives link little narratives in parallel, either around (about) a referent (classicism) or an original sender (modernism)" (68). The subject provides a unified perspective from which to view other narratives. If there were no unified subject, there could be no unifying perspective — no metanarrative.

A feminist metanarrative would posit a goal for feminism, such as the liberation of the female subject, and organize the diversity of feminist narratives around this goal. The meaning, for feminism, of a text like Duras' could be explained in terms of this goal. In this chapter, I will not, therefore, attempt to identify THE meaning for feminism of *Le vice-consul*. The problem with a goal like the liberation of the female subject is that it accounts for neither the diversity of women nor the diversity of theories of liberation. Because of this diversity, one woman's liberation may well contribute to another woman's oppression. This is a point that Gayatri Spivak makes often and well in essays such as "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," and "Feminism and Critical Theory." A woman is never just a woman; her position as woman is mediated by her economic position, the colour of her skin, her nationality and so on; and her feminist perspective is bound up with the practical and theoretical concerns associated with a multiplicity of subject-positions. It seems unlikely that western theory, which has failed to unite all humans under metanarratives such as liberal humanism, Marxism, or psychoanalysis, will succeed in uniting all women under a metanarrative of feminism. The mistrust of metanarratives actually marks a point of intersection between the discourses of postmodernism and feminism, for feminism contributes to this mistrust by examining the ways in which women have been excluded from metanarratives.

THE IMPASSE OF RELATIVISM

What then is the status of the discourse of feminism if its contradictions cannot be resolved by reference to a metanarrative? On what basis can differing views within feminism be judged and, more generally, what prevents feminism from becoming just another way of seeing things (on a level with Nazism, for example)? I would argue that a purely relativistic view is one which claims metanarrative status for itself by maintaining that subjective relativism is the only way of viewing differences. Relativism continues to privilege the position of the narrator, but erases differences by stating, in effect, that the meaning of differences is meaninglessness. Postmodernism, while it may be a refusal to

elevate one element of narration, namely the narrator, to a position outside of the condition of narration (i.e., a refusal to forget that the narrator is narrated) is not necessarily a refusal to discriminate between narratives on the basis of their effects, which may include domination and oppression. A refusal of a feminist metanarrative is not a refusal of feminist narratives, nor is it a refusal to make judgements; it is a reminder that no one set of criteria will adequately account for the diversity of women.

Furthermore, it is not necessary that the scope of feminist narratives be cut back to the point of virtual insignificance. In their article entitled "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson warn against throwing out "the baby of large historical narrative with the bathwater of philosophical metanarrative and the baby of social-theoretical analysis of large scale inequalities with the bathwater of reductive Marxian class theory" (25). As Fraser and Nicholson point out, effective criticism of gender relations requires an array of analytical tools:

It requires at minimum large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology, empirical and social-theoretical analyses of macrostructures and institutions, interactionist analyses of the micropolitics of everyday life, critical-hermeneutical and institutional analyses of cultural production, historically and culturally specific sociologies of gender, and so on. The list could go on. (26)

The types of analyses listed above are necessary to feminist critique. At the same time, it is necessary that such analyses attend to historical and cultural context, and strive to recognize rather than to transcend biases. Every configuration of feminism interacts with other discourses to exclude some women from consideration. For example, North-American women claim rights and privileges using the language of a legal and political system that may oppress women in other countries. The response to this situation is not to stop asking how North-American women are marginalized by this continent's legal and political systems, but rather to combine a continual interrogation of the gender bias of various discourses (such as law or psychoanalysis) with an interrogation of the biases of various feminist configurations. In other words, feminists must consider the consequences for other women of, for example, a heterosexual or an individualist bias. In her article "French Feminism in an International Frame," Gayatri Spivak gives examples of these consequences at both a theoretical and a practical level. Spivak's analysis of Julia Kristeva's *Des Chinoises* describes a case of western feminism appropriating the story of Chinese women for purposes of self reflection. According to Spivak, *Des Chinoises* turns out to be about western patriarchy. On a more practical level, Spivak includes the following disconcerting footnote:

To take the simplest possible American examples, even such innocent triumphs as the hiring of more tenured women or adding more feminist sessions at a Convention might lead, since most U.S. universities have dubious investments, and most Convention hotels use Third World female labour in a most oppressive way, to the increasing proletarianization of the women of the less developed countries. (*In Other Worlds*, 291)

These types of consequences can be considered in the context of a feminist discourse that exists as an association of narratives concerned with the position of women within specific social contexts, and with the relationships between women in different social contexts. I have in mind a discourse that does not perpetuate the myth of an autonomous subject, that interacts with and interrogates a spectrum of other discourses, and that claims no fixed or universal grounds of legitimation — a discourse that could be referred to as itinerant.

ITINERANCY IN *LE VICE-CONSUL*

A discussion of the figure of itinerancy in Duras' novel *Le vice-consul* can help to illustrate my theoretical position. Itinerancy figures on the novel's stylistic, thematic, and structural levels. On the level of style, point of view can be described as itinerant because of the absence of a traditional third or first person narrator. Point of view circulates freely between direct discourse, indirect discourse, omniscient narrator, and so on. The frequent use of the third person indefinite pronoun "on" creates the impression of a vague, collective point of view. For example, many sentences begin with "On dit," followed by a statement of direct discourse. In addition, words themselves are itinerant in Duras' text: paragraphs, sentences and phrases are placed where their meaning changes depending on whether they are associated with what precedes or with what follows them.

Such narrative devices disrupt the possibility of a unifying, stable perspective and cause a continuous shifting of the reader's interpretive stance. For example, Ninette Bailey, in her article entitled "Discours social: Lecture socio-critique du *vice-consul* de Marguerite Duras," describes an example of a single phrase that is positioned so that it can be interpreted either as a polite exchange between two of the novel's white characters or as a descriptive comment made by a character (or by the narrator) about a group of Indians mentioned in the novel. The effect of this technique is described by Bailey:

De la sorte, ce qui peut se laisser lire comme une formule de communication (question de politesse, ou même d'intérêt entre les voyageurs blancs) pourrait aussi constituer un moyen textuel de communication, la tacite mise en relation des deux groupes raciaux par

un énoncé à double utilisation. (237)¹

Still on the level of style, the possibility of a unified narrative perspective is further troubled by an unconventional use of syntax (for example, parts of speech, such as pronouns or verbs, are omitted from sentences), and an unconventional use of narrative elements such as temporal exposition and personal pronouns. In an article entitled "Significations du métarécit dans *Le vice-consul* de Marguerite Duras," Micheline Besnard-Coursodon performs an in-depth analysis of Duras' use of verb tenses and personal pronouns. As Besnard-Coursodon observes, Duras persistently uses the present tense, even though the text contains two diegetic levels. On the primary level, the novel describes about three days in the lives of a group of Europeans living in Calcutta. One of the Europeans, Peter Morgan, is writing a novel, the text of which constitutes the secondary diegetic level of *Le vice-consul*. Morgan's novel is about the long march from Cambodia to Calcutta (and madness) of an itinerant beggarwoman. The events of Morgan's novel are situated in the past with respect to the primary text. Nevertheless, Duras uses the present, the conditional, and occasionally the future tenses to describe these events. Besnard-Coursodon describes how Duras uses tense changes to control the rhythm of the text, as in the following example, wherein Morgan modulates from the future to the present tense: "Calcutta où elle restera. Elle restera là, elle reste, reste là, dans les moussons." (60). Besnard-Coursodon views Duras' use of tenses as a "temporal perturbation" that contests narrative conventions. One effect of this flattening out of temporal distinctions is, in my view, to erase the temporal reference points that establish a stable narrative perspective. Duras' use of pronouns has a similar effect. As Besnard-Coursodon observes, in a single paragraph, first, second, and third person pronouns may be used to refer to the same character, and Duras omits any of the indicators that traditionally accompany such shifts.² All of these stylistic techniques contribute to the creation of an itinerant point of view.

The play between diegetic levels can also be discussed in relation to the structural and thematic itinerancy of the novel. The beggarwoman who is the subject of Morgan's novel also appears as a character in the novel's primary

1 The passage in question is on page 176 of the novel and reads as follows: Elle vient de se réveiller. Il prend sa main et l'embrasse longuement. Elle a posé sa tête contre l'épaule de Charles Rossett. — Ça va? Mille sur les talus, ils transportent, posent, repartent les mains vides, gens autour de l'eau vide des rizières....

2 Besnard-Coursodon cites the following passage as an example of shifting pronominal references (the same passage demonstrates the shifts in point of view discussed earlier): "Elle part ... elle cherche sa mère fatiguée qui l'a chassée. Sous aucun prétexte tu ne dois revenir. Elle ne savait pas, cette femme, elle ne savait pas tout, mille kilomètres de montagnes, ce matin, ne m'empêcheraient pas de te rejoindre, innocente, dans la stupefaction tu oublieras de me tuer, sale femme, cause de tout, je te rendrai cet enfant et toi tu le prendras..." (25).

diegetic level. She can be described as itinerant as she moves between narrative levels within *Le vice-consul* and from novel to novel in Duras' writing.³ The beggarwoman, who wanders through the text, unfixed in space, in time, or in number, is described as follows by one of the European males: "je la vois parmi des jeunes filles, d'autres jeunes filles, je les vois vieilles entre le Siam et la forêt et jeunes à leur arrivée à Calcutta" (180). The relationship between the novel's two narratives can also be described as itinerant because of the strength of their thematic overlap. In an article entitled "Hypo-Stories: The Heuristics of Perplexity," Mieke Bal suggests ways that the two narratives interact and determine each other's outcomes. According to Bal, the themes of hopelessness and failed communication in Morgan's story of the beggarwoman signify the failure of the colonial discourse which forms the context of the novel's primary diegetic level. Thus, the slippage between narrative levels points to the way in which the colonial discourse determines or limits the lives of the whites.

Duras uses several other techniques in the novel to point towards discursive limits and to indicate the impossibility of an all-inclusive narrative. The absence of a unified, logical narrative creates gaps in the reader's understanding of the text. Information about events and characters is incomplete and, in general, there is constant reference to that which is outside (là hors)⁴ the limits of certain discourses (such as a colonial or a phallogocentric discourse). For example, the Vice Consul of Lahore, in reference to certain disturbing acts he has committed, which include firing a gun at lepers, declares, "je me borne ici à constater l'impossibilité où je suis de rendre compte de façon compréhensible de ce qui s'est passé à Lahore" (39).

The book's narrative structure draws further attention to the inexpressible and the unexpressed by structuring the novel around these lacunas. For example, one of the novel's focal points is the beggarwoman who traces a path through Duras' writing. On the one hand, her presence pervades *Le vice-consul*. She carries forward the narrative and focuses the reader's interest as well as the interest of the novel's characters. On the other hand, the beggarwoman's presence is largely mediated by Peter Morgan, who makes up practically everything he writes about her. The first line of the novel immediately positions the itinerant beggarwoman as a central, voiceless presence in the narrative. Duras writes: "Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan" (9). Thus, what is usually merely absent becomes *conspicuously* absent in Duras' text.

By stressing the importance of absences within the novel along with the figure of itinerancy, I hope to avoid creating the impression of an endlessly protean narrative perspective. In an interesting article entitled "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism," Susan Bordo expresses her concern that the "view from

nowhere" of modernist metanarratives may be replaced by an equally ubiquitous "view from everywhere" in postmodern critiques, "by supposing that the critic can become wholly protean by adopting endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points, none of which are 'owned' by either the critic or the author of a text under examination" (142). In this discussion of postmodern feminism, I am suggesting that texts, including this one, be "owned up to"; in other words, that they be situated historically and culturally so as to indicate their inability to include all vantage points. I do not wish to suggest that changing point of view in *Le vice-consul* creates the effect of a roving narrator who "contains" all perspectives. Rather, the narrator(s), like the characters, appear to be contained, to some extent, by the colonial discourse, whose limits are constantly indicated by the novel. The narrator(s) do not stand outside the narrative, but within a limited and confining narrative, providing neither the abstracted view of an autonomous subject nor an inexhaustible multiplicity of views.

WOMAN AS OTHER

Having considered how some stylistic, structural, and thematic elements of Duras' novel can be read in relation to the postmodern critique of metanarratives, I would now like to refer to the psychoanalytically-informed feminism of Luce Irigaray in order to show how Duras' narrative strategies can be read as a critique of phallogocentrism and colonialism (and, implicitly, of feminism).

Another of the strangely silent focal points that structure *Le vice-consul*, is Anne-Marie Stretter, the wife of the French Ambassador to India. She is often depicted as sleeping or absent while others discuss her. She is continually being spoken of and observed by others, but she rarely speaks, and when she does it is usually in enigmas. The mysterious, seductive centre of a circle of male lovers, she is identified as "une femme qui n'a pas de... préférences" (171). The fewer desires she is invested with, the less clearly she is delineated as a subject of desire, and the more fully she is represented as an object of desire for her lovers. If we put this in the terms of Irigaray's argument in *Speculum de l'autre femme*, Anne-Marie Stretter, as woman, can be seen as the non-subjective other, in relation to which the male subject establishes itself. Woman here is excluded from subjectivity so as to represent the ground from which the male subject can differentiate himself, and the male subject is seen as continually striving to appropriate more of the ground. Recognition of the possibility of a desiring female subject as opposed to a female object of desire is seen as a threat to the dominant position of the male subject. Irigaray describes this dynamic in the following terms:

La subjectivité déniée à la femme telle est, sans doute, l'hypothèque garante de toute constitution irréductible d'objet: de représentation, de discours, de désir. Imaginez que la

3 For example, the same, or a similar beggarwoman appears in Duras's *L'Amant*, 103-08.

4 This phonetic play was noted by Madeleine Borgomano in her article.

femme imagine, l'objet y perdrait son caractère (d'idée) fixe. De repérage, en fin de comptes, plus ultime que le sujet, qui ne se soutient que par un effet en retour de quelque objectivité, de quelque objectif. S'il n'est plus de "terre" à (re)fouler, à travailler, à (se) représenter, mais aussi encore et toujours à désirer (s'approprier, matière opaque qui ne se saurait pas, quel socle subsiste-t-il pour l'ex-sistence du "sujet?") (165)

Both Anne-Marie Stretter and the Cambodian beggarwoman are divested of personal desires, and invested instead with the fantasies of the book's male characters. They are cast in the role of objects instead of in the role of desiring subjects, whose positions might conflict with or threaten the dominant position of the male subject. Indeed, when, towards the end of the book, the beggarwoman steps out of Peter Morgan's narrative into the novel's primary diegetic level, and confronts one of the European males, she is perceived as extremely threatening.⁵

Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggarwoman are linked as objects of combined fascination and repulsion for the male characters in the book. This link sets up an exchange between the phallogentric and colonial discourses that works on several levels. First, the following passage, which juxtaposes dialogue about Peter Morgan's story of the beggarwoman with references to the sleeping Stretter, suggests that repudiation of the feminine underlies the kind of fascination that a woman like Anne-Marie Stretter holds for her male admirers.

Peter Morgan regarde Anne-Marie Stretter qui dort.

— Elle est sale comme la nature même, ce n'est pas croyable... ah, je ne voudrais pas quitter ce niveau-là, de sa crasse faite de tout et déjà ancienne, pénétrée dans sa peau — faite sa peau; je voudrais analyser cette crasse, dire de quoi elle est faite.

... Pourquoi parler à cette femme qui dort?

— Discours inutile et silence profond, dit Michael Richard.

... — Je l'abandonnerai avant la folie, dit Peter Morgan, ça c'est sûr, mais j'ai quand même besoin de connaître cette folie.

— Serait-elle seule dans le livre? demande Charles Rossett.

— Non, il y aurait une autre femme qui serait Anne-Marie Stretter. (182-83)

The above passage also clearly emphasizes the way in which both Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggarwoman are constructed as objects of investigation. The subject/object dynamic here leads to an appropriation of the identity of the object, the latter being subordinated to the subject's desire for knowledge. Peter Morgan, a westerner living in Calcutta, creates the beggarwoman's story from his own imagination to fulfil his need for creative exploration, and, in doing so, he actually effaces her existence. His friend Michael Richard observes that, "il voudrait ne lui donner d'existence que dans celui qui la regarderait vivre. Elle,

⁵ The passage to which I refer begins on page 205 of the novel.

elle ne ressent rien" (182). Through the figure of the beggarwoman, the subject/object dichotomy that is fundamental to western metaphysics is linked to both phallogentrism and colonialism.

However, despite their association, there are important differences between Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggarwoman. Stretter occupies a much more significant place in the primary narrative. She is identified by name and holds an important position within the colonial community. In her article "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," Spivak suggests that the lack of specificity that first world feminism accords to third world women is a symptom of the complicity between first world feminism and imperialist discourse. Stretter's complicity with the colonialist community is suggested by her refusal to become intimate with the Vice Consul of Lahore, who represents a challenge to the colonial status quo. She explains that accepting the Vice Consul would threaten her "tranquillité d'esprit" (195) and that of her companions. The complicity of the novel's white women with the colonial discourse is further emphasized through references to their supportive roles. In the following passage, the women reflect on how the Vice Consul's inability to settle comfortably into his role might be overcome:

Des femmes pensent: Il faudrait que l'une d'entre nous lui parle peut-être. Une femme pleine de sollicitude et d'intelligence qui s'adresserait à lui, et peut-être à son tour parlerait-il. Une femme pleine de patience seulement, peut-être n'en demande-t-il pas davantage. (118-19)

Stretter's complicity with the other whites, together with the relative lack of specificity in the beggarwoman's description, suggests a limit to the association between the two women and raises the question — to what extent and to what effect does western feminism reflect the dynamics of the discourses it critiques? (Kristeva's *Des Chinoises*, mentioned earlier, is one example of such participation that comes to mind.)

The question is also raised of how Duras' novel itself participates in the discourse of imperialism. I have been arguing that it is impossible to arrive at an unbiased position, but that one can, nevertheless, continually strive to become aware of biases. In my view, Duras does strive for such awareness in *Le vice-consul*. Her association of phallogentrism and colonialism is a critique of both which draws on the concerns of western feminists. Beyond this, Duras makes a point of indicating the complicitous status of western women, as the passages cited above show. Furthermore, the relative statuses of Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggarwoman in the novel's primary diegetic level correspond to the stratifications within the colonial discourse that *Le vice-consul* enacts. Nevertheless, Duras does participate in the objectification of the colonial subject to the extent that she also, like Morgan, appropriates the story of the beggarwoman. Within the novel, the beggarwoman's march functions as a metaphor for discourse as a performative activity impelled by loss. And, in general, the story of the

beggarwoman allows Duras to create a reflection on western subjectivity, influenced by psychoanalytic discourse (although she also critiques this discourse, as will be seen). Thus, although Duras' novel does not totally escape complicity, it does perform a critique of colonialism that draws on and interacts with its feminist critique.

INDIA AS OTHER

The novel's critique of colonialism can be considered further by examining another of *Le vice-consul*'s pervasive absences with reference to Irigaray's psychoanalytic model. Duras' novel positions the Indian subject as the other of colonial discourse. Much of the novel is set in Calcutta, sometime around the 1950's and all the characters, except for the beggarwoman, are diplomats who circulate within European enclaves such as embassy grounds and luxury hotels. The subject of India constantly invades and troubles the conversation of the diplomats, making them strangely inarticulate. There is a complete lack of specificity in their references to India. Famine is discussed on a level with climate and lepers are not distinguished from dogs: hearing cries, one diplomat asks another, "Ce sont des lépreux ou bien des chiens?" (95). As Mieke Bal points out, "When they [the diplomats] speak of 'the sorrow of India,' they are talking of all these inconveniences at once, putting on the same level misery and heat, leprosy and blinding sunlight, beggars and dust" (178). The novel refers to India as a vaguely determined unity that groans and moves instinctively outside of the fenced-in European circles. There are numerous descriptions of Calcutta as a sleeping, mindless creature. On page 30, we read, "Calcutta remue. Nid de fourmis grouillantes," and later, "De nouveau grince Calcutta au loin dans son sommeil" (160). Yet the diplomats are drawn by India even as it repels them. The more amorphous and mysterious it appears to them, the more fully it seems to occupy the role of other that grounds their subjectivity (as differentiated identity). Here race can be seen as a determining factor in the construction of the western psyche (male and female).

Thus, Irigaray's model can be extended beyond gender to describe the way that other factors inflect the constitution of the western subject. Within the psychic economy of the western female, the colonial subject has been constructed as an object who is defined oppositionally and, in Irigaray's vocabulary, whose identity is appropriated under the logic of the same. Thus, the psychic economy described in the following passage is less neatly divided along gender lines than Irigaray seems to imply.

il s'agit en quelque lieu, de plus en plus insistant dans sa morgue, du risque de délitement du sujet (comme) même. Donc aussi de "l'objet," et des modes de départs entre eux de l'économie. Notamment du discours. L'allégeance silencieuse de l'un(e) garantissant l'auto-suffisance, l'auto-nomie de l'autre, tant que l'interrogation sur ce mutisme comme

symptôme — de refoulement, historique — ne s'impose pas. (167)

Looking more closely at the economic terminology which is so prevalent in Irigaray's discussion of male subjectivity (both in the above extract and in the one cited earlier), it seems clear that a parallel is being drawn between the repression of woman within the psychic economy described and the repression of women by material and political economies. Similarly, the appropriation of the colonial subject's identity within colonial discourse parallels the appropriation of this subject's labour and territory (ground). The psychic economy, which deprives Indians of subjecthood, can interact with political and material economies to support the colonial system. If they are not constructed as subjects of desire, and are not considered quite as human as westerners, Indians need not be represented in white Calcutta's ethical and legal systems. In Duras' novel, the Vice Consul's crime of shooting lepers in Lahore, is not exactly considered a crime by the diplomats, who ask each other, "est-ce tuer que de tuer des lépreux ou des chiens?" (94). In a discussion of the event, the French ambassador remarks that, "Ici, il n'y a pas de partie adverse, n'est-ce pas, c'est un ... état de choses ... c'est évident et Lahore ... Lahore, qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?" (42). As long as the Indians are not recognized as subjects, their labour can continue to support the privilege of the colonizer.

Linking psychoanalytically-informed feminism to interracial studies, and psychological repression to economic and political repression can lead to useful insights. For example, Rey Chow has explored such links in her critique of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, in which she extends the concept of "feminization" to a study of interracial relations. For feminism, establishing theoretical links with interracial studies can provide an enlarged understanding of the complex relationships between the production of gendered identities and the perpetuation of economic and political structures that are unfavourable to women.

However, in addition to creating a useful exchange between gender and interracial studies, the extension of Irigaray's model beyond gender indicates some of the limits of that model. Although Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme* provides an invaluable critique of psychoanalytic theory, it also participates to some degree in the discursive traditions to which it responds. For example, Irigaray's conception of gender identity in *Speculum* seems to be essentially uninflected by the numerous factors which differentiate women, and because of this it shares the tendency of psychoanalytic discourse to obscure problematic social and economic conditions by focusing narrowly on gender dynamics. When Irigaray writes that "La subjectivité déniée à la femme telle est, sans doute, l'hypothèque garante de toute constitution irréductible d'objet" (emphasis is mine), she is avoiding the issue of how women objectify other women. One implication of Irigaray's statement seems to be that the objectification of women as women can be separated from their objectification as, for example, blacks. However, many critics, including bell hooks and Trinh Minh-ha, have argued

against the possibility of this kind of separation. In her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Trinh writes as follows:

The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), again, partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics.... The pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms. (104)

In general, feminists who rely on psychoanalytic theory can benefit from critiques of that discourse that do not focus solely on gender. For example, within *Le vice-consul* is a more general critique of psychoanalysis that indicates how the explanatory value given to childhood events allows the changing variables of social circumstances to be ignored. Duras also indicates a failure to contextualize the close studies of familial relations that are privileged by psychoanalysis. This inability to see the forest for the trees is reflected in the discourse of maternal abandonment that appears in both diegetic levels of the novel. The beggarwoman of Peter Morgan's story was expelled from home by her mother because she became pregnant as an unwed girl.⁶ The girl's mother is thus identified as the origin of her dispossession. On page 25, the mother is referred to as "sale femme, cause de tout." Later she is "la vieille mère du Tonlé-Sap, origine, cause de tous les maux, de sa destinée de travers" (67). While it is impossible to deny the mother's complicity in this story of repudiation, the fact that she is held entirely responsible in Peter Morgan's narrative allows the patriarchal social structure underlying the girl's expulsion to be overlooked. Both the social system that restricts the roles of women, and the neighbour who, it can be inferred, gets the girl pregnant by raping her, could be more easily identified as the origin of the girl's "destinée de travers."⁷

In my view, Duras creates ironic distance between the reader and the discourse of maternal abandonment in Morgan's story by including a similar discourse in the novel's primary narrative. The diplomats in Calcutta persistently focus on the Vice Consul's past, and on his childhood in particular, in their efforts to explain his aggressive actions in Lahore. There are many allusions to how his mother supposedly abandoned him by sending him to boarding school; however, this assignation of blame to the mother, and to his past in general, is

explicitly questioned in the novel's primary diegetic level. The authorities write to the Vice Consul's aunt in Malesherbes (a word which, in this context, calls to mind the notion of bad growth) for information about his childhood. In her reply she writes: "Avant que d'être tout à fait blâmée, cette conduite ne devrait-elle pas être considérée avec attention, peut-être dans son principe? Pourquoi remonter à l'enfance pour expliquer sa conduite à Lahore? Ne faudrait-il pas chercher aussi à Lahore?" (42). Upon reading this, the French ambassador removes the letter from the file, remarking, "Je préfère qu'on en reste aux conjectures habituelles, qu'on cherche dans l'enfance" (42). Thus, by locating the origin of the Vice Consul's behaviour in his childhood, the problematic social and economic conditions of Lahore can be elided.

Finally, in this postmodern feminist reading of *Le vice-consul*, it seems necessary to consider some of the limits of my own perspective. What, for example, might be the significance of the fact that my post-colonial observations focus on a locale that is far from my North-American home? Could it be said that my east/west division to some extent obscures the heterogeneity of western women, and of their relationships to the colonial discourse? It is true that many women in the west have been the object rather than the subject in the colonial relation, and, for some of these women, the eastern/western hierarchy has been reversed. bell hooks makes the point as follows in her book entitled *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*:

The current popularity of post-colonial discourse that implicates solely the West often obscures the colonizing relationship of the East in relation to Africa and other parts of the Third World. We often forget that many Third World nationals bring to this country [the United States] the same kind of contempt and disrespect for blackness that is most frequently associated with white western imperialism. (93)

This type of auto-critique is, of course, an ongoing process that cannot be exhausted and, therefore, I will halt my peregrinations at this point to reconsider the possibility of a postmodern feminist reading. My discussion of Duras' narrative strategies in *Le vice-consul* has been heavily informed by a particular form of western feminist theory. However, by considering the position of Anne-Marie Stretter both with respect to her male companions and with respect to the Cambodian beggarwoman, I have tried to recognize some of the distinctions that exist within the category woman, and thus to acknowledge the need to ask, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?" (*In Other Worlds*, 150). In addition, I have explored how the figure of itinerancy in *Le vice-consul* indicates the absence of a fixed perspective guaranteed by an autonomous self, and suggests the extent to which narratives interact with and are determined by each other. In general, I have attempted a reading that reflects my own understanding of postmodern feminism as a discourse which continually displaces itself, and

6 The actual age of the girl is mentioned only once in an ambiguous fashion: "La mère a dit: Ne va pas nous raconter que vous avez quatorze, dix-sept ans, nous les avons eus ces âges-là, mieux que vous; taisez-vous, nous savons tout" (20).

7 The only mention of how the girl was impregnated occurs on pages 19 and 20 of the novel. Again, the circumstances are left ambiguous: "Le voisin de la famille avec lequel je suis allée dans la forêt était un pêcheur du Tonlé-Sap, je suis trop jeune pour comprendre."

which exists simultaneously in a variety of forms, shaped by a variety of interacting discourses, but which is held together by a concern for the function of gender in the symbolic practices of particular social groups.

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Postmodernism Meets the Great Beyond: *les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien*

In many ways, Monique Wittig's *les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* explore the intersection of feminism and postmodernism; these texts function both within and outside (alongside) the postmodernist exploration of the thinking subject and the feminist exploration of the female subject. Wittig's texts investigate a feminist urge to violate and/or obviate the social construction of the female self and to explore alternate possibilities made available to the feminist writer through the fragmentation and decentering proposed by postmodernist readings of the world. Wittig's process, her attempt to write against, outside and beyond the dictates of a masculinist culture, are the focus of this paper. In taking up this reading strategy, the paper intervenes in a debate between French feminisms which has been played out in the form of a running argument between Wittig and Hélène Cixous and their respective "supporters." Though Cixous and Wittig have different agendas, their protests are not fundamentally at odds; they both wish to deny or abrogate the patriarchy, admittedly through different processes. Thus, this paper attempts an analysis of Wittig's work in terms of literary and social theory rather than solely in terms of her relationship to other French feminist theorists/writers, or to her own conceptualizations of her project.

Wittig's earlier text, *les guérillères* (1969), comes out of the context of the 1968 radical student movement in France and intervenes in that social moment in the form of a manifesto calling for all-out rebellion. *les guérillères* conspicuously engages in restructuring European phallogocentric myth and genre in terms of the female. It is an epic tale told in terms of battles, "pastoral" interludes, and stories of the "time-before." As Dianne Chisholm writes:

les guérillères narrates the epic tale of a lesbian people who separate from patriarchal society, arm themselves with "feminaries" — little books, little war machines, inscribed with Sapphic lyrics, lesbian mythologies, bestiaries, and vulgar iconography — who mobilize armies, launch a holocaust, destroy surviving patriachs, and absorb the total converts. (11)

The "story line" follows the structural form of epic, as it juxtaposes stories of trials and discovery in a stately progression to the orgasmically destructive climax. The text presents the reader with an Edenic New World built upon the