

ARTICLE

The Black Aristocrat in Ourika: Outliving an Idea

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SUMMARY

European antislavery fiction of the eighteenth century often deployed the figure of the “noble Negro,” whose birth, stature, comportment, and education were made to resemble those of an idealized European aristocrat. In this article, I examine whether the “noble Negro” continues to function as an effective emancipationist trope in nineteenth-century literary Romanticism. I take as my case study Madame de Duras’s *Ourika* (1823), whose intricate variations on black aristocracy run up against the limits of this trope for representing black emancipation. I then examine two imitative stories of the 1820s—*La Nouvelle Ourika* and *La Nègresse*—which were written in response to *Ourika*’s literary success. These popular fictions imagine greater liberties for France’s black subjects by moving away from the literary myth of black aristocracy.

KEYWORDS : abolitionism – antislavery – colonialism – emancipation – novel – nineteenth century – Romanticism – “noble Negro” – race

Angelo était d’une stature moyenne, svelte et bien proportionnée; la régularité de ses traits, et la noblesse de sa figure, formoient par leur beauté un contraste avec les idées défavorables qu’on a communément de la physionomie des Nègres; une souplesse extraordinaire dans tous les exercices du corps, donnoit à son maintien, à ses mouvemens, de la grâce et de la légèreté: à toute la délicatesse de la vertu unissant un jugement sain, relevé par des connaissances étendues et solides.

-- Abbé Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres* (speaking of Angelo Soliman, an African who resided in Austria and Liechtenstein)¹

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688), the tragic story of an African enslaved in Surinam, enjoyed considerable vogue in France in the second half of the eighteenth century. At that time, the French were as likely to be reading Behn’s original seventeenth-century text as they were Pierre Antoine de La Place’s eighteenth-century French translation. La Place’s 1745 *Oroonoko, traduit de l’anglais*

1 This article is excerpted from chapter 4 of my book, *Colonialism, Race, and the French Romantic Imagination* (Routledge, 2009). I thank the publisher of my book for permission to reproduce the material here. I have made some changes and enhancements to the version that appeared in 2009.

par Madame Behn, despite its title, is better described as an adaptation than a translation of Behn's *Oroonoko*. As Doris Kadish has shown, La Place made numerous adjustments and changes to the English text, so as to appeal to eighteenth-century French sensibilities (26-35). Notably, while the original *Oroonoko* ends with the tragic and violent death of its hero, in La Place's version he eventually returns to his home in Africa and rules his people. This attention to contemporary audience taste must have surely paid off, as the French *Oroonoko* was re-edited numerous times, with the last edition appearing as late as 1799. Behn's original novel was also widely read in France at this time. According to one bibliographic survey of eighteenth-century private libraries, it was one of the nine most read English novels in France (Mornet 461). Not surprisingly, a number of French novelists of the eighteenth century imitated *Oroonoko*. According to Edward Seeber, the narrative outline of La Place's *Oroonoko*—an African prince unjustly enslaved by Europeans who is eventually freed and returns to live as a leader among his people—is repeated in at least three eighteenth-century French novels: Saint Lambert's *Ziméo* (1769), La Vallée's *Le Nègre comme il y a peu de blancs* (1789) and Staël's *Mirza* (1795). Gabriel Mailhol's *Le Philosophe nègre* (1764), whose protagonist is an enslaved African prince, is also worth mentioning here. However, two elements distinguish Mailhol's novel. The author's tone of acerbic irony sets this text apart from the unabashed sentimentality of other texts of its time that gave voice to noble African slaves. The protagonist's denunciation of *marronnage* as barbaric, and his exhortation to marooned slaves to return to plantations and earn their emancipation through obedient work for a benevolent master diverge sharply from his earlier angry descriptions of the brutalities of the Middle Passage.

All of these texts—Behn's *Oroonoko*, La Place's translation, as well as the novels that borrowed some of the themes and structures of *Oroonoko*—were implicitly or explicitly abolitionist in their intent. Despite proposing a more diluted antislavery message than the original, the French *Oroonoko* is credited with having contributed to the many forces that led to France's first abolition of slavery in 1794 (Tieghem 77). Saint-Lambert's very popular *Ziméo* has an explicit antislavery message: the European narrator ends the story of the African *Ziméo* with his own "réflexions sur les nègres," in which he asks European readers to be involved in the emancipation of Africans. Of the many discursive strategies of abolitionism in these texts, the most common is their construction of a black protagonist who is a "noble Negro," or, in Laura Brown's words, a "European aristocrat in blackface." According to Brown, such a protagonist helped create a "sentimental identification" with the European reader, and became a "staple component of antislavery narratives" (37). The "noble Negro" has, first and foremost, exceptional physical attributes that conform to classical European standards of beauty. *Oroonoko* the "royal slave" is described in the following manner: "The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turned from Head to Foot. His Nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat. His mouth, the finest shap'd that cou'd be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the *Negroes*" (13). According to the narrator of Stael's *Mirza*, the features of the hero *Ximéo* "n'avaient aucun des défauts des hommes de sa couleur" (272). *Ximéo*'s physique is compared to the perfection of the statue of the Apollo Belvedere (273). The physical beauty of the "noble Negro" is matched by his nobility of class, and refinement of spirit. Generally the son of an African chief, he receives an extraordinary early education, in some cases under a European tutor. His high birth and Europeanization—either in physical stature, or education, or both—are obligatory elements of these narratives. In this way, when he is ensnared into slavery, the debasement of his condition appears all the more flagrantly

unjust to the European reader. In the pages that follow, I examine whether the “noble Negro” continues to function as an effective emancipationist trope in nineteenth-century literary Romanticism. I take as my case study Claire de Duras’s *Ourika* (1823), a novel that was a minor literary phenomenon when it was published, and continues to be relished by readers and critics today. Reading Madame de Duras’s novel against two imitative stories that appeared in the wake of *Ourika*’s literary success, I ask why, despite being largely derivative works of fiction, these knock-offs abandon the “noble Negro” figure that was so central to the original.

In the early nineteenth century, two decades before Claire de Duras published *Ourika*, the noble Negro *topos* and its attendant trappings had found their way into *De la littérature des nègres* (1808) by Abbé Grégoire, one of the most prominent French abolitionists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.² *De la littérature des nègres*, in part a response to Napoleon’s reinstatement of slavery in 1802, is a particularly notable text because it was written at a time when “abolitionist activity was reduced to a trickle” in France (Jennings 5), and when any critique of slavery could have been subject to Napoleonic repression. While the main goal of the text was to bring to light the cultural and literary achievements of blacks, it also refuted racial taxonomies of naturalists and scientists, and provided arguments against the perceived inferiority of blacks. In it, Grégoire included a relatively lengthy “notice biographique” of an African named Angelo Soliman who lived and worked amidst the Austrian and Liechtensteinian aristocratic societies during the eighteenth century. The Soliman story is not well known, and to this day, Grégoire’s biography remains one of the rare non-German accounts of his life. Soliman’s life story stands out in *De la littérature des nègres*, as it is not included among Grégoire’s short summaries of the work of black writers, poets, and artists such as Phillis Wheatley, an eighteenth-century African-American poet, and Gustavus Vassa (aka Olaudah Equiano), who is credited with having written the first slave autobiography. Instead, it receives a separate chapter-length exposition. The attention accorded to Soliman may at first seem curious because unlike Wheatley or Gustavus Vassa, he was not a writer; his life’s work therefore did not offer much in terms of evidentiary support for Grégoire’s persuasive treatise on “la littérature des nègres.” In all probability, Grégoire chose to showcase Angelo Soliman as his life bore an uncanny similarity to the imagination of noble Negroes in abolitionist fiction. In Grégoire’s narrative—which is woven from details provided to him by Viennese noblewomen—Angelo is the son of an African prince whose peaceful and idyllic childhood is thrown into disarray by a war with the neighboring kingdom. During the hostilities, he is captured and sold to whites in the slave market. After being passed from one European master to another, he is gifted to a marquise, in whose home in Messina he lives as a quasi-family member: The marquise “lui donne un instituteur pour lui enseigner la langue du pays” (135). When he falls sick, “la marquise, sa maîtresse, a pour lui tous les soins d’une mère, au point qu’elle veille près de lui une partie des nuits” (135). He is then transferred to the home of the Austrian prince Lobkowitz, where he is given a full-fledged European education. It is here as well as later in the court of prince Wenceslas of Liechtenstein, living and working among European aristocrats, that he accomplishes most of his life’s work: as an advisor and military companion to Lobkowitz, and as court secretary to Wenceslas. Grégoire’s descriptions of Angelo, which I have highlighted in the epigraph of this chapter, mirror those of “noble Negro” fictions. His features are more “regular” than those of other members of his race; he displays exemplary virtue

2 From this point onwards, I will not be using quotation marks around the term noble Negro.

and talent, whether as a military tactician or as an employee of the court.

However, unlike standardly plotted noble Negro fictions in which black subjects are either free or enslaved, Grégoire's biographical tale tells the story of a black aristocrat who must negotiate his personal freedoms in contexts that transcend the simple polarity of liberty and servitude. Let us consider the episode during which Soliman moves to the home of a Liechtensteinian aristocrat after the death of the Austrian prince Lobkowitz:

Son maître mourut. Par son testament, il avoit légué Angelo au prince Wenceslas de Liechtenstein qui, depuis long-temps désiroit l'avoir. Celui-ci demande à Angelo, s'il est content de cette disposition, et s'il veut venir chez lui. Angelo donne sa parole ... Dans l'intervalle, l'empereur François Ier ... lui fait le même offre ... Mais la parole d'Angélo étoit sacrée; il reste chez le prince de Liechtenstein (138).

Here, Grégoire describes Soliman as both an autonomous subject who has dominion over his own word ("la parole d'Angélo étoit sacrée"), as well as the transferrable property of a dying master's will ("il avoit légué Angélo au prince Wenceslas"), and as such without true agency of his own. Later on, the ostensibly independent choices he makes in his personal life are in fact subject to the caprices of the court. Soliman marries a Belgian noblewoman, which suggests that he is afforded a relative measure of flexibility and freedom to enter into an interracial alliance. That this marriage produced a daughter who later acquired the title of baroness is further proof of this flexibility. Yet, because the alliance flouts social conventions of propriety, he feels obliged to keep his marriage a secret from his employer. When the prince learns of his secret marriage, he banishes Soliman from his house and casts him out of his will, forcing him to lead a more modest life with his spouse and daughter. However, the prince's successor at the throne re-employs Soliman as his son's tutor, and guarantees his family a life-long pension.

By plotting Soliman's biography in a manner consistent with existing narrative models, Grégoire appealed to an antislavery sentiment initiated by abolitionist fiction of the previous century. At the same time, his biography refashions the noble Negro narrative. Here we have the case of an upper class African who is forcefully uprooted from his native home, but whose life is marked more by the privileges of European aristocratic life than the harsh brutalities of slavery. The last line of the biography states that Soliman's portrait hangs in a gallery, giving the impression that it is one among that of other deceased Liechtensteinian nobles. But Grégoire's story does not occlude the fact that Soliman's personal freedoms are in no way guaranteed by the rights and liberties afforded to him by a legal, economic, and political system; rather, they depend on the fickle nature of European court patronage. Therefore, although Soliman was not enslaved like his fictional predecessors Oronoko and Ziméo, Grégoire ends his biography with a dose of didactic abolitionism. In a vein similar to that of the narrator's comments in Saint-Lambert's *Ziméo*, Grégoire concludes with reflections that reiterate the many talents of Africans, and calls upon Europeans to treat Africans as their equals.

Abbé Grégoire's career extended through several decades, and was marked by many of the highs and the lows of the antislavery movement. He was one of the original members of the

Société des amis des noirs (founded in 1788), but he survived by a long stretch most of the other founders such as Jacques Pierre Brissot and Etienne Clavière. Thus, he continued to publish actively well into the 1820s, when a much younger Claire de Duras first wrote *Ourika*, a short novel that told the story of a Senegalese girl brought to France by a colonial governor before the French Revolution.³ The young girl, named Ourika, is bred into gentility and struggles to find her place in the aristocratic circles in which she is brought up. After a relatively happy childhood, her psychic life comes unhinged when she overhears a conversation between her adoptive mother Mme. de B. and an unnamed marquise, in which they speak of the complete impossibility of her integration into French society. In that conversation, Ourika's color is invoked as the main reason for her outsider status: they lament the fact that she would not be able to marry a white man, and that it would be virtually impossible to find a black man who could be her intellectual equal. Later in life, Ourika retreats to a convent, where she recounts her story to a doctor who has been called in to treat her physical and psychological malaise. *Ourika* was a quick-selling novel. It was first published in a private edition with no author's name on the cover in 1823. The first public edition in 1824 sold out so fast that it had to be reprinted. In the very same year, a pirated edition of the novel appeared in the marketplace (see Scheler). It also created a ripple effect in the literary and cultural arena of Restoration France, inspiring plays, novels, poems, and a painting by François Gérard.

The novel's protagonist Ourika belongs to the long line of Africans in European literature who possess superior intellectual and moral refinements. The name Ourika, which had already been used by Staël for a secondary character in her *Mirza*, and whose sonority bears a resemblance to Oroonoko, are both indications that Duras places her novel within the genealogy of noble Negro fictions. But Duras's heroine is a black aristocrat of a somewhat different stripe. To begin with, Ourika lacks a pre-history in Africa. Virtually nothing is known about the circumstances of her birth, her lineage, or her African family. Her narrative begins at the exact moment of her departure from Senegal (her first words are: "je fus rapportée du Sénégal, à l'âge de deux ans," 5). Whereas writers such as Staël and Grégoire are careful to designate their protagonists as belonging to an elite class of Africans, Duras's novel lacks such gestures that would authenticate the heroine's African origins, noble or otherwise. Moreover, Duras concentrates primarily on the life of Ourika's mind, in some ways disembodiment her protagonist. The French doctor who first encounters Ourika refrains from describing her, setting himself apart from previous European narrators who made it a point to extol the noble Negro's exceptional physical attributes. *Ourika*'s reader knows virtually nothing about what its protagonist looks like. Finally, Ourika's exceptionalism comes from being a naturalized European aristocrat; she is not a black subject who stands out as extraordinary among a majority population of subjugated slaves in the colonies. Thus, Ourika's

3 When *Ourika* was published, the slave trade had been officially abolished, but not slavery itself. France's Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies were slave colonies. However, the novel takes place in the pre-revolutionary period, when the slave trade was still legal. In writing *Ourika*, Claire de Duras was inspired by the true story of a Senegalese girl who had been brought to France shortly before the Revolution by Stanislas-Jean de Boufflers (1738-1815), then governor to a French colonial post in Senegal. Boufflers's correspondence and journals indicate that he returned to France in 1786 with an infant named Hourica, presented to, and adopted by, his aunt Mme. de Beauvau. The girl is said to have died at the young age of sixteen.

challenges, like Soliman's, are those of a subject with a minority and immigrant status in Europe. Unlike Soliman, however, she has never been sold or owned (for example, her adoptive mother Mme. de B. is repeatedly invoked as Ourika's "benefactress" and not her "mistress").

Indeed, the questions that Ourika's story elicits about the French empire's black subjects go well beyond abolitionism. As Christopher Miller has rightly stated, the tendency among critics to associate Duras's *Ourika* with abolitionism must be scrutinized. He argues that on the contrary, the text glosses over the horrors of the Middle Passage and the violence of plantation life (162-171). Pursuing Miller's argument a little further, I would like to suggest that while Duras models her heroine on the protagonists of antislavery narratives, the nexus of race, agency, and emancipation in her novel is best examined not within the backdrop of slavery, but within the context of domestic French politics. Ourika may have been saved from colonial slavery as a child, but the rest of her personal story has less to do with slavery than with the ways in which discourses of race and class unfolded in France during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. The paradoxical position she occupies as an alienated black woman and a privileged aristocrat is brought into relief most prominently during her narration of revolutionary change. It must be remembered in this context that Ourika is brought to France during the decades immediately preceding the French Revolution, a time during which France was "on the one hand, becoming thoroughly entangled in the Atlantic slave system, and on the other, developing a radical new political discourse based on notions of freedom, equality, and citizenship" (Peabody 3). This tension became most manifest, notes Peabody, when a growing number of blacks sued for free status after being brought to France as slaves or servants. Although the total number of blacks (*noirs*) in France was relatively small, their symbolic presence in the courts loomed large (the term *noir* referred to individuals with origins both in Africa and elsewhere, such as the Indian subcontinent). Taking advantage of a freedom principle that stated that every individual is free when he enters France, a number of them obtained freedom under the jurisdiction of the Parliament of Paris. But there was also a backlash against this movement: in 1776, in response to a proliferation of such court cases, the king's council drafted legislation that would not only police blacks in the capital, but also limit the entry of more blacks into France. This "Police des Noirs" was not very well implemented, however (Peabody, chapters 7 and 8).

To be sure, Duras's *Ourika* makes no reference to the legislative negotiations around the status and rights of black subjects in France. As in the case of Angelo Soliman, the categories of "free" and "slave" do not fully apply to Ourika. Moreover, because she is sheltered under the tutelage of privileged *ancien régime* aristocrats, it first seems as though Ourika need not worry about the exact nature of her place in the French polity. But she grows up at a time during which the social and political structures taken for granted in the *Ancien Régime* are changing. Indeed, she comes of age when France witnesses a burgeoning of the public sphere and a civil society. Whereas divine-right absolutist monarchy had previously not acknowledged any locus of public authority outside of the crown, the decades leading up to the revolution saw a growing importance of public opinion as a legitimating force in French political life (Melton 45-78). The young Ourika has significant access to discourses of the French public sphere and public opinion in the discussions of Mme. de B's salon, discourses that lead her to question her position in a changing French society. The immense philosophical and political changes of the pre-revolutionary years

are reflected in the conversations of Mme. de B's salon. Ourika, whose alienation is by now rather extreme, is sensitive to the possibilities of reform and transformation that these conversations bring up:

Rien n'était plus capable d'étendre et de former mes idées que le spectacle de cette arène où des hommes distingués remettaient chaque jour en question *tout ce qu'on avait pu croire jugé jusqu'alors*. Ils approfondissaient *tous les sujets*, remontaient à l'origine de *toutes les institutions*, mais trop souvent pour tout ébranler ... J'entrevis donc dans ce grand désordre, je pourrais trouver ma place; que *toutes les fortunes renversées, tous les rangs confondus, tous les préjugés évanouis*, amèneraient peut-être un état de choses où je serais moins étrangère (18-19; my emphasis).

The sweeping iterations of the adjective “tout” in this passage give little insight into the specific institutions and belief-systems that were on the brink of reform, and if reformed, would be more inclusive to persons like Ourika. In fact, throughout her first-person narrative, Ourika expresses herself most frequently in an expansive language of sentimentality, and only rarely in political terms. Her narration of revolutionary change is imprecise, but its effects on her psyche are described in a very precise manner. But for those reading *Ourika* (whether in the 1820s or today), it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to place the protagonist's words within specific revolutionary processes of change as they related to France's disenfranchised subjects. The notion of “citizenship,” which went through one of the most profound transformations in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary French political thought, is particularly pertinent in this regard. From the 1760s onwards, the *Ancien Régime's* hierarchical and privilege-based conception of citizenship, which granted the status to a wealthy minority of ruling elites, was increasingly questioned. With the substitution of common law for privilege, a more inclusive and rights-based idea of citizenship was formulated (Brubaker 39). This new conception of citizenship was also tied to the philosophy of universalism: in the 1789 Declaration of Rights of Man, the citizen was characterized as an “abstract, rights-bearing individual,” “a neutral subject who must be divested of all particularities to access those rights” (Schor 345). Thus, in principle, citizenship in revolutionary philosophical and political thought was all-encompassing, and universally applicable to all; it disavowed the particularities of difference, such as race, gender, language, or ethnicity. In reality, however, political citizenship in France at the time did exclude a large part of the population. Feminist historians have shed light on the many chinks in the armor of French universalism, which failed to accord full political rights to women even while defining them as citizens (see Scott, *Paradoxes*; Hunt 42-43). In the context of Ourika's struggle for identity, two pieces of revolutionary legislation pertaining to persons of color bring to the fore some of the contradictions surrounding the universalist discourses of citizenship. In 1791, the Constituent Assembly of the Revolution granted franchise partially and not universally to blacks: citizenship was accorded to blacks born to free parents in the French colonies, but not to freedmen (*affranchis*) who had either been granted freedom or had purchased it. A year later, in 1792, the Revolutionaries granted full citizenship to the *gens de couleur*. *Gens de couleur* was a term that applied to free people of color in Saint-Domingue (Haiti), specifically to a generally wealthy population of mixed French and African descent, as opposed to free blacks. The 1792 legislation was the result of intense influence exercised by the *gens de couleur* themselves on the French Revolutionaries. These two legislative moments demonstrate

that although the French citizen was defined as an abstract and universal subject who must not in any way lay claim to his race or class status, in practice, this principle of universalism was open to adjustments. In the case of the *gens de couleur*, not only were the Revolutionaries susceptible to lobbying from a constituency that identified itself in terms of its race and class, but they also relied on that identity as grounds for political enfranchisement.

If we are to evaluate *Ourika* as a novel concerned with black emancipation, it is imperative that we locate the politics of the era embedded within her sentimental rhetoric. The transformations in ideologies of citizenship, moreover, are emblematic of Ourika's rising hopes during the Revolution, as they represent the possibility that previously disenfranchised individuals like her might stand to improve their social and political standing. *Ourika* forces the question of how a black subject may be accommodated into a society that is on the brink of breaking with its own inegalitarian social structure. As the Revolution is recounted in the voice of a black woman, and one who has a profound investment in revolutionary reforms no less, the universal French subject is both "raced" and "gendered." Thus, the conceptualization of the French citizen as an abstract individual with no sex, gender, or race, is tested by the novel. More importantly, the novel exposes the Revolution's inability, despite its claims to universal egalitarianism, to actualize the citizenship and belonging of subjects who are "different." If we examine Ourika's position against the articles of the 1791 French constitution, it becomes clear that she stands in a no-man's land of "impossible citizenship."⁴ According to Article 3 of the constitution, residents of France without a French lineage who were born outside of France could be naturalized as citizens—accorded *droit du sol*, that is—if they acquired certain types of property or married a French person.⁵ In other words, Ourika would not qualify for citizenship under any of the provisions made available to persons of color or foreigners during the revolutionary era: she is not the daughter of freed blacks, cannot claim membership among the *gens de couleur*, and finally, cannot meet the requirements of foreigners residing in France. As she comes to the realization that the Revolution will do little to relieve her sense of exclusion, she expresses her disappointment in the following terms: "Leur fausse philanthropie cessa de m'abuser ... en voyant qu'il resterait encore assez de mépris pour moi au milieu de tant d'adversité" (19). Once again, we may trace a political meaning and a language of protest in Ourika's words. "Mépris" may be read as an allusion to the continued second-class status of persons like her, and "fausse philanthropie" the false promise of one of the revolution's grand abstractions, fraternity.

However, Ourika's narration of the Revolution does more than bring her own disenfranchisement into focus. It also details the suffering of the aristocrats during the Terror, from their forced exile ("les uns fuyaient les persécutions dans les pays étrangers; les autres se cachaient ou se retiraient en province") to the seizure of their property ("à la fin de l'année 1792, parut le décret

4 I am borrowing here Sophie Wahnich's term "l'impossible citoyen" in her book of the same name. Wahnich's study elaborates the ways in which the "foreigner" (l'étranger) was written out of French citizenship in revolutionary discourse.

5 Article 3 states: "Ceux qui, nés hors du royaume, de parents étrangers, resident en France, deviennent citoyens français après cinq ans de domicile continue dans le royaume, s'ils y ont en outre, acquis des immeubles ou épousé une Française, ou formé un établissement d'agriculture ou de commerce, et s'ils y ont prêté serment civique."

de confiscation des biens des émigrés,” 21). Embedded with her aristocratic family during the Terror, Ourika identifies with them and adopts their stance towards the events of the time. Seeing that the decapitation of Louis XVI causes her adoptive mother Mme. de B. great distress, she calls it a “grand crime” (21). She also alludes to certain key revolutionary dates as “les affreuses journées” (21). While she does not expressly endorse *ancien régime* aristocratic privilege and seigneurial rights, she cannot help but appear as a legitimist invested in the maintenance of the pre-revolutionary social order. Her close identification with the aristocratic minority comes into full force when she and her adoptive family receive news of the revolution in Saint-Domingue across the Atlantic. Reacting to the massacre of white colonists by Haitian revolutionaries, Ourika declares: “Les massacres de Saint-Domingue me causèrent une douleur nouvelle et déchirante: jusqu’ici je m’étais affligée d’appartenir à une race proscrite; maintenant j’avais honte d’appartenir à une race de barbares et d’assassins” (20). Interestingly, this is one of two instances in the text in which Ourika uses the word “race,” which, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was just beginning to acquire its modern ethnological and biological meaning. As Ourika invokes “race” in these terms, it is to underline her distance from, and an uneasy belonging to, her assigned racial group. Her description of the Saint-Domingue revolutionaries as an angry and savage group unleashing violence on unsuspecting white planters obscures the real political import of the Haitian revolution. It bypasses the pre-existing brutalities that gave impetus to the revolution, namely the colonial violence of a white supremacist plantation society. Her attitude towards the analogous revolution in the *métropole* is similar: she finds herself allied with a privileged minority population, deemed victims of the unjust furor of a violent majority. For Ourika, the juxtaposition of these two revolutions “is an occasion not for constructive mirroring, but for shame and horror” (Jenson 50).

Ourika’s double-voiced commentary during the revolution—as a disenfranchised African woman as well as a proponent of the royalist white nobility—sets itself apart when read against previous models of black aristocrats, or noble Negroes. For eighteenth-century French authors, as well as for Abbé Grégoire, the yoking together of blackness and aristocracy was an instrumental abolitionist tool. Abolitionist texts attempt to restore the humanity of the slave by going against the rhetorical processes of proslavery texts and slave traders’ accounts. While slave trading ledgers “describe the process by which an individual was seized upon as a commodity,” abolitionist texts “try to reverse this process by capitalizing on what escapes the equation of price and person” (Festa 153). The noble Negro figure in texts by authors like Staël, Saint-Lambert, La Vallée and Grégoire accomplishes precisely this: he possesses human attributes that are above economic exchange, such as refinement of intellect and education, and a physical beauty that reflects his purity of soul. But his aristocracy in and of itself is not anchored in any particular social or political context, whether it refers to his elite African origins, or his ability to pass as a European aristocrat. African nobility is defined vaguely and panders to the European reader’s expectations of exotism in fictional texts; his European aristocracy simply means a general refinement of manners and a cultivated mind. Duras’s *Ourika* departs from these models in important ways. On the one hand, the heroine’s black aristocracy seems to offer a far more radical message than that of its predecessors. Ourika’s sophisticated manners and superior education appear in no way manufactured to prove a point about her humanity; they are taken for granted as part of her upbringing. More importantly, her observance of salon discussions enables her to voice a protest that not only

expounds upon the shortcomings of the revolution, but that also demands an emancipation that goes beyond the abolition of slavery. Ourika's utterances about the revolution and revolutionary change have implications for a wider set of issues regarding black subjects of the French empire, such as their citizenship, political equality, and social agency. On the other hand, unlike that of her noble Negro predecessors, Ourika's nobility has a tangible and precise referent: it points to a particular class of *ancien régime* aristocrats, whose landed privileges were ruthlessly contested by the revolution. Hence, when Ourika takes on the role of spokesperson for this very class of people, painting them as victims of the revolution, her claims become specious. They undercut her previous more radical critique of the revolution. If we consider this from the perspective of the doctor through whom her story comes mediated, the contradictions are even more glaring. The doctor meets Ourika for the first time after the Revolution and Terror have ended, and during Napoleon's reign. Although not much is said about his background in the narrative frame, we know that he is bourgeois, a man of science, and from some of his own declarations, anti-clerical. When he enters the convent, he speaks of a reawakening of the prejudices of his youth, and expects to encounter another victim of the religious convent. Even if he is not identified as republican, he belongs to a class that stood to benefit most from the Revolution. As Ourika retells the revolution from the vantage point of disenfranchised and alienated subjects such as her, it may serve to remind the doctor that the revolution did not fully accomplish its cherished goals, and mostly benefited white bourgeois men such as him. But when she laments the fall of the monarchy, she appears to be ventriloquizing the opinions of her adoptive family and risks turning into an unreliable narrator. To the post-revolutionary reading public of the 1820s, nobility would have been as likely to evoke the aristocracy's excessive privileges, as it would a genteel and elevated state of humanity. For the same readers, the novel may have also seemed unstable in terms of its stance with respect to the revolution, as if it were trying to have it both ways: its protagonist, a black aristocrat, presents herself as someone who has both a lot to gain and a lot to lose in the revolution. Thus, black aristocracy runs up against certain limits, and no longer functions as a fully persuasive trope for black emancipation. It appears to have run its course. It is perhaps for this reason that some of the popular novels published in imitation of *Ourika* quite simply abandon the model of the black aristocrat.

Between 1824 and 1826, *Ourika* had a robust after-life in the French literary and theatrical marketplace. New *avatars* of Duras's heroine appeared in plays, poems and novels. In the spring of 1824, barely a year after the first commercial edition of *Ourika* was published, a slew of plays that borrowed its subject matter were staged on the boulevard theaters of Paris. Sylvie Chalaye has republished three of these plays in her *Les Ourika du Boulevard* (2003). Her introduction to the volume surveys the reception of the three plays by the theater critics of the 1820s. Some of the poems published in the wake of Duras's novel have also received some critical attention.⁶ However, it is mostly unknown today that popular novelists also produced imitations of *Ourika*. Two such stories—*La Nouvelle Ourika, ou les avantages de l'éducation* (published in 1824) and *La Nègresse* (a short novella published in 1826)—receive a brief mention in Léon-François Hoffmann's *Le Nègre romantique* (1973), but have passed under the radar of scholars and critics of Romanticism. *La Nouvelle Ourika* and *La Nègresse* were surely capitalizing not just on the success of the original

6 See, for instance, T. Denean Sharpley Whiting's analysis of Gaspard de Pons's "Ourika L'Africaine" (52-70).

novel, but perhaps also on the fast growing number of readers, and the inexpensive commercial lending libraries (*cabinets de lecture*) that proliferated in the 1820s. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how widely these novels were read, or whether the readers of these novels were demographically distinct from the largely elite readers of the original *Ourika*. However, given their imitative nature, and their less-than refined literary quality, it is likely that these novels were destined for a larger audience. Indeed, the second edition of Duras's *Ourika* probably also enjoyed a wider readership, as it may have been available for rent in urban areas.⁷ Both *La Nouvelle Ourika* and *La Nègresse* indicate the ways in which Madame de Duras's tale was received and interpreted in the popular imagination, compelling the reader to reevaluate and question the assumptions of the original novel.

Because both novels are little known, it may be useful to provide a brief account of their major events. In *La Nouvelle Ourika*, the eponymous heroine is the daughter of a working class Frenchman and a quadroon from Saint-Domingue (according to racial categorizations of the time, a quadroon is of one-quarter black ancestry). After the death of her parents, she is sent to France and adopted by a Parisian aristocratic family there. The author of the novel reuses some of the same character names of the original *Ourika*—Charles, Mme. de B., la marquise—but transforms their roles considerably. For instance, here *Ourika* has an adoptive sister in addition to her adoptive brother Charles; the marquise is not a friend, but a sister to Mme. de B. If the mixed-race *Ourika* can sometimes pass for white, her indigent origins are never forgotten in the society in which she is adopted. But *Ourika*'s main nemesis in the story is her adoptive mother's sister, the marquise, who not only cooks up a false story about the young heroine's passion for Charles, but also locks her in a dungeon for several months during the Revolution. The Revolution, for its part, is the most significant event in the story; it reverses the fortunes of all the characters in the novel. The aristocrats such as Mme. de B. and Charles are left floundering after the loss of their property and financial resources. *Ourika* and a maid named Lisbeth, on the other hand, acquire a good measure of social mobility, either through marriage or their own resourcefulness. *Ourika* in particular lives off her painting, which attracts the attention of an American businessman and art-lover. She eventually marries this businessman, with whom she also has a child.

La Nègresse is primarily concerned with one single question that was implicitly posed in the original *Ourika*: whether a relationship is possible between a white man and a black woman. Proposing a new version of the original novel ("Écoutez donc, l'histoire véritable d'une *Ourika* à ma façon," 171), the narrator tells the story of Marie, the daughter of a freed slave from Saint-Domingue. After having served in the French military, Marie's father retires with his wife and daughter to the Loire valley, where they befriend Mme. Bertaut, a neighbor with a considerable fortune. When Marie's parents die, she is adopted by a Mme. Bertaut, and grows up alongside her biological daughter Lise. *La Nègresse*, which is far shorter than *La Nouvelle Ourika*, focuses pri-

7 I owe these speculations about the readers of *Ourika* and *Ourika* copy-cats to Professor James Smith Allen. I thank him for his generosity and his patience in fielding my many questions on early nineteenth-century readership in France. In his *Popular French Romanticism*, Allen states that Romanticism participated in the "transition from an essentially bifurcated culture of eighteenth-century elite and popular literatures [...] to a more homogeneous culture of nineteenth-century mass literature" (9).

marily on the relationship between Marie and a young white man named Henry. Despite many obstacles in their path, and a social context rife with racial prejudice, Marie and Henry marry and raise a family together.

Both novels present themselves as interpretations of *Ourika*, elucidating issues and questions that were not adequately resolved in it. They are both *romans à thèse* that counter the claims of the original. *La Nouvelle Ourika* seeks to prove that Duras's novel had it wrong when it suggested that the heroine's superior education was a burden and an obstacle to her social integration. *La Nègresse* wishes to actualize an interracial love affair, evoked only as a taboo in the original novel. Both novels also depart from the original *Ourika* in their episodic plot structure: anticipating the popular *roman feuilleton*, they are organized around a series of adventures or mishaps. The protagonist sometimes takes on the traits of the endangered Gothic heroine, a British import that was widespread in popular literature of the time. Various types of threats and terror befall the heroine, from predatory men to the perils of cavernous dungeons. Finally, the two novels make a concerted effort to imagine a different narrative ending for *Ourika*. In both cases, the marriage plot is resolved fruitfully, involving an interracial alliance into which the heroine enters on her own terms.

How do these two spin-offs achieve the kind of social integration for the heroine that the original novel did not even attempt to imagine? One could argue that they are able to do so by virtue of their pulp status, one that allows them to pull "happy endings" out of a hat with little regard to verisimilitude. This can only be part of the answer, however. I contend that they are also able to do so by altering the heroine's social circumstances and moving away from the literary myth of black aristocracy—and thereby away from Duras's allegiance to the noble Negro figure. Although *La Nouvelle Ourika* was published within a year after the original *Ourika* came out, it represents a milieu in which the aristocracy, its values, and its way of life are all in danger of perishing. A large part of the novel takes place after the revolution, when Mme de B. has been forced out of her ancestral chateau, Charles has been made to flee the country, and Ourika's adoptive sister Lise has begun frequenting persons of a lower class. As they descend in social and economic standing, Ourika, for her part, moves upward in status. More importantly, although Ourika grows up among nobles, she distances herself from their way of thinking: after the revolution, she advocates a bourgeois ideology that values work, division of labor, and the productive use of economic capital. In one conversation between Ourika and Lisbeth (an erstwhile maid of Mme. de B.'s family), the two women regret the fallen condition of some aristocrats in France after the revolution, but blame it on the aristocrats themselves. They contend that these aristocrats view the idea of working as shameful, and hence refuse to use their many talents as productive labor. Here, the narrator of the story endorses the opinions of the two characters with a footnote citing the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson, in which he promotes the efficiency of a proper and separate distribution of employment among men. In the spirit of this principle, the two women make a living by dividing their talents and labor: Ourika paints, and Lisbeth sells the paintings. This faith in work and in the fructification of one's talents is rewarded when Ourika's art gets noticed by the American businessman Williams Maurice, who will go on to become her husband and the father of her child. Towards the end of the novel, Maurice comes into a considerable amount of money, with which he is also able to provide financial assistance to members of

Ourika's adoptive family. Maurice and Ourika take on a stance that is typical of owners of capital; Ourika convinces her husband to put their newfound money to work by setting up a commercial establishment ("une maison de commerce et de banque" [II: 188]), one that would even employ nobles such as her brother Charles ("nous pourrions utiliser les talents de M. Charles et M. Florence, et ... ce serait un moyen de leur rendre vos bienfaits plus précieux" [II: 188]). It is at this moment that *La Nouvelle Ourika* effectuates a complete reversal of the original. The aristocratic "bienfaitrice" of Duras's novel—Mme. de B.—is replaced by a new "bienfaiteur," a capitalist businessman. Whereas Mme. de B. proved to be entirely passive and ineffectual against the rigidity of *ancien régime* convention, incapable of altering the tragic outcome of Ourika's life, Maurice, the benevolent capitalist, is able to provide for, and transform the condition of, those around him. Interestingly, the narrative of *La Nouvelle Ourika* ends with a long didactic conclusion, very much in the vein of some of the antislavery texts discussed earlier in this essay. In it, the narrator takes issue with the original novel on two fronts. First, for suggesting that Ourika's excellent education did her more bad than good. Second, for upholding a rigid, punitive, and obsolete idea of the social order. More specifically, the narrator cites the marquise's declaration in Duras's novel that society would take vengeance on Ourika for having broken its "natural order." Instead, he postulates that those who have the audacity to rise above an inferior social condition are more likely to leave a positive mark on society.

Unlike *La Nouvelle Ourika*, *La Nègresse* does not venture into the terrain of economic arguments. But very early on in the narrative, it also extricates itself from the social and political order represented in *Ourika*. The class status of the protagonist Marie's adoptive mother—Mme. Bertaut—is not made fully clear. The authors retain the "B" of Mme. de B.'s patronym, but erase the preposition "de" which is often a mark of nobility. Whether Mme. Bertaut is a wealthy bourgeois widow or a provincial noblewoman is left open to interpretation. The same goes for the patronym of Marie's suitor and future spouse, Henry Durand. Its frequency of occurrence in the nineteenth century may have pointed to any number of social and geographical origins. As it turns out, Henry is the nephew of a "riche propriétaire des cantons" whose fortune he stands to inherit (182). If it is suggested that Marie's social circumstances both before and after marriage are more bourgeois than aristocratic, this does not protect her from racial prejudice. However, every instance of racism in the text is countered and nullified in some fashion. When a marine officer in their social circle complains that Marie receives too advanced an education for a person of color, Mme. Bertaut is quick to reassure her adopted daughter otherwise. At an older age, when living with her adoptive sister, Marie becomes the victim of racist opinions of a conservative woman who frequents the same salon. Once again, these opinions are quickly invalidated by the convincing arguments of another salon attendee whom the narrator calls a "libéral." But it is Marie's own expression of her agency that is the most significant in this regard. When her suitor Henry's uncle makes advances towards her, using his inheritance as a form of leverage to seduce her, she does not succumb to the older man's designs. Instead, she decides to explore her legal options in court:

Sois béni o Dieu! qui a conduit ma famille sur *cette terre libre!* Sur celle de l'esclavage, j'aurais déjà succombé, peut-être, hélas! sans soupçonner l'étendu de mon malheur; la vertu est encore une filée de la liberté. Que ciel vous protège, *nobles contrées où les hommes sont égaux* devant la loi. Je l'appellerai à mon secours, elle me tiendra la main (201-202; my emphasis).

Marie's speculation that, "sur la terre de l'esclavage," she may have had to succumb to the advances of an older and powerful man is a pointed reference to the exploitative relationships between older male colonists and young female slaves in the colonies. To this she juxtaposes, albeit somewhat uncritically, metropolitan France as a land of unconditional liberty and equality. Nonetheless, her full awareness of her position as a free, rights-bearing individual who can claim equality before the law irrespective of her race is a far cry from the hand-wringing resignation of both the protagonist and her adoptive mother in the original *Ourika*.

It is entirely fair to argue that *La Nègresse* and *La Nouvelle Ourika* arrive at their resolutions because they simplify, at times in a deliberately literal manner, the problems posed by the original novel. Despite their simplicity, however, they both make a claim that it is valuable and worth retaining: the black subject's emancipation can only be achieved upon moving away from the old feudal rules of birth, inheritance, and status. With the importance of birth and origins considerably diminished, she finds herself with more room to maneuver, and with the possibility of greater social mobility. In Duras's novel, Ourika's aristocracy may have made her seem more distinguished or elevated in status when compared to the debased condition of a slave, but it simultaneously trapped her in an old order, an order sans issue, and an order to which she unwittingly finds herself committed. Although the two spin-off novels were written in exactly the same era as *Ourika*, they transcend the noble Negro model. In doing so, they propose new ways of thinking, and new social arrangements that distance themselves from the hierarchies of a feudal regime. At the end of *La Nègresse*, for instance, Marie and Henry are careful to avoid conservative social milieus that are more likely to be unwelcoming of Marie: "Nous ne pensons point que [l'époux de Marie] l'ai présentée au faubourg féodal; il se contenta de ses succès dans le quartier des arts et de la philosophie" (218; my emphasis). In *La Nouvelle Ourika*, the demise of the old order is symbolized by the melodramatic death of the marquise, who, in the original, was the gatekeeper of *ancien régime* social hierarchy. In the popular novel, the marquise jumps to her death onto a courtyard of her chateau for fear of being attacked by an angry mob during the Revolution.

In bringing these two lesser-known novels to light, I do not mean to propose that the solutions they suggest and their facile espousal of bourgeois values are without fault. Rather, I present them here because they account for the ellipses in the original text, giving expression to forms of black emancipation that were repressed in it. Both stories bring into sharper focus the plot of miscegenation, which was merely evoked in the original. In *Ourika*, the protagonist's options as a citizen with rights before the law were obscured behind rigid social stratifications and aristocratic conventions of *bienséance*. The more popular *Nouvelle Ourika* and *Nègresse*, on the other hand, make visible the possibilities open to the protagonist; they offer up models of black subjects who, while not exempt from alienation and discrimination, are able to see themselves as sovereign citizens with legal rights. The original narrative of Ourika's life may have been a tragedy of alienation and disenfranchisement, but she had quite a different destiny in store for her elsewhere in the literary corpus of the 1820s. In 1848, two decades after all of these novels were published, slaves in the French colonies were emancipated. The popular reimagination of Duras's novel did not just fabricate happy endings for Ourika out of nowhere; it had its pulse on a social and political movement of emancipation that was already well in motion.

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