BOOK REVIEW

Mary Ellen Birkett and Christopher Rivers, Eds. Approaches to Teaching Duras’s Ourika. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009.

BY ANTHÈRE NZABATSINDA
Vanderbilt University, Nashville

The ambitions of this volume are appropriately summed up in the notion of “an approach.” Four elements, at least, may be sorted out in order to define this notion. First, an approach relates to the movement of coming near or nearer an object or subject (the airplane approaches an airport before landing; rain approaches from the horizon). Second, an approach suggests beginning to work on a topic, as one refines methods, ways, and means: there is, then, a hint of approximation in what would be equivalent to an attempt. Third, an approach is sometimes equivalent to an offer: an approach is politely offered to an authority in the way of suggestion. Fourth, an approach is a condensation of systematic methods, aims, means, and ways: this consideration of the notion would apply to the analysis conducted in scientific studies. In its perspectives, it responds to the question related to “how to?” This volume has remarkably succeeded in achieving what a reader could expect from an approach. In fact, at first glance, it can be quite difficult to imagine how a relatively small volume in size may contain so much information and gather so much a variety of intellectuals and scholars disserting on a short text. First published in 1823, the novel totals 69 pages in the widely used Claudine Herrmann’s feminist edition in French, “des femmes,” 1979, which counts 47 pages—plus 22 pages of Herrmann’s introduction; while one of its numerous translations, John Fowles’s Ourika, 1977, counts 65 pages comprising an introduction and an epilogue—both total 31 pages. The essays compiled in this volume have lived up to the challenges of tackling the complex dimensions of a novel that is an interesting representation of history,
economy, race, gender, society, class, medicine, religion, language, literature, and pedagogy.

Claire de Duras’s *Ourika* recounts the story of Ourika, an orphaned young girl from Senegal “rescued” (brought at the age of two years old) from slavery by a French nobleman. He offered Ourika as a gift to his aunt who then raised this child as her own in the Parisian aristocratic society at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. This black girl died at the age of sixteen out of melancholy, a moral sickness (*mal*) that would be the equivalent of the malady then referred to as *le mal du siècle* and mostly affecting young male romantic poets. The main traits characterizing this vague moral anguish were mostly solitude and unquenched desires associated with impossible love. This feminine story recounting Ourika’s life and demise evolves in the contexts of the French and Haitian Revolutions (respectively, 1789 and 1804), the Restoration, the laws abolishing slavery, the social prohibitions banning interracial love and marriage, and the cloisters (*couvents*) where unwed or in fact not marriageable aristocratic girls found refuge. Christine de Vinne’s essay (“Religion under Revolution in *Ourika*” 37–44) illuminates the contexts in which Ourika is as an outcast cloistered in a convent for the Ursulines in Paris.

The essays in this volume, *Approaches to Teaching Duras’s Ourika* have given useful suggestions and methods toward teaching an innovative text. How to teach a sentimental yet complex novel written by a woman at a period of time when there were not very many women writers? How to challenge students to get to properly “listen” to the voice of this young girl portrayed in the novel and recounting her own story? How to take into account the different contexts within which her character evolves and becomes entangled in a marginalization that exiled a woman, a black girl, and a “different” girl (raised against the “natural order of things” of the time)? How to relate to such a marginalization in modern contexts? The essays offer students multiple points of view and perspectives as a way to reflect on themes and questions such as racial identity, inequity and inequality, sexual tensions, love, social exclusion, power (political as well as economic), differences and consequences associated with race, class, and gender, especially when black women are at the disadvantaged receiving end. “What is the natural order of things?” as Mary Jane Cowles (“The
French Revolution in *Ourika*” 24–30) suggests “students ask themselves again” (30). Pertaining to the question raised above are the notions of “revolutions” and “natural laws,” including the law of God. As Marshall C. Olds underlines (“The Restoration Looks Back at the Revolution” 31–36), students are drawn to the particular moment when Ourika’s “double conscience” (realization) at both personal as well as social levels forces her to see how a misfit she is as she has sinned against her “natural destiny” (36). Indeed, as a black woman raised by a white woman within the values of the French aristocratic society of the time, Ourika is doomed. As such, she cannot or is not authorized to find love in “her” aristocratic society of Mme B., within the white race, in Paris, France. Yet, she has no other social or racial group to join; certainly not the race of Blacks mirroring to her for “shame and horror” (Deborah Jenson, “Mirror Insurrections: Haitian and French Revolutions in *Ourika*” 45–50).

Even when Ourika is consumed by melancholy, she is not within the order of things. No one would acknowledge in her the same *mal* that male characters such as Chateaubriand’s René or Duras’s Olivier suffered. “Are all hearts equal?” So should students ask themselves (Birkett and Rivers, “Introduction” 22). Keri Weil, in her essay, “Telling Stories of Melancholia: René and Ourika” (79–84) gives the example of a course titled “The Outsider” that discusses this question of inequality. Additional essays provide some theories that bring students toward understanding the inequality in which the melancholia experienced by male characters had served to empower them in terms of poetic creativity, while a similar condition only leads Ourika to death in her solitude and silence. Dorothy Kelly (“*Ourika* and the Reproduction of Social Forms: Duras and Bourdieu” 85–90) offers a comparable perspective as she uses Pierre Bourdieu’s “Masculine Domination” (85) to propose to students a theoretical approach that would help them understand gender and social inequalities as mentioned above. Equally interesting is the theory of “epidermalization of racist gaze” that Deborah Jenson (48) quotes from Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks* 11) to underline its relevance in helping students understand the alienation in which Ourika had become fearful and hateful of her own image. The fact of her being black had cancelled out the possibility of a successful integration in the Parisian aristocratic society as well as any opportunity of
experiencing love, marriage, and motherhood: “Seeing herself is now as alienating as being caught in the racist gaze of the marquise” (48). Chantal Bertrand-Jennings (“Ourika and Women’s Literary Tradition in France” 73–78) brings to her classroom a similar reflection on alienation. Carolyn Fay’s essay (“He Said, She Said: Ourika in a Gender Studies Course” 145–150) indicates useful perspectives to analyze gender as represented in literary texts. Her essay points out ways in which students may properly understand that “gender is a social construct” (145). The suggestion in this essay is that the reading of both Duras’s Ourika and Chateaubriand’s René bring about a dialogue that “demonstrates that the construction of gender always intersects other categories of identity such as race, culture, sexuality, and social class” (145). By these texts, students are able to link the gender analysis to facts of contemporary real life. So does Barbara Woshinsky’s essay (“Teachings of Ourika” 157–161), which underscores the “concatenation of race and gender that occurs within a sensitive consciousness.” (157) This essay concludes and closes the volume in the following words:

Whether in terms of family and love relationships, ethnicity, the role of women in society, racism, or general feelings of otherness—physical and spiritual exile—what Ourika teaches is the power of literature to engage us in very personal ways. (161)

Some other essays had proffered, as well, ways to read Ourika’s story in light of literary contexts. Examples: Adriana M. Paliyenko’s “The Literary Frames of Ourika, Then and Now” (97–102); Kathryn M. Grossman’s “Duras and Hugo: An Intertextual Dialogue” (110–116); Dawn Fulton’s “Exile According to Ourika and Julia” (117–121); and Mireille Rosello’s “Ourika’s Mal” (91–96). David R. Ellison, on his part, had provided teaching strategies that help to better grasp the links between language and literature (“Ourika in Fourth-Semester French Language and Culture Course” 140–144).

Approaches to Teaching Duras’s Ourika is a commendable reading for teachers as well as for students in a wide range of fields of study: French literature and language, comparative literature, humanities, gender, history, medicine, psychology, sociology, and religion. The intentions set forth by this volume’s editors seem to have been accomplished: to analyze contexts of Claire de Duras’s
*Ourika*, offer strategies to effectively teach this text, and propose practical examples of approaches that have particularly succeeded in the classroom.

The essays comprising this volume are varied in scope. However, one cannot help wonder why it did not include (or why it did exclude) any view from an African or a Caribbean scholar. This exclusion seems to somehow truncate the volume’s ambitions of “wide scope”. Is, thus, the underlying suggestion to be that *Ourika* is not taught in the African and/or Caribbean black classrooms? Unless the title of *Approaches to Teaching Duras’s Ourika* assumes that any reader ought to easily understand that adding “in America” would have been a useless redundancy.