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Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

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Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present

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The Lover: Marguerite Duras Returns to the Threshold

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The Lover: Marguerite Duras Returns to the Threshold

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The story Duras tells is heavily autobiographical, but it is a story that she told at least three times, with significant differences in each case, and so is equally heavily fictionalized.

It is a tale that might easily be assumed to be an account of predation and abuse, but Duras tells it in such a way that it is not clear who is taking advantage of whom.

Duras challenges our assumptions about intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class.

Even love stories are seldom simple,
not least in the context of colonial racial
categorization or the complex
family history with which
Duras's narrator's story is entwined.

The novel is also a story about memory, time, and ultimately death.

Many of its key players are now deceased: the narrator can try to settle accounts with them, but they are beyond her judgment, just as what exactly took place can only now be told, but never definitely confirmed.

Something happened: some kind of threshold was reached and perhaps crossed, even double-crossed; some kind of event to which Duras (or her narrator) seeks to be faithful, to hold onto something even as what she has to tell us is also about betrayal, leaving, and loss.

In the end, it may well be she who is
betraying the lover in writing about him,
in reimagining him as the victim
less in an act of homage than in
a belated gesture of revenge.

In rewriting the lover, she also rewrites herself, her origin as writer, in a precarious zone shuttling between past and future and back again.

APPROACHING
AGENCY

The narrative of *The Lover* takes some time to emerge, both in that it takes fifty years to take this form, and also within the novel itself.

“One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, ‘[. . .] Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.’” (3)

“I have a face laid waste.” (5)

“So, I’m fifteen and a half.
It’s on a ferry crossing
the Mekong River.” (5)

“So, I’m fifteen and a half.
It’s on a ferry crossing
the Mekong River.” (5)

“It's the end of some school vacation,
I forget which.” (9)

“I’ve taken the bus from Sadec,
where my mother is the
headmistress of the girls’ school.” (9)

“I always get off the bus when we reach the ferry, even at night, because I'm always afraid, afraid the cables might break and we might be swept out to sea.” (12)

“Never again shall I travel
in a native bus.” (34)

What she is remembering is a pivotal moment, a turning point in her sense of self and her relationship to the world around her.

"I'm wearing a dress of real silk, but it's threadbare, almost transparent. [. . .] It's a sleeveless dress with a very low neck. [. . .] I think it suits me. I'm wearing a leather belt with it, perhaps a belt belonging to one of my brothers. [. . .] This particular day I must be wearing the famous pair of gold lamé high heels." (11)

“Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire.” (13)

“I’m used to people looking at me. People do look at white women in the colonies; at twelve-year-old white girls too.” (17)

“On the ferry, beside the bus, there’s a big black limousine with a chauffeur in white cotton livery. [. . .]

Inside the limousine there’s a very elegant man looking at me. He’s not a white man.” (17)

A trap is about to close.

“He slowly comes over to her. [. . .] His hand is trembling.” (32)

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“Will you allow me to drive you where you want to go in Saigon?” (33)

“She looks at him. [. . .] She asks him what he is. [. . .] She says she will.” (33)

“She knows [. . .] that the time has probably come when she can no longer escape certain duties toward herself. And that her mother will know nothing of this, nor her brothers.” (35)

Leaving her family behind, at only
fifteen (and a half), she is now, like it or not,
a woman of the world.

“He’s also afraid, not because I’m white, but because I’m so young, so young he could go to prison if we were found out.” (63)

It is not just from our perspective today, in hindsight, that it feels exploitative, even abusive: the older man taking advantage of a much younger girl.

It is not just from our perspective today, in hindsight, that it feels exploitative, even abusive: the older man taking advantage of a much younger girl.

And yet Duras does not write it that way!

The affair is indeed portrayed
as exploitation, but it is not always
clear who is exploiting whom.

Which of the two is in control? Who has the upper hand? How much freedom or agency do either of them have?

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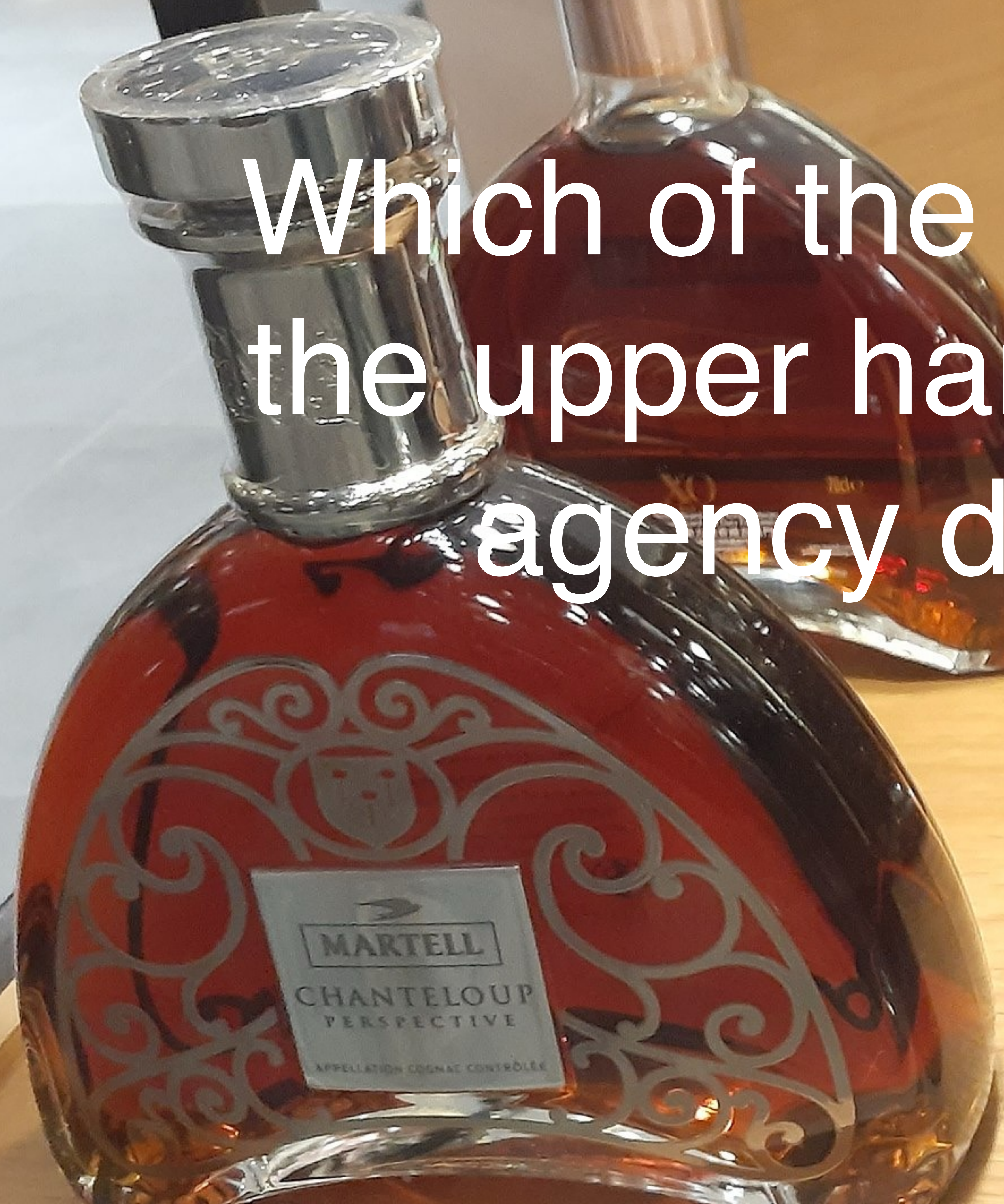

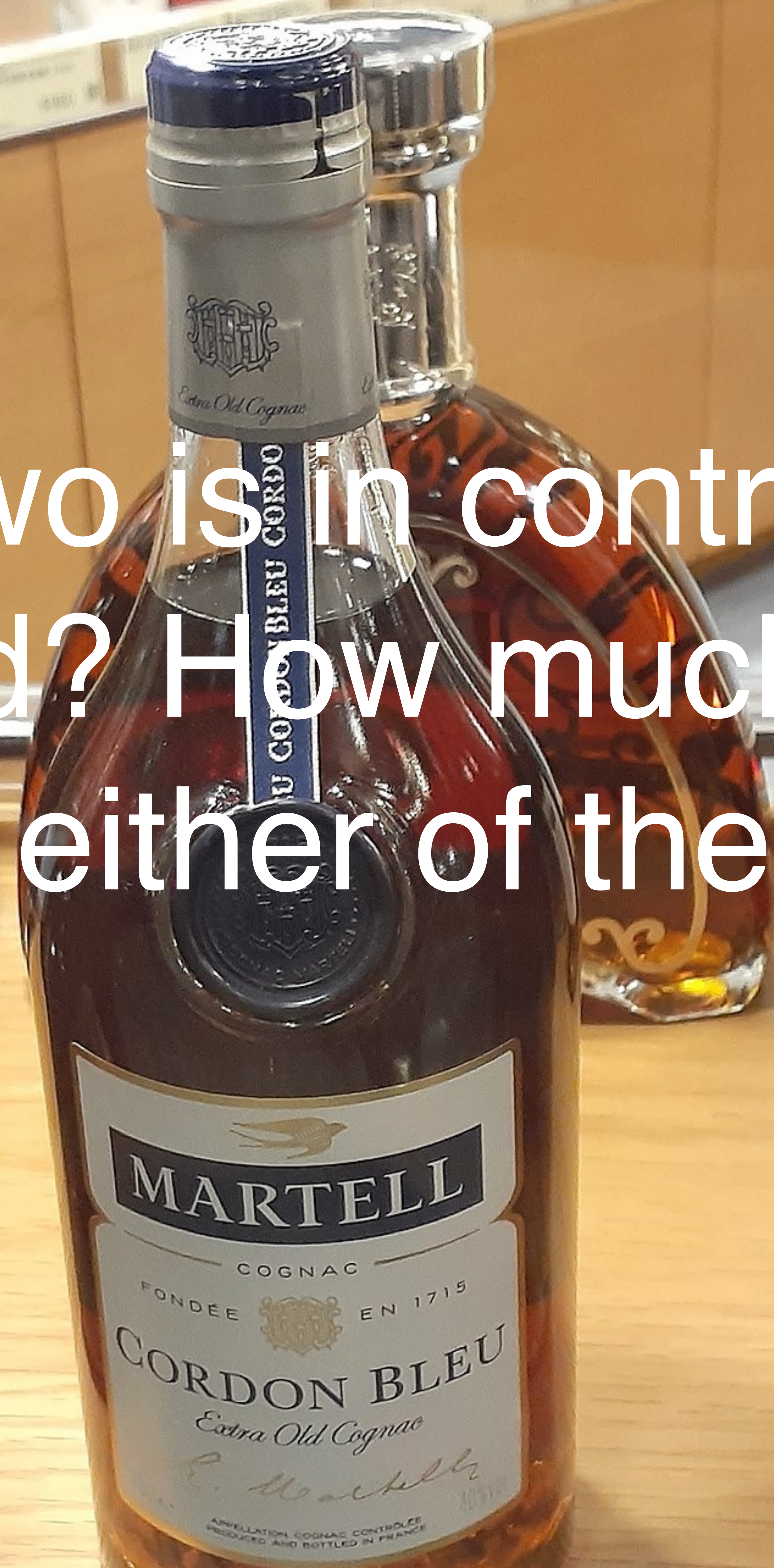

“From the first moment she knows more or less, knows he’s at her mercy.” (35)

She has a sense of self-belief,
almost of invulnerability.

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Duras thus implicitly contests the feminist critique of the “male gaze,” which emphasizes how women are objectified as they are portrayed through men’s eyes.

“For Sartre, the person looking always dominates the person being looked at. [. . .] Duras inverts the power relationship: for her, the person doing the looking is revealing weakness. [. . .] To look makes you vulnerable, because what you look at reveals your desire.” (Toril Moi)

“The young girl in *L’Amant* declares that she doesn’t love the man. Yet she craves his gaze: by looking at her, he becomes her inferior; refusing to look back, she exults in her own power.” (Toril Moi)

“Suddenly, all at once, she knows, knows that he doesn’t understand her, that he never will, that he lacks the power to understand such perverseness. And that he can never move fast enough to catch her.” (37)

She may indeed be his prey, but she is sure that she will always escape him, and delights in the game of hide and seek that he is perpetually destined to lose.

REWRITING
HIERARCHY

The narrator’s social status is uncertain and perhaps not what we might expect.

She and her family are white, French, representatives of the governing colonial order.

"He had arrived with his head ringing with the fine words that had been drummed into him before he left: to be head of a school is to represent France [. . .]. Ideologues repeated it at every possible opportunity: the real, gradual and day-to-day colonization of a country is done through the school." (Laure Adler)

"Single women were seen as the quintessential *petit blanc*, with limited resources and shopkeeper aspirations. Moreover, they presented the dangerous possibility that straitened circumstances would lead them to prostitution, thereby degrading European prestige at large." (Ann Stoler)

“That’s why, though she doesn’t know it, that’s why the mother lets the girl go out dressed as a child prostitute.” (24)

“He calls me a whore, a slut, he says I’m his only love.” (42)

“He calls me a whore, a slut, he says I’m his only love.” (42)

“He won’t let his son marry the little white whore from Sadec.” (35)

The scandal of their union involves
a complex entanglement of
gender, age, race, and class.

“He belongs to the small group of financiers of Chinese origin who own all the working-class housing in the colony.” (33)

“He smells pleasantly of English cigarettes,
expensive perfume, honey, his skin
has taken on the scent of silk,
the fruity smell of silk tussore, the
smell of gold, he’s desirable.” (42)

“His place is modern, hastily furnished from the look of it, with furniture supposed to be ultra-modern.” (36)

These are transactions that cannot be acknowledged as such.

In so far as status depends upon recognition, the *petits blancs* maintain the power to withhold it from the man without whom they cannot even return “home” to Europe, without whom they would remain stuck and desperate as colonial paupers.

I discover he hasn’t the strength to love me in opposition to his father, to possess me, to take me away.” (49)

“He’s hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex.” (38)

"He's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex." (38)

It is as though *he* were the defenceless young girl, and not the narrator.

In the version found in her earlier novel, *The Sea Wall*, the lover, “Monsieur Jo,” is not Chinese but white, “a planter,” though he also “looks like an ape” (33).

The mere fact that it is the prompt for writing itself comes to be the most important aspect of the narrative.

“I want to write. I’ve already told
my mother: That’s what I want to do—write.
[. . .] Then she asks, Write what?
I say, Books, novels.” (21)

“I want to write. I’ve already told
my mother: That’s what I want to do—write.
[. . .] Then she asks, Write what?
I say, Books, novels.” (21)

The lover gives her
something to write *about*.

The book is equally a settling of accounts
with her mother, her brothers, as well as
with a cast of other characters whom
she meets at school or on the boat home.

"One of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down. She may be loving him to have something to write. She has a story to tell because of having loved him." (Maxine Hong Kingston)

“The story is essentially one of creativity, in particular the self-making of a woman and of a writer whom we watch in the process of creating out of that very initial non-presence.” (Susan Cohen)

The event, the threshold that the narrator crosses in her encounter with the man on the Mekong ferry, is Duras’s coming into writing. . .

. . .her seizing the power to craft a description of that event itself, a description that may be more or less faithful to what happened in that it also enables her to escape it and represent it in ever new variations.

Writing also allows—or perhaps forces—her continually to return to that threshold, to reimagine herself once more betwixt and between the various entangled hierarchies that structure her experience in colonial Indochina.

“One must not neglect the fact that
the rite of passage takes place on a ferry,
which, rather than transporting one
to a permanent destination, shuttles back
and forth. The ferry has neither port of
origin nor end port.” (Susan Cohen)

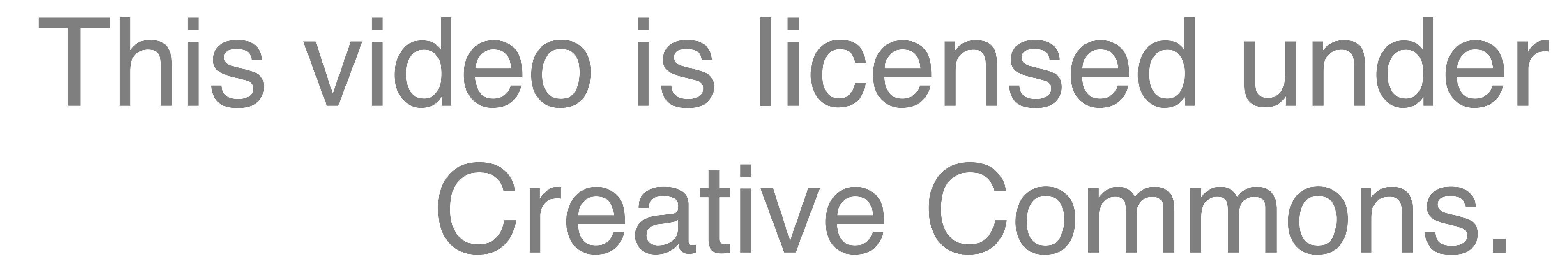
Duras cannot leave her story alone,
but instead continually returns to rewrite it,
perpetually bringing back into focus
that image.

“The image doesn’t exist. It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was removed or detached from all the rest.” (10)

Fifty years later, Duras was still coming
back and putting new touches to
a story that is forever about to begin,
but always already in motion.

MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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