

Exoticism and its Discontents

Chair: Dominique Jullien, University of California-Santa Barbara

We propose a three-person panel that will address several of the topics listed on the conference program: “Travel Writing and Literature”, “Social, sexual, political, identities”, “Inscribing / Representing the Exotic” and, for two of the papers, “Nerval à 200”. Our panel seeks to problematize exoticism as a source of knowledge and representation of the other, hence typically as a one-way relationship reaffirming, more often than not, the supremacy of the European traveler over the exotic native, whether Oriental or Tahitian. During the second half of the 19th century, with the rise of colonialism, its iconographic dimension in the form of exotic images of the non-European other becomes widespread in literature and culture, and so too does discontent with the often cliché images that this exoticism helps popularize. Writers in search of a more authentic relationship with other cultures will seek to reverse the facile sentimentality (e.g. European male lover, submissive exotic mistress) and the playful assertion of colonial superiority acted out by the prevailing trope of cross-cultural disguise. Going native, dressing like the natives, keeping a native lover—all these modes of behavior are well established by the middle of the 19th century, to the point where they risk becoming themselves part of the stock of clichés expected in a travelogue or an exotic novel. We look at writers (Segalen, Nerval, Eberhardt) who attempt to disentangle their own discourses and experiences from these clichés and reformulate the practices of contact, relationship, disguise, etc.

Marina Van Zuylen looks at Victor Segalen’s attempt to redefine a higher, more demanding notion of *exotisme* against the prevailing one set by the enormously popular Pierre Loti. In Segalen’s vision of Tahitian or Chinese exoticism, shaped by his admiration for Gauguin, the Other is no longer an object of knowledge (or domination) but rather a source of pleasure.

Dominique Jullien focuses on the combination of two prevalent paradigms in Oriental travelogues: donning Oriental dress and referring to the *Thousand and One Nights*. In the case of Gérard de Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient*, these common practices produce a number of paradoxical reversals that destabilize the usual power relation between East and West.

Madeleine Dobie focuses on two travelogues (by Nerval and Eberhardt) in which disguise is a key narrative device, to analyze the practice of ‘oriental transvestism’ as one where the problematic and elusive nature of intercultural contact itself is played out.

Marina Van Zuylen
Bard College

“*Déguster le Divers*”: Victor Segalen’s exoticism as *jouissance*

Victor Segalen’s voyage to the îles Marquises in 1903, was met with the shocking news of Gauguin’s death. He decided to remain in French Polynesia for over a year and ended up producing a series of writings (*Hommage à Gauguin* and his novel *Les Immémoriaux*), works that would redefine exoticism against what he considered Pierre Loti’s shockingly reductive definition. To Segalen, his exoticism “n’est pas celui que le mot a déjà tant de fois prostitué. L’exotisme est tout ce qui est Autre. Jouir de lui est apprendre à déguster le Divers” (*Equipée*).

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This talk will situate Segalen's reply to Loti's colonial Tahitian exoticism through his consistent attempt to pay homage to a subject that would persist in the European's sentimentalized love affair with an unknown other. What Segalen had critiqued in Loti would be confirmed some years later (1909) upon meeting Paul Claudel in Peking. Disgusted by Claudel's poor Chinese (he had read Lao-Tze in translation, barely able to put two words of Chinese together) and his smug appropriation of Taoism, Segalen wrote his "Essay on Exoticism," a text that remains one of the most provocative statements about the dangerous appropriation of otherness. As Richard Sieburth writes about *Stèles*, and this could apply to a host of Segalen's writings, "the various cultural and epistemological impasses" explored by Segalen testify to "the Self's inability to comprehend the Other." These impasses, in the end, can only be resolved at the purely aesthetic level of the text.

Dominique Jullien
University of California-Santa Barbara

Dressing the part:

Nerval's Orient, the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the pleasures of disguise

For many 19th century artists on their Grand Oriental tour the *Thousand and One Nights*, translated and popularized by Frenchman Antoine Galland, served as a kind of tourist guide, filtering virtually all their perceptions of the foreign reality, both an interpretative lens that colored travel experiences and a literary model that shaped travelogues. Gobineau hailed the tales as "the most accurate portrayal of the Orient". Travelers anticipated scenes and characters from the *Nights* and acted out the tales themselves. Maupassant strolled around Algiers impersonating the Caliph Haroun Al-Raschid wandering incognito in the streets of Bagdad. Oriental dress, donned upon arrival, was no longer a simple precaution (the way it was, say, for Sir Richard Burton, the notorious translator of the *Nights*, whose talent for disguise, along with his knowledge of Oriental languages and customs, allowed him to travel to parts never before seen by a European) but a source of fascination and delight. Dressing up as the exotic Other was part of "a joyful inhabitation of another culture" (Gail Chiang-Ling Low, *White Skins / Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism*, p.202). Upon his arrival in Cairo, Gérard de Nerval, like Lane before him, declined to reside in the Frank neighborhood, preferring instead to rent a house in the indigenous part of town, adopt the Arab costume, and even marry a local woman. Nerval's adventures frame his Oriental travelogue, enclosing inset tales—"The caliph Hakim", "The Queen of the Morning", "The photographer in the harem"—like a European's sly variation on the *Arabian Nights*. It would seem, however, that in Nerval's case, the cross-cultural dressing game ends up destabilizing the very power relation between Westerner and Oriental that the act of dressing up serves to signify. Just as the centers of power and civilization in the East are subtly but unmistakably subverted in Nerval's travelogue (as Michel Butor argued in *Répertoire IV*), so the tropes of the *Nights*—the epitome of cultural appropriation of a text—and of cultural cross-dressing go awry, fantasizing the unexpected power of female over male, East over West.

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Madeleine Dobie
Columbia University

Meeting in Disguise: Costume and Contact in French Oriental Travel Writing

Disguise—the adoption of costumes that alter the appearance of either the national origins or the gender of the wearer—has been a recurrent trope of European travel writing about the ‘Orient’. The protagonists of several major travel narratives: Mary Montagu; Gérard de Nerval; Richard Burton, all allude to their adoption of oriental dress. Alphonse de Lamartine relates that when he visited the English emigrée, Lady Esther Stanhope, in Lebanon, she greeted him in oriental dress. The writer/traveler Isabelle Eberhardt dressed as a Muslim man to disguise both her sex and her cultural background. And several protagonists of the novels of Pierre Loti don local dress as a preliminary to settling in the Muslim quarters of Istanbul and other cities. As scholars who have addressed the practice of ‘oriental transvestism’ have noted, these costume changes reflect a number of different intercultural dynamics: the desire to penetrate a forbidden oriental space, such as the oriental harem or the holy sanctuary of Mecca; the quest for fusion with the cultural other, and the abandonment of European social norms; the destabilizing impact of cultural contact on systems of gender and sexual identity. This talk will take a step back from these different interpretations to argue that the prevalence of the theme of disguise in representations of cultural encounters also reflects the elusive nature of contact itself. Critical writing on contact zones and experiences of encounter has tended to conceptualize intercultural contact as the meeting and reciprocal engagement of groups or individuals previously separated by geography and culture. But this positivistic model neglects significant dimensions of contact. It does not account, for example, for spatio-temporal disjunction: the belated encounter with another culture at an earlier historical moment, nor does it relay the central role that miscommunication, mistranslation, and misrecognition play in travel and encounter. I argue that the prevalence of disguise and transvestism in travel literature reflects not only the practical circumstances of travelers, their alignment with the forces of colonial occupation, or, alternatively, their resistance to these forces, but also a subjacent understanding of contact as a process that involves not only discovery, communication, interaction (whether of a positive or a negative nature), but also the negotiation of obstacles and facades. Encounters between nineteenth-century European travelers and North Africans or Middle-Easterners were framed by the colonial ambitions of European nations as well as by the complex, multi-layered history of European representations of oriental culture. As such, they were always mediated by discursive traditions and textual precedents that over-determined both the perception of oriental others and the self-perception and self-representation of European travelers. Focusing on works of two different periods in which disguise is a significant narrative device: Nerval’s *Voyage en orient* and Eberhardt’s novel *Vagabond* and short writings published under the title *Dans l’Ombre chaude de l’Islam*, I consider how the representation of oriental transvestism is interwoven with recognition of the element of ‘missed encounter’ that is inherent to intercultural contact.