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Exoticism in Works by Late-Nineteenth Century Female Artists

[*A Female Poetics of Empire: From Eliot to Woolf*](#). Julia Kuehn. New York and London: Routledge, 2014.
253 pp.

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<1>Julia Kuehn's book examines "constructions of exoticism through realist and romance modalities" (15) in women's colonial art produced between the 1870s and the 1930s. Both written and visual texts are taken up, and their range is remarkably broad, including novels by such canonical authors as George Eliot (*Daniel Deronda*) and Virginia Woolf (*The Voyage Out*), as well as texts and paintings by obscure or neglected female artists. As for the geographical locations engaged in Kuehn's book, the focus is on representations and projections cast toward the British colonial territories, including India, the Middle East and North Africa.

<2>The book's main objective is to examine the selected wide-ranging colonial texts and images through the interpretive system of exoticism, as a presumably broader and more inclusive framework than Said's Orientalism. While not dismissive of Said's work or post-colonial theory's insights, Kuehn spends some time explaining her decision to move "beyond Orientalism" as an interpretive grid that tends to foreground the political agenda and use of colonial art. Kuehn finds the framework of exoticism to be better suited to her interest in exploring the selected works' use of various aesthetic tools and narrative modalities (realism vs. romance) to represent the foreign other's varied effects on the Western subject. As Kuehn posits, in comparison to Orientalism, "exoticism allows for more disruption and contradiction" and, quoting from K. O. Longley, "it is more 'elusive and ungraspable, more slippery . . . and more capable of sliding away or striking back'" (3).

<3>Kuehn begins by laying out her conception of exoticism, turning significantly to the work of Victor Segalen along with consideration of Tzvetan Todorov, Francis Affergan, and Roger Celestin, and aligning her approach with Peter Mason's *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (1998) and Chris Bongie's *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (1991). Readers interested in theories of colonial and foreign otherness will likely find Kuehn's discussions of exoticism particularly

engaging. While appreciating some of the book's observations about the limitations of Said's Orientalism, scholars coming to Kuehn's book with a background in post-colonial theory might welcome additional in-depth engagement with what post-colonial theory does have to offer to discussions of colonial works not only by reminding us that the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is one of power and domination, but also by interpreting the varied, often ambiguous and slippery, effects of the native other on the Western subject. One thinks of the contributions to post-colonial theory by some of Said's successors (although Bhabha's work is engaged by Kuehn briefly) and their efforts to combine perceptive textual analyses, quite capable of capturing discursive ambiguities, with an eye for the political dimensions of the historical contexts in which colonial works were produced. The framework of exoticism set up and deployed by Kuehn, on the other hand, clearly prioritizes the aesthetic over the political.

<4>Returning to what *A Female Poetics of Empire* does set out to do and the framework of exoticism it deploys, in her reading of Segalen's work on exoticism Kuehn emphasizes his effort to recuperate what he considers the original meaning of the term "exotic." Objecting to treating exoticism as an ideology necessarily aligned with colonial politics and inferring racial or cultural inferiority, Segalen reminded his readers that in its most original and pure sense, "exoticism" simply implies "the feeling of experiencing the purity and intensity of Diversity . . . the knowledge that something is other than oneself [and] . . . the ability to conceive 'otherwise'" (5).

<5>From Segalen, Kuehn turns to Todorov's mapping of the exotic onto the distinction between universalism (as an attitude that incorporates difference, causing its disappearance) and relativism (where both the other and the self are left intact). For Todorov, Kuehn recaps, "the 'true' exote . . . is the one who moves on the spectrum between strangeness and familiarity, self and other, home and abroad, universalism and relativism" (8). In Affergan, Kuehn finds useful the distinction between reductive and hierarchical "difference" on the one hand and "alterity" on the other. For Affergan, as for Kuehn, alterity implies a more creative and dynamic encounter with the exotic, in which the self constantly changes in contact with the other. Finally, Celestin, according to Kuehn, distinguishes between two extreme modes of navigating encounters with the exotic: one wherein the exotic is interpreted against a center-oriented system into which it ultimately disappears, and another in which the self dis-identifies from her home but ends up losing herself through her complete immersion in the foreign.

<6>The above delineations are applied by Kuehn in the rest of her book as she works to shed light on the variety of ways in which the exotic is deployed in the selected colonial works by female artists. She adds to this interpretive framework a discussion of realism and romance as two major narrative modalities through which the exotic gets represented in *fin-de-siècle* works of art. Focusing specifically on works by women, Kuehn also points out that while it is generally assumed that the late nineteenth-century debate about the strengths of romance versus realism was an almost exclusively male critics' affair, in reality, "many women writers negotiated the possibilities of romance and realism in practice in their writing, and perhaps especially their writing about colonial and foreign spaces" (12). Arguing that realism to some extent maps onto the self and romance onto the other, Kuehn then asks whether any one of the two literary modalities might "complicate empire" (16) more than the other, or whether one of them might encourage othering more than the other. She concludes that "exotic discourse moves

between a realist, documentary modality on the one hand and a more 'dreamy' romance on the other" (187). Finally, Kuehn also poses questions about the ways in which exoticism is gendered. Her study reveals that femininity maps onto exoticism in a variety of different ways that resist easy classification. Applying these complex theoretical frameworks onto her discussion of the representations of the exotic in the selected works by women, Kuehn posits that ideally "a female poetics of empire" will emerge.

<7>Discussing specific works, Kuehn first takes up Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, arguing that the critical lens of exoticism allows for a more subtle reading of the hero's "oscillation on the exotic spectrum between sameness and difference" (40) than Said's reading of the same novel. In her chapter on Anglo-Indian popular fiction, Kuehn explores representations of interracial desire and the range of possible trajectories, and 'what if' scenarios, offered by the authors through their stories of fictional interracial relationships. The next chapter deals with harem paintings by Henriette Brown and Elisabeth Jerichau-Bauman, and Kuehn here points out the ways in which some of these women's paintings "transgressed the neat binaries of Saidian Orientalism" (81) while others fit these binaries more closely. Next discussing travelogues about the Middle East by Ellen Miller, Gertrude Bell, and Isabella Bird, Kuehn focuses her analysis on the texts' oscillation between objective facts and subjective impressions, between empirical description and imagination. Moving on in the next chapter to women's travel writings about Egypt, Kuehn introduces the concept of the picturesque as a descriptive mode particularly well suited for women who might wish to represent a landscape in an emotionally charged, rather than empirical, way. Kuehn's discussion of women's desert romance focuses on texts that combine exotic settings with sensationalist plots of love, sex, desire and/or murder. Kuehn here applies Peter Mason's five characteristics of the exotic to elucidate the ways in which exoticism comes into existence through these narratives. Finally, Kuehn's reading of Woolf's 1915 *The Voyage Out* as an example of "internal exoticism" (176) foregrounds Woolf's narrative deployment of the external exotic (in the form of Rachel's contact with South American villagers) to initiate an internal development within the character of Rachel. Woolf and Eliot are then linked in Kuehn's conclusion as authors whose work offers a "complicated voyage into the exotic self" that manages to avoid Orientalist gestures of appropriation (187).

<8>As Kuehn herself underscores, each chapter deploys a different framework for discussing how the exotic is represented in the selected works. The goal is to suggest "the myriad of ways in which exotic discourse finds representation" (17) and in which a "female poetics of empire" takes form. Kuehn carefully avoids flattening out the complexity of the aesthetic strategies she traces in the analyzed texts and images. The conceptual lens she applies allows for a customized approach to the individual works, doing justice to their divergent and varied aesthetic negotiations of exotic otherness. Some readers might miss a more forceful generalizing thrust foregrounding groups of ideas overriding the individuality of the specific works and specific strategies. Where Said's work offers Orientalism as such a group of generalizing ideas through which to assess colonial works, sometimes perhaps reducing the individual specificity of an author's approach to colonial otherness, Kuehn's grid of exoticism seems to tip the balance towards the individual and the aesthetic.