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Memoirs of the Orient

Abstract: Arthur Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha—the fictionalized memoirs of a geisha set in the Gion district of Kyoto between the 1930s and 1950s—became a bestseller in the United States immediately following publication in 1997. This essay examines two issues: what accounts for the mass popularity of Memoirs in the United States, and is either the text or the interest (in Japan/geisha) it spurs orientalist? Commonly enjoyed by fans as a “trip to an exotic land” that is also “authentic” in its (re)presentation of Japan, the book is widely read as a fantasy, the essay argues, that engages readers in a world that is enticingly other.

In October 1997 Arthur Golden published his fictional account of a geisha’s life story starting at age nine in 1929 in the Gion district of Kyoto. Within months, Memoirs of a Geisha had become a sensational hit. The target of a mass media blitz—reviews, interviews, and news reports in everything from Newsweek and People magazines to National Public Radio and morning television—Memoirs soon hit the New York Times bestseller list (where it remained for 58 straight weeks), became a staple of reading and literary circles across the country, and was picked up by Steven Spielberg for a Hollywood film. Everywhere I went, people were talking about Memoirs of a Geisha. And the reports—from my sister and aunts, neighbors, hairdresser, and dentist—were that the book was an incredible read, the world of geisha it portrayed fascinating, and the author amazing for his ability as a man to capture a woman’s life and voice.

I would like to acknowledge the generous feedback and input I received from the following people in writing this essay: Charlie Piot, Katherine Frank, Niko Besnier, Orin Starn, Ralph Litzinger, Mack O’Barr, Kathy Ewing, Andy Gordon, Kathy Rudy, and Margot Weiss. And for their helpful comments I would also like to thank the coeditors of the Journal of Japanese Studies, John Treat and Susan Hanley, and the anonymous referees. The comments of the last referee, in particular, were exceedingly helpful in rethinking my position on orientalism.
As someone who works on Japan, I found the buzz surrounding *Memories* to be both intriguing and unsettling. Thanks in part to Golden's book, Japan was now becoming a topic of everyday conversation and this in the United States where general interest in and knowledge about Japan are disturbingly low. Yet most of the frenzy was limited to the subject of the geisha—an exotic, orientalist figure even in Japan where she has all but disappeared and whose image was now being shaped by a Cinderella story with a Western sensibility. Upon reading *Memories*, I agreed with many of the reactions to the book; it is beautifully crafted and its story and setting powerfully render a world that readers find compelling at both intellectual and emotional levels. *Memories* also struck me, however, as orientalist in the Saidean sense of treating the “Orient” as innately different from the West whose culture homogenizes as well as differentiates “them” from “us.” My concern was not that Golden, as an outsider, could not or should not write about geisha, but rather that the outsider is so central in shaping this story as well as its mass appeal in the United States. Witness, for instance, the fact that there are plenty of excellent books, movies, and artwork by Japanese on geishas that have never attained the popularity of this geisha book, written by an American, within the United States.

This leads to a certain exoticism. The book is written in such a way that it fosters the impression of taking a trip to an exotic, distant land whose foreignness is “unmasked” and whose “veil of secrecy” lifted, allowing readers/travelers to enter into a “secret world of the geisha.”1 Continually people spoke of reading *Memories* as an “adventure,” of feeling transported to an unknown place that was often described to me with ambivalent emotions—the geisha world is beautiful but horrific, precious yet vile.2 For most readers I talked to, Gion still seemed foreign and strange at the end of the book, but their experience of “going” there had been thrilling and educational. Of course, transportation to alternative worlds, whether “real” or imaginary, is a common pleasure in recreational pursuits of all kinds—travel, movies, fiction, and sports. In *Memories*, however, the fictional abuts continually against what readers absolutely insist is the “authentic,” “historically accurate” depiction rendered by Golden of geisha Japan: a presentation that many told me allowed them to better understand Japan and Japanese more broadly. Engendering this “understanding” were images from

1. These quotes are taken from readers who wrote into the *Memories* website on amazon.com.
2. Viewing foreign peoples in pairs of opposites has a long history in the West. Columbus “saw” the Indians in the New World as both pure primitives and “dirty dogs” (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* [New York: HarperPerennial, 1984]) and Ruth Benedict regarded the Japanese as “the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought” in terms both of “the chrysanthemum and the sword” (Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946], 1).
the book of beautiful aesthetics, the sympathetic Sayuri, and the familiar (though Western) Cinderella story of Sayuri and the Chairman. Present too were the tale of the young girl, Chiyō, being taken “like a slave” from her hometown and sold into the geisha house; the acts of violence and meanness toward Chiyō and other women at the bottom of Japan’s nightlife that pervade the first third of Memoirs; and a number of remarkably ugly, deformed, and/or crude Japanese men who appear throughout the book.

Are readers of Memoirs likely to see the portrayals here as representative of “Japan” and, if so, what of Japan does the book project? Though a novel, this popular book is widely perceived to be historically and ethnographically correct. Along with the story then, readers are introduced to a world they identify as “Japan.” I pose a question—to what extent is a writer responsible for the effect of his or her writing?—to Golden, but also to all of us who write (as outsiders and also insiders) about specific worlds that get known and seen through our representations. This is an especially acute issue when the topic at hand involves behavior such as sexuality with its potential to titillate and disturb. I know this firsthand. My own work on sexuality in Japan, despite rigorous efforts to situate practices such as visiting hostess clubs within specific historical and socioeconomic relationships, has still led to orientalist reactions on the parts of some of my readers, students, and audiences. After one talk on pornographic manga, for example, a colleague disturbingly commented “Those Japanese are sure strange!” I thus strongly believe that all of us who chart (by studying, teaching, traveling to, portraying) other worlds need to continually, and aggressively, find ways to deal with the realities of (cultural/national/spatial) difference in a way that transcends rather than reinscribes a view of radical alterity. This, needless to say, is the challenge facing all of us in a field like Japan studies.

English sales have now, as I write in the winter of 2001, surpassed 40 million and the book has been translated into 32 languages. What can we make of this popularity of a book about Japanese geisha? What fuels the appeal and passion? And, as scholars who also write about Japan but with a

3. The plot of Memoirs, in brief, is: Chiyō, a girl from a poor family in a fishing village, is sold to a geisha house (okiya) in Kyoto. For years she struggles as a maid in the okiya and is subjected to brutal treatment (largely at the hands of Hatsumomo, a senior geisha jealous of the pretty Chiyō). When a geisha from another house agrees to be her “older sister,” things start to change and Chiyō, finally allowed to start training as a geisha, becomes an apprentice geisha at age 15 (when her name changes to Sayuri). The book is filled with description of Sayuri’s training and the steps she goes through to become a highly successful geisha in Gion (including her mizuage, de-flowering ceremony). She takes on a danna (patron), becomes the “mother” of her okiya, and triumphs over Hatsumomo. Her “real” love is a man she met at age 12, the Chairman, with whom she finally consummates a relationship decades later. At the end of the story, the Chairman has become her danna and Sayuri moves to New York where she bears a son, sets up a salon, and outlives the Chairman by many years.
reception far less than that enjoyed by Arthur Golden, what can we learn from *Memoirs* about the images, interests, and imagination this book fosters in its Euro-American readers about Japan? In this essay, I have two objectives. The first is to dissect the mass appeal of *Memoirs* in the United States by concentrating on what I have discovered to be the three features organizing readers’ reactions—realness, the story, and passion. My methodology combines textual analysis and ethnographic research: ten intensive interviews (all with white Euro-American women between the ages of 25 and mid-70s, the primary reading audience for *Memoirs* according to its publisher, Random House), more casual (though often lengthy) conversations with about 70 people (including men), and an examination of over 300 entries on the *Memoirs* website on amazon.com.

My second objective is to analyze the popular phenomenon of *Memoirs* in terms of whether or how it is orientalist. I take orientalism, in Edward Said’s sense, to be the perspective of viewing other cultures as essentially (by culture or race) different in a way that privileges (and hierarchizes) the self. As Said formulated it (mainly in reference to Middle East scholars in England working in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of British colonialism), this homogenizing and dichotomizing (“us”/“them”) of identities is a mode of representation anchored by (and the anchor for) material processes dictated by power inequities—colonization, travel, militarism, trade.4 The concept of orientalism has been deeply influential within and beyond the academy including a field such as Japan studies. Yet orientalism has also been critiqued and rethought, particularly in terms of the articulation it poses between power and othering, and also various changes in the world today (whose global marketplaces and post-cold-war geopolitics certainly complicate if not displace earlier—colonialist, modernist—powers and divisions). Richard Minear, for example, in his important 1980 article on “Orientalism and the Study of Japan” noted that while power has been a part of the field in which Japan scholarship is conducted in the United States, it is inflected differently than in the case of the Orientalist scholars described by Said (in direct partnership with Britain’s imperial military complex). That an orientalizing tendency still exists in Japan studies may well be motivated then by something other than “power” per se (or power defined by territorial, militaristic control).5

In my analysis of how fans enjoy and engage with *Memoirs* in the United States, I argue that there is a pattern of what I call distant intimacy: becoming intimate with the story, the world, and the characters (particularly Sayuri) through the mediation of a distance that is orientalist (geisha and

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their world remain other in the end). In this sense, the book creates a fantasy for fans akin to that of romance novels as Jan Radway argued in her study of romance fandom amongst white women in the 1980s. Unlike the latter genre, however, where stories are patently made up, Memoirs is granted higher truth value and therefore authority; fantasy collapses into “knowledge” which reflects on not only the author but also the reader. Is there a type of power in this—of reassuring the reader of authority, superiority, or dominance through this storytelling about a Japanese geisha? Certainly, there is a long history in the United States of approaching Japan, as other countries in the “Orient,” through the lens of radical difference (be it national, cultural, or racial). True as much of Memoirs as of Ruth Benedict’s The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Japan gets perceived by what Lisa Yoneyama calls “dominant listeners” in terms of the differences it poses to America. Such texts homogenize not only those who are being studied but also those who listen. In so doing, a “normative imaginary of American ‘we-ness’” is projected which can easily harbor a sense of cultural smugness if not colonial or imperial power.

In scholarly discussion, such identity politics is often at the center of orientalism. Thus, in the host of orientalist archives that have accreted in the United States since the eighteenth century (conditioned by different geopolitical shifts) attention is given, for example, to the standard themes involv-

6. For these women, romance novels were also enjoyed for the educational value (historical settings and backdrop) they provided. This insistence on “learning” in addition to enjoying a romantic fantasy was a reaction I also found with fans of Memoirs. Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance has been a groundbreaking text in cultural studies for its incorporation of reader response and its analysis of the genre of Harlequin romances. As Radway showed, the readers of romance novels she studied use these stories as a form of fantasy escape to both endure and reimagine their conventionally heterosexual, family-based lives. Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).


8. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans were riveted by the race to the Orient that was reflected in literary and scholarly texts on various “Oriental” countries. Though this race was first limited to merchants and missionaries, tourists began visiting Oriental destinations (Egypt, the Holy Land) in the 1830s. There was great interest in Oriental travel and travel writing in the nineteenth century; fascination with the Far East (particularly India) culminated in the 1850s and 1860s in the works of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Malini Johar Schueller, U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890 [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001]). At the turn of the century after Japan’s emergence from the Tokugawa period and with its commercial and military involvements with the rest of the world, interest in Japan picked up, stimulating an aesthetic craze for woodblock prints and lacquerware, and a fetishization of the “oriental” love story, Madame Butterfly.
ing identification: the Orient as a “yellow peril” or an erotic “butterfly” that gets dominated (and abandoned in the Madame Butterfly variant) by the West as white male. In this orientalism, the American is interpellated and reconfirmed through constructs of whiteness, middle-classness, maleness, and heteronormativity.9 There also, however, is a tendency to add a dimension of masquerade or play to orientalist texts. In Hollywood movies such as My Geisha and My American Geisha, Americans masquerade as Japanese geisha (as does Golden, in some sense, in Memoirs) which complexifies the ideological anchoring of identity and opens up a space for reimagining gender and sexuality along more fluid lines.10 Still, there is an orientalist agenda here if “playing” only goes one way (Sayuri never masquerades as an American professor, for example) and is performed through/on the bodies of racialized others. Said, of course, recognized the interplay of gender and sexuality in the operation of orientalism; playing with orientals reconfirms the power and dominance of the orientalist. But I question whether play or desire or study involving “others” always or necessarily is reducible to relations of power. The construction of fantasy depends, for example, on a configuration of otherness that also goes beyond or outside both identity and power, I suggest. The pursuit of knowledge as well involves a process in which the subject of inquiry is, almost by definition, reduced to the status of an object. And, in the case of the study of other cultures, this aggression is exacerbated even further.11

Realness: Authenticating the Text

What delights fans in Memoirs is not simply the “authentic aura,” as one person puts it.12 It is this coupled with the narrative which, variously

9. The Madame Butterfly story was first penned by Pierre Loti as Madame Cysanthème in the 1870s. John Luther Long next adapted it into a short story in 1898 changing the national identity of the naval officer from French to American. This story became the basis of a stage play that toured in the United States and Britain which Giacomo Puccini saw and made into an opera. It has subsequently gone through several iterations from a silent film in 1915 starring Mary Pickford to the brilliantly deconstructive play, M. Butterfly, written by David Henry Hwang in 1988 which inverted the national sex dynamic (and power) of the main characters. The main story is of an American naval official, Pinkerton, who visits Japan at the turn of the century and “marries” the geisha Cho-cho-san, whom he subsequently impregnates. When Pinkerton returns to the United States he officially marries an American woman and returns with her to Japan where Cho-cho-san has been waiting patiently for her husband. Asked to give up her child to the new couple, she does so by committing hara kiri. For Hollywood treatments of the Butterfly story, see Gina Marchetti, Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); for a sharp analysis of Hwang’s play, M. Butterfly, see Dorinne Kondo, About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater (New York: Routledge, 1997).
10. Marchetti, Romance and the “Yellow Peril.”
12. This quote and those in the following sentence are taken from postings at amazon.com.
portrayed as a “fairytales,” “juicy memoir,” and “pornographic Harlequin romance,” is enjoyed for a constellation of pleasures ranging from beauty, eroticism, and enchantment to excitement, captivation, and escape. Strikingly, while fans tend to gush about these latter enthrallments, they also mention liking Memoirs for what is learned historically about geisha and Japan.

I wanted to check out if the stereotypes of geisha were real. This made me interested in Golden’s credentials. That he had them gave the book more credibility. I didn’t know that much about Japan before reading it, so if the author hadn’t had this background, I wouldn’t have found the book so moving. I wouldn’t want to be duped into a false read of a geisha’s life.

The fact that this book was set in Japan was very important. I enjoy other cultures, but I hadn’t been particularly interested in Japanese geisha before. But this was a tantalizing part of reading Memoirs.13

In the minds of those fans I interviewed and those recording their views on amazon.com, Memoirs is a book that not only doubles as novel and historical text but assumes a status as something in between, what one fan calls “a good authentic fiction.” Continually, at least in reader responses given on amazon.com, one sees a collapse between what is assumed to be factual in Memoirs and what is taken to be good craft or fiction. Hence the book is said to be both “110% accurate” and entertaining; Golden, a “true Japanologist” as well as a gifted writer; Sayuri, the “essence” of geisha culture and an “Asian Cinderella”; and the story, “pure entertainment” and also a “stunning revelation of a very foreign culture.”

What draws American readers to this historical fantasy and what role is played here by Japan, a place far more in the news these days for its economy, technology, and cram schools than the geisha community so dramatically and anachronistically (re)presented in Memoirs?14 The latter intrigues precisely for its difference, of course; fans15 repeatedly describe the world of geisha found here as “exotic,” “foreign,” “forbidden,” and “vanishing.” Yet what does it add to this fantasy that Golden’s depiction has an “authentic aura”? Malek Alloula has written of a similar dynamic in picture postcards of Algerian women, posed to be both sexually alluring and ethnographically authentic, taken (and sent) by the French during their colonial control of Algeria in the twentieth century. As he observes, there is always a kernel of truth or verisimilitude in the pose. Without this “counterfeit realism,”

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13. Interview with a middle-aged, professional woman in Durham, North Carolina.
14. Many of the people I spoke to about Memoirs said they had not known much about Japan before reading Memoirs. One interviewee, for example (a middle-aged woman, office worker, Boulder), told me that “Japanese culture is not that widely known, not like other cultures.”
15. These comments are taken from reviews of Memoirs and postings on amazon.com.
the “whole endeavor would degenerate into gratuitous fantasy.” Consequently, models came to the studio and were dressed in articles of local costume. The portraits that resulted, however, were stylized erotic stereotypes: “Bedouin woman,” “Moorish woman in housedress,” “Reclining odalisque,” “Moorish bust.” As Alloula puts it, a truth in the details does not add up to a truthfulness of the whole.

In this case, what drives the quest for “truth” is a desire for control that is central, yet elusive, to all colonialist endeavors. So much is unknown in dealing with a foreign culture that penetrating its inner mysteries is a fantasy that haunts all colonialism. What the picture postcards of Algerian women therefore offered was a view of a revealed culture, a pacified land, a possessed body: the intertwinment of knowledge and power, ethnography and desire.

What Alloula refers to as an “ethnographic alibi” is also at work, I believe, in the popular phenomenon of Memoirs: the insistence of so many fans that the story spun by Golden reflects a world that is historically real. Here is a desire to both know and see the exotic female, though, in the case of Memoirs, it is not organized by colonialism, or at least not the modernist, masculinist kind waged by the French in Algeria. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of what is organizing the erotics of epistemology (or epistemological erotics) in the case of Memoirs, it is important to consider first how Golden is so effective in establishing the ethnographic alibi in his book. This is especially striking given that few readers (at least among those I have spoken to and reviews I have read) have much, if any, previous knowledge about Japan or geisha with which to judge the book’s accuracy. Thus, apart from the question of how “right” did Golden get it, the question is: what rhetorical strategies does he use to convince so many readers that the book absolutely “rings true”?

Following the title page and preceding the main narrative is a four-page fictional prelude to Memoirs, entitled “Translator’s Note,” signed by a fictional character, Jakob Haahrhuis, Arnold Rusoff Professor of Japanese History, New York University. Here Professor Haahrhuis tells the story of how Sayuri came to record her memoirs, thereby breaking the silence surrounding the geisha world. When the “translator’s note” ends, the main story begins: when it does, the “voice” we now hear has been fictionalized twice over, with the author posing as both the storyteller herself and also the authoritative academic, shaping and legitimizing the text. These are both creative plays, of course, not unlike those used by other authors in writing fiction. But here the effect seems particularly potent and readers become particularly susceptible to believing the fiction. Since publication of his

17. Ibid.
book and the celebrity blitz that surrounded him, Golden has often told the story of its writing: it took eight years and the scrapping of two entire drafts to hit upon a strategy that worked—the first-person story of Sayuri beginning as a child. With this device, readers are introduced to geisha knowhow—the makeup, kimono, hairstyles, transactions—as Sayuri learns it herself rather than having it pedantically intrude into the text.

Golden’s intention to blur the personal and professorial voice is then quite conscious and, indeed, it is as both a good story and instructional text that the book has become so popular. For readers, one result of this blurring is that many remain unclear as to who precisely is speaking in Memoirs. Some never realize it’s a novel and some only when they have finished the book and talk with friends. But, even more interesting, a number of readers I have spoken to are thrown by “Jakob Haarhuis,” wondering why Golden didn’t sign his own name as the translator. One woman I interviewed understood this was all a ploy but still was motivated to look up in a New York University catalog to see whether there was an Arnold Rusoff chair in Japanese history. To this fan, a highly educated professional, the strategy of fabricating Haarhuis was brilliant, making the memoir seem more real. But of equal importance were Golden’s academic credentials because, coming to the book with little knowledge of Japan and an interest in learning the reality behind the stereotype of geisha, she read Memoirs as a “cultural study.” In addition, the text is written in a style to accent an “Oriental” feel or sensibility. The effect is a “Japanesy” setting, a creation readers are unlikely to question when both the book and author are taken to be scholarly.

The “professor,” whatever/however he is conceived, is thus an authenticating shadow in Memoirs. He is not the only one, however. So is Iwasaki Mineko (or at least until she denounced him recently), the “real-life” geisha who, introduced through a family friend, spoke to Golden of geisha life with the same “candor” and “intimate detail” (Memoirs, p. 433) that Sayuri herself grants Professor Haarhuis. In the promotional materials accompanying Memoirs, Iwasaki and Golden’s access to her were invariably hyped, along with the juiciest snippet of her geisha stardom in the 1960s and 1970s: the high price (reportedly more than half a million dollars at current rates) of her mizuage, the geisha practice of selling one’s virginity. At once literalizing and exoticizing Sayuri’s story, Iwasaki’s shadow has thus anchored one foot of the book in Gion just as Professor Haarhuis/Golden anchors the other in U.S. academia. This structure of the Western authority gaining (surprising, revealing) entée into the foreign world is reminiscent of Said’s ori-

18. Golden received his B.A. at Harvard in East Asian art and an M.A. at Columbia in Japanese history.
19. This is a direct quote from a Japanese historian.
entalism. An asserted authority stands on one side and speaks of/for/with a cultural other who is revealed, as the authority is not, in the process. No matter how sympathetic or kindly the resulting portrayal, according to Said, this discursive relationship is inherently unequal with power, real or imaginary, weighted at one end.20

Anthropologists have come under heavy criticism, from both inside and outside the discipline, for precisely these dynamics in studying “other,” typically less economically and industrially developed countries, within the framework of Euro-American academia. This has led (especially since the appearance of two landmark books in 1986, Writing Culture and Anthropology as Cultural Critique21) to anthropologists becoming more self-reflective and unmasking our own positionality and rhetorical strategies when studying (and representing) others. In this move to expose and break down the self/other border in studies of culture, subjects are starting to both write back (against Western representations) and write of their own cultures, what Said calls “oppositional culture” and considers a corrective to orientalism. On the surface, the structure of Memoirs would seem to collapse both these modalities; the voice is (orientalist) the Western scholar’s yet (oppositionally) “native” as well. Further, the book presents a catalog of what Said criticizes as “cultural archives”—details of tradition, custom, and worldview that explain the “essences” of a particular culture—but also a historical and personal (albeit fictional) narrative, what Said proposed for disrupting the static orientalism of an archivist’s essentialisms.22

But, to conform to Said’s “oppositional culture,” can a construction of the “native” stand in for the “real” thing? In the case of Memoirs, both Sayuri’s voice and personal story are total fabrications. Furthermore, the real-life native who lent her experiences to Golden for writing his book has now claimed that her privacy was exposed and the author’s portrayal of geisha inaccurate. By her account, Iwasaki has been victimized by a type of chauvinism consistent with (rather than oppositional to) orientalism. She was shocked that Golden would not only use her picture and history (particularly details of her mizugae) in promoting his book, but also print her name in the book’s acknowledgments. Personally exposed in a way she had been promised would not happen, this has led to Iwasaki’s alienation from the geisha community, where a code of secrecy is still upheld. Even more upsetting was reading the book when it came out in Japanese (October 1999, two years after it first appeared in English). In her mind, Golden’s portrayal

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of the geisha world is totally different from the one she gave him. In his hands, it is more tawdry and smutty than cultured and refined; the book is a “potboiler” where geisha appear as prostitutes—more a fantasy of Western men than an accurate representation of Japanese geisha.  

Iwasaki Mineko sees the role she played in Golden’s *Memoirs* as the flesh-and-blood subject whose story was milked and tossed aside by the powerful and successful Western male writer. Golden, of course, has a different account. But the issue I raise here is not who is more “right,” but rather that of construction and how Sayuri is not only a fictional construct but also one constructed to feel “real.” And this realness, which borrows from but is not, itself, “reality,” is an important factor in the popularity of *Memoirs* and the nature of its orientalism.  

**Passionate Orientalism**

When readers described their experience of *Memoirs* to me, it was often in language befitting a love affair. They would smile and get excited, talk quickly, and move their bodies. Passion, bordering on arousal, was palpable, and what was verbalized was the sensation of being “moved”—by the gripping story, the beautiful writing, the visual magic, the sensual world. In almost all cases, the pleasure gained from reading *Memoirs* was analogized to travel taken to a “far-away place”—a trip that, at once thrilling and eye-opening, carried them away from everyday lives while also bringing them in touch with something deep and familiar within. As Spielberg’s screenwriter Ron Bass put it after reading the book, “It all seems so foreign, but once you get into the hearts and souls of the people, you recognize all the emotions and feelings.”  

In such a depiction, there is something both distant and intimate: something both of and other than the self. A similar architectonic of distant intimacy structures the orientalist urge, parallel to what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the ambivalence of the colonial encounter, and involves an organization of passion and subjectivity around things, peoples, and places perceived to be (in some ways, but in some ways not) other.

One woman in her 70s whom I interviewed, however, was clearly dis-


24. Katherine Frank has discovered a similar pattern in U.S. strip clubs where dancers stage their identities (assuming made-up names, histories, personalities, interests) but are constantly quizzed by their customers as to how “truthful” they are being. The desire is for a performance that is both good and believable. Katherine Frank, “The Production of Identity and the Negotiation of Intimacy in a Gentleman’s Club,” *Sexualities*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1998), pp. 175–201. Jennie Livingstone has recorded a similar dynamic in drag balls in her movie, *Paris is Burning*.


passionate about *Memoirs*. When asked what she liked about the book, she said it was the fact that it showed a life completely different from her own. This world, however, struck her as very “trite” and an “empty type of living for both the men and the geisha.” The descriptions of kimono and makeup were “impressive” but unengaging, even boring, in their excessiveness, and the characters seemed shallow and undeveloped with plot twists that were implausible (such as Sayuri becoming “enamoured” of an older man at the age of 12). More than anything, this woman spoke of “sadness” in the geisha world by which she meant an “emptiness” and “bamboozling” associated with “selling bodies.” “Japanese men come off looking pretty bad,” she concluded, adding, “They should be home talking with their wives instead.” Distasteful, even repulsive, were the differences of value and lifestyle this reader met, through *Memoirs*, in Gion, and her reaction was that these people were empty.

In the sense that this “traveler” learns little from her travels and finds the world she has entered repugnant (and, by contrast, her own cultural home reassuringly better), her reading of *Memoirs* is orientalist. Strikingly different, at least on the surface, is the far more common response to the book of utter captivation and fascination. Many, when describing their experience of reading *Memoirs*, speak of the enthrallment of being “swept away” by the “eroticism” and “beauty” of the story and seductively “drawn into” a “veiled,” “forbidden” world so thoroughly “foreign.” Conjured up is an image of a dark, dashing lover with whom a relationship is compelling, even illicit. Analogies of absorption are often used to describe this sensation: of being “transported” to another world, going on a “great adventure,” “slipping into a silky hot bath,” and getting engrossed in a painting “with very fine brushstrokes.” Many readers feel “possessed” by what they encounter in *Memoirs*. They also express feelings of actively possessing: of enjoying the sensation of drawing back the curtain of a private, secretive world and not only viewing it (voyeuristically) but also entering and even inhabiting it.

Readers continually stress how intriguing the world is they discover in *Memoirs*. But this does not mean they necessarily like or identify with what they find. Rather, it often seems the newness, the difference, the unimaginable richness of it all, revealed in such delicious detail, is reveled in as with a sumptuous meal. A number of fans on amazon.com express their experiences with *Memoirs* in these terms: of being “swept away” from “everyday foreign” to a “universe foreign to Western civilization.” As one person recommends the book, it is a “must read for anyone who wishes to leave home temporarily.” Described as exotic escapism, this is akin to what bell hooks, the black cultural studies scholar, means by “getting a bit of the other”: a

27. The quotes here are taken from the *Memoirs* website on amazon.com.
thrilling escape that leaves both the self and other intact after the ride. For its one-sidedness and adherence to notions of inalterable (cultural/racial) difference, such a response is orientalist.

Certainly, for most readers of Memoirs I have spoken to, there is the perception of considerable difference and distance between the world of the geisha and the reader’s own: “I loved the book, but the geisha world is different you know: a different moral universe. Not bad; just different.” Of course, this sense of otherness is precisely what compels so many readers, but the ways this is both experienced and navigated in Memoirs can be much more complex, profound, and personal than a simple “getting a bit of the other” description would give it credit. As my two most articulate interviewees (Ruth and Carol) explained it to me, there is an overlap between what is learned about geisha culture, what is evoked by Golden’s sensuous writing, what is imagined through the panoramics of his descriptions, and what is experienced through a story that elicits a whole spectrum of human emotions. For these women, all these threads weave and blur together so that their reading of Memoirs was aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional all at the same time.

The biggest factor by far in the popularity of this book is the laced texture of geisha culture that is as intriguing as it is sensuous: the lush elaborations women use to remake themselves into exquisite art pieces that Golden both conveys and mimics in his writing. Golden crafts his text so visually, and the geisha world itself is so visual, that readers feel they are not merely reading about this world but actually seeing it, living it, even embodying it. Ruth added to this that Golden’s writing is not only beautiful but also subtle in that he evokes scenes and dramas indirectly with all the delicacy of a geisha herself. At the beginning of the book, for example, when Mr. Tanaka happens to see Chiyô at the water hole when she is naked, the girl’s nakedness is implied rather than stated. Such a technique makes readers use their imaginations to see events through their own eyes. Brilliant as well, Ruth commented, is the first-person narrative technique and the fact that we “hear” this geisha speaking in the voice of both a wise woman reflecting on her life and the childishness of a girl (Chiyô) discovering a geisha’s secrets for the first time.

Readers often point to a sense of familiarity, intimacy, or identification with the character Sayuri, less with her being a geisha (which most say they still find alien and totally at odds with anything they ever could imagine being or becoming) and more with her story as a woman. Most commonly I was told that Sayuri was a tough woman, whose life story of surviving and coping with the endless challenges and heartbreaks that litter the text was

29. Middle-aged woman, personal interview.
pure triumphalism. Interestingly enough, while I and a few other readers felt her obsession with the Chairman (that lasts for so long based on so seemingly little) undercut Sayuri’s image as a strong, independent woman, this was an infrequent response. Far more prevalent is admiration for Sayuri as a resilient and resourceful woman, an impression not tainted by the fact that she both is and wants to be occasionally “saved” by men (a customer “saves” her during the war by arranging for her to work in the countryside rather than a dreary factory in Tokyo, and Sayuri longs often for the Chairman to “save” her from the various pains she endures). The romance that is consummated in the end, making for the type of happy ending Western (though not Japanese) readers are used to, is also one of the great highs of the book, according to about 80 per cent of the people I spoke to. (In the words of one interviewee, “‘Whew!’ was the reaction I had when she got together with him.”) Some pointedly call Memoirs a Cinderella story—and apparently this was its attraction for Steven Spielberg in imagining it as a movie—and love the rags-to-riches formula that is a Western invention, added on to this geisha story to make it more palatable and familiar to Western audiences.

For some, perhaps many, of Memoirs readers, there is a type of identification with Sayuri, not as a geisha but as a woman with a hard life and a fantasy love life. But for some Memoirs readers, I sense there is more play with the border between the exotic and the self; the geisha is exoticized but as an exotic other that readers imagine trying on themselves. Certainly the masquerade and disguise part of the story is what a recent trend in geisha glam has picked up, designing fashion with a body erotics based on concealing rather than revealing flesh, and playing with the line between these (“the allure of geisha chic comes from wrapping and reticence” reads an article about this fashion in the New York Times). More to the point perhaps is the book’s modeling of an alternative construction of sexuality and identification, one that ties neither to the compulsion with “truth” that so binds them, as is Michel Foucault’s great insight, in the West. The geisha performs sensuality and selfhood with a playfulness that flirts with the border of reality rather than conforms to it. The “truth” of things is consistently disguised to feed the geisha’s performativity and desirability as a fantasy woman. And both the customer and geisha are well aware of this construction.

In the geisha world, everything is about artifice and fiction, which makes interactions here not so much “false” as beyond the conception of “truth”

31. The queen in George Lucas’s recent Star Wars: The Phantom Menace has also been said to be dressed as a geisha with kimono-like costumes and white paint on her face.
altogether. As one of my interviewees (a middle-aged, professional woman) revealed as well, the “tricks” a geisha uses to sensualize her being (pouring tea with just a hint of flesh exposed, for example) intrigued her, in part, because the art of feminine “objectification” was something the interviewee had strictly avoided learning about (or presumably adopting) as a feminist. In the context of Memoirs, however, she was intrigued by the playfulness and pleasures of seductiveness for which she developed a new understanding and even appreciation. By contrast, another reader (also a middle-aged, professional woman) was more critical of the seductions at work in Memoirs. Pointing out the scene where the Baron “creepily but erotically”undyresses Sayuri, she calls this a “manipulation” because “two things are going on at once—a sort of male-seduction point of view mixed in with Sayuri’s supposed resistance. Golden is the one being very creepy, because he’s pretending to tell his character’s truth but he’s actually up to something else.” As this woman suggests, Sayuri’s story is played as the life of an independent woman, but she is also a vehicle of and for male desires. Precisely, I would say, except this dressing as erotic fantasy feeds desires that are not purely “male” given, for one, that the readership of Memoirs is overwhelmingly female. Identity as well as passion is shifting here in ways that potentially unsettle old binarisms between female and male, hetero- and homosexuality.33

A trope of disguise juxtaposed against its seeming opposite—truth—permeates the structure and pleasures of Memoirs. Geisha are in disguise, the book disguises itself as a “memoir,” Golden speaks in the guise of both Sayuri and Haahrhuis. Much of Memoirs’ hype, in fact, has centered around the “ventriloquist’s act”34 performed by Golden who, as an American, male author, embodies the life and voice of a Japanese woman. Equally as important as the motif of masquerade, however, is its unmasking in a search for (and belief in) an underlying truth that anchors the book for many of its readers. Readers typically insist on the value of Memoirs as not just a good read or romantic fantasy but also an educational resource. Such an insistence on a literal truth carries over into the construction of the narrative as well: to the story of Sayuri, for example, who spends her life moving between two conflicting goals—to construct herself as a fantasy and to deconstruct her inner self by pursuing a “true” love.

33. Gina Marchetti has made this point as well regarding Hollywood-brand geisha movies (such as My Geisha and My American Geisha); with their fantasies of masquerade, they make explicit the notion of femininity as masquerade. This opens up the possibility of not only looking at gender as a (cultural/historical) construction, but also considering lesbian eroticism (Marchetti, Romance and the “Yellow Peril,” pp. 200–201).

Readers seem deeply attracted to this intermixture, identifying more with one side (the strong Sayuri, her romantic denouement) and playing more with the other (as a fluid, constructed, postmodern, imagined, and imaginary source of identity and fun). (Interestingly, I have encountered only two people who openly say they identify with the geisha in *Memoirs*: Madonna, who has appeared on the Grammy awards and in a video “like a geisha,” and someone on the *Memoirs* website on amazon.com.) It is important to keep in mind, however, that the sub-text about inner truth and self-revelation in *Memoirs* is far more a Western than Japanese trope: something that pulls Euro-American readers in, which gets conflated, nonetheless, with the “truth” that *Memoirs* seemingly establishes about Japan. An even more serious concern is that, if one of the pleasures of reading *Memoirs* is, as I have suggested, a play with one’s own identity, sexuality, and/or gender, this endeavor is conducted through the vehicle of racialized, other-ized women (who, in some sense, are considered “real” and, in this capa-city, stand [in] for Japan). And the difference between the “other” and the “self” is not dissolved by the end of the read. In this, there is as orientalizing a project as anything in the orientalist archives of this country, and it is, as bell hooks has suggested, “playing with the other” in a way that reinscribes (rather than disrupts) the authority of white, normative (and probably het-eronormative) America.

**Phantoms and Fantasies**

The intoxication of travels to and fantasies of distant places has relevance, I believe, to *Memoirs* where fans don’t identify overtly with geisha-dom but nonetheless feel powerfully moved by and attracted to the story. This book moves readers, and not only in their heads but in their (sexed) bodies as well. But there is an interesting tension here: the eroticism of the exotic as I have laid it out actually hinges on the object remaining some-what distanced, remote, unknown—a masquerade that stays masked.35 But Golden’s book is also dressed and read as a scholarly textbook providing knowledge about Gion and Japan. So which is it? Or, given that readers say *Memoirs* does both—entertains and teaches—how does this work?

35. There are many texts that differently weave the strands of identity, sexuality, knowl-edge, and power I explore here in terms of orientalism. One is the novel *Silk* by Alessandro Barcco (trans. Guido Waldman) (London: The Harvil Press, 1997) in which an Italian man, traveling to far-away Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, becomes infatuated with an exotic woman. The relationship barely develops, but the fantasy it triggers is a powerful erotic for not only the man but also his wife who inhabits the fantasy herself in order to win her husband back. What I call distant intimacy or otherness in this essay (being drawn to an object despite, and precisely because, s/he is exotically distanced) is central to the structure of fantasy in *Silk* and illustrates its importance to not only orientalism but also fantasy/desire more generally (and thus, the relationship between the two).
My own assessment is that *Memoirs*, more than anything, is a good story and, next, an exotic fantasy (which doesn’t discount the profound and personal impact it has on many readers). But, given that the subject is geisha who themselves embody the fantasy of exoticism, then what we “learn” in this book melds pretty seamlessly with everything else; the history is enveloped in the story that enfolds the fantasy. Masks get unmasked and re-masked continuously throughout the book—perfect voyeurism. In saying this, I am not impugning the historicity with which Golden has done research to portray Gion with an accuracy that most scholars I know agree is good or certainly good enough. And the sense of ethnographic authenticity Golden projects is unquestionably important to almost all those who love this book the most. But when we ask why this aura of truth is so important to *Memoirs*’ popularity, I’m not convinced that it is merely or mainly for what people say: that it opens up a window onto a culture they know little about. And, if it is, I find it disturbing that this is the text, fictional and imaginary, about a behavior so minor, antiquated, and fetishized in Japan today. When readers say, “Orientals have always been a mystery, but this book taught me a lot,” what Japan, and what of Japan, are they learning?

But even acknowledging that some readers do think *Memoirs* is educating them into the essences of Japanese culture, even its postmodern iteration of the 1990s, my own sense is that most readers realize that geisha don’t adequately represent the contemporary, urban, postindustrial Japan of today. Anchoring *Memoirs* in historical fact does something else, though, that is far more critical to its popularization: it provides the ethnographic alibi that allows women to fantasize Sayuri and geisha. Without this cover of being “out there,” women would have to acknowledge the fantasies inspired by *Memoirs* as being theirs. Using distant places as metaphors, respites, or displacements for sexuality variously outlawed or repressed at home was long a pattern of colonialism. With *Memoirs* too, women are flirting with a different sensuality: in the delights of reinventing oneself, playing with masquerades and charades, and finding pleasure in being the object and performer of eroticism. And they want both to “know” how this is done and to keep this image at a distance—something exotic enough to remain exciting, different, and other (to them and as an otherness valued precisely in these terms).

Such a sensual impulse, if I have hit the mark at all, hardly seems radical. Yet given the mainstream complexion of the *Memoirs* fandom I at least have been exposed to and the sexual atmosphere of the United States in the late 1990s—still chaste and moralistic; in love with the idea if not always the practice of marriage; and suspicious of “unconventional” sex, which

continues to be policed and criminalized as “deviant”—experimentation can be dangerous. And vicarious, voyeuristic travels so much safer. Does this mean Memoirs is orientalist? I would say yes to the degree that it fosters readers to indulge fantasies they can only play out through the disguise of projecting them onto someone else—an other not oneself. In this sense, the confusion between the historical authenticity of Memoirs and its fantasy story is highly problematic (and exacerbated rather than dispelled by the technique of enfolding cultural archives into a fictional tale of an imaginary geisha) if and when readers read it unself-consciously as a tale (only) of someone else rather than themselves.

But I also urge us, in reconsidering orientalism, to more seriously engage the dimension of distant intimacy Golden has so powerfully touched in the lives and imaginations of his readership in the United States today. Not only is this “real” in and of itself, but its electrification through the vehicle of Japanese geisha has something to do with Japan. What precisely this is falls within the domain of what I have been trying to investigate here with orientalism: how what we see, experience, and “know” of other cultures is affected by our own (personal, political, sexual) desires. In order to move beyond orientalism, beyond the East/West divide that many say the “real world” of global capitalism and transnationalism has already transcended, we need to better scrutinize the various guises of orientalism as it accompanies the ways “we” (any of us) view and interact with people across the chasm of difference. At the same time, I urge us also to learn from what Golden performs about the allure of foreign travel. How to tell better stories that are imaginative and compelling without falling into the trap of exoticizing or essentializing (or of doing either without reflecting on the desires this involves for the self) is the task I see for us (would-be) postorientalists.