They're Not Coming Back

Profiles of artists and writers who left their homelands for the creative life abroad.

By JOSEPH O'NEILL

IN THIS ESOTERICALLY learned and always entertaining book, Jamie James offers biographical sketches of aesthetic extremists who decided to settle somewhere foreign to them, usually a hotter and poorer place: The Pacific and the Caribbean figure luminously in these pages. (Funny how people don't seem to reinvent themselves in Swindon or Stuttgart.) James names his subjects "exotes." Unlike the traveler or the tourist, who belongs somewhere and intends to return

THE GLAMOUR OF STRANGENESS
Artists and the Last Age of the Exotic
By Jamie James
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there, the exote is a "voluntary exile who goes to distant lands in search of a new home with no intent to repatriate." Rimbaud was an exote. Marco Polo wasn't.

A Texan who wrote art reviews for The New Yorker in the 1990s, James is himself an exote. After years of incessant travel, in 1999 he upped sticks from New York and moved permanently to Bali, where, by all appearances, he has found his métier as a writer of fiction and nonfiction with local and regional themes. James is passionately interested in Pacific culture, Indonesian in particular, and he has an inordinate, and no doubt cost-ineffective, appetite for research. He may be a blue-chip professional writer (and one with a subtle sense of language and a very good idea of where his reader is), but there's no question that his new book is the work of an amateur in the strictest, most laudable sense: the one who acts, in this case writes, out of love.

This amateurism generates the book's raison d'être and, most important, its good faith. It serves as a shield against the criticisms that a project of this kind must risk, given the ideological terrain it crosses. Difficult questions about race, Orientalism, imperialism and the sexual exploitation of the poor are squarely raised by "The Glamour of Strangeness"; and one is ticklishly aware, while reading about these advantaged bohemian adventurers, that more than 65 million people, an all-time high, are currently categorized by the United Nations as refugees or internally displaced or seeking asylum. Of course, it's precisely in dark and vexing times that the fantasy of the exit revives. (Or, see Brexit, the fantasy of retreat and fortification.) Quite a few readers will, I'm sure, pick up James's book to nourish dreams of escaping the malfunctioning contraption of the homeland.

JOSEPH O'NEILL'S *most recent novel is "The Dog."*

Isabelle Eberhardt

We are concerned, in this "natural history of exoticism," with Raden Saleh (1811-80), a Javanese painter who spent 20 years in Western Europe; the Frenchman Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), of Polynesian fame; Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904), a Swiss-Russian writer who moved to Saharan North Africa; Victor Segalen (1878-1919), a writer from Brittany who for years lived and worked in China; the painter Walter Spies (1895-1942), who left Germany for Bali; and finally, Maya Deren (1917-61), the Russian-born American avant-garde filmmaker whose trips to Haiti defined her life and her work.

These characters deserve our attention, James argues, on account of the art they made in their new surroundings. However, it's the outlandishness of their shenanigans and situations, their utter removal from "pedestrian middle-class existence," that immediately detains us. Schlosses, yachts, villas and boutique homes abound, as do royals, barons, Hollywood stars, millionaires, servants and lots of sexually obliging locals. If you amalgamated our six protagonists into a single character, she/he would dress as an Arab man; impersonate a Javanese prince; excavate the oldest sculpture in China; practice Voodoo; enjoy a scandalous love life; cut a dash in the ballrooms of Paris; lead the fight against a virulent outbreak of the pneumonic plague; inspire Noël Coward to write a poem; and hold court as a tropical *"arbiter elegantiae* and philosopher-raja." These are the Most Interesting People in the World.

Up to a point. Glamour has its peculiar tediousness; and James, who is properly sympathetic to his subjects, does not shrink from the fact that Gauguin, Spies and Eberhardt made use of the lopsided sexual power they enjoyed in the colonies. Indeed, by way of investigating the subject, he provides details of the sex tourism of Flaubert, Wilde and Gide, and of the "outrageous" erotic career of the exote Sinologist Sir Edmund Backhouse. If this material feels like gossip, it's because the book's conceptual apparatus is, in this context, a little flimsy. James is rightly reluctant to offer a "grand philosophical scheme" or "factitious hypothesis" of exoticism. But it would have been fascinating to read a fuller critique of the ways in which the "beautiful" girls and "lads" of the colonies were aestheticized into a sexual iconicity that

Paul Gauguin

Difficult questions about race, imperialism and sexual exploitation are raised.

amounted to a kind of invisibility — and to what extent this erasure informed the art, and with what implications.

James's most relevant thesis, here, is that "these exotes, who declared their personal independence from their native lands, constitute their own school of art: the school of no nation, or all nations." He is on to something important. He persuasively suggests that his exotes' response to "the accident of nationality assigned by birth" is of contemporary significance "in their anticipation of a world in which commerce and communications and culture flow easily across national boundaries."

Nationalistic notions of art, a relatively recent phenomenon, were quickly dissolved, or diluted, by ideas such as *l'art pour l'art*, and thereafter by modernism and its successors. Is there anything particularly Dutch about Mondrian's geometric paintings? Is Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" — an artwork that doubles as a physical feature of the United States — really to be understood as an American thing? Nonetheless, we continue to assume that a Turkish writer, say, gets closest to her truth about the world by writing, preferably in Turkish, about Turkey and Turks. Counterexamples — self-alienating writers such as Beckett and Conrad — are exceptional. Ultimately, the issue is political as much as aesthetic: *What* interests the artist is inseparable from *who* interests the artist. And what if, this book asks, the artist and subject are defined by a relation of "strangeness"?

The title is from T. E. Lawrence's "Seven Pillars of Wisdom": "Pray God that men reading the story will not, for love of the glamour of strangeness, go out to prostitute themselves and their talents in serving another race." James's exotes would have given Lawrence little cause for worry: They served themselves. A central purpose of their expatriation was to escape the burdensome rules and customs of the native land, and they were in no hurry to assume a foreign set of obli-

Maya Deren

gations. Eberhardt and Gauguin, James states, believed in "the principle of unhindered self-sovereignty." Walter Spies, in Bali, created and presided over "a tiny aesthetic state." In this sense, they laid claim to an extranational space of radical personal autonomy.

On paper, this sounds terrific. But the trouble with radical personal autonomy, of course, is what happens to the autonomy of the next guy, especially if he is a colonized subject over whom you hold excessive power. And the trouble with an excess of power, I would suggest, is that it weakens the perception associated with the most truthful art. "Free at last, with no money troubles, and able to love, to sing, and to die," Paul Gauguin, dreaming of Polynesia, wrote to his wife, Mette. He was talking about his finances and his songs, not anybody else's. □

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