Cross-cultural dressing is usually seen as a Western activity, but elite Ottomans would have been by the end of the empire perfectly accustomed to wearing Western clothes – something which challenges current theories about cross-cultural dressing. The following considers photographs of cross-cultural dressing in books written by two friends: the Ottoman Zeyneb Hanum, who with her sister, Melek Hanum, collaborated with Pierre LOTI on his novel, Les Désenchantées (1913), was edited by Ellison, whose own story of visits to Turkey, An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem, appeared two years later in 1915. In both books the authors appear cross-culturally dressed, yet the images register very differently.

Within Orientalism’s fantasy logic about the forbidden harem, women writers could claim an insider’s knowledge prohibited to Western men. But, as Ellison knew, associating oneself with a realm so relentlessly sexualized in the minds of the West was also risky. To the Western ear, to be staying in a Turkish harem sounds alarming, and not a little – yes, let us confess it – improper (Ellison 1915, p. 2). Although this closeness to the object of study might prohibit a mode of detached scientific neutrality otherwise desired by European women, Ellison welcomes the proximity permitted by cross-cultural dressing when the privileges of passing gain her access to religious sites:

... now I am wearing a veil that can tell whether I am Muslim or Christian! ... (But) how could I, even as a veiled woman, take my place amongst the women? ... I was too frightened; my action might be mistaken for irreverence.

(Ellison 1915, pp.162-4)

But she is all laughter at having fooled some Europeans.

Just before we reached our carriage I saw a dear friend ... escorting some English visitors around... She recognized my voice, and I was introduced as a Turkish lady to my compatriots.

I felt just a little guilty at their delight in meeting Oriental women, for I had been too dangerous to undervalue them in those fanatical surroundings. “And how well you speak English too!” “It’s not English; it’s the first language I spoke,” I answered truthfully. I wonder whether Miss A. ever told them I really was?

(Ellison 1915, p.169, my emphasis)

Yet though Ellison delights in being mistaken for a Turk, the narrative also marks out her distance from her Oriental objects of study, often by referencing her attempts to ‘capture’ Oriental women in photographs.

There is a beautiful old woman in the household whom I long to “Ku’dah”. Once I thought I had her... but she noticed me, alas! then cursed, screamed, and buried her head in her roomy pantaloons. I shall not try to repeat the experiment.

(Ellison 1915, p.180)

Not only did the new technology of photography develop cotermoinously with the new investigative social sciences of anthropology and ethno-graphics, it also became an established part of the fieldwork process – classifying, conceptualizing and visualizing ‘other’ peoples. For Ellison, the Orient’s enchanting distinctiveness becomes exaggerated when it thwart its ethnographic and scopophilic desire to gather photographic evidence: she finds members of her hostess’ entourage to be ‘most fanatical’ in their insistence that photography is forbidden by Islam (though photography was, in fact, increasingly available in Istanbul by this period). Defiantly en-acting her book An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem, Ellison fronts it with a photograph of herself, “the author in Turkish costume”, in ‘native’ dress – her hair covered by a tscherch, her face unveiled. The Ottoman clothes are identified as ‘costume’, rendering ‘native’ activity, but elite Ottomans wear as time-honored as modern fashion, further endorsing the sit-ter’s racialized identification.

Grace Ellison is identified as ‘the author’ at the head of the book, yet in another photograph, ‘An Englishwoman wearing a Yashmak’ (see photo), the identity of the woman as well as the author is removed, making it seem as though the veil is a costume rather than as modern fashion, further endorsing the sit-ter’s racialized identification.

Ellison fronts Zeyneb Hanum’s book, featuring her in ‘Turkish costume’, with a photograph of herself, entitled ÒZeyneb in her Paris drawing roomÓ (see photo), the identity of the woman as well as her nationality or race of the subject can be thrilled but not her name. Passing only makes sense if it can be based on the transgression of clearly fixed boundaries of racial and cultural difference. So Ellison, whose face is still clearly visible, can be thrilled when she hoodwinks people into thinking that she is Turkish, just as she plans to hoodwink her readers who open the book expecting one thing (disreputable ‘smoking room’ tales of polygamy) and get another. By presenting herself through photographs and prose as willingly acculturated to Turk-ish life, Ellison suggests the positive aspects of haremization and keys into a mode of surveil-lance based on invisible voyeurism. Whilst the book pictures elite Ottoman women’s adoption of Western fashions, Ellison’s photographs of herself, ‘in disguise’ (Ellison 1915, pp.162-4), we have a mixture of the two – a visi-bly Turkish woman in her Turfukled room in the French capital. If the frontispiece to Elli-son’s book, fronting her in “Turkish cos-tume”, is designed to testify to the activity of her visits to Turkish harems, the photo-graph which fronts Zeyneb Hanum’s book shows her bringing the harem with her. Being seen wearing a yashmak in Paris proves her authenticity as a Turkish woman in the West. Unlike Ellison, who can leave it to cap-tions to distinguish her racialized identity, Zeyneb Hanum’s attempt to dress as a Turk in the West. Unlike Ellison, who can leave it to cap-tions to distinguish her racialized identity, Zeyneb Hanum’s identifications need to be seen as performative, as identifications which, rather than being natural or innate, are constructed and understood through the reterritorialization of cultural difference which suggests a self-con-scious manipulation of Western cultural codes, since cross-cultural dressing would have had a very different meaning for her in an Ottoman context. There, Western com-modities were seen as part of a continuum of the exoticizing, would too much trouble the transcultu-rizing drive of the book.

European harems

The power of dress as a cross-cultural dressing is illustrated by Zeyneb Hanum. Offering a cogent criticism of the limitations of West-ern freedom, she finds the harem in Europe a prize worth the effort. What a curious harem!... [This] Ladies’ Club [where she is staying in London] is not a big one, but it has an historic aura of an Eastern Harem – a Club... is after all an-other kind of harem, but it has none of the mystery and charm of the Harem of the East. (Zeyneb Hanum 1915, pp.182-3)

Zeyneb Hanum exerts a haremizing gaze on the West that makes visible its hidden dis-junction of space and organization of sexuality, relocating Orientalism’s sexualized projec-tions back to their Western point of origin.

But, my dear (Grace), why have you never told me that the Ladies’ ‘Galerie’ [in the Houses of Parliament] is... the harem of the future!... You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where you lunch, you cover them with a symbol of protection.

(Zeyneb Hanum 1915, p.114)

Clearly Zeyneb Hanum had European clothes and even in Turkey, like many elite women, would have habitually worn Paris fashions – something which would have been extraordinary to Edwardian readers. But by the 1910s, European images, like those of Fortune magazine, which shows women wearing Turkish clothes in all but one of the illustrations. In the face of the potentially accelerating ef-facts of their sojourn in Europe these photo-graphs work to maintain a sense of the au-thor’s Turkishness. It is, after all, the racialized portrait of the East which supports the rationale of the whole book. So when we turn to photographs like “Zeyneb in her Paris drawing room” (see photo), we see a mixture of the two – a visi-bly Turkish woman in her Turfukled room in the French capital. If the frontispiece to Elli-son’s book, fronting her in “Turkish cos-tume”, is designed to testify to the activity of her visits to Turkish harems, the photo-graph which fronts Zeyneb Hanum’s book shows her bringing the harem with her. Being seen wearing a yashmak in Paris proves her authenticity as a Turkish woman in the West. Unlike Ellison, who can leave it to cap-tions to distinguish her racialized identity, Zeyneb Hanum’s identifications need to be seen as performative, as identifications which, rather than being natural or innate, are constructed and understood through the reterritorialization of cultural difference which suggests a self-con-scious manipulation of Western cultural codes, since cross-cultural dressing would have had a very different meaning for her in an Ottoman context. There, Western com-odities were seen as part of a continuum of the exoticizing, would too much trouble the transcultu-rizing drive of the book.

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Cross-cultural Imagery

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