
Paul Poiret's Magical Techno-Oriental Fashions (1911): Race, Clothing, and Virtuality in the Machine Age

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ABSTRACT: This essay draws on Paul Poiret's Orientalist fashions and fancy-dress party as a case study for exploring the relations of race, aesthetics, and technology particularly as they cohere around techno-Orientalism. It situates Poiret's fashions within the history of techno-Orientalism to demonstrate clothing's significance as a virtual technology, as well as a technology of racial virtuality. Focusing on this early instance of techno-Orientalism in French fashion, we see that virtuality does not simply name an externally produced sensorial *effect*. It is an ideological discourse or cultural system that mediates social relations and related social anxieties. Poiret's wearable virtual technologies provide a useful lens through which to examine the dialectical relations of race and virtuality in which virtual bodies are constituted through racial logics, and racial discourses function virtually.

On 24 June 1911, Paul Poiret, the French fashion designer who the American public dubbed the "King of Fashion" (a title he happily embraced) hosted a lavish "Thousand and Second Night" fancy-dress party in his Paris atelier. The event was inspired by the recent French premiere of the Ballet Russe production of *Schéhérazade* at the Opera Garnier.¹ Poiret invited 300 guests, each of whom was carefully vet-

1. Poiret always maintained that the Ballet Russe played no influential role in the designs of his Orientalist fashions. However, fashion historians—after noting Poiret's denial—cite his love of the theater (he wanted to be an actor before becoming a designer), his regular attendance of *Schéhérazade* in Paris a year earlier, and his close and sometimes contentious relationship with Leon Bakst (the costumer for *Schéhérazade*) as evi-

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ted at the door by, as he put it, “a squad of old gentlemen . . . who were no jokers.”² Guests who did not arrive in Oriental fashions were hastily escorted to another room, where they were outfitted with clothes from Poiret’s latest collection. Poiret recalls, “I knew the carelessness of some of my friends, and I had taken measures to counteract it.”³ His guests chose from “harem pantaloons” (*jupes sultan*) and an array of tunics and caftans, as well as “hobble skirts” (so named for the built-in sash that held ankles closely together, thus limiting the stride of the wearer in order to give her, through sartorial means, the experience of being a Chinese woman with bound feet or a Japanese geisha).

Once guests were appropriately dressed, they were ushered by “a half-naked negro, draped in Bokhara silk [across] a sanded court where, beneath a blue and gold tent, fountains gushed in porcelain basins.”⁴ Arriving at the other side of the court, guests “ma[d]e their obeisance according to the tradition of Islam” (per Poiret’s instructions) by greeting him with a bow (fig. 1).⁵ The host wore a fur-trimmed caftan, harem pants, and a jeweled turban. Gripped in one of his fists was an ivory-handled whip.⁶ In his autobiographical account of the party, Poiret rhapsodizes that he felt “like some swarthy white-bearded Sultan [in] the sun-filled patio of Aladdin’s palace” (fig. 2).⁷

If virtuality, as Nicholas Mirzoeff explains it, is a “way of experiencing the outside on the inside,” then Poiret’s sensation of being transported spatially and temporally into “the sun-filled patio of Aladdin’s palace” and into the body of “some swarthy white-bearded Sultan” is an early example of a virtual experience.⁸ Poiret’s Orientalist fashions are more than material forms and practices of self-

dence that the designer was indeed inspired by the costumes in the play. In fact, there is evidence that Bakst introduced Orientalist fashions to Paris. In a letter to his wife after the premiere of *Schéhérazade*, Poiret enthuses that “the whole of Paris now dresses in ‘Oriental’ clothes” (cited in Alexander Schouvaloff, *The Art of Ballet Russe* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997], p. 63).

2. Paul Poiret, *King of Fashion: The Autobiography of Paul Poiret*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (London: V&A Publishing, 1931, 2009), p. 98.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

5. Paul Poiret, *My First Fifty Years*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931), p. 188.

6. Poiret, *King of Fashion* (above, n. 2), p. 100.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 99.

8. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 181.



Figure 1. Guests gather at Paul Poiret's atelier on the avenue d'Antin for the Thousand and Second Night (*La mille et deux nuits*) Party.



Figure 2. The Poirets at the Thousand and Second Night Party.

presentation; they are technologies for extending the limits of the physical body and expanding the possibilities of somatic experience to include the experience of the Oriental Other, a racially sexualized experience that is symbolically outside, or “other,” to the (white) French subject.

Clothing has an important place in the popular history of virtual technologies. In 1949, Stanley Weinbaum published a science-fiction short story called “Pygmalion’s Spectacles” that is widely accepted as the earliest portrayal of virtual technology. Weinbaum describes a pair of “magic spectacles” that draws the wearer into “a fantastic Utopia that was literally nowhere.” Wearing Pygmalion’s spectacles, the individual is immersed “in the story”; “instead of being on a screen, the story is all about you, and you are in it.”⁹ Another key moment in this history occurred in the mid-1960s when electrical engineer Ivan Sutherland invented the first actual wearable virtual technology, a head-mounted display system so bulky that it had to be attached to a mechanical arm suspended from the ceiling of Sutherland’s Harvard laboratory. Today, wearable virtual technologies are much less cumbersome. Data bodysuits, gloves, and helmets, which were developed around the 1990s and are now primarily used by the military and gaming industries (two not unrelated enterprises), are portable, relatively light, and closely fitted to the body.

Left out of the conventional history of virtual technologies are Poiret’s Orientalist fashions. Yet at the turn of the twentieth century, his collection included some of the most exciting virtual technologies of the day. *Vogue* magazine devoted numerous ecstatic pages to what it called Poiret’s “modern magic.” The “arts of [this] veritable magician,” the magazine extolled, was “designed to appeal to all the senses” in such a way that his customers and their realities were “transformed.” Describing his Orientalist collection, the *Vogue* journalist writes: “[W]e left behind . . . the dull materialism of the temperate zone to . . . warmth, colour, and perfume in the tropics. . . . [His designs] conjured . . . the magic of . . . some forgotten island lost upon the bosom of the South Seas.”¹⁰ From the “materialism of the temperate zone” to the immaterial or virtual world of fantasy, Poiret’s magical clothing draws the wearer into a multi-sensory and thoroughly exoticized Orientalist experience.

9. Stanley G. Weinbaum, “Pygmalion’s Spectacles,” in *A Martian Odyssey and Others* (Reading, PA: Fantasy Press, 1949).

10. “‘L’oasis’ Was the Brilliant Gala Spot for Paris Fêtes,” *Vogue*, November 15, 1919, pp. 39–43.

Poiret's use of clothing as a technology of racial visibility and difference was not novel even in his time. Clothing has long been foundational to Western epistemologies of race and the maintenance of dominant social hierarchies. Nearly two centuries before Poiret's party, Carl Linnaeus developed what would become a widely accepted four-race human classification system. In it, he characterizes *Homo sapiens asiaticus* as "yellowish, melancholy, endowed with black hair and brown eyes . . . severe, conceited, and stingy. He puts on loose clothing. He is governed by opinion."¹¹ In contrast, *Homo sapiens europaeus* is characteristically "changeable, clever, and inventive. He puts on tight clothing. He is governed by laws." One of the key pivots of racial difference in this new science of race, then, turns on clothing design—particularly the racial signification of loose and tight clothing.

Linnaeus's sartorial racial classification coincides with key style elements of eighteenth-century fashion. In many European countries, stiff bodices and strapless stays cut high at the armpit for women and tight knee-length trousers for men typified the fashion trends among the white bourgeoisie. While loose clothing was acceptable during this period, it was only acceptable when worn in private, "in the intimacy of the boudoir." Worn in public, loose clothing and the body that wore it were "equated with wantonness."¹² The same sartorial logic of human classification also informed the period's cultural constructions of mental and physical health. In popular stories published in English periodicals like *Spectator* and *Tatler*, the imagery of loose clothing was a common literary device to symbolize madness; evidence of loose clothing warranted, in one story, that an individual should be "clapped . . . into Bedlam."¹³ The loose-clothing/tight-clothing dyad also organized evaluations of "hygiene"—a term loaded with classed meanings. As Ken Montague has found, carefully tailored clothing signified individuals' detailed attention to the appearance and hygiene of the body, distinguishing them, ostensibly, from the "great unwashed masses"—Edmund Burke's notorious

11. Quoted in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," *Camera Obscura* 24:1 70 (2009): 7–35, quote on p. 11.

12. Patricia Cunningham, "Classic Revivals in Dress," in *Fashioning the Future: Our Future from Our Past* exhibition catalog, p. 5. Snowden Gallery of Schottenstein Wing of Campbell Hall, Department of Consumer and Textile Sciences, Ohio State University, October 26, 1996–April 11, 1997.

13. Allan Ingram and Michelle Faubert, *Cultural Constructions of Madness in Eighteenth-Century Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 88.

description for the eighteenth-century proletariat.¹⁴ In each of these examples, clothing is a technology that makes visible what is invisible by mapping hierarchies of morality, mental health, and hygiene onto material surfaces of clothing and skin now assigned with racial, gendered, and classed meanings.

The racial signification of both loose and tight clothing is, no doubt, contextual, but the core ideological premise of this duality has survived and reemerged intermittently throughout fashion history as mechanisms for social differentiation and stratification. In the nineteenth century, loose clothing indexed an uncorseted body and thus the unrefined character of a morally suspect woman. Corsets were widely accepted as “the hallmark of virtue,” while an “uncorseted woman reeked of licence.”¹⁵ Maids, prostitutes, and other working women were either prohibited from wearing corsets by sumptuary laws intended to regulate and maintain class distinctions and sometimes racial hierarchies (particularly among women within a household) and/or eschewed them as impractical restraints on their ability to perform the physical labors of their occupations. As we will see later, the controversy surrounding Poiret’s baggy harem pants, roomy tunics, and other Orientalist fashions centered on their negative associations with racial and gendered Otherness. It is worth noting that these associations are still present today. Contemporary Orientalist cultural constructions of kimonos, saris, abayas, chadris, chadors, and other styles of Islamic dress worn in the Middle East, central Asia, Southeast Asia, and North and West Africa continue to rest on the ideological duality of loose and tight clothing. The loose designs of Asian and Islamic dress are often taken as visual evidence for the irrational dress practices of unmodern people, whereas fitted/tailored clothing continues to be “the mainstay of modernity.”¹⁶

The long history of clothing demonstrates that it is not a neutral technology, but one that is embedded with and reproductive of racial and gendered ideologies. The particular function of Poiret’s fashion is evocative of what scholars have described as techno-Orientalism

14. Ken Montague, “The Aesthetics of Hygiene: Aesthetic Dress, Modernity, and the Body as Sign,” *Journal of Design History* 7.2 (1994): 91–112.

15. Bernard Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1972), pp. 110–11.

16. Dipti Bhagat, “The Sari Dhurries: History, Technique, Pattern, Identification” (review of *The Sari* by Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller), *Journal of Design History* 19.2 (2006): 171.

or, alternatively, high-tech Orientalism.¹⁷ Focusing their analyses on techno-Orientalist cultural productions like the Hollywood films *Blade Runner* and *Black Rain* and cyberpunk novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, scholars have shown that techno-Orientalism is a representational device that assigns technological and thus inhuman characteristics to the peoples and locations of the so-called Orient. Writing about two cyberpunk novels, *Neuromancer* and Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun defines techno-Orientalism as "the reduction of others to data," or the representation of Orientalized Others as a flood of readable and manageable cultural and electronic information that is at once exciting and overwhelming. In these and other representations of techno-Orientalism, the Orient signifies both a threat to and the consequence of the demise of Western hegemony in the age of techno-capitalism.

Studies of techno-Orientalism largely focus on the systems and narratives of cyberspace and their electronic production of virtual environments and bodies. My discussion intends to expand the critical scope of techno-Orientalism to include the virtualization of racialized environments and bodies through the aesthetic technology of clothing. By analyzing an early instance of techno-Orientalism in French fashion, we can see that virtuality has never simply named an externally produced sensorial *effect*. It is, in Sorin Matei's words, "a type of ideological discourse about social interactions," a cultural system that mediates social relations and related social anxieties.¹⁸ Virtuality is thus inextricably implicated in technologies of racial visibility, since the processes of making racial differences visibly meaningful are conditioned by virtual representations that are not real, but are instead technologically and socially constructed.

Indeed, virtuality is a constructive heuristic device for understanding the character and operation of racial discourse itself. Racial discourse, like virtuality, is a medial concept structured by dynamic

17. See also Toshiya Ueno's "Japanimation and Techno-Orientalism: Japan as the Sub-Empire of Signs," Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, *Documentary Box 9* (1996) (<http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/9/box9-1-e.html>); David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995); Oliver Marchart, "The East, the West and the Rest Central and Eastern Europe between Techno-Orientalism and the New Electronic Frontier," *Convergence* 4.2 (1998): 56–75; and Greta Aiyu Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction," *MELUS* 33.4 (2008): 73–96.

18. Sorin Matei, "Sounding Board for the Self: Virtual Community as Ideology," *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication* 35.4 (2005): 346.

processes of coding and encoding. The “appearance” of the virtual implicates the “disappearance” of the encoded (and thus hidden) though nonetheless actual material conditions and contradictions. Virtuality is constituted by both the *virtual visible* (the simulation) and the *material invisible* (the material conditions and contradictions embedded in the technology).¹⁹ In Gilles Deleuze’s conceptualization of virtuality, “[i]t is not, but it acts.”²⁰ In other words, while the virtual may not exist in reality, it does exist in actuality through externally produced effects. This is why, for Deleuze, “the virtual” is not opposed to “the real”; they coexist in “the reality of the virtual” generated by structures of social, material, and symbolic relations.²¹

My discussion takes Poiret’s fashions as an exemplary case study for the exploration of other (and othering) virtualities; his technologies of visibility provide a useful lens through which to examine the dialectical relations of race and virtuality. As we shall see, racial logics are embedded in the technological processes and practices of virtuality; at the same time, Poiret’s sartorial technologies virtualize racial discourse by making visible Western concepts about the mythical bodies and locations of the Orient. By thinking together the structures of race and virtuality, what I hope to evidence is not only that racial logics constitute virtual bodies and environments, but also that racial discourse functions virtually.

Colonialism and/as Fashion Design

Poiret’s legendary fête has been widely discussed in fashion histories. While most of the attention focuses on the representational dimensions of the party’s fashions and sceneography—as reflections of prevailing cultural ideas about the strange and sensuous opulence

19. Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, albeit in different ways, have shown that the opposite of virtual is not *real*, but *actual*. For them, both the actual and the virtual are real and co-constituting categories of existence. Engin F. Isin, following Deleuze and Derrida, explains that “[t]o say that a body such as state or nation exists as virtual does not mean that it has no real existence. The assemblage of the state as a space is realized through borders, controls, walls, checkpoints, taxation, education, passports and other *real* means and effects but the state as an actual entity does not exist” (“City.State: Critique of Scalar Thought,” *Citizenship Studies* 11.2 [2007]: 211–28, quote on p. 221 [emphasis in original]). See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (1968; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 208–14; and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 133–39.

20. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1988), p. 55 (emphasis in original).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

of the Orient and its imagined peoples—several scholars have noted its technological dimensions. Nancy Troy describes the party as “a particularly effective marketing tool [with] which to publicize a line of women’s clothing.”²² Caroline Evans likens the fashion event to “a cinema of attractions [in its] concern with images of women in motion.”²³ And Christopher Breward credits Poiret for his “embracing of modern communications,” as well as a “careful collaboration across media [that] offered fashion as a dream.”²⁴ My discussion extends this critical line of technological inquiry to include an analysis of Poiret’s fashions as a technology of virtual race, and the Thousand and Second Night Party as a virtual environment. While analyses of consumption/reception are dominant critical trends in technology studies, my concern is less with how his guests used his fashions and more with how social norms, values, and feelings are embedded in these technologies and virtual environments in ways that predispose, but certainly do not predetermine, users’ interactions and experiences with the fashions.

This is not an argument for technological determinism. To suggest that fashion’s technical design exists and operates beyond the social is clearly an untenable proposition. But rather than to “immediately reduce [fashion] to the interplay of social forces,” this essay takes up Langdon Winner’s challenge, following Edmund Husserl’s philosophical injunction, “to take technical artifacts seriously . . . to consider *the things themselves*.”²⁵ Technologies are not mechanically objective, and racial logics are not outside of technology: they are embedded in technology, structurally favoring dominant modes of technological use and particular groups of technical users who benefit more from its development and usage than others. To adapt a phrase from Winner, “the technological deck [is] stacked.”²⁶

By situating Poiret within the history of virtual technology, I am emphasizing Poiret’s technique over his taste—which was, for different reasons, as questionable then as it is today. Although extremely popular in his day, he was not uncontroversial. Jean-Philippe Worth,

22. Nancy J. Troy, “Paul Poiret’s Minaret Style: Originality, Reproduction, and Art in Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* 6.2 (2002): 119, 125.

23. Caroline Evans, “The Walkies: Early French Fashion Shows as a Cinema of Attractions,” in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 110.

24. Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 40, 41.

25. Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 22 (emphasis in original).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

a contemporary of his and the great grandson of the man who is widely recognized as the first couturier, Charles Fredrick Worth, publicly disparaged Poiret's fashions in a 1908 interview in *Vogue*: "They are hideous, barbaric. They are really only suitable for the women of uncivilized tribes. If we adopt them, let us ride on camels and ostriches."²⁷

Tellingly, Worth's aesthetic evaluation of Poiret's fashions ("hideous") is articulated through colonialist discourses of technology ("barbaric"; "uncivilized"). The discursive logic of Worth's statement would have been both reasonable and familiar to some French readers, since France's empire-building projects at the time, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, made techno-racial discourse part of the national common sense. On the other hand, not all French people would have agreed with Worth. During this period in which labor and natural resources were being plundered to aid in France's colonial expansion, Oriental designs were also viewed as valuable raw resources that could be mined and reprocessed for the benefit of French creativity and innovation. However readers interpreted Worth's statement, it is significant for the ways by which it illuminates the location of Poiret's fashions at the nexus of race, aesthetics, and technology.

Many of the garments Poiret created were techno-aesthetic inventions or machine art. The harem pants, Mandchou tunics, embroidered Confucius evening coats with pagoda sleeves, curved-toe, Turkish-style slippers, turbans, feathered Aigrette headdresses, lampshade tunics, and hobble skirts were more than sartorial representations of Orientalist fantasies—they were sartorial feats of biomechanical engineering. As virtual technologies, they generated fabricated bodies and experiences that, in spite of the couturier's insistence that his Orientalist fashions were designed "according to authentic documents," had no actual referent in the real world.²⁸ In fact, Poiret's Orient is a simulacrum of a simulacrum; it is a reproduction of an Orient based on another Orientalist reproduction (the Ballet Russe's *Schéhérazade*)—itself based on a translation by a scholar of dubious reputation, Jean-Charles Mardrus. (Mardrus was known to openly express that the original "*Nights* was not dirty enough . . . [he] thought that the stories would be improved if the

27. Qtd. in Gaylyn Studlar, "'Out-Salomeing Salome': Dance, the New Woman, and Fan Magazine Orientalism," in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 114.

28. Poiret, *My First Fifty Years* (above, n. 5), p. 185.

erotic element in them could be heightened." Thus his translation includes "whole new stories."²⁹ As virtual technologies of techno-Orientalism rather than material representations, Poiret's fashions did not only wear their Orientalism on their sleeve, so to speak, but they were structured by Orientalism from the inside out. That is to say, Poiret's fashion designs have racial politics. To understand what they are, it is necessary to consider the historical moment of construction and consumption.

The prevailing interpretation of Poiret's Orientalist fashions places them at odds with the machine-age aesthetic, ideological, and political trends of his time. However, a closer examination of the design construction of these fashions reveals the hidden though intertwined relations between his Orientalist fashions and the machine age in which he lived (and, for a time, reigned as the King of Fashion), as well as the ways in which French fashion mediated the relationships between racial and technological formations more broadly.³⁰ As with all technologies, Poiret's fashions are constituted by a tangle of social and technological realities. His Orientalist fashions are rooted in and emerge out of the technological and social milieu of modern life in the machine age, which included the acceleration of industrialization, political and commercial globalization (springing from new technologies of mass production and consumption like the modern sewing machine and standardized dress patterns, as well as from France's many imperialist projects), the white feminist dress-reform movement, nativism (in response to France's economic depression, labor shortages, and the impending world war), and the rise of avant-garde art movements.

The machine age—the late industrial period in which Poiret emerged as a celebrity designer in Europe and the United States—was marked by a growing reliance upon machinery as tools for the acceleration of the processes of mass production and mass consumption within the home and the marketplace. It was also a time of widespread faith in the inherent value of technological rationality, progress, efficiency, and speed. "The religion of the machine," as Lewis Mumford writes, "preached the gospel of work, justification by faith in mechanical science, and salvation by machine science."³¹ Not un-

29. Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane / Penguin Press, 1994), pp. 38, 19.

30. Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton, *Poiret* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 14.

31. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), p. 54.

like that of the current digital age, machine-age techno-fundamentalism was founded on both the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. In his book *Technics and Civilization*, Mumford describes “the missionary enthusiasm of the enterprisers and industrialists and engineers”; science “captured [their] emotion, all the more because the golden paradise of financial success lay beyond.”³²

As well as on market and labor processes and practices, the machine age had a profound impact on popular perceptions about the ideal design of bodies and of fashion. It was in this period that “the modernist body”—a “healthy, intelligible, and progressive”³³ body, in the words of famed British merchant Arthur Lasenby Liberty—emerged.³⁴ The presentation and performance of the modernist body demanded the rejection of “ornament and artifice . . . in order to produce,” Peter Wollen explains, “a more natural and functional figure.”³⁵ Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, scientific values of rationality and objectivity came to dominate, among other sites, the design of fashion, interior spaces, and architecture. But if machines rationalized bodies, the modernist body also humanized the machine. As Mumford points out: “With the neotechnic phase [beginning around 1900] . . . instead of mechanism forming a pattern for life, living organisms began to form a pattern for mechanism.”³⁶ Mumford’s emphasis on patterns highlights a machine-age concern with the rational ordering, arrangements, and regulation of everything, not least of which were people. The figures of the modernist body and the humanized machine both express an immersive—that is, virtual—relation between body and machine that is exemplified in Mumford’s description of machinery as “virtual” organs: “Cranks, pistons, screws, valves, sinuous motions, pulsations, rhythms, murmurs, sleek interfaces, all are virtual counterparts of the organs and function of the body, and they stimulated and absorbed some of the natural affections.”³⁷ Central to machine-age cultural logics was the idea and ideal of technological embodiment. But

32. Ibid.

33. Qtd. in Peter Wollen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body,” *New Formations* 1 (1987): 5–33, quote on p. 26.

34. Liberty’s “Eastern Bazaar” of ornaments, fabrics, and objets d’art located in the basement level of his Regent Street shop was much admired from the 1880s to the 1920s by a growing consumer market of financially independent young women.

35. Wollen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body” (above, n. 33), p. 26.

36. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (above, n. 31), p. 216.

37. Ibid., p. 55.

as Poiret's fashions and the larger technological history of clothing demonstrates, technology does not render an abstract body. During the machine age especially, technological embodiment was not a state of being, but a process for the production of racial and gendered bodies and hierarchies. As an aesthetic technology, clothing plays a significant role in rendering racial and gender ideologies visible and thus seemingly self-evident.

The applications of clothing as a technology for "social sorting"—David Lyon's term for the ways in which technology is used to "sort" people by race, ethnicity, consumer power, and so on—are perhaps nowhere more clear than in the state-sponsored world's fairs during the machine age. These wildly popular expositions organized in Western Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were highly choreographed and massively attended spectacles of technological and national progress. New technologies like escalators, bridges, and railways were spotlighted alongside live human exhibitions of non-Western people in nude or semi-nude dress. For the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, organizers mounted a twenty-foot statue called *La Parisienne* in the main entrance. *La Parisienne*, modeled after French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt—known as "The Divine Sarah" for her grace and beauty—was extravagantly styled in a gown and coat designed by a contemporary of Poiret's, Jeanne Paquin. Through *La Parisienne*, fashion was articulated as the hallmark of Western technological and social advancement; but more saliently, it was reflective of the machine age's understanding of the role of clothing as a technology for making visible racialized differences.

La Parisienne was a feat of architectural and sartorial engineering; it also exemplified the social applications of techno-scientific language and logics. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, socio-cultural studies like *Physiologie de la Parisienne* (1841) and *Physiologie de la Grisette* (1841) employed scientific language to argue that clothing was the technological expression of physiological differences between women who were *plus femme* and those who were not. These studies emphasized the ways in which clothing and their associated poses, gestures, and mannerisms were physical and material signs of an individual's inner character. Thus clothing was understood to be a technology for making visible hidden truths about race, gender, and class. The interconnection of clothing and character is inscribed into and reflected by physiological taxonomies of *la Parisienne* (the modern woman) and *la Grisette*. Significantly, *la Grisette* intertwines ideas about the Othered body with sartorial aesthetics; it is a term that refers at once to the working-class woman and her stereotypical coarse gray dress.

According to *Physiologie de la Parisienne*: “Provincials put on clothes; the Parisienne dresses.”³⁸ This classed distinction between “putting on clothes” and “dressing” and, implicitly, between “clothing” and “fashion,” makes clear that these related sets of terms are ideologically constructed rather than ontologically given categories. The scientization of style in these studies were attempts to rationalize constructions of gender, class, and racial differences as innate to human behavior. By locating these differences in the very intimate act of getting dressed (and all of the technologies of the body entailed by this human practice), the discourse of fashion as physiology obscures the reality of gender and class stratification. In fact, such differences were not physiological or natural, but social and legal constructions produced and secured by a host of formal and informal codes, such as the vestimentary and sumptuary laws in France and elsewhere.

The presence of *La Parisienne* (the statue) in what was fundamentally a technological event of nation-building is evocative of fashion’s deeply entwined relationship with techno-science and its association with modernity. *La Parisienne*, as so many have commented, represented an idealized figure of white bourgeois femininity that had been capturing the imaginations and passions of French artists and writers since the late seventeenth century. Although some, such as nineteenth-century-writer Louis Octave Uzanne, believed that “[a] woman may be Parisian by taste and instinct . . . in any town or country in the world,” the socio-visual economy of fashion, technology, and race at the Paris world’s fair suggests that she was not a universal female subject.³⁹ Representing the modern (white) woman in her French designer gown, *La Parisienne* was defined against not only the “primitively” dressed (nonwhite) women displayed in, say, the Living in Madagascar exhibition (a popular attraction at the exposition), but also against the legacy of dehumanized women of color whose bodies had been segmented and reduced to little more than biomedical, anthropological, and physiological information. Perhaps the most egregious example of this was Saarijite Baartman (the original, but not the only, “Hottentot Venus”). When she was alive, Baartman was caged and exhibited in the nude; after she died, she was dissected so that her genitals could be cast in wax and displayed at the Royal Academy of Medicine in France. Live exhibitions of women of color like Baartman dehumanized them, shifting racial signification away from the body/biology and towards technology

38. Qtd. in Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (1988; reprint, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), p. 74.

39. Louis Octave Uzanne, *La Femme à Paris* (Paris: Quantin 1894), pp. 3–4.

under the sign of fashion. At the Paris exposition, clothing as technology operated to produce gendered racial knowledge and maintain civilizationalist distinctions between the West and the non-West as objective and observable truth.⁴⁰

Poiret's clothing demonstrates a dialectical relationship between French fashion and technology that is a precursor to digital techno-Orientalism. Techno-Orientalism is distinct from other forms of racial virtualities, in that it temporally locates Oriental difference in the future rather than the past. If the clothing of the women displayed in the Living in Madagascar exhibition, for example, functioned as a mechanism for mapping their bodies to a primitive past, then Poiret's fashion located the Oriental in a modern, albeit dystopic, future. The future is at once fantastic and frightening precisely because it is imagined as both high-tech and Oriental, or racially and sexually perverse. The techno-Orientalist future is almost always imagined as a near future because it manifests Western paranoia about the impending decline of hegemonic white masculinity at a time when modernization processes seem to be moving so fast as to be out of (the Western and, tacitly, white man's) control.

Inherent to the virtual bodies and environments generated by Poiret's fashions is the constitutive contradiction of techno-Orientalism: that the clothes were simultaneously liberating and fetishistic. On the one hand, his designs enabled and enacted proto-feminist bodies and mobilities, thereby liberating European white women from crinolines and corsets and the constrictive norms about proper Victorian womanhood that these sartorial devices bound them to; and on the other, the very same technology of (white) feminist liberation was premised on a racially sexualized stereotyping of the Oriental. As an inhuman and dehumanizing figure of machinic modernity, the visual/virtual manifestation of the techno-Oriental is conditioned on and reduced to a controlled, repeatable, and ordered set of information about racial differences. How Poiret's designs were

40. The figure of the "Hottentot Venus" is a spectral presence in the history of Euro-American fashion. Scholars and journalists who have written about the bustle, what J. Yolande Daniels calls "fashioned steatopygia," argue that this undergarment "gave the female a look of the primitive and the erotic while staying safely within the bounds of middle-class fashion." See Daniels, "Exhibit A: Private Life without a Narrative," in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), p. 64; and footnote 52 in Sander Gilman's "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *ibid.*, p. 31. Elizabeth Alexander locates the bustle's popularity in the constitutive relation of primitive and civilized femininities: "That which you are obsessed with, that you are afraid of, that you have to destroy, is the thing that you want more than anything" (qtd. in Lisa Jones, "Venus Envy," *Village Voice*, July 9, 1991, p. 36).

shaped by gendered and racial meanings is the focus of the next section.

Fashioning Feminist and Orientalist Mobilities

Poiret once stated that “I maintain that the straight line is the line of beauty.”⁴¹ His design philosophy echoes the aesthetic principles of modern art and design, particularly the avant-garde movements of Cubism and French Purism emerging during this period. (Cubist painters like Picasso, who was a close friend and frequent dinner guest of Poiret, created images from multiple planes that allowed viewers multiple perspectives at once, creating a three- or even four-dimensional illusion.) Poiret’s designs brought to life the aesthetic principle and practice of avant-garde geometries and their production of the immersive or virtual relation between body and machine-art object. Poiret characteristically cut his clothes along straight geometric lines rather than around the contours of the body—a mathematical formalization of the female form.⁴² Madeleine Vionnet, a contemporary of Poiret who is best known for the “bias cut,” summed up the sartorial zeitgeist best when she asserted: “The couturier should be a geometrician.”⁴³ Fabric patterns of rectangles and squares created an illusion of “flatness and planarity . . . turning three-dimensional representation into two-dimensional abstraction”—a radical shift away from the corseted S-curve silhouette that forced women’s breasts and backsides to protrude outward (often painfully).⁴⁴ Further, most of his clothes were created from complex draping techniques. (The grand couturier did not know how to sew.) By draping geometric swaths of fabric, Poiret decentralized the body and privileged the material components. The execution of the garment (cutting, fitting, seaming, and finishing) depended less on the human figure and more on technical features like the cut, structure, and weight of the fabric.

Together, the cut and drape of Poiret’s design technique mechanized the female body. The restrictive styles of Victorian fashion with

41. “How Poiret Conducts an Opening,” *Vogue*, April 15, 1912, p. 36.

42. His designs anticipate by nearly a century the primary task of technical fashion workers today. While biorobotic engineers and biometric software programmers working on the development of virtual fitting rooms (laser-imaging body scanners that enable consumers to try on clothes without undressing) are trying to establish and regulate the mathematical relation between body and garment, in the early 1900s, Poiret was already demonstrating that this relation is a calculable set of measurements that can also be readjusted to produce different outcomes.

43. Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet* (New York: Chronicle Books, 1998), p. 117.

44. Koda and Bolton, *Poiret* (above, n. 30), p. 14.

its high, stiff collars, unwieldy bustle, and, of course, the tight corsets (made even more rigid with steel stays which were introduced in the machine age) restricted physical movement and helped to reproduce and secure a gender-differentiated discourse of mobility. Inherent to the notion of Victorian femininity was the ideal of immobile subjectivity. In the words of Mrs. Ellis, a popular writer of etiquette books at the time, the duty of proper women was "to suffer and be still."⁴⁵ The distinctively unstructured cut of Poiret's clothes physically freed women's bodies from the Victorian silhouette, as well as its associated discourses of feminine immobility. Poiret's clothes neither required nor permitted a corset. It is no wonder that the loose cut of Poiret's harem pants, tunics, and caftans appealed to young, modern white women like Hollywood film stars Clara Kimball Young, Norma Talmadge, Bessie Love, Mae Marsh, and Margaret Loomis, as well as to feminist dress reformers who had been encouraging women for decades, with only modest success, to abandon the corset, which was now a sign of unmodern femininity.

The geometric construction and draping of Poiret's Orientalist fashions dovetailed with the machine-age ethos of functionality and technologically enabled motion. In Alfred North Whitehead's words, this period was marked by "the displacement of the notion of static stuff by the notion of fluent energy."⁴⁶ This was, according to Mumford, "the worthiest object that a mechanical habit of mind and a mechanical mode of action put before men."⁴⁷ Although Whitehead and Mumford have in mind more familiar (and masculinized) technologies (for example, the steam engine, railroad, textile mill, and iron ship), Poiret's feminine technologies and his interest in enabling new modes of female mobility exhibit the same concerns.

His Orientalist fashions were biomechanic designs that altered the ways in which women moved. While the famous French caricaturist Georges Goursat (who went by the pseudonym Sem) had an ungenerous opinion of Poiret, his description of the ways in which Poiret's clothes affected the movement of women's bodies is instructive. Sem described Poiret's female clients as "disjointed mannequins, women-serpents . . . who undulate, slowly convulsing, their stomachs pushed forward and a foot trailing . . . enervate with adulter-

45. Qtd. in Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2.3 (1977): 556.

46. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 309.

47. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (above, n. 31), p. 53.

ated tea and mysterious dopings."⁴⁸ Sem's not-so-subtle anti-Asian references to dragon ladies and opium, popular cultural signs of Oriental pathologies since the early nineteenth century, are reflective first of his own rampant racism, and second, of the broader xenophobia in France during the years leading up to World War I. (Sem frequently depicted African women as slimy bugs, and he collapsed distinctions among indigenous people in Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas, drawing them all as hysterical, bare-breasted—that is to say, primitively dressed—savages.) Still, Sem was right that Poiret's clothes empowered new bodily movements and mobilities.

With Poiret's billowy harem pants and without the corset, women were able to ride bicycles and play hockey, tennis, and basketball. The new sport of bicycling, which emerged in the 1890s, previously excluded fashionable women. According to an 1895 article in *Scribner's* magazine, "[w]hen the bicycle craze began there were no women's dresses . . . just imagine one of the leaders of society going to her dressmaker and requesting a suitable costume to ride a steel wheel. . . . So the first costumes were mostly home-made affairs, designed by the riders and made up by work-women."⁴⁹ The popularity of Poiret's harem pants not only helped to de-stigmatize bicycling, but they hastened the transformation of *la bicycliste* into an idealized figure of the modern woman. As one journalist for *L'année Féminine* describes *Les Parisiennes d'a Présent*: "She travels by bicycle. Tomorrow it will be by automobile . . . independent and self-sufficient, without master or god."⁵⁰ Even Poiret's most critical contemporaries had to grudgingly admit, as Worth did, that Poiret's fashions were "synchronize[d] with the growing restlessness of this age, an age of fast motoring and flying machines."⁵¹ Notably, Poiret's other sartorial inventions include the prototype for the modern bra (*cache-corset*), itself an exemplary device of biomechanic engineering of the female form. Today, he is still remembered as the designer who liberated women from the corset and all the social constrictions that garment symbolizes—a title he was not shy about claiming: "It was in the name of Liberty that I brought about my first Revolution, by deliberately laying siege to the corset."⁵²

48. Nancy J. Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002), pp. 180–81.

49. Qtd. in Steele, *Paris Fashion* (above, n. 38), p. 175.

50. Georges Montorgueil, Illustrations of Henri Boutet, *L'année Féminine (1896): Les Parisiennes d'a Présent* (Paris: H. Floury, 1897), 4.

51. Qtd. in Steele, *Paris Fashion* (above, n. 38), p. 229.

52. Wollen, "Fashion/Orientalism/The Body" (above, n. 33), p. 10.

Certainly, not all of Poiret's Orientalist fashions were physically liberating. But even the constricting design of Poiret's hobble skirt, for example, was modern in its technological and social effects. The hobble skirt fomented new technologies like the low-level, center-entrance cars that were invented in 1912 to accommodate high-society women wearing hobble skirts. These streetcars, popularly known as "hobble skirt cars," were lowered to about eight inches from street level and had sloped floors that accommodated the biomechanics of the hobble-skirted woman. The *New York Times* viewed this as a victory for women's privacy: "a woman in a hobble skirt will be able to climb into them without collecting a crowd."⁵³ The hobble skirt was thus a feminist fashion not despite its Orientalist design, but because of it. The loose cut of the hobble skirt (at least above the ankles), as with the loose cut of his other Orientalist fashions, symbolized a relaxing of gender and sexual mores and values that the "new woman" embraced.

It is important to note that the feminist associations to Poiret's fashions did not overturn the loose-clothing/tight-clothing dyad. In fact, young white women's sartorial-sexual transgressions were responsible for much of the moral and racial panic of the day. If the geometric cut and loose draping of Orientalist fashions empowered women's gender and sexual liberation, they also signaled the racial downfall of Western white society. The emergence of the new woman gave rise to a crisis of masculinity in Europe and America in which the modern woman was disparaged as sexually aggressive and emasculating—not unlike Sem's Orientalist women-serpents, or dragon ladies. Worse, gendered critiques of *la bicycliste* fanned existing fears about the low birth rate in France, which eventually led to legal prohibitions against contraception and abortion in the 1920s, and its racial and global consequences: "It is not a man that passes by in baggy knickers, calves exposed, the . . . size of a rower. Is it a woman?"⁵⁴ The masculinization of women was seen as a threat to the intertwined production and reproduction of race and nation and with it, the dominant social order, since white women seemed no longer able or willing to fulfill their assumed bio-national gender roles.

Poiret was not deaf to the crisis of white masculinity. Indeed, his dramatic embodiment of the swarthy sultan is a cathartic experience that allows Poiret and his guests to control and contain these social

53. "50 Hobble Skirts: Washington Women Win Fight for Lower Steps Than in Cleveland," *New York Times*, March 21, 1912, p. 1.

54. Montorgueil, *L'année Féminine* (1896) (above, n. 50), p. 14.

anxieties. Recalling the moment when his harem slave (virtually embodied by Madame Poiret) was released from her “immense golden cage, barred with twisted iron grilles,” Poiret reveals that “[s]he flew out like a bird, and I precipitated myself in pursuit of her, cracking my useless whip.”⁵⁵ In this techno-Orientalist scene, virtuality as an ideological mechanism for managing uncomfortable social relations is on full display. In giving expression to masculine anxiety, Poiret symbolically “gets it off his chest,” transferring the social castration of the useless whip to the techno-Oriental man and thereby securing normative white masculinity in a period of social upheaval.

This spectacular drama of Oriental despotism, racial castration, and (physical and sexual) white feminist liberation was also the prelude for the debut of Poiret’s latest creation, the “lampshade tunic”—a knee-length triangular dress wired at the hemline and edged with fringe, theatrically modeled by Madame Poiret. Some fashion historians count the Thousand and Second Night Party as the first modern fashion show—it certainly functioned that way. As *Vogue* reported six months later, “every woman in the land possessed at least one of [Poiret’s lampshade] tunics.”⁵⁶

In Poiret’s Orientalist fashions and fashion exhibition, modernism and Orientalism at once implicate and obscure each other. Sexual and gender liberation are figured as modern and thus white. However, this radical modernity was also perverse and hence Oriental. The Orientalized sexuality of young, modern white women is discussed at length in the essays collected in *The Modern Girl Around the World* (2008). As the contributors show, images of the “modern girl” on American and European fashion and beauty advertising and packaging materials frequently utilized visual motifs of Asianness. And indeed, Poiret’s fashions were rife with representational Orientalism. The riot of contrasting bright colors that characterized Poiret’s fashions signified an Orientalist sensibility that was prominent not only in fashion, but also interior design. Paquin, who openly condemned Poiret’s Orientalist fashions as un-French (*faux chic*) more than once, nevertheless participated in the Orientalist trend in her salon. Paquin’s “Persian Room,” as it was popularly known, contained many of the same design elements as Poiret’s Thousand and Second Night Party, notably the colorful carpets that lined the floors and walls of both spaces and the dense scattering of bright floor pillows, all embellished with geometric designs. While the clash of bright colors

55. Poiret, *King of Fashion* (above, n. 2), pp. 99, 100.

56. “So Say the Paris Openings,” *Vogue*, April 1, 1914, p. 37.

was an Orientalist aesthetic, their manufacture was driven by a modernist desire to showcase the relatively new techno-science of synthetic dyeing. Unlike natural dyes, synthetic dyes could be artificially manipulated to produce a vast range of colors and hues. Thus Orientalist and modernist aesthetics were not at odds with each other; while Orientalism and modernism would seem to make strange bedfellows, in the machine age they were not only well matched, they empowered each other.

Poiret's fashions, therefore, did more than represent Orientalist fantasies: they enabled individuals to interactively inhabit these virtual realities as actor and audience—a dual role characteristic of all virtual gamers. Recall *Vogue's* breathless description of the experiential effect of Poiret's fashions: “we suddenly found ourselves the entertainers instead of the entertained . . . turning every spectator into an actor.” The experience “was as exciting as a heady tropic wine.”⁵⁷ The immersion of the Poirets and their guests in the virtual reality of an Oriental world—an hallucinatory experience—was instrumentalized not simply by Orientalist ideologies, but by the very construction of the clothes that impacted on and engaged with the entire perceptual spectrum of the individual (operating on the level of the visual, but also fundamentally on the visceral, tactile, temporal, and kinesthetic). As already mentioned, Poiret's Orientalist fashions were designed to predispose particular physical and social mobilities. For what else was a body to do in a lampshade tunic, which was constructed with double-tiered, wire-hemmed, and often fringed full skirts encircling the butt, hips, and thighs, but shimmy seductively—and perversely (fig. 3)?

Just as computational codes in Internet applications make things happen, the racial logic encoded in and shaping the structures and operations of Poiret's fashion does not simply appear—it *does*. In other words, the effects of Orientalist and colonialist knowledges that underwrite Poiret's fashions do not only manifest as representational stereotypes acted out by Poiret's “swarthy Sultan” and Madame Poiret's harem slave or the surface embellishments of the clothing, but Orientalist simulations or racial virtualities make things happen. One such set of actions is the making and mapping of social relations, Lyon's “social sorting.” Social sorting is itself a kind of technology, an organizational infrastructure or an arrangement of social and material power that conditions the operations

57. “Special Features: L'Oasis was the Brilliant Gala Spot for Paris Fêtes,” *Vogue*, November 15, 1919, pp. 39, 41.



Figure 3. Lampshade tunic and harem pants, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit.



of technology. Nina Lerman, following Leo Marx, argues that organizational infrastructures do “boundary maintenance work.”⁵⁸ And indeed, the instrumental effect of social and material organization at the Thousand and Second Night Party does just this kind of boundary maintenance work.

At the party, Orientalist fashions enabled virtual mobilities for Poiret and his (white) guests across race, time, and space, but black and Asian bodies are immobilized—fixed to/by their racial difference that is rendered immutable. Orientalist fashions and the virtual Orientals they generate displace actual Persian bodies as both fact and concept at the party. As well as the displacement of actual Persians, Orientalist fashions relocate black bodies, such as the “half-naked negro, draped in Bokhara silk,”⁵⁹ to the periphery, where they are fixed in their role as abject racial Others. Such dislocations are not uncommon in the history of technology because technological discourse has long perceived race and raced people as obstacles to scientific progress. The concomitant conceptualization of racialized people as irrational (that is, superstitious, hypersensitive, childlike) and science and technology as rational has conditioned and justified the history of racial dislocation in the name of scientific and technological progress. The sentiments of one U.S. congressman in 1830—Richard Henry Wilde of Georgia, who asserted that the failure to remove Native Americans from western lands would “obstruct the march of science”⁶⁰—are reflective of the deeply entrenched racial ideologies in technological discourse.

That blacks at Poiret’s party did not experience bodily transcendence is not a technological glitch; the organizational infrastructure of technologies produces uneven conditions of access and participation. The restrictive conditions of participation for blacks at the party (as both theater props and servants who are denied Poiret’s techno-Orientalist fashions) make bodily transcendence, which is the central promise of virtuality, impossible; the racial denial of social and somatic transcendence is built into the organizational infrastructure of the party. Indeed, the raced and classed division of the technological haves and have-nots has long been structural. Technologies are designed to benefit and burden social groups differently. It is as such that Poiret’s Orientalist fashions operate as mechanisms

58. Nina E. Lerman, “Categories of Difference, Categories of Power Bringing Gender and Race to the History of Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 51.4 (2010): 901.

59. Poiret, *King of Fashion* (above, n. 2), p. 99.

60. Qtd. in Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 96.

of social sorting, reproducing and securing—by technological design—the privileged relation of white subjectivity to physical, social, and virtual mobility. Ironically, the virtualization of Oriental bodies at Poiret's party secures white privilege. Orientalist fashions racially unify Poiret and his white guests through their shared access to the virtual technologies of bodily transcendence—and against nonwhite Others who are denied access to these technologies. This is a poignant example of Rayvon Fouché's observation, in another context, that technologies have historically been "tools of white uplift [that] reinforce racial inequality."⁶¹

The numerous contradictions inherent in Poiret's fashions—between Orientalism and modernism, art and commerce, and white feminist uplift and racial subjugation, to name only a few—articulate a broader tension between the modern and the traditional that is endemic to periods of massive technological development. In Poiret's time, the struggle between the traditional and the modern was sharply inflected by xenophobia, so that the traditional represented the fantasy of a racially pure and essential Frenchness, and the modern represented the fear of the foreign.

Poiret was controversial because he seemed to be influenced by foreign cultural sources (the Oriental and its imagined sexual perversions), as well as by foreign commercial practices (Jewish mercantilism and American merchandising strategies). As technologies, Poiret's Orientalist fashions helped to work out the contradictions of modern life, including the struggle over the racial and gendered meanings of national identity in a globalizing world. Toward this end, the ambivalence of Orientalist fashion—its simulation of a racial and yet disembodied experience—was necessary and even desirable. It did the boundary maintenance work of the social without compromising the machine-age ethos of scientific reason. Poiret's Orientalist fashions functioned as technologies that rationalized the simultaneous exploitation and containment of foreignness as both fantasy and fear. Poiret himself noted in an interview with *Miroir des Modes* that the woman he designed for "wouldn't dream of adapting [his Orientalist fashions] to ordinary usage. . . . My personal pleasure leads me to dress only women who have attained a degree of erudition and grace sufficient to wear my outfits in the context of their aristocratic homes."⁶² His expressed desire to contain Oriental-

61. Rayvon Fouché, *Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 23.

62. "Poiret: Une Silhouette Parisienne," *Le Miroir des Modes*, June 1912, p. 243.

ist fashions within a French aristocratic domestic order, and yet his interest in employing these fashions as technologies to transcend the body for an Orientalist experience, exemplifies the constitutive contradiction of virtuality in which external and internal operations are dialectically opposed though cooperating. In this way, Poiret is a forerunner of Steven Whittaker's description of the cyberspace enthusiast who "desires embodiment and disembodiment in the same instant. His ideal machine would address itself to his senses, yet free him from his body. His is a vision which loves sensorial possibility while hating bodily limits. He loves his senses and hates his body!"⁶³ If Poiret was indeed ahead of his time, a predecessor to the cyber enthusiast, then it is because his designs cast him into the near future of techno-Orientalism.

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63. Steven Whittaker, "The Safe Abyss: What's Wrong with Virtual Reality?" *Border/Lines* 33 (1994): 45.