# The Imperial Guest: Excess and the Affective Economy of Diderot's *Supplément*

MEGAN GALLAGHER

This paper theorizes the tension between a desire for hospitable relations and a will to dominate by examining the formal and affective roles of excess and fear in Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville.* Its central claim is that the *Supplément* theorizes a political (specifically: republican) alternative to a form of politics (specifically: despotism) characterized by its excesses. It considers the French/Tahitian encounter described in the *Supplément* as a "despotic imaginary" in which each party places demands on the other, the excess of which is characteristic of despotism. Diderot's text traces a series of exchanges in which the colonizers transmit their own fear of the subjugated other to those they seek to subjugate. In so doing, they fail (as do the characters ostensibly discussing the supplementary text, perfunctorily named A and B) to recognize that the purportedly Edenic nature of Tahiti operates according to its own affective economy. While the Tahitians also make claims on the French, their claims do not approach the level of despotic demands because, as Diderot recognizes, the Tahitians' power, as well as their affective economy, remains bound to their possession of the island. The power of Bougainville and his crew is abstract and thus eminently motile; it rests in their (in)ability as (imperial) 'guest' to impose their fear-based affective economy upon (colonial) 'host' societies.