

Exhibition Catalog



Return to Sender

Women of Color in Colonial Postcards
& the Politics of Representation

Exhibition Catalog | FALL 2023

Return to Sender: Women of Color in Colonial Postcards & the Politics of Representation

An art exhibition inspired by Mara Ahmed's film of the same title. With Fatimah Arshad, Urvashi Bhattacharya and Sumayia Islam

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• Why Colonial Postcards?

An attempt to decolonize knowledge is the common thread that runs through my art practice, across multiple media formats, conceptual narratives, and community projects. Colonial postcards, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and their representations of women from the colonies embody what Ramón Grosfoguel calls epistemic racism and sexism, the production of a Eurocentric canon of thought or knowledge taught by the Westernized university, based on systemic exclusion, and part and parcel of global power structures. The specificity, tangibility, and information available about colonial postcards make them an ideal case study. As Malek Alloula said in his seminal book, *The Colonial Harem*, to track the colonial depictions of these women of color is to undertake a “double operation: first, to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze; then, to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women.”

• Purpose of Catalog

Alloula believed that curation can help us investigate, reframe, and challenge harmful images and the ideological stories they tell. This is what we hope to accomplish with the film, *Return to Sender: Women of Color in Colonial Postcards & the Politics of Representation*, and its accompanying art exhibition.

The purpose of this catalog is to provide more historical context for the film and exhibition. It hopes to excavate layers of colonial history, gender relations, and power dynamics in order to deconstruct the male gaze (a concept rooted in the objectification and sexualization of women), and to clarify its intersection with colonialism and imperialism.

The ultimate goal is to try and decolonize knowledge which as Alana Lentin explains “does not mean becoming inward looking, anti-European or fundamentalist. On the contrary, a decolonial approach would be based in a truly universal outlook which looks, as [Gurminder K] Bhambra says, at how ideas are always arrived at from a variety of sources – there is no one truth out there, but many truths.”

• Some History

In his article, *Orientalism and the British Picture Postcard Industry: Popularizing the Empire in Victorian and Edwardian Homes*, Gilles Teulié describes how “during what became known as the ‘golden age’ of picture postcards (from the 1890s to the 1920s), statistics concerning picture postcards reached huge proportions: 2,360,000,000 postcards were sent each year, according to the French illustrated newspaper *Le Monde Illustré*... A whole industry emerged.” He continues: “the invention of the postcard in Austria in 1869 and its developments towards the end of the Victorian era, resulted in art becoming industrialized... The interplay between manufacturer and customer can probably be best exemplified in the British picture postcard industry, through the best-known picture postcard company of the time, Raphael Tuck & Sons (Ltd) which, in 1904, could boast a production of 15,000 different postcard designs.”

Teulié explains that “late Victorians and Edwardians had a proclivity towards the spreading of stereotypes, images and representations of the world through the mass production of objects that extolled ideas and ideologies.” In fact, Orientalism was embedded in Victorian culture.



- **What is Orientalism?**

Orientalism is a discourse of power that enabled Western societies to define, control, and represent the East.

Namrata Verghese provides more context:

In his pioneering 1978 book *Orientalism*, postcolonial studies scholar Edward Said defined Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ... ‘the Occident.’” Put simply, the “Orient” is a colonial invention. Orientalism is a collection of binaries — between “East” and “West,” foreign and familiar, civilized and uncivilized, primitive and progressive, colonizer and colonized, self and Other. It is a system of representation through which the West produced the East as its opposite, its “surrogate and underground self” — a strange, backward, barbaric land, steeped in mysticism and danger.

Tellingly, *Orientalism* opens with this Karl Marx quote: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” As Thomas Babington Macaulay, the British politician who imposed English colonial education on India, once infamously stated, it could not be denied that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” Given the assumed superiority of Western culture and literature, it fell to the West to represent the East. Western colonial powers assumed this paternalistic obligation by manufacturing the body of theory and practice that became the “Orient.”

...Through the colonial project of Orientalism, the “Occident” produced the “Orient.” However, and perhaps more importantly, the “Orient” also produced the “Occident.” Without the East, there is no West. The Orient “helped define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.” European culture came into being “by setting itself off against the Orient” — by defining the “self” as what it is not.

Orientalism was aided by the work of culture producers such as the French Romantic painter, Eugène Delacroix. In *(Re)Envisioning Orientalist North Africa – Exploring Representations of Maghrebian Identities in Oriental and Occidental Art, Museums, and Markets*, Isabella Archer describes Delacroix's famous trip to Morocco and its long-term implications:

In 1832 Eugène Delacroix journeyed to Morocco as part of a French ambassadorial delegation to the Moroccan sultanate. The drawings, sketches, paintings, and notes Delacroix produced during and after his travels have had a lasting effect on the definition of what constitutes North African culture for both nineteenth and twenty-first century consumers. From the Denon salon of the Louvre Museum, where millions of visitors view *Women of Algiers in their apartment*, Delacroix's painting depicting North African women lounging in a harem, to the markets of Tangier and Meknes, where tourists and Moroccans alike buy Delacroix-inspired street-artist paintings and postcards, Delacroix's Moroccan images and their likenesses have served as 'authentic' representations of Morocco for generations.



- **The Camera as a Weapon**

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.

— Susan Sontag, *On Photography*



As cultural or symbolic domination is frequently achieved through visual means, the use of photography in anthropology has been fraught since its invention in the 19th century. Orientalist photography often justifies itself by using an ethnographic alibi. Colonial postcards, with their photographic surveys of societies and landscapes (captioned as if documenting life in the colonies), can be linked to works such as the eight-volume visual encyclopedia "People of India," a photographic compendium of Indians categorized by caste, tribe, and religion, which was commissioned by British colonial administrators in 1868. In the name of science and colonial government, there was an urge to apprehend the land and its inhabitants through observation, cataloguing, and measurement. A similar visual language frames colonial postcards. As cultural anthropologist Rupa Pillai has pointed out, both otherize women from the colonies, "an idea further enforced by their arms and legs being on display. With the postcards published at the height of the Victorian era, the exposure of hands and feet would have been shocking."



• Western Imperialism & the Construction of the East

To understand the construction of the East through colonial Orientalist postcards, it is crucial to comprehend the broader historical context of European imperialism. The rise of colonial powers coincided with a period of cultural curiosity and fascination with the unknown. As European empires expanded their territories, the acquisition of colonies engendered a desire to portray these lands as enigmatic and intriguing, reinforcing the notion of Europe's superiority and its civilizing mission.

Colonial postcards played a pivotal role in disseminating and perpetuating such constructed narratives. As Alloula explains, at a time when mass media did not yet exist, the postcard filled that gap and added "its 'inspired' chatter to the colonialist discourse."

The images on these postcards often depicted exotic landscapes, veiled women, and exoticized men, promoting a sense of cultural "otherness" and reinforcing stereotypes about the East. These fantasies portrayed the East as a realm of sensuality, mysticism, and unexplored wonders, catering to the Western gaze and appealing to the romantic notions of the time. The selective portrayal of the East through these postcards shaped Western perceptions, generating an allure that obscured the complexities and diversity of the regions being depicted. By controlling the visual narrative, Western agents perpetuated cultural hegemony, reinforcing their domination by reducing the East to a picturesque backdrop for Western fantasies, stripping its inhabitants of agency and autonomy.

The influence of colonial Orientalist postcards extended beyond mere imagery; it shaped academic disciplines, literature, art, and popular culture. It impacted the East by perpetuating an essentialist understanding of diverse peoples and cultures, rearranging its space and structure on the basis of alien criteria, and imposing a Eurocentric lens through which people from the colonies began to view themselves. For the West, the postcards strengthened imperialist ambitions and served to justify colonization.

- **Diffusion to the Homeland / PR for Colonialism**

As Alloula writes in *The Colonial Harem*, the postcard “straddles two spaces: the one it represents and the one it will reach.”

Unlike paintings, picture postcards were cheap and accessible to middle-class Europeans living in India. Often described as the Instagram of the 20th century, they became a new means of communication that did not require arduous letter writing and reached all strata of society on account of efficient global postal services. They were collectible and projected a certain cosmopolitanism. All of this facilitated their diffusion to mainland Britain.

Although large swathes of British society had little knowledge about colonial territories or imperial philosophies, daily objects, memorabilia, and advertisements played an instrumental role in reinforcing the notion of the empire's grandeur and inculcating a sense of national identity among the British populace. Orientalist postcards were part of the material artifacts (fine chinaware, household items adorned with imperial symbols, toys featuring military regalia, medals, badges, and souvenirs from military conquests or colonial exhibitions) that created national pride during the Victorian era.

While these artifacts played a unifying role within Victorian society, it is important to note that the same objects might have elicited different emotions among colonial subjects.



- **Women of Color as Figures of a Phantasm**

Orientalist postcards often depicted women from the colonies as exotic, sensual, and submissive, perpetuating a fantasy of the Orient. These racialized and sexualized images emphasized perceived differences and a sense of "otherness." The portrayal of women from the colonies in elaborate traditional attire, often in seductive poses, contributed to the creation of an illusion that romanticized the colonial experience. By constructing fantastical images of women from the colonies, British postcards served as a veil that obscured the harsh realities of colonialism.

In other words, they normalized the idea that colonial rule was benevolent. Orientalist postcards also reinforced the imperial ideologies of the British Empire. These images were not only consumed domestically but were exported, shaping global perceptions of the colonies and their peoples.

The postcards were an aesthetic manipulation, what Alloula calls "ventriloquial art" that does not speak but is spoken. With European photographers in charge, the photographs were staged in studios, replete with fake backdrops and made-up scenarios.



Many times, the women's expressions were distant, blank, vacuous. Marcus Bunyan has described their body language, drawing attention to the demurely clasped hands, the "dead" eyes as they stare at the camera, the timidity of their posture, some almost cringing away from the camera's gaze.

They posed alone most of the time, following the photographer's directions, disconnected from their homes and communities. They were nameless, often labeled as a generic type: Bengal Beauty, Jaipur Woman, Hindoo Ayahs, Parsee Woman, Kashmir Beauty, South Indian Woman, Punjabi Rose, Milk Woman, Cooly Woman, Sind Water Carriers, Indian Girls.

• **The Colonial Male Gaze & the Objectification of Women**

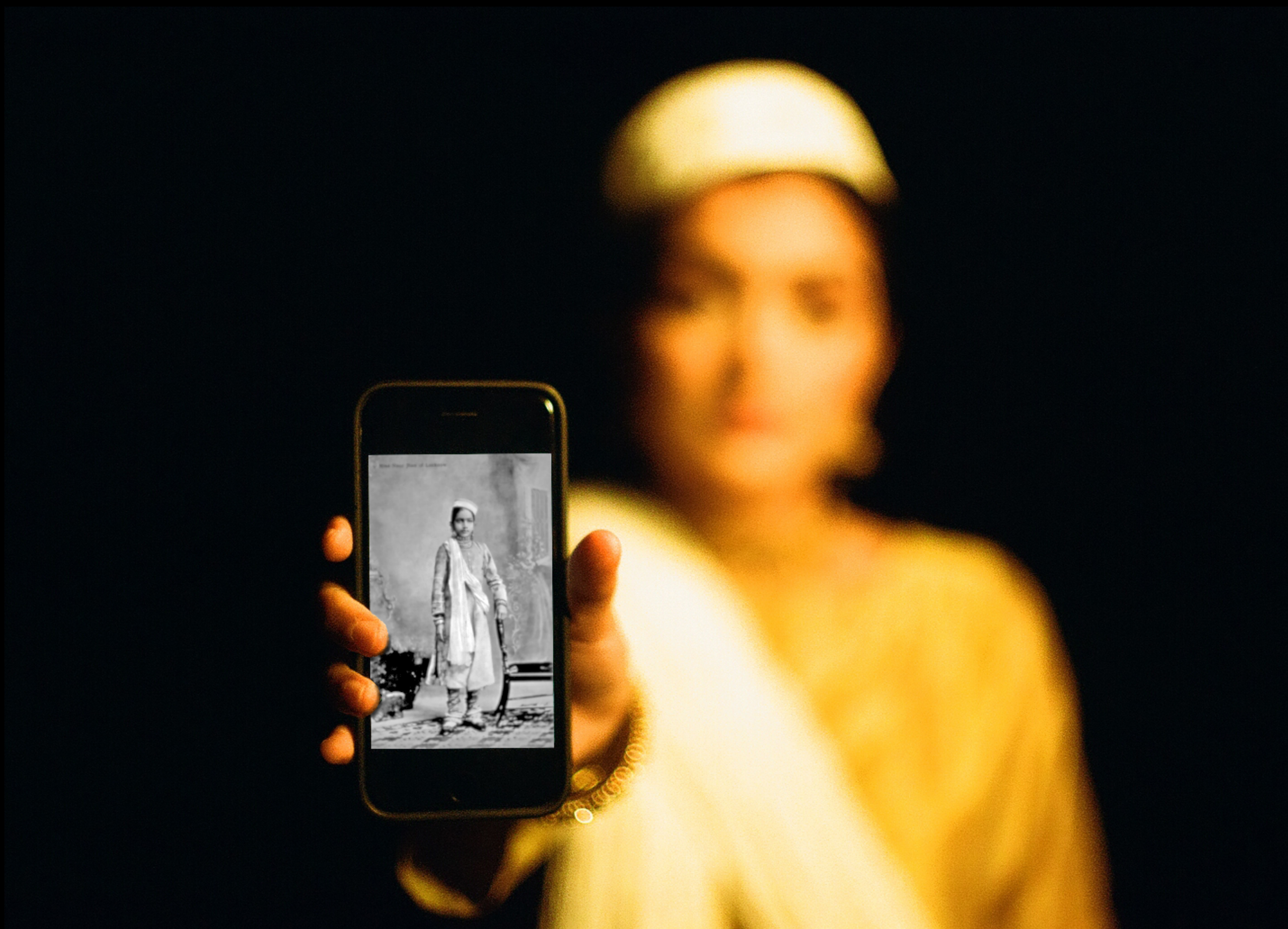
According to Malek Alloula, "colonialism is, among other things, the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze, and not only in the metaphorical sense of the term. Colonialism imposes upon the colonized society the everpresence and omnipotence of a gaze to which everything must be transparent. The exercise of power, especially when the latter is arbitrary, cannot permit the maintenance of shadowy zones; it considers them equivalent to resistance."

The production of Orientalist postcards enabled the colonial eye – its penetration and reach. As Alloula explicates, this is how the colony ceases to be opaque or "stubbornly resistive to the violation that it suffers. In its illusive dissolution of actual resistance, the colonial postcard offers a view of a pacified reality, restored to the colonial order, which presently proceeds to draw up an inventory of it."

In *Returning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling*, Carla Rice et al discuss how imperial and male gazes can "collude and conflict" but are "impossible to disentangle as both privilege a white heteropatriarchal perspective."

Colonial era postcards offer insight into the racial and gender dynamics at work within European colonial societies. The colonial male gaze shaped the representations of colonized women, reinforced colonial power structures, and in the end, impacted the experiences of women of color within colonial contexts. Women from the colonies were frequently portrayed as passive, docile, and sexually available. They were depicted as harem women, nautch girls, or exotic concubines, perpetuating the idea of the "sensual other." The objectification of these women served to dehumanize them, reducing their identities to mere objects of desire or ethnographic clichés. Exoticization played a central role. Physical features such as skin color, clothing, and body language were exaggerated to fit the Western imaginary of the "exotic other." These representations not only contributed to the fetishization of women of color but also fostered racial stereotypes that portrayed them (and their societies) as primitive.

The legacy of colonial postcards and the power of the male gaze continue to persist in contemporary times, impacting modern perceptions of women of color and their cultures. By understanding the historical contexts and political dynamics embedded in these representations, we can foster critical conversations about racism, sexism, classism and other social biases, as well as their intersectionalities in postcolonial societies.



• Decolonial Resistance / Returning the Gaze

By acknowledging and critiquing historical representations of women of color and people from the Global South, we can strive for a more inclusive and equitable future that challenges the persisting legacies of colonialism and promotes a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of women of color.

We can start by taking apart what Alloula calls “the mise-en-scene” and “uncover the original triad constituted by the photographer, his model, and his studio,” so the postcard women can reclaim their historicity.

In *Returning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling*, Carla Rice et al delve into how to re/turn, refuse, and reckon with the colonizer’s gaze and resist heteronormative, racist, sexist hierarchies:

...we aim to pry open the western gaze and with it, western ways of fixing indigenous bodies, identities and lives as “objects” that can be known. Even as we work in visually-oriented video storytelling genres, we reject any western ontology that takes an object-oriented view to reality, challenging the empiricist idea that “seeing is believing” and empiricism’s orientation to the material world as relatively stable, discoverable (or in the case of the camera, capturable) and knowable.



Instead we endorse indigenous ontologies that highlight the fluidity and processual nature of reality, orienting to organic and inorganic things as continuously moving and shifting, and in ongoing dialogue with Indigenous ways of knowing. In keeping with this ontology, we understand our analyses and the storytellers' own interpretations of their lives as provisional truths that offer up critically important visions of and insights into the situated moments in and about which they were crafted. As we have elsewhere written, "we recognize that all accounts, whether written, told, or imag(in)ed, are partial truths and that the truths of aggrieved groups must be proliferated if we hope to create a more just society."

Likewise, Ramón Grosfoguel reminds us that if we are to achieve epistemic decolonization, we should not study the other as an object of knowledge such that mainstream hegemonic thinking is left intact.

In the words of Annette Kuhn, as quoted by bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*:

...in order to challenge dominant representations, it is necessary first of all to understand how they work, and thus where to seek points of possible productive transformation. From such understanding flow various politics and practices of oppositional cultural production, among which may be counted feminist interventions... there is another justification for a feminist analysis of mainstream images of women: may it not teach us to recognize inconsistencies and contradictions within dominant traditions of representation, to identify points of leverage for our own intervention: cracks and fissures through which may be captured glimpses of what in other circumstance might be possible, visions of "a world outside the order not normally seen or thought about."

In accordance with these decolonial methodologies, the following interventions were made in the film and art exhibition, *Return to Sender: Women of Color in Colonial Postcards & the Politics of Representation*:

-So as not to double objectify by reappropriating harmful images and using colonial photographs without the subject's consent, both the film and art exhibition do not foreground the postcards themselves, rather they focus on the three contemporary women (Fatimah Arshad, Urvashi Bhattacharya, and Sumayia Islam) who agreed to personify them. Any images of the postcards (used however infrequently in this project) have been blurred.

-The three women emulating the colonial postcard subjects are given agency. They break out of their staged poses and perform an action of their own choice, an action that subverts colonial stereotypes, the circumstances and power dynamics under which the postcards were produced, as well as the linearity of time.

-During filming, Sumayia, Urvashi, and Fatimah are brought out of the darkness of the studio into the natural light offered by a South Asian home, in which they are allowed to be in community and discuss their reactions and experiences. It's a way to restore the voices of the postcard women and let them be in control of their own stories.

-The idea behind this multimedia project is not only to investigate and intervene but also to create community. The aim is to facilitate discussions about the problematic history and continuing representations of women of color in mainstream media. Hence the screening of the film is to be followed by a panel discussion headed by three women of color.



- Responses to the Project / Personal Reflections

WHO IS THE OTHER?

By Avina Mathias

It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*



Double consciousness is something I have wrestled with since middle school but only recently have I been able to name this disconnect in my life. I grew up in a town that lacked diversity and went to a school where the number of children with skin as dark as mine could be counted on one hand. The feeling of walking into a classroom and being acutely aware that not a single other person looked like me is one I'll never forget. Though it was seldom talked about, the feeling of being different was almost tangible and I did everything I could to ease that discomfort. In an attempt to fit in, I spent time actively erasing parts of my identity which were rooted in a culture that was seen as exotic. I started seeing my own food, clothes, and traditions as weird, improper, or abnormal. Though I had no way of conceptualizing it, I experienced myself and my own culture from the perspective of my white counterparts and learned to become empathetic to their inability to digest my otherness. I never considered how in another landscape, my peers could be the other.

Until this project, I had never acknowledged the possibility that I might view my own culture from a mainstream white point of view. Everything I was taught both inside and outside my home about my own history and traditions seems to have been influenced by colonization, therefore everything – from the Eurocentric beauty standards perpetuated by my family and South Asian peers to the history I studied in school – needs to be reevaluated using a decolonial lens.

Though being surrounded by white students deterred my understanding of my own background and identity, immersing myself in the South Asian community posed its own challenges. My South Asian peers were taught the same colonial understanding of our shared culture, which is how Eurocentric knowledge and standards continue to thrive. Not all South Asians I met experienced or upheld conformity to such standards and values, but most did so vigorously.

Being othered by people who were supposed to be a part of my own community resulted in a further dissociation between what I felt and who I was supposed to be. At home I smeared Fair & Lovely, a skin whitening cream, on my face every morning and was constantly told to stay out of the sun, only to go to school and be in the company of friends who longed to go out and tan or artificially darken their skin.

When surrounded by fellow South Asians, I was “othered” for not conforming to their version of European beauty standards.

From a social perspective, I was taught to place the needs of my family above my own and make decisions based on the potential opinions of a future husband: stay fair, stay thin, no tattoos. This had the effect of alienating mainstream American culture which values individuality, self-expression, and the pursuit of personal passions, all of which could be seen as self-serving.

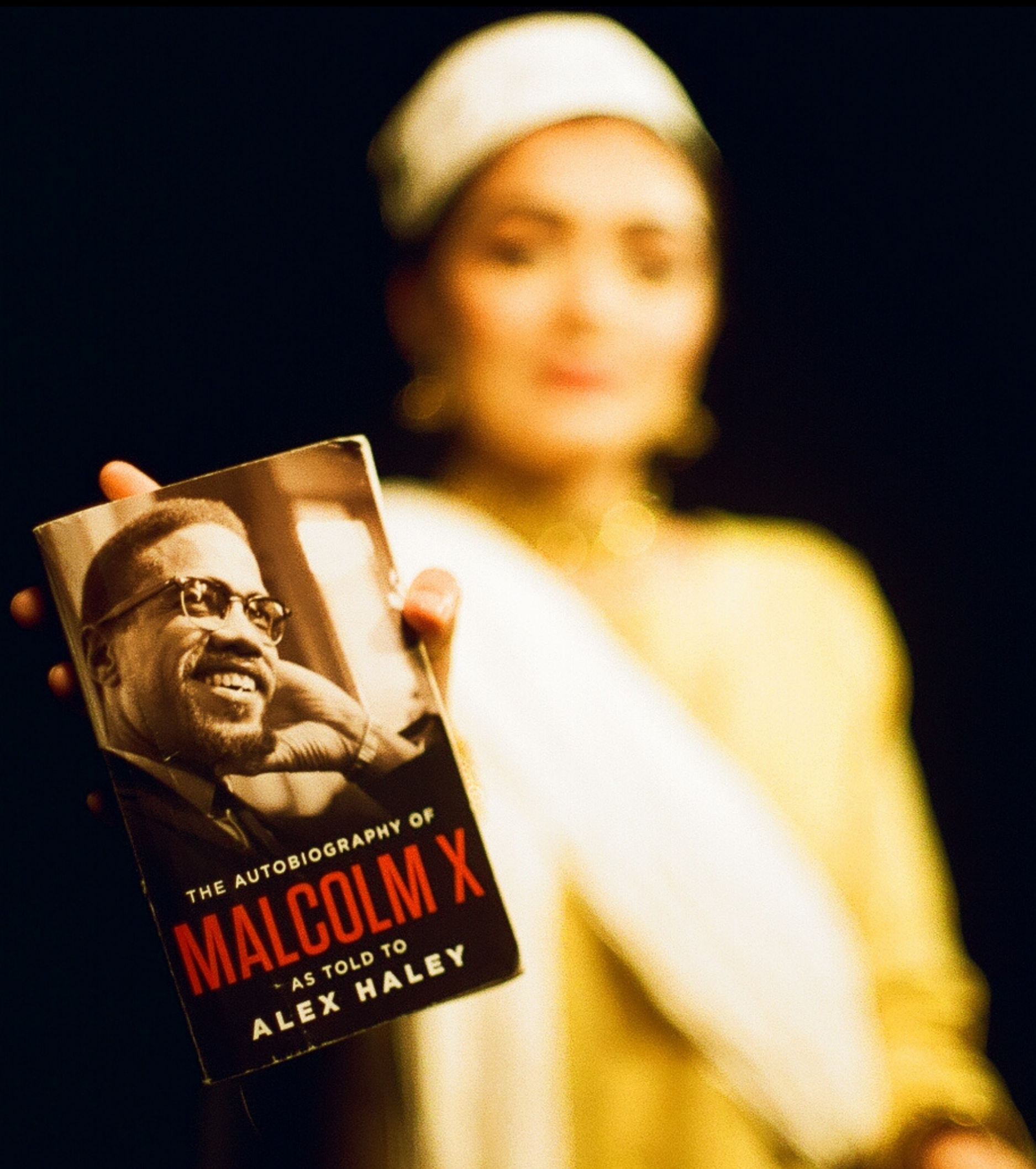
As I’ve grown older I’ve come to appreciate both sets of values and acknowledge the merits in each system, though I still struggle to balance these perspectives. I feel a strong disconnect from the woman my Indian parents expect me to be and the version of myself I present to society. The clash between these contradictory norms and worldviews continues to confuse me, but also uniquely shape my identity. Though I still feel uncertain about my identity as a dark skinned South Asian woman born as an American, I have found comfort in not being who I am “supposed” to be. I am an amalgamation of all my experiences in both Eastern and Western settings and I find it empowering to be able to forge my path without being restricted by monolithic ideals set forth by society. Finding connectivity and richness in being a patchwork of identities is an ongoing process but one I have come to own.

UNA CHICANA POR DENTRO Y POR FUERA

By Emelyn Pareja-Garcia

What does the ideal Mexican-American girl look like? The girl with brown skin, brown eyes, dark brown hair, perhaps hairy arms, and sideburns running along the side of her face? This could be the stereotype of a typical Mexican girl. But we all come in different skin tones, shapes, sizes, eye color, hair color, and more.

The word we use for a Mexican-American girl is Chicana. A Chicana in the United States chased after a dream that her parents weren't able to live because of how their life was different in Mexico. A dream that one day she will make her parents happy, and proud of all the sacrifices they made crossing the United States-Mexican border. She is stuck with the idea that her people and Americans are separated by a big wall dividing lives and opportunities, that there will always be the possibility of not being allowed in.



Growing up I was raised in a Mexican household where Spanish became my first language and English emerged once I started school. I was put in ESL classes so I could fit in and be one of them. Phrases that were meant for me to sound native-like, what my name was, or how old I was. What my favorite food was too. Once I learned English, my Spanish kind of faded. Felt like I lost a part of myself. A part of the culture I was born into. I still ate Mexican food but American food overtook my body. My favorite Mexican dishes – mole, pozole, tostadas de tinga – are made at home, but when I was out, I ate American food. I was raised in a town where there were people from different Latin American countries and the Caribbean. People spoke Spanish, English, Creole, and French. You could hear people talk on the phone in Spanish at the Latin supermarkets: “Orale pues” or “Alli nos vemos cuando llegue ala casa.” Different Spanish dialects and me catching onto them, bit by bit.

But English is the main language spoken in school. You don't speak English, you feel left out and are called names that refer to you as an immigrant with no capabilities of ever learning the English language or fitting in. You're only in school because your parents want you to be. Not because you want to.

Once I got older, I realized that I shouldn't let that piece of me go. I learned to appreciate my language and culture. Yet when my family would tell me “Eres Mexicana debes de saber hablar Español” or “Emelyn que dijiste? Asi es que se dice,” I was embarrassed. I wanted to be better at Spanish.

Being bilingual, especially in English and Spanish, is an amazing thing. When I go to Mexico, I want to be able to hear that yes I am American but I haven't lost that Mexican side of me that has been with me since birth. Si soy una Mexicana nacida en los Estados Unidos pero mi cultura es algo muy importante para mi y poder hablar el idioma de mi pais es lo mas bonito que puedo tener.

I may look like the stereotypical Mexican girl and I should be that girl. The one who loves all the beautiful things about her ancestral home and culture. I'm a proud Chicana with many opportunities to live the dream my family always wanted for me.

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**More information at MaraAhmedStudio.com
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This project is made possible with funds from the Statewide Community Regrant Program, a regrant program of the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature and administered by The Huntington Arts Council, Inc.

