

## Forged Imagery for a Forged History

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“JEUNE MAURESQUE DANS SON INTÉRIEUR”. French Colonial Postcard from Morocco.

*History is not the past, it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past.*

(Mantel, 2017)

Starting from Hilary Mantel’s (2017) quote on the imperfection of history, I tried to fragment it in order to understand and relate it to issues in the fashion archive and obstacles facing fashion historians. According to the novelist, ‘there will always be many more gaps, errors and unreliable witnesses.’

*History is not the past...* It is an interpretation of past events. It is a record of who lived and what happened before the present time. It is a cumulative and continuous effort to keep up knowledge of the past, that started with humanity.

*- it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past.* Maybe that can describe fictional historical writing. I align more with history being the method evolved of organising what we know of the past, no matter how little it is. Mantel (2017) says 'As soon as we die, we enter into fiction'. I believe we enter fiction way before we deacease. In the mind of each person we have crossed paths with, lives a different version of us. The truest version of ourselves lives in our mind. The ability to convey that image varies from one person to another. Some people are masters of branding themselves and creating an image for themselves that lives on. How accurate that image is to their inner thoughts is up for questioning. Some are less articulate or simply do not care. One can't live a life of trying to fix their image in other people's minds. Others are deemed unworthy of been mentioned in *history*.

*It's the record of what's left on the record... It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it.* 'Not only that, it's an interpretation of the space in between, looking at different mediums to gather a narrative. From this part, I understand that as time goes by, past events are interpreted and reinterpreted. History gets reconstructed continuously which makes it lose its accuracy. I somewhat disagree with this explanation. Perhaps, with time and technological advancements, more details are uncovered contributing to a clearer bigger picture. Circumstances that may have been too complicated to explore in the past due to social, technical or scientific limitations may have an explanation or a better context further down the line. Looking at imagery created in the past through the decolonial lens, one can understand that history may have been manipulated to serve the privileged and to marginalise and oppress the Other.

While it is believed that imperial regimes were able to better control their 'subjects' through meticulous record keeping (Moss & Thomas, 2021), they got rid of most documents that incriminated them, like in the case of the British Empire (Cobain, 2013), leaving gaps in the archive. Colonial officers of European descent were instructed to destroy records which are likely to be interpreted, either

reasonably or by malice, as indicating racial prejudice or religious bias on the part of Her Majesty's government (Cobain, 2013). To tackle the resulting discontinuity in the archive, historians should adopt non-conventional archiving techniques: decolonise the archiving process, acknowledge that part of history is forged, contextualise photographs and historical imagery, and reimagine silenced and hidden stories through critical fabulation and oral histories. It also should be helpful to differentiate between institutions established in settler colonies in contrast with colonies of the exploitative variant, as ex-colonies usually inherit the colonial institutions and practices (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012). Banerjee and Duflo (2012) conducted social research on different past colonies in Africa and concluded that areas with low settler mortality are more prosperous than areas with higher rates. This goes to show that colonisers established exploitative institutions in regions they could not live by cause of environmental circumstances. These establishments' only purpose was to extract as many resources without bearing in mind the condition in which the region is left, as opposed to others in settler colonies.



1950s-1960s Propaganda poster distributed by the Bureau of Psychological Action of colonial France.

Poster reads in French : «*N'êtes-vous donc pas jolie? Dévoilez-vous!* ». In English: “*Are you not pretty? Unveil Yourself!*”

A key to decolonising the archive is to think of image as a political construct (Azoulay, 2019). Contextualising painting, photographs and other historical imagery helps deconstruct bias we may have about the people in the image. This bias starts with the creation of the image and outlives the subject. It is used to further push a narrative created to other them. An example of that would be photographs taken **about** Algeria during the French colonial era from 1830 to 1962 (**about** rather than **in** Algeria because some Algeria French imagery was staged in other countries like Tunisia (Choudhary, 2021)). Photographers exploited *models* from the margins of society to pose in a staged set to legitimise the fantasy created around the veiled, inaccessible Algerian woman. France, like other imperial forces, wanted to know everything about its colonial subjects to better control them. Especially the Algerian woman, the government was obsessed with unveiling her. France wanted to bring the *Algérienne* to light. Following suit to the Orientalist painters, French photographers created a persona of the Algerian woman often called Fatma, often in suggestive poses and topless. This can be perceived as ‘symbolic revenge upon a society that continues to deny him any access and questions the legitimacy of his desire’ (Choudhary, 2021). Liberating the Algerian woman from the traditional oppressive veil and modernising her dress had the political purpose of breaking the Algerian resistance, as Fanon (2003) points out: ‘*Algerian society with every abandoned veil seemed to express its willingness to attend the master’s school and to decide to change its habits under the occupier’s direction and patronage.*’ Contextualising the image and understanding the traditions of the region helps spot details that confirm that the photograph was staged. Anyone who has been to a North African household knows that shoes don’t go on carpets, yet they were removed and placed again on the rug, as seen in many colonial postcards and ethnographic images of women. As Cole (2019) expresses, ‘*This photography, in which the subjects had no say in how they were seen, did much to shape the Western world’s idea of Africans.*’ Photography stripped its subject from the right to conceal or to control their image, allowing white supremacy to visually back its claims of the inferiority of the Other.

Ariella makes certain claims regarding architecture during an interview with the AA School of Architecture (2022) students, which I applied to fashion. Fashion is never impartial. It cannot be separated from the imperial project; it is constitutive of it. It acts as an organizer by destroying the previous syntax and imposing a new one. I understand this applies to the ethnographic categorization and labelling of traditional dress by region or ethnicity as part of the colonial archival process as well as policing dress and highlighting European dress as modern and more practical. These practices contribute to legalising the theft of land, people and culture... Azoulay (2019) also speaks about the concept photography and the shutter which precedents the invention of the camera. The shutter divides people from objects, past that is being invented from other tenses. It divides between territories, people from their lives turning them into slaves, undocumented, infiltrators... Imperial technology organises different elements in a shared world. Decolonising the archive can be approached from dissociating photography from its modern narrative and treating it as a concept rather than a modern artistic medium. But how does seeing the shutter as a divisive technology influence how we read the photograph? The photograph is usually treated as an instance of the past, seeing it as a single event... When seeing black and white photographs of the 1948 *Nakba*, the event feels distant and momentary. However, the Palestinian struggle is ongoing, and Israel is still displacing, violating, incarcerating and killing. She recognizes the archive as a technology that produces documents which force people and objects to embody descriptions and labels pushed on them by the archival process. She stresses that the archive should be acknowledged not as repository of documents to be interpreted but as a foundation for a continuity of violence that produces those documents and bestows power and authority on them. The Palestinian Jew (Azoulay, 2019) argues that to decolonise the archive and unlearn its imperial practices. The archival process consisted of the classification and tagging of people to order social life. Considered by the author as a regime rather than a mere institution, it facilitated violent activities such as looting, deportation, enslavement and appropriation. It has allowed colonial powers to disrupt the lives of many reducing them to 'infiltrators', 'undocumented', the Other. To decolonise the archive is to let go of the ruling technologies through and with paper as well (Azoulay, 2019).

Silencing and erasure have not only targeted marginalised and oppressed groups, but also people whose voices were deemed unworthy for differences like gender, religion and the lack of social status. The archives show little to no trails of people outside of the elite. In their book *Archival silences* (Moss &

Thomas, 2021), the editors reiterate throughout the introduction that ‘the marginalised are not the only ones to suffer from silences’. While all of these categories deserve to be given a voice in the archive, shedding light on their lives, traditions and culture, it remains necessary to make a distinction between groups who have been silenced because of the past’s elitist documentation techniques and those whose existence was purposefully meant to be erased through imperial archiving practices (Levi, 2022). ‘By equating however all archival silences, they inadvertently downplay the concept itself’. Intersectionality in engaging with archives is considered to be the key solution to this challenge and an enabler for an archival process that strives towards social justice.

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