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Dore Bowen

San Jose State University, dore.bowen@sjsu.edu

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**This Bridge Called Imagination:
On Reading the Arab Image Foundation and Its Collection**

Dore Bowen

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Seeing that which had previously been invisible becomes an activity that renews the exoticism of territorial conquests of the past. But seeing that which is not really seen becomes an activity that exists for itself. This activity is not exotic but endotic, because it renews the very conditions of perception.

—Paul Virilio¹

The Journey Out

In the civil archives of Paris one can study strange missives—written notes found in the pockets of eighteenth-century illiterates who drowned in the Seine. Why would farmers, barge operators, and nomadic souls with no knowledge of written language have carried scribbled notes on their person? Historian Arlette Farge ponders this enigma, suggesting that these notes may have been part of a verbal process whereby thoughts were whispered to a member of the literate public who then transcribed them; these texts were then carried by travelers with other symbols such as good luck charms and memorabilia. Consequently, rather than being a form of self-expression, Farge suggests that this variety of written language ought to be considered an expression of the social and political currents of the time and, like the travelers and ferrymen and ferrywomen who used the river as their mode of transport, “these written words also made the route and the voyage.”²

Like any respectable historian, Farge accounts for what is known of this population, and of the eighteenth century in general, by looking to the archive; yet her Foucauldian-inspired method also suggests that the minor figures who haunt the margins of the historical *mise-en-scène* cannot be detected within the surviving documents without the historian’s extrapolation. In another text, Farge employs a variation of this (dis)associative process. Here, rather than delving into the discontinuity of past events she turns to examining her own archival habits—and this includes investigating the sensuality of the marked documents she holds in her hands as well as the maneuvering that goes on in the research library for the best table—thereby refuting the notion that her historical subject is distinct from herself. Through this interweaving of past and present, document and researcher, the subject becomes more relevant to “us” while the lives and events that constitute history (for example, the figures who speak as a community from the chilly waters of the past) remain open to speculation.³

Farge employs imagination in order to embrace discontinuity, leaping over obstacles and lacunae in order to form a picture of the past in relation to seemingly marginal events and actors.⁴ When history is written this way, the reader is encouraged to make mental associations rather than follow the linear path constructed by historical narratives. In a sense, then, imagination acknowledges the ruptures, crises, and traumas that constitute the ebb and flow of temporality. At the same time, this gesture, this “leaping

over,” while acknowledging the complexity of History, bears its own sense of smug certainty. The historian recuperates a moment past by using her imagination to flesh out the possibilities that documents merely suggest. And this is precisely the danger; this bridge called imagination leads the reader here and there and back again, providing her with the sense of being an adventurer who crosses a great divide while the ensuing story comes to take the form of a travelogue. Those figures imagined by the historian come to have a face, a body, and a context, and thus the Other appears with a purpose provided by the historian’s consciousness and informed by his or her cultural attitudes.⁵ When this Other is given a literal designation (e.g. a country of origin, a name, a political face) the danger of imagination is compounded.⁶ Farge protects against over-identification by allowing the drown bodies to remain anonymous while she, at the same time, rescues them from watery obscurity by lending their marks meaning.

Following Farge, I look to imagination to explore historical documents and bring unsung, ordinary heroes of another era to light. However, imagination seems an inappropriate tool for me, an American scholar, to use when working with the Arab Image Foundation—a Beirut-based archive that responds to the domination of Western imagination by collecting photographs of the Arab world *from* the Arab world.⁷ In addition, this moment—when an American-initiated war rages in Iraq—seems an inauspicious one to take up the Western imagination of the Arab world as a theoretical topic. Haven’t we seen enough of Western projection? And yet imagination is precisely what is at stake, what is harnessed, what is taken for granted, what is offered, when I, or another, read across time and geography. Furthermore, imagination might be an *appropriate* tool for me, a Western feminist, to use as a counter-discursive tool to forge alliances with women from other countries and with diverse religious affiliations. There is no way out of this conundrum, even if I, the historian, speak only to my own location, or to others like myself. Consequently, I look outward, toward the collection at the Arab Image Foundation, in order to consider the complexity of imagination as a method for reading the archive across culture, and in order to consider the vicissitudes of imagination itself.

What is imagination? In Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1940 *L’imaginaire* (published in English as *The Psychology of Imagination*) he explains that imagination is a form of consciousness that produces a mental image. For Sartre, this mental image is not “in” consciousness, nor is it an illusion or trick played upon the perceptual faculties. Rather, imagination is distinct from perception, with its own manner of relating to objects and people.⁸ For example, while the act of perception involves grasping a three-dimensional object in a particular time and space—and with all the variety of shadow and distortion this implies—Sartre notes that the act of imagination produces an image from something that is not present to perception. Whereas in perception an object is available for investigation (the viewer might, for instance, walk around the object and touch its contours), when the object is absent imagination steps in to produce a mental image. While the object that the mental image refers to may be dubious (like a unicorn), nonpresent (like a lost watch), or departed (like a deceased friend), it still exists in imagination. In this sense it is not illusory; imagination is a manner of relating to objects and people in the world. Sartre goes so far as to state that the imagined person is necessarily absent and this absence affords the fullness of imagination: “Were Peter to appear in person the image would disappear.”⁹

As the word *imagination* suggests, this process revolves around images—be they concrete or phantasmatic. Since, in imagination, it is decidedly difficult to distinguish a picture from its corresponding mental image, Sartre uses the term *image-consciousness* to clarify the interdependence of these components. It is helpful to think of image-consciousness as two sides of the same coin; the term *image* falls on the side of the picture and *consciousness* on the side of the viewer and her or his mental image. Consequently image-consciousness, or imagination, refers to a picture when it becomes enmeshed in a viewer’s consciousness. Which sorts of pictures prompt this process of entanglement? While different sorts of pictures prompt different kinds of imagination, analogic pictures, particularly photographs, encourage the viewer to form a mental image of an absent person. For example, when I look at

photographs from the Arab Image Foundation, my looking and musing on the figures animates them. I sense them as sentient beings; I imagine the people and situations to which the images refer.

Photographic and Digital Imagination

Looking at a Foundation photograph of two women and a man in the countryside, I observe from the title that they were on an outing around the coastal town of Chekka, Lebanon, in the summer of 1960. Since the formal clothes and comportment suggest an arranged date among couples, I assume the photographer to be the second gentleman in this quartet. When I slip into the site of this absent photographer, I notice that the woman nearest the viewing plane is looking either away or toward me—I am not sure. Is she shy? Flirtatious? While the similarly dressed woman behind her peeks at me with an austere and somewhat icy gaze, I am clearly in cahoots with the young man on the edge of the left frame; we have a plan and hence he acknowledges my look. My critical eye notices that a tree trunk nearly dead center in the frame divides the man from the women, producing a clumsy composition that is crowned by the man's cropped elbow on the left. Still, the black-and-white tones are interesting: the tanned, white-clothed figures stand out from the dark gray tones of the background. The blank page of the sky divides the frame into top and bottom, nearly decapitating the figures while throwing their faces into relief. The divisive sky, taken with the partitioning tree, separates the frame into quadrants, echoing the four figures (including myself, or, the absent photographer). All of these formal elements make up the picture. Yet, ultimately, it is the absence of youth's unease that I sense, the absence of summer and, since the photograph is dated before my birth, the world before my presence. (The starched white dresses of the women and the rolled sleeves of the man strike me as period details.) Although my mental image is inspired by photographic detail, it is also rooted in the seeming presence of these absent figures and, as well, what I take from this partial encounter when I turn away from the photograph.



0088kh00087
 Outing around Chekka
 Lebanon/Chekka, 1960
 Anonymous photographer
 Khazen, Fayza Salim el Collection
 Copyright © Arab Image Foundation
 Keywords: Glance; Young man;
 Young woman; Plain
 Genre: Snapshot
 Photographic process:
 Positif/black & white/support papier
 DOP-Papier a developpement à la
 gelatine
 Size: 6.50 * 9.30 cm
 Aspect Ratio: 1.43
 Condition:

Youth, summer, Lebanon, countryside outing, 1960. All of these rest in my imagination as if caricatures, thereby calling forth new caricatures. And the danger of imagination is that, indeed, it generalizes. As Sartre writes of the mental image, it “teaches nothing.”¹⁰ Since we already know what we will find in imagination (since nothing new is discovered), it is the exact opposite of an encounter with objects and people in the variable world of perception. It is a variety of stereotype. And yet we begin a journey with an image already in mind, and we return home with pictures in hand. Imagination and perception are intertwined and act upon each other. Vilém Flusser describes this looping structure thus: “Images signify—mainly—something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). The specific ability to abstract out of space and time and project them back into space is what is known as

imagination.”¹¹ As Flusser suggests, the mental image and the picture intersect in space. Mental images, though abstract, have the power to alter perception and the material world, while pictures, particularly those that prompt imagination, have real effects and thus are often considered dangerous or desirable.

While difficult photographs—those that stray from the norms of composition, tonality, subject matter, and so on—challenge the viewer’s *a priori* mental images and thus threaten to alter perception, conventional photographs do precisely the opposite: they abstract the four dimensions of time and space in forms that viewers already anticipate. For instance, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of Arab women (by photographers from both Europe and the Middle East) often depict the figures in a pose similar to that found in Orientalist painting. In the photograph below, the woman closest to me is pictured holding an urn in a reclining position, which reminds me of Eugène Delacroix’s famous painting *Algerian Women in Their Apartments* (1834).¹² At the same time, due to the particularity of the photograph, the image depicts a moment past—a moment when a photographer stood before a group of women in 1902 and snapped the shutter of an elaborate camera. As opposed to painting, the photograph necessarily depicts someone that existed. Technically speaking, light bounces off an object or person, is channeled through an aperture, and is fixed on a light-sensitive surface. This is often described as the photographic index; the photograph captures a moment of light’s reflection on a substrate surface. Thus, as derivative or Orientalist or normative as they may be, photographs indicate a slice of time. When a photograph is taken up as a mental image—when it enters the viewer’s consciousness—it carries along with it the absent presence of objects and people that once existed. While it indicates a moment past, a photograph also refers to the absence of this moment in the present. Thus we often say that photographs are haunted, and surely they are. The photograph encourages a particular type of imagination—an imagination inhabited by specters that, nevertheless, tell us little about the world from which the photograph was taken.



0008ab00027
 Lutfiyah Abu Izzeddin, Tafidah and friends.
 Egypt/Cairo, 1902
 Abu Izzeddin, Selim - Amateur photographer
 Abu Izzeddin, Faysal Collection
 Copyright © Arab Image Foundation
 Keywords: Backdrop of exterior scene; Lyre; Woman; Jar; Oriental clothing
 Genre: Group portrait
 Photographic process: Negatif/black & white/support en verre/plaque au GBAG
 Size: 17.80 * 13 cm
 Aspect Ratio: 0.73
 Condition:

Finally, the absent presence of the photographer is inscribed within the photograph. It is taken from a particular point of view, in relationship to a body that stands *behind* the camera. This cultural structure informs the photograph without announcing itself and acts similarly to what Roland Barthes calls the photographic *studium*.¹³ This is why the Foundation can boast of being “from” the Arab world; it matters who took the picture, where, and within what context.

Interestingly, the indexical traces that unwittingly sign the photograph often seem to be at odds with the impression the photographer had hoped to convey. For example, many of the Foundation’s studio photographs bespeak their own desperate attempt to outrun the indexical limits of the medium. This is particularly true with the photographs that fall under the keyword *backdrop of exterior scene* in the

Foundation's database. In the anonymous photograph above the exterior scene is clearly a backdrop and its edge is exposed in the lower right corner. Such "errors" bring us back to the moment and circumstance of the photograph's taking—for instance, in a studio and not in a site of pristine nature as the backdrop suggests—and remind us that the photographer was forced to contend with a limited repertoire of studio objects to create the picture. This tension can make such photographs comical. (Paintings are not comical in the same way.) This is the crux of the photographs that fall under the keyword *painted set up*. These unusual group portraits are not meant to convince us of their veracity but, instead, the desire for and the impossibility of the scenario they picture.



0001ph00022

First from the left: Yvette Pharaon.

Lebanon/Zahleh, 1940 - 1945

Anonymous photographer

Pharaon, Alfred Collection

Copyright © Arab Image Foundation

Keywords: Painted set up; Boat; Man;

Woman; Girl; Sea

Genre: Studio photography

Photographic process: Positif/black &

whitesupport papier/DOP-Papier a

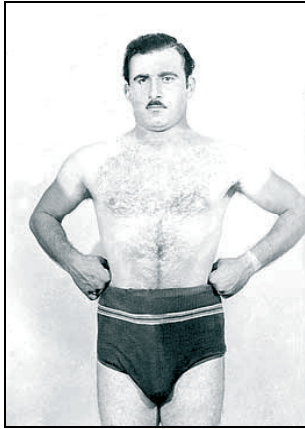
developpement à la gelatine

Size: 6.80 * 10.30 cm

Aspect Ratio: 1.51

Condition:

Because the viewer has probably stood with her or his head planted firmly inside a painted set up—a headless diorama constructed specifically for the studio—hoping to “look natural” for the camera, laughter results. It is a gag for a photo-conversant viewer. But what results when such photographs enter into a digital environment? The Arab Image Foundation is in the process of scanning, digitizing, and archiving its collection, and I am responding to (and reproducing) the digital images here. The original photographs are now protected—as are many photographs—in a temperature-controlled environment and thus are not easily accessible. On the other hand, the digital image, scanned from the photograph at various levels of resolution and placed on the Foundation website is available to anyone with a computer and Internet connection. What is a digital image as opposed to a photograph, and what sort of imagination does it inspire? Something so obvious as to be overlooked is that in the transformation of an image from photographic to digital form the image becomes mathematical data.¹⁴ In this transformation the image no longer marks the photographic relationship to time, for the digital image circulates endlessly and has no origin. The aura of presence that was displaced by photography is erased or, more accurately, has ceased to exist.¹⁵ With the digital image we are no closer to or further from a moment in time. Consequently, new questions other than those generally asked of the photograph—such as, Is it an original or copy? When was it taken? Who is it of?—must be asked of the digital image. What is the compression of the image? What is the website address, and is it still active?



0038so00344
 Studio portrait.
 Lebanon/Saida, 1950
 Soussi, Anis el - Professional
 photographer
 Soussi, Chafic el Collection
 Copyright © Arab Image Foundation
 Keywords: Moustache; Nudity; Torso;
 Flexing; Man; Bathing suit
 Genre: Portrait; Studio photography
 Photographic process: Negatif/black &
 white/support en verre/plaque au GBAG
 Size: 14.50 * 9.60 cm
 Aspect Ratio: 0.66
 Condition:

With digitization, the absences and presences figured by the analog photograph are reworked and the sort of imagination inspired by the image alters accordingly. No longer deliberating on what, who, and when, theorists, journalists, and artists alike turn to addressing dead links and conspiracy theories. The digital image rests within a network of images, and yet the digital image does not reside within an entirely seamless web of information. There are seams. For instance, at one point many of the photographs at the Foundation were reworked in order to erase the marks and aging spots that transfer from print to scan to file. While the reworked images seem timeless, the first scan—with blemishes and all—betrays the process of translation with its photographic accent. Consequently, although digital information produces a new kind of image that demands to be understood on its own terms, what is perhaps less obvious is the way in which digital images are conjoined to previous systems of ordering and imaging, and hence imagination.¹⁶

Archival Imagination (*Not Given*)

The term *archive*, notes Jacques Derrida, is derived from the Greek *arkhē*. This term refers to the both the site—the container that houses the materials and where the archiving will commence—and the authority, the command, the law that the archive exercises. To this he adds *arkheion*, the name for the domicile, the magistrates, and the *archons*—those guardians of the container whose authority lends the archive its prestige and weight.¹⁷ This process of archival authority, its “patriarchic function,” is at odds with the fluidity of the digital image, which slips covertly under the archons’ patrolling eyes to flirt with interested viewers who lack the proper permission to enter this hallowed site. However, the question Derrida ultimately asks of the archive is more and more relevant in the digital age: Given the changes in the archive, what will be remembered, impressed upon consciousness, and what necessarily forgotten? Who is allowed to view the archive now that the boundary between public and private has shifted? The Arab Image Foundation—a young foundation whose collection is already the largest online image database from the Arab world, whose staff and members speak Arabic, French, and English equally well, and whose funding is derived from its founding members in Lebanon but also the Ford Foundation and grants from the European Union—is *in medias res*. This archive has not yet erased the marks and stains that bespeak the process of translation and consolidation.

The images from the Foundation are available on a website and can be accessed by keywords (among other categories). Having borrowed its system of classification from *Le Patrimoine Photographique* in Paris, the Foundation has begun the work of altering the keywords to fit its altogether different cultural context with a taxonomy that reflects the values of French patrimony. This misfit is an essential element of *Not Given: Talking of and Around Photographs of Arab Women*, a multi-media installation I curated with French media artist Isabelle Massu from December 2005-January 2006. *Not Given* was first mounted at La Compagnie Contemporary Cultural Center—a gallery located in a primarily Algerian-French

neighborhood in Marseille—under the title *Soit dit en passant* and remounted at San Francisco Camerawork in Spring 2007. The title, *Not Given*, refers to Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant donnés* (*Given*, 1946–66), an installation in which the viewer steps forward onto a mat in front of a coarse wooden door and peers through two peepholes to a construction behind.¹⁸ Inside, an eerily realistic nude female form lies on a bed of twigs, gas lamp in hand. The viewer’s movement toward the door activates this installation and consequently, as Rosalind Krauss notes, *Etant donnés* operates as a kind of vision machine: it situates the viewer in such a way that it generates the desire to see and, in doing so, reveals the sexual codes that predetermine Western visuality.¹⁹ While photography originated within this Western schema, *Not Given* complicates this codification by introducing aural narratives derived from members of the community in which the images were taken and later viewed. Consequently, the installation involves a sound component in which verbal commentaries built around absent photographs construct their own story. The second component of the installation is visual and involves working with the photographic collection from the Arab Image Foundation. This collection—from which a selection of images are reproduced here—is stunning in its diversity, often calling into question preconceived notions of Middle Eastern photography in general and Arab women in particular. However, like all archives, the Foundation organizes its photographs based on a set hierarchy of terms. The photographs are sorted and tagged with a gender, a class, and a function. *Not Given* scrutinizes the logic of the archive and seeks the subterranean narratives that emerge from its seams.



Soit dit en passant, Installation View, Marseille (2005-06)

By exhibiting the Foundation’s images in relation to their corresponding keywords, *Not Given* exposes the logic that undergirds the classification system—a system the Foundation is itself struggling to redefine through the addition and deletion of terms. *Activité Culturelle*, *Activité Productrice*, *Genre Humain*, *Milieu de Vie*, *Milieu Naturel*, *Termes Generaux*, *Vie Quotidien*, *Vie Sociale*. In English: *Cultural Activity*, *Trade and Industry*, *Human Elements*, *The Living Environment*, *Natural Environment*, *General Terms*, *Everyday Life*, *Social Life*. This set of terms was used by *Le Patrimoine Photographique* to classify itself and its others. *African person* and *Asian person* are the only classifiable “persons,” and *religion* is a subcategory of *Social Life*. Clearly this system reflects the secular collection it once housed—photographs of twentieth-century Paris with its pigeons, squares, benches. Indeed, the bulk of the keywords seem to date from the post-WWII period with terms such as *industry* but also *poverty*, *prisoner*, and *ruins*—evoking the modernization of city-life but also urban devastation. *Animals* and *countryside* are a subcategory of *Natural Environment*, as if exceptions to the rule. Looking outward from Paris, the system of classification divides the world up according to an Occidental vision: there is no Middle East (nor is there a Maghreb or Levant region) listed under regions and the computer has not yet entered its lexicon. In order to update and account for cultural differences, which words will the Foundation keep? Which must go?

The terms added and deleted by the Foundation indicate the slant of the Foundation itself. The woman in charge of this project, Tamara Sawaya, alters this system bit by bit as she sees fit. When a photograph defies description a new term is added. When a term is not useful it is deleted. In *Not Given* the images filed under added keywords are projected on two adjacent screens in the first room. In the second projection room, images that fall under keywords that express emotion or gesture are doubly accessed with either the keyword *man* or *woman*, and these gendered groupings are projected on opposing screens. The most striking examples in this group are terms that yield nothing. For example, *caressing* + *man* yields no images, and *grimace* + *woman* likewise. Under *undressed* + *man* only one image emerges—a man reveals his scar to the camera—while the opposite screen features numerous images, many of scantily clad women from the studio of Van Leo, a Cairo photographer whose luscious retouched images depict women as if they are Hollywood stars with the appropriate lighting, backdrop, and effects. Following the logic of this system, it seems that women do not grimace or flex and men do not caress. Do men undress? Only to reveal their wounds, apparently.



Soit dit en passant, Installation View, Marseille (2005-06)

Under the combination *undressed* + *woman*, among the many images of Hollywoodesque women, one image shows up with both the keywords *undressed* and *veil* attached. The image is of a nude male child atop a veiled woman's shoulder. Here, a certain archival humor results when a fully clothed woman comes up under the term *undressed*, and an undressed child under the term *veil*. Furthermore, there is a certain visual irony in juxtaposing the child (who is fully exposed to us) against a woman (who is concealing her body). Notice that the child's and the mother's hands meet atop her veiled head. In a sense, then, the veiled woman acts as a backdrop that allows the undressed child (which is not the same as a *nude* child) to show up. These dynamic oppositions—veiled/ undressed, exposed/hidden—are grounded by the woman's right ringed hand, which is implanted firmly in the child's right breast.



The keywords attached to this image are a valiant attempt to express the complexity of the image in six succeeding words—*woman*, *baby*, *oriental clothing*, *yashmak*,²⁰ *veil*, *undressed*. To further complicate this story, the term *veil* is used by the Foundation to signify much more than that of the French *voile*. Eighteen pages of images come up under the term on the Foundation’s website, and these include fashion and marriage veils, Christian and Muslim veils, full-length veils as well as short headgear. When the word *veil* is seen in relation to these columns of photographs, the heteroglossia of the term is evident, which fractures any simplistic notion of “the veil.”

Added keywords that I find interesting: *air hostess*, *rifle*, *camel*, *obesity*, *orange*, *pistol*, and *camp* (indicating a refugee camp).²¹ In the process of adding and reinterpreting keywords the photographs become a contested terrain in which notions of gender, the individual, the collective, the family, and cultural value are negotiated via the words used to describe them. The keywords introduce these cultural abstractions into the system by which the photographs are ordered and accessed while also acting like weighty fruits added to the slim genealogical branch provided by the French classification system. Fashion, for instance, trembles now under the burden of *aabaya*, *dishdasha*, *yashmak*, *tarbouche*, *kuffiyah*, *igaaal*, *ghoutra*, *veil*.



0038so00322
 Studio portrait.
 Lebanon/Saida, 1955
 Soussi, Chafic el - Professional
 photographer
 Soussi, Chafic el Collection
 Copyright © Arab Image Foundation
 Keywords: Sitting; Boy; Horse; Disguise;
 Igaal; Toy
 Genre: Portrait; Studio photography
 Photographic process: Negatif/black &
 white/support souple transparent/support
 polyester
 Size: 14.70 * 9.70 cm
 Aspect Ratio: 0.66
 Condition:

And *daughter* has been added to the *family* branch. Suitable as this may seem, subtle questions emerge: How, for instance, can “daughter” be read off the image of a young woman? Does this involve reading the proximity of a young woman to a father and/or mother figure in the same picture? This added keyword, thought in relation to the fact that *communism*, *buddhism*, *hippie*, and *fascism* have been deleted by the Foundation, suggests that familial affiliation can be read off an image, while political and religious

affiliation cannot.

For the exhibition of *Not Given* in San Francisco we showed prints from the digitized images that fall under the keywords *disguise*. Seven pages come up under this keyword in the Arab Image Foundation database including dogs in shorts, boys in military garb, angelic girls, and cross-dressing adults. Here gender is no longer a stable anchor as images of men come up under *disguise + woman*, and images of women under *disguise + man*. Neither is culture a reliable category, since certain figures appear as cultural clichés. We see geishas, commandos, sultans, and businessmen. Does disguise mean, simply, not what you think it ought to be? Look again? Or does it refer to the gaps and fissures inherent to viewing, and thus the disguised pose speaks to the relationship of image and consciousness? Scholar Tarek el-Ariss suggests that in Arabic this connotation is correct. He writes that “[t]he word disguise in Arabic is *tanakkur*, which literally means a “disowning” and a “disavowal” of one’s representation for the sake of another. It is sufficient to say *atanakkar*, “I disown,” to mean that one is *in* disguise. . . . Not to be in disguise, to appear as one is and as one is reflected to oneself, involves therefore an embracing of one’s true reflection. In both cases, the subject imagines representation as something he or she can control, either by accepting or by denying it.”²²

What does it mean for an archive to file certain images under the keyword disguise? Certainly in the archive of origin, *Le Patrimoine Photographique*, this term derived from the French *deguisé* and thus referred to masked balls and the like. Translated into English *disguise* suggests duplicity. The woman dressed as a man is “in disguise,” coded, not to be taken at face value. If thought in Arabic, *tanakkur*, the same image might suggest that the poser has disowned her or his true self for the sake of another. . . for the photographer perhaps?



0063ag00003
 Marguerite, dressed up as a man.
 Palestine/Jerusalem, 1935
 Anonymous photographer
 Agazarian, Alice Collection
 Copyright © Arab Image
 Foundation
 Keywords: Leaning on; Woman;
 Terrace; Smoking; Costume;
 Disguise
 Genre: Portrait
 Photographic process:
 Positif/black & white/support
 papier/DOP-Papier a
 developpement à la gelatine
 Size: 8.40 * 5.40 cm
 Aspect Ratio: 0.64
 Condition:

For Translation

Identity is related to representation, technology, translation, situation, interpretation, and the various ways in which these fluid processes encourage imagination. While imagination may promote projection or, worse yet, well-worn stereotypes, in the best-case scenario imagination reveals the way in which the viewer’s sense of self is made up of absent others. Since its inception, photography has been implicated in this form of mental colonization; with photography the Western viewer has imagined himself or herself via exotic others. Now the Arab Image Foundation has generously made its collection available and we see that the Arab world imagines itself and *its* others.

If imagination references an absent presence, surely the Arab Image Foundation imagines with the ghostly presence of *Le Patrimoine Photographique*—an archive that encourages a certain regard, a mode of consciousness. The Arab Image Foundation also imagines with the absent presence of the original photographs, which are stored off-site. My imagination informs my reading of the photographs discussed here as well, and so we add to this list of absences the people and objects that I carry with me as mental images. As Paul Virilio suggests in the epigraph to this essay, seeing that which is not really seen is not an exotic but endotic activity—it is a way to renew the conditions that govern perception and, in this case, my particular perceptual situation. Indeed, like the French and British explorers who sought the Orient, and using what Edward Said calls “traveling theory,” I have smuggled “my theorists”—Sartre, Virilio, Said, Flusser, Farge, and Derrida (to name just a few)—across borders, taken pictures, written notes, and returned home to receive my own postcard.²³ Despite this obvious bias, I find this journey out, intimately related to the history of photography, to be productive. This quasi-fictional journey, on which many philosophers of the photograph—including Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and John Berger, as well as Foundation artists Walid Ra’ad and Akram Zaatari—have embarked, recasts the viewer’s relationship to the other by turning his or her attention toward what is not given to be seen in the image.

Finally, every journey references the location of the traveler. This is why Farge looks toward and away from a historical event in order to understand it. She anticipates her own miscomprehension when she, a contemporary historian, looks back three centuries. My looking at photographs from the Arab Image Foundation is not so different. In the photograph from Chekka I find that the figure closest to me in the photograph mirrors my own position. She does not seem to be in collusion with the photographer like the young man to the left, but neither is she defiantly returning the photographer’s gaze, as is the woman behind her. She is caught with her eyes in the process of closing or opening. “She blinked,” we say. Many of us are caught this way in photographs (although such photographs rarely make it through the first round of selections)—caught between being a posed figure for the camera and a viewer ourselves. The figure seems to be blurred because she is both looking, as the woman behind her is, and being seen, as the man to her left is. She is a translator between these two positions.

She is useful, this translator; for with this figure in mind it becomes apparent that the photographs housed at the Arab Image Foundation are translated many times over and that this text is just one more manifestation of this process. The photographs are transferred from family souvenir to historical artifact, from analogue photograph to digital image, from digital image to database citation (which is itself a hybrid system), from database citation to mental image, from mental image to written language, and so on. She is here between these pages, in a temperature controlled environment in Beirut, and she is indexed in a classification system that is now available online. In each of these transformations a different sort of absent presence is offered up, and thus a different sort of imagination of this “plain” woman. (Although the image is filed under the keyword *plain* it is clearly not plain to me.)

Finally, this topic of translation forces me to reconsider my own identification with this phantom figure who, in a roundabout fashion, leads me to consider the difficulty of imagination. Thus, I end with a phenomenological exercise (which I invite you to take) that speaks to the paradox of imagination by putting my identification with this figure under examination. First, I stare at the spots and colors my vision throws upon the white wall above my desk; I see myself seeing as I observe the distortion that vision necessarily involves. Now I look at the picture of the outing in Chekka, and back again to the empty wall. Again, back and forth from photograph to wall. Flipping between these two I realize that although I scrutinized this image at length, what looks like a woman in the foreground—a woman I somehow felt I knew—now appears as a stain, a reverse image seen against the backdrop of the text, activated by my own desire and projected onto my current landscape. Gradually, I understand that although she was there in Chekka in 1960, this woman, this figure (I am not sure which), was never there *for me*. She makes an impression, surely, but as Sartre notes, “I can produce at will—or almost at will—the unreal object I want but I cannot make of it what I want.”²⁴

NOTES

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¹ Paul Virilio, "Improbable Architecture," in *The Lost Dimensions* (New York: Semiotexte, 1991), 83.

Quoted in Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory In Visual Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 185.

² Arlette Farge, *La chambre à deux lits et le cordonnier de Tel-Aviv* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 32 (English translation mine).

³ Arlette Farge, *Le gout de l'archive* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989).

⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge have used this method to explore the lives of women. They write: "If we wish to write a different history of women, we must first let go of a certain vision of the past and take a fresh look at the sources; rather than take contemporary testimonies and representations at face value, we must try to relate what knowledge we have of the reality of women's lives to the texts that discuss women, knowing full well that the two are complementary and intertwined." Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, "Women as Historical Actors," *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

⁵ Edward Said notes that Orientalist culture was not merely a product of colonialism but predated and informed the economic and military domination of the Orient. He writes: "I am interested in showing how modern Orientalism...embodies a systemic discipline of accumulation. And far from this being exclusively an intellectual or theoretical feature, it made Orientalism fatally tend towards the systemic accumulation of human beings and territories." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 123.

⁶ This notion of theory as a Western product is analyzed by James Clifford. He writes that "[s]ince Fanon at least, non-Western theorists have encroached regularly on the territories of Western theory, working oppositionally, with and against (both inside and outside) dominant terms and experiences. Since the sixties and seventies, diverse non-Western and feminist writers have challenged the status of traditional theory, particularly its aspiration to potent overview, its suppression of location and of its genealogical, storytelling functions." James Clifford, "Notes on Traveling Theory," *Inscriptions 5* (1989),

http://humwww.ucsc.edu/Cultstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/clifford.html (May 2008).

⁷ Lynn Love writes that "The Arab Image Foundation...is the first attempt in the Arab world to change this external [Western] viewpoint. The method is to collect, conserve and exhibit work by Arab photographers who photographed locally, either as amateurs or professionals, and thus build an alternative to the visual history defined by the West." Lynn Love, "The Picture Between," *The Saudi Aramco World* 52, no. 1 (January/February 2001),

<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200101/the.pictures.between.htm> (May 2008). The Foundation states that "The Arab Image Foundation is a non-profit foundation that was established in Lebanon in 1996" and that the collection "includes photographs produced by professional, amateur, and anonymous residents of the region, now boasts more than 75,000 photographs from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, and from the Lebanese diaspora in Argentina, Mexico and Senegal." <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/english/fsct-presentation.htm> (May 2008).

⁸ Sartre states that in the imagination, "the objects become affected with the character of unreality. This means that our attitude in the face of the image is radically different from our attitude in the face of objects. Love, hate, desire, will, are quasi-love, quasi-hate, etc., since the observation of the unreal object is a quasi-observation." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Citadel Press, 1961), 174.

⁹ Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 33.

¹⁰ Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 148.

¹¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000), 8.

¹² For an excellent history of this topic see Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 28. Barthes writes that the studium is a “kind of education (knowledge and civility, ‘politeness’) which allows me to discover the Operator, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them ‘in reverse,’ according to my will as a Spectator.” Ibid.

¹⁴ Lev Manovich theorizes the dramatic shift from the photographic index to the database by noting: “Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee) the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database.” See Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,”

http://transcriptions.english.ucsb.edu/archive/courses/warner/english197/Schedule_files/Manovich/Database_as_symbolic_form.htm (May 2008).

¹⁵ Writing of Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura,” Douglas Crimp usefully complicates the common understanding of Benjamin’s famous text by arguing that the Frankfurt theorist did not lament the *loss* of the aura but, rather, analyzed the separation of the object from its aura, particularly as this occurred in the work of artists such as Eugène Atget. Crimp terms this an “emptying operation.” In postmodernism, on the other hand, Crimp finds another sort of operation at work. “The photographic activity of postmodernism operates, as we might expect, in complicity with these modes of photography-as-art, but it does so only in order to subvert or exceed them. And it does so precisely in relation to the aura, not, however, to recuperate it, but to displace it, to show that it too is now only an aspect of the copy, not the original.” Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 117.

¹⁶ Bernard Stiegler calls this hybrid image the “analogico-digital image” and notes that it “may contribute to the emergence of new forms of ‘objective analysis’ and of ‘subjective synthesis’ of the visible—and to the emergence, by the same token, of another kind of belief and disbelief with respect to what is shown and what happens.” Bernard Stiegler, “The Discrete Image,” in *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 152.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–2.

¹⁸ The full title of the work is *Etant donnés: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. le gaz d’clairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas).

¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 112.

²⁰ *Yashmak*: a long, narrow face screen or veil traditionally worn in public by Muslim women. For more see Encyclopædia Britannica Online, www.britannica.com/eb/article-9077856 (May 2008).

²¹ The Jaffa orange is a highly political export and contested symbol which many historians link to both Palestinian and Israeli national identity. The symbolism of the orange was raised in a fruitful discussion with the students of Tarek el-Ariss at New York University in March 2008.

²² Tarek el-Ariss, “Playing House in the Studio of Hashem el Madani” *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts* Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 11.

²³ Edward Said, “Traveling Theory,” *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²⁴ Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 192.