

Gazing: A defiant act

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The proposed paper investigates how performative strategies, specifically the embodied, critical act of *gazing* induced by photographic fiction can unsettle the hegemonic visual order constructed through archival images of colonial violence. This paper emerges from my ongoing artistic research project, which investigates how photographs of colonised Bengal in British colonial archives can be appropriated and reinterpreted to facilitate collective defiance against the colonial gaze that persists within them.

Building on Azoulay's conception of photography as an *event* rather than a static representation, the research approaches photographs as relational encounters among photographer, subject, and spectator in which political and ethical responsibilities emerge (Azoulay 2008). The paper argues that the act of gazing, contrasted with passive looking, offers a decolonial mode of photographic engagement capable of redistributing authority and reconfiguring the viewer's relation to the colonial archive.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition that the colonial archive is not neutral; it is a hierarchical structure that governs not only what is preserved but also how it is seen, read, and interpreted. As Derrida reminds us, the archive is a "privileged topology" and a "site of authority" which names, classifies, and decides what constitutes history (Derrida 1995). Within colonial photographic archives, this authority manifests through visual strategies that stabilise hierarchies between coloniser and colonised. These strategies are evident in the ethnographic and documentary photographs of that era, such as Willoughby Wallace Hooper and John Watson, whose repeated tropes create a perceptual environment in which the colonial gaze becomes naturalised as the dominant mode of looking.

This paper resonates with Barthes' account of photography's triad of the operator, the spectator, and the spectrum (Barthes 1988). But proposes that, where Barthes' model implies static roles and a linear order of actions, Azoulay offers an entangled, dynamic model where the protagonists are implanted with agency and therefore, responsibility.

It also aligns with Said's articulation of Orientalism as an epistemic structure that precedes the act of seeing, determining in advance what the viewer believes to be visible, interpretable, or true (Said 1978). Fanon's examination of racialised subjectivity further reveals how the colonised self is constituted within these regimes of visibility, where one becomes "fixed" in the racialising gaze of the other (Fanon 1952). Together, these frameworks clarify how the colonial archive shapes and limits the perceptual habits of viewers, producing what can be termed a "colonised gaze."

Against this backdrop, the paper proposes *gazing* as a critical, decolonial counter-practice. Gazing, unlike looking or watching, foregrounds active interpretation, contextual awareness, and imaginative reconstruction. It demands attention to what the image withholds, erases, or cannot contain. Drawing on Nietzsche's distinctions between truth, illusion, and interpretation (Nietzsche 1873) and Hartman's practice of "critical fabulation", a method that uses fiction to restore suppressed histories and challenge archival authority (Hartman 2008), this paper argues that fiction becomes a necessary tool for disrupting colonial visual regimes. Fiction here does not imply fabrication but offers a performative method for re-entering the photograph's event, making space for the voices, gestures, and possibilities the archive has foreclosed.

These theoretical insights crystallise in the analysis of my artistic work *Gazing: An Act of Defiance*, a one-person photographic play that performs a series of interventions into one of Hooper's archival image of the 1876–78 famine in British colonised India. The play is a curated "photographic encounter" (as described by Azoulay) through which the set of images, that are derived from Hooper's original image, are shared with a small audience some of whom are also invited to play characters in the play. It uses sequential manipulations such as erasure, tracing, cropping, and removal of human figures to produce a curated encounter that deliberately dislocates the authority of the original photograph. Each manipulation operates as a performative gesture that shifts how the spectator is positioned in relation to the image. In the play the character of Avita, who embodies one of the people in the photograph, hands out these reinterpreted images and as she tells the story of the photograph being made. Her story is a collection of oral histories, poetry, folklore, songs, personal testimonies, diary entries and other alternative methods of recording the past. Avita is therefore a synthesis of multiple experiences that come together to form a singular voice of the past.

Audience responses to *Gazing: An Act of Defiance* illuminate the performative stakes of this method. Some viewers articulate feelings of betrayal, abandonment, or helplessness when confronted with the image's structural violence without interpretive closure. Others decline to participate in reenactments, perceiving them as potentially re-inscribing the harm enacted by the original photograph. These reactions underscore the ethical complexity of performative interventions into violent archives. They reveal the tension between enabling agency in spectatorship and acknowledging the affective limits of confronting traumatic visual histories. As Lamming notes, the image of the Other always implicates the self (Lamming 1992); thus, decolonisation cannot rely on a single interpretive gaze (not even a counter-colonial one) but must allow for multiplicity and relationality.

This paper argues that the effectiveness of *Gazing: An Act of Defiance* lies in its performative redistribution of agency across the protagonists of the photographic event: the subject, the photographer, the spectator, and the absent or erased figures within the archive. Through fiction-enabled gazing, the play reconfigures the image as a contingent encounter that can be reopened, reinterpreted, and ethically renegotiated.

By situating photography as an ongoing event rather than a closed document, and by foregrounding *Gazing* as a performative strategy of decolonial engagement, the paper

contributes to the Helsinki Photomedia subtheme “Performative Approaches.” It demonstrates how performance through gesture, fiction, manipulation, and embodied looking can transform archival images of violence into sites of critical attention rather than passive consumption. In doing so, it proposes that the future of decolonial photographic practice lies not only in new images but in new ways of *encountering* images: ways that recognise the archive’s hierarchies while actively performing their disruption.