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Rewriting Postcards: Experiments in Collaborative Transnational Curation

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ABSTRACT Since their invention, picture postcards have played a key role in circulating racist and imperial ideologies. In this paper, the researcher explores how experiments in producing and exchanging postcards used in the Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE) project attempted to subvert traditional anthropological and colonial perspectives. Drawing on examples created for the exhibition *Exchanging Cultures of Equality* held in London in 2018, the author discusses how GlobalGRACE researchers in six different countries individually and collectively sought to disrupt and challenge historical imaginaries using postcards. The creative process required them to consider how they might differently visualize, articulate, and publicly share ideas about their work and field sites while also asserting the value of transnational exchange. The researcher argues that critical reflection on the tensions and challenges that arose from this transnational collaborative experiment are both productive and necessary in informing further and new decolonising engagements with postcards.

INTRODUCTION

Postcards are deeply embedded in the pasts and presents of colonialism. Sold alongside “living dioramas” at World’s Fairs, or purchased by colonial officers’ overseas and sent back home to Europe, picture postcards played a key role in circulating racist imaginaries and imperial ideologies throughout the early twentieth century (Hoskins 2007; Jain 2018). Particularly across the global south, postcards sold to tourists frequently continue to promote racialized and gendered imaginaries of “exotic” people and places, often intertwined with mundane “wish you were here” sentiment (cf. Fabião 2011; Kurtz 2018).

Postcards do other things too, of course—not least facilitating communication, both local and global, in the conventionally recognizable form of a picture and short text sent in the mail, envelope-free. They are also used as a device in sociological projects, both popular and academic, notably as a means of collecting anonymous data from self-selecting research participants. PostSecret, to which people anonymously send a secret written on a homemade postcard, has found a huge international audience for its books, travelling exhibitions, and still growing digital archive (postsecret.com). Scholars similarly employ picture postcards to elicit written insights from target publics, for example to investigate processes of memory and place-making (Millman 2013). Theorists and authors have meanwhile used the concept and connotation

of postcards to anchor their ruminations on, for example, the motivations and satisfactions that arise from acts of exchange, both in the sending and the receiving (Derrida 1980), or simply to untangle characters’ relationships with others—and themselves—when writing in the epistolary mode (cf. Fisher 1987).

Returning to the material world of postcards, archives and private collections of postcards are sources of visual and textual information, highly prized by local and social historians (Nigro 2015) as well as deltiologists. Broader publics are likewise compelled by the glimpses into bygone eras found in postcards: the UK-based Twitter account Postcard from the Past, which posts “fragments of life in real messages from old postcards,” boasts over 78,000 followers (as well as a book and podcast series).

As a medium, postcards have also been embraced, or at least toyed with, by established artists whose interventions have been framed as elevating its status: “Each postcard is an original idea, not an illustration. If you own one of these postcards, you own an original work by this artist. Instead of acting as a reminder of something that exists somewhere else, that you may or not have seen, it shares the same space as you, addressing you directly. As an opportunity to express a poetic idea, each postcard is considered as seriously as a book, a sculpture or a gallery installation” (Clark, quoted in Cooper 2019). For the Royal College of Art, the broad appeal of

affordable yet exclusive “art-postcards” sustains its RCA Secret annual charity auction. Meanwhile, postcard-based initiatives and exhibitions that marry art and political action remain particularly popular. The Migrations Project, for example, hosted its first exhibition at the 2017 Biennial of Illustrations in Bratislava featuring 300 bespoke postcards that had been illustrated and mailed to Slovakia by a different international artist. Themes of communication, mobility, connection and migration are especially ripe for postcard-based experiments (cf. Kundiman 2017).

Contemporary picture postcards can serve as adverts, conduits of information, or calls to action—handed out on street corners, stacked up in community centres, picked up at events. They are pinned to noticeboards and fridges, boxed away as keepsakes, wedged in stacks of mail, stamped and posted, framed for gallery walls. Even while smart phones and apps facilitate near-instantaneous transnational communication—of images and text as well as audio and video content—these simple cardboard conduits of word and image remain internationally popular and recognisable. Claims that the medium is on a “slide towards extinction” (Dawson 2017) are overstated. Postcards retain an enduring, and enduringly mailable quality—as well as an unshakable power to shape how we see the world.

It is with these thoughts at the forefront of our minds that my colleague Nirmal Puwar and I have been using postcards in our curatorial work and as a communicative device within Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE), a transnational collaborative project comprising six local research teams in six countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa and the UK. In each location, team members are using arts-based methods to research and respond to issues of gender, wellbeing and cultures of equality. Each team comprises a collaboration between academics and NGO staff, with the exception of the UK team, which includes myself and Puwar. I am a Postdoctoral Early Career Researcher in Anthropology and Puwar is a Reader in Sociology.

Our team has a two-pronged agenda. One focus is researching the experiences of women working in senior roles in museums in the United Kingdom and South Africa, and the other is curating the project’s launch and closing exhibitions. These exhibitions are platforms through which we are

bringing together the disparate yet related research activities of the GlobalGRACE teams and placing them into conversation with each other for a broad public audience. As well as guiding curation, Puwar and I are also contributing our own research findings to these exhibitions.

In this paper, I explain how we are experimenting with postcards as a communication tool, a research method, and exhibition device within GlobalGRACE. To illustrate how these experiments have played out in practice to date, I reflect on our curation of the GlobalGRACE launch exhibition *Exchanging Cultures of Equality*, held in the Kingsway Corridor at Goldsmiths College, University of London in June 2018 (culturesofequality.com). I then discuss some of the ways in which our colleagues responded to our call by creating postcards for display. My aim in this paper is to consider how reflective engagements in producing and exchanging postcards might open pathways to subverting traditional anthropological and colonial perspectives. In the following section, I explain how our collective experiments are set to continue in new forms in light of these possibilities, including for the GlobalGRACE exhibition that is scheduled to open in Cape Town in 2021.

First, however, I outline some of the ways in which picture postcards, in conjunction with anthropology and museums, are inextricably tied to colonialism. Even while extolling the flexibility and varied potential uses of postcards in research and display, such history cannot be overlooked. This is particularly true in the context of GlobalGRACE, an ethnographic methods-based research project funded by a UK-based Development body, which counts our exhibitions as a deliverable “output” in the production of knowledge. We must take seriously, particularly in this context, questions of perspective, gaze, representation, and audience reception, while we experiment with postcards.

MUSEUMS, ANTHROPOLOGY, POSTCARDS

“The idea of the nation is inseparable from its narration: that narration attempts, interminably, to constitute identity against difference, inside against outside, and in the assumed superiority of inside over outside, prepares against invasion and for ‘enlightened’ colonialism” (Bennington 1986: 132).

In the eyes of Enlightenment thinkers, an institutionalised postal network was central to the functioning of “civilised” social life and political systems, facilitating the (possibility of) correspondence within the nation-state—and as such demarcating its boundaries. As the Baron de Montesquieu asserted, c. 1725: “The invention of the post produced politics: we do not politic with the Mogol [sic]” (quoted in Bennington 1994: 245). While the letter sealed in an envelope provides privacy or secrecy (in content if not in the fact of its existence), in this schema the postcard can be understood as a conduit for an open secret; sent to all possible recipients within the delineated (national) network regardless of the addressee.

Postcards narrate the nation by communicating images and ideologies far beyond sender and recipient. Image-first, they are displayed and sold to a public elicited to inscribe and share their personal annotations and in doing so join a national chorus of shared politics and open secrets. Even unwritten, unsent, the possession of picture postcards becomes an assertion of belonging to a network of values shared. This characteristic feature of postcards has been evident throughout their history.

Although antecedents of the format date from the mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of picture postcards as we now know them surged from the mid-1890s in North America and across Western Europe. This boom was fuelled by a coalescing of factors, including technological advancements in photography and printing, the increasing ease and accessibility of tourist travel, cheap postage rates and corporate investment in an effective wide-reaching advertising medium (Woody 1998). The resultant “Golden Age” of the picture postcard did not merely coincide with a fervent period of colonial expansion, it was fuelled by it.

While countless small businesses made and sold postcards that depicted more nuanced views of local life, the international postcard industry was dominated by large companies able to mass produce and seeking wide distribution. These businesses played a central role in circulating imperial imaginaries and ideologies around the globe—while also accumulating significant profits for manufacturers based in Western Europe and the United States. White photographers living or travelling around the world sold their work to specialised firms, which would turn them into commodities to be shipped back out to the colonies

and sold to Western buyers, who in turn would send or bring their souvenir “back home” (Geary and Webb 1998: 2). Always already intended to be sent from “here” to “there” (or vice-versa), the postcard by its nature indexes distance—and difference.

Postcards sold in French Indochina, for example, commonly featured “erotic, opium infused images” that depict “the elegant fiction of exotic utopia... carefully constructed to justify the colonial enterprise” (Hoskins 2007: 16). Depictions of Indigenous, colonised and enslaved individuals in sexualised or “wild” poses, which frame people as dangerously uncivilised and uncontrollably sexual in order to deny their humanity (Lugones 2010: 743), defined the popular “colonial nude” postcard style—and remain popular among collectors. Such postcards traded in stereotype, offering:

“a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved” (Bhabha in Black 2010: 101).

In the UK, scenes from military campaigns overseas were a recurrent and popular postcard theme, the Boer War even being cited by deltiologists Tonnie and Valmai Holt as “the final push that brought the postcard into everyone’s home” (1971: 35). The Holts continue:

“[p]atriotism was a popular sentiment then, and the picture postcard... was the right medium to express it. The khaki uniformed soldiers, adopting the colour of the Indian battlefields and the name of field dust in place of the traditional red coats featured prominently, with proudly flying Union Jacks” (1971: 37).

The nostalgic tone of this description is echoed in the continued use of “Golden Age” to denote the height of postcard popularity, c. 1895-1914—a phrase also historically used by European colonial powers to describe periods of rapid empirical expansion fuelled by slavery and exploitation. In October 2019, Amsterdam Museum announced it will jettison the term specifically because “it hides the colonial past of the country” (Schavemaker quoted in Siegal 2019).

In the United States, the boom in postcards was closely associated with World’s Fairs, where they were among most popular, and affordable, souvenirs

sold (Bassett 2016). Such fairs and expositions were, alongside ethnographic museums, among the most salient and notorious locations of early “anthropological” displays, attracting huge crowds wherever they landed—particularly across France, England and North America. One popular fair attraction was the so-called living exhibit, in which people enslaved or otherwise coerced by colonial captors were forced to appear, and often to perform, in “authentic” reconstructed villages. Visitors eager to retain a token of their day out at the fair bought postcards of these dioramas, which often included posed and close-up portraits of the people forced to occupy them.

The imperial ideologies and imaginaries promoted in postcards sold at and circulated beyond the fairs were not limited to exoticized peoples and places. They also included feats of engineering and technological and industrial innovation that celebrated the relentless “progress” shepherded by Western colonial powers. Regarding fair postcards, historian Robert Rydell summarises:

“Undoubtedly, postcard representations of colonised people, like the ethnological displays themselves, reflected strategies of control and domination. Postcards transmitted the very ideological messages that were embedded in the expositions about the essential rightness of imperialism and the importance of mass consumption to the continued progress of Western civilisation. As one component in the broader set of ‘cultural technologies’ that included fairs, museums, and zoos, mass-produced exposition postcards aided in the campaign to make ‘empire as a way of life’ on both sides of the Atlantic” (1998: 58).

The trade in and popularity of international postcards declined rapidly with the onset of World War I, as all “non-essential” mail and related production processes ground to a halt. The “Golden Age” is long over, and World’s Fair and Expositions are (at least to Western eyes) “relics” of the past (Byrnes 2014). Contemporary postcards however continue to display “exoticised representations” that “perpetuate racial stereotypes” (Robinson 2014). The museum continues to be “an expression of the modern/colonial power” that plays a significant role “in the erasure of other worlds, of other forms of sensing and meaning” (Vázquez 2019: 65). Anthropologists continue to be embedded in and enraptured by the “exhibitionary complex”

(Bennett 1994)—despite our efforts to respond with valid critique (cf. Lidchi 2006).

Postcards also retain a significant presence within museums and galleries, from the archives to the gift shop, where they are among the most popular items sold to visitors regardless of the exhibition on show. These postcards can preserve the historic circulation of values attributed to specific, curated objects and images—and by extension peoples—by those controlling the institution. Rolando Vázquez argues that, “[w]hat the museum presents as a ‘given’, we see as an enclosure into a Eurocentric and gendered sphere of intelligibility. [...] Normative publics do not go to the museum simply to entertain themselves, but to be produced as the subject that can see” (2019: 65). Those publics frequently depart the museum with a postcard in hand, carrying the potential to reassert elsewhere the canonical—white, heterosexual, masculine, Eurocentric and elite— notion of what counts as “art” and what (and who) counts as “artefact”. Depending on where and how the buyer circulates their commodity, they may alternatively challenge it.

Postcards are also valued as historical documents within the museum. The Pitt-Rivers Museum, for example, boasts an extensive collection of postcards sent by anthropologists in the field, revealing perspectives that contrast with more self-consciously composed field notes. It also houses a contemporary collection of over 1,000 postcards, as well as numerous private collections donated to the museum, including by individuals about whom little is known (Kurtz 2018). We do know that postcard collecting has historically been a “feminine” activity (Hoskins 2007: 17), and that the ability to amass and securely store any collection over a long period of time—not to mention the instinct to bequeath it to a museum—are activities generally associated with wealth.

While historical postcards can undeniably provide valuable and unusual insights into the past, whether through the images and/or texts they contain, appraisals of archive collections often lack critical reflection regarding the positionalities of the photographer, manufacturer, buyer and keeper. Particularly when images and texts are read by curators as parochial, or benign, the contexts in which they were produced can be easily overlooked. Extolling the value of postcard collections in general to local and social historians in New York state, librarian Fred Bassett notes, for example:

“[Picture postcards] provide a portrait of life in America, especially life in the first two decades of the twentieth century. [...] Whenever America paraded or celebrated anything, the postcard photographer was there. He was also there when disasters – fires, floods, earthquakes, train wrecks – occurred. [...] Heroes and celebrities of all kinds were portrayed on postcards, as was home, mother and the Flag. They also covered love and courtship, humor, racial attitudes, sports, and sexy girls” (Bassett 2016).

Bassett here presents an unintentionally revealing commentary on the narratives circulated by mainstream postcards of the era: America personified as consumerist, heterosexual, patriotic, male and presumably white. For Bassett, these themes represent a full, universal, portrait of life in America. Questions of whose visions, whose heroes and whose “racial attitudes” made it onto postcards are left unasked, re-inscribing a narrative of the nation only partially recalled. During the era referenced here, scenes of lynchings were extremely popular content for “souvenir” postcards (Allen 1999), as were posed and doctored images that served to “artificially restrict Native Americans to a mythic and remote past” (Stokely 2015: 111). Postcard archives are partial and always highly subjective visual records of the past, and attention to the absences within them—the people, places, and events not captured—can be as revealing as the presences.

I have outlined here how postcards historically created for international markets and/or associated with ethnographic and museum spaces have circulated colonising views. This should not deny or obscure, however, the fact that communities the world over have also historically produced, and continue to use postcards to document, and celebrate their lives on their own terms. Kiowa photographers Horace and Bruce Poolaw, for example, documented the complexities of Native life—while also catering in different styles to more commercially lucrative tastes—on postcards from the 1920s until the 1970s (Stokely 2015: 110-113).

Naming people pictured, rather than using generic categories or descriptors is one mode of rejecting the anonymising colonial gaze in such contexts. Tjapukai Dance Theatre in Australia more explicitly seeks to interrupt dominant narratives. It produces postcards promoting their work, and

Tjapukai culture, that carry the instruction: “I like to be seen—PLEASE don’t send me in an envelope.” (Robinson 2014). A set created in 1991 by the Brazilian Intertribal Committee to highlight the heterogeneity and solidarity of Indigenous groups was captioned—less the producers aims be misconstrued—“500 years of Resistance”. Artists and activists have similarly intervened in the archive, adapting and reframing postcards to highlight or subvert their meaning (cf. Cooper-Willis 2014; Alloula 1986).

There is scope, then, to challenge the dominant modes of representation by engaging directly with postcards.

EXPERIMENTING WITH POSTCARDS

Our first experiment with postcards took place as part of the exhibition *Exchanging Cultures of Equality*, which marked the project launch. Here, I explain our approach to using postcards as a multifaceted communication device in our curation of that exhibition. In the next section, I consider some of the contributions received from project partners.

As both researchers and curators within the project—which posits south-south exchange as central to its stated aim to “do development differently”—Puwar and I sought to explore processes, and the challenges, of transnational communication. Attentive to the limits of exhibiting in the traditional mode, we were also motivated to reflect and intervene critically on the contours, temporalities, and modalities of “anthropological” displays. Using postcards as a device offered opportunities for both.

Two months ahead of opening, we wrote to our new colleagues via email in order to request contributions for the exhibition. In the request, we asked each team to send us six images, each accompanied by a short text of no more than 50 words, specifically for us to make into postcards. In her email, Puwar wrote:

“At our first partnership meeting and project launch event we would like to begin the very process of experimenting with ways of working together on the notion of global museums and exhibitions. Clearly we don’t want to repeat the inequalities of contemporary global art biennials or of historic cabinets of curiosity.

Since our projects are engaging in different types of media and modes of communication, we would like to begin the process of working with texts and images in a global context. Keeping in mind the means by which we send and receive news and materials transnationally, we would simply like you to send us the following: 1. Six postcards from your field site. [...] The writing for each postcard could consist of notes from the field, quotes, poems, letters, songs or academic references. [...] We are hoping for a close up and delicate engagement, from audiences, with what you send. Rather than a big splash coverage of walls” (Puwar 2018).

Marking the launch of our project, these postcards were intended to serve as introductions to our respective sites and sensibilities; as glimpses into research not yet fully underway. The request posed productive and revealing challenges as we worked together via email, across languages, disciplines, time zones and cultural difference to create our first collective exhibition.

Each project team distributed responsibility for selecting images and texts in different ways, in some cases choosing by consensus between three to five team members, with the intention of producing a coherent and complementary postcard set. In other cases, team members worked autonomously, each person choosing their own image and text, providing quite distinct perspectives and emphasising different themes within one site. Ethical questions concerning image attribution and informed consent arose as researchers and NGO workers assessed, from their respective viewpoints and institutional norms, if and how pictures and words recorded in the field could be displayed in London, and later online. Some images sent to us were later retracted, or replaced, with these questions in mind.

Particularly for teams that work with visual media, choosing just six images was felt as too constraining. Conversely, for other teams, sourcing desired images of sufficiently high resolution and appropriate proportions proved difficult: while mobile phone technology has allowed rapid documentation of events, the resultant image files are usually intended to be shared only digitally, not in print. Images viewed on screen have different qualities when printed, and these are further impacted by ink type, card stock, and so on. Cropping edges or adding borders to meet uniform dimensions similarly changes the visual impact of

images. Such changes, where necessary, were made in consultation with groups via email. Within each project team, including our own, compromises had to be made between ideal images, and those that were suitable, available and permissible.

The 50-word limit, required due to limitations of space, provoked frustrations almost across the board. Texts exchanged back and forth in multiple revisions and occasional wholesale replacements as we wrangled with the challenge. The question of what, and how much, context should be provided was approached differently by each group. Some chose quotes, or poems, to evoke an affective response from the viewer or platform interlocutors’ words. Others included academic citations, accentuating the theoretical framing of their work. Annotations written by researchers foregrounded their own analyses; statements of fact or aspiration were used to underscore their political perspectives.

During the compilation process, our Brazilian colleagues reminded us via email of the need to “challenge the hegemony and normalization of English as the dominant language” in the text used throughout the exhibition, including on postcards. Their intervention prompted important discussions within and between project teams regarding intended audiences and tensions between the requirement to be, and competing desires not to refuse to be, legible in the inescapably colonial and elitist context of the British academy. This question of political praxis was compounded in light of “logistical” issues: would non-English texts be limited to fewer words, in order to allow space for translation? If translated texts were placed elsewhere, not on the postcards themselves, would their relational impact be blunted?

We decided to retain but visibly deemphasize English by shrinking the translated text and placing it below the original on the postcard (see Figure 2 below), but recognise that other display options were available. Our intent with this choice was to make explicit the fraught, often demanding, processes of translation—between cultures as well as languages—that are both constant in and central to GlobalGRACE, rather than simply highlight the multilingual nature of the project. In the context of this, as with all UK-funded projects, translation is not optional, as the imagined primary audience is English-speaking. Our design choice reveals how this can become an imposition; a taking up of space.

Other challenges of translation emerged during the preparation. Creating digital files for print required text be transformed into high-resolution image files, obliging multiple back-and-forth exchanges between colleagues as we proof-read across different alphabets as well as languages, and contended with “font incompatibility” and other software anomalies. I came to regard this collaborative and didactic digital labour as a productive entanglement in wires crossed, so too the time I spent with colleagues mining our respective languages for concepts and meanings that otherwise risked being lost in translation. These crossed wires became connecting threads between us: a means through which I began to better understand some of the details and nuances of my colleagues’ work and ways of working—and them with mine. Such “behind the scenes” conversations are foundational to collaborative work.

Pulling together key and emerging themes of transnational exchange and communication; crossed wires and connecting threads, I ran thin red cables along the length of the exhibition space, connecting display areas to each other along their top edges and creating a lattice ceiling along the exhibition space, a corridor inside the main campus

building. These wires zig-zagged down the wall to a table in the centre of the space, where visitors were invited to write their own postcards “to” the project, attaching them to the cable and joining the conversation underway. Such feedback loops help to make visible the processes of exchange, debate, and reflection that are too-often obscured in anthropological, and other, exhibition spaces.

We divided the walls of the Kingsway Corridor into seven areas, one for each project site with an additional space for introductory text and post-visit reflection. Placing this opening/ending space in the centre of the exhibition meant that there was no “first” or “last” set of postcards to explore. The repeating format—of one large image, one large text and six postcard sets equally spaced and at a consistent height throughout—provided conceptual and aesthetic coherence, ensuring that each project was placed on equal footing. The crisscrossing wires above additionally disrupted the inherent sense of a linear flow “through” the corridor, instead encouraging circular, multi-directional movement.

In her reading of Ella Shohat’s “relational approach” in the context of the gallery, Maura Reilly argues for curators to:



Fig. 1. The Exchanging Cultures of Equality exhibition, the Kingsway Corridor, June 2018

“place diverse works in dialogic relation to one another in order to underscore what [Chandra] Mohanty refers to as “common differences”—that is, the significant similarities as well as the localized differences between artists across cultures. With careful juxtaposition of works, then, curators are able to draw attention to important differences in the... treatment of similar themes” (2018: 31).

The layout and architecture chosen for *Exchanging Cultures of Equality* was informed by such a relational approach, which “is interested not in a monologue of sameness, but in a multitude or cacophony of voices speaking simultaneously,” and which is emphatically “not concerned with assimilation but a levelling of hierarchy” (Reilly 2018: 30). This orientation, which for Reilly is explicitly activist in nature, is of utmost importance in the context of ethnographic/art curation, and in a project such as ours.

The postcards created for *Exchanging Cultures of Equality* were read by visitors as devices. They were displayed with “front” and “back” impossibly side-by-side, with printed text and were intentionally unaddressed, pointing to a broad public as our intended audience. A project logo stamp signified the conduit—not the destination—

for the exchange. They had been made, not mailed, for this specific space.

As curators and colleagues, we were mindful to ensure the conceptual integrity of the exhibition by limiting the number of postcard sets printed. In addition to those printed for display, we produced one full set for each project team, collated with note pages and bound together by adjustable loops so that they could be re-arranged and annotated by the holder according to their own curatorial perspectives. These collaboratively-produced shared gifts have now travelled to our six project sites. We purposefully did not circulate the postcards beyond project spaces, where meanings can be changed through commodification. Visitors, accustomed to the normative presence of postcards in museums, nonetheless enquired where they could buy, or obtain their own copies.

Critical Response

“[Normative] aesthetic formations, which are dominated by the white male gaze, are loaded with the violence of coloniality. [...] The colonial landscape, the exoticised nudes of racialised women, and the aesthetic appropriation of primitivism are



Fig. 2. Postcard chosen by researchers based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

all articulations of the reification and consumption of coloniality as aesthetics” (Vázquez 2019: 71).

In the section above, I outlined the curatorial intentions and process that informed *Exchanging Cultures of Equality*. Here, I consider a selection of the images and texts chosen by our colleagues in reply to our request, focusing on different ways in which, in my own analysis, they can be read as attempts to subvert, reject and/or confront the white, masculine, colonial gaze. This gaze predominates in art galleries and museums, canonical literature, humanitarian campaigns and, as argued above, the picture postcard, which is itself continually informed by norms in documentary, and tourist, photography.

Such a gaze has been established and perpetuated in large part by the continually circulating aesthetic of *National Geographic* magazine (Lutz and Collins 1991), which has facilitated “the dissemination of that [imperialist] gaze” through which “ideology is made accessible for a larger public [and] imperialism is created” (Dizon in Dizon and Lê 2019). By the magazine’s own recent admission, the publication has promoted deeply racist frames. For editor Susan Goldberg, “acknowledgement” of this fact will

allow the institution “to rise above our past” (Goldberg 2018). Yet, as Khairani Barokka points out, this *mea culpa* does not promise change and does not address how the *National Geographic* archive—in its material and spectral sense—still “perpetuates the worldview of our lands as resources for plunder, and our lives as classifiable, capturable, translatable only through the white gaze” (Barokka 2019). Our colleagues’ postcards responded not only to our call for exhibition content, but also to this pernicious worldview.

Refusal

The images—as well as an object that there is not scope here to discuss—chosen by colleagues working in Brazil (Marta Regina Fernández, Andréa Gill, Tatiana Moura, Victoria Page and Isabela Souza) intended explicitly to: “create tension with the imperial museological gaze historically projected to (not!) see the “Third World”.

In Figure 2, that gaze is refused by a boy eating crisps as he watches a religious service—we can guess but cannot be sure—unfold. The photographer, Bira Carvalho, is the Coordinator

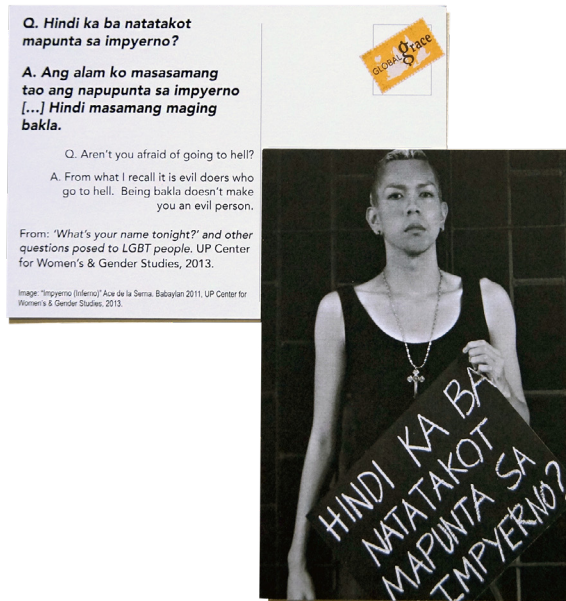


Fig. 3. Postcard chosen by researchers based in Manila, the Philippines

of the Images of the People project at the Favelas Observatory. His presence when taking his picture does not bother the boy, who, unperturbed by the presence of his neighbour, simply ignores it. Carvalho is interested in the everyday life and “plural coexistences” in Maré (Carvalho, 2018, 2019), and here, as in much of his work, employs specific conventions—shooting scenes from behind, in reflections, through objects—that inform the viewer that they are not seeing the “full” picture. They exemplify refusal to be known.

The boy’s refusal to look back further forces viewers to interpolate themselves as such, and to consider their own identity and position in relation to the scene. It forces them to reflect on the act and process of looking. The boy casually regards a scene that the viewer cannot see. The power to look is his. The accompanying text further situates the politics of the image: peace contemplates everyone—but justice is a precondition of that peace. Without justice, you will not see us.

Response

In the context of World’s Fairs, people’s acts of resistance included refusal to perform for

the camera. But this was not the only form of subversion practiced: others refuted the colonial gaze by making a point of returning it (Randell 1998: 58-60). In three of the postcards (not shown here) chosen by colleagues in Cape Town, the person or people pictured look out at the viewer and inform them, through signs or a pointed finger: “I am speaking to you.”

This is another assertion of power, interpolating the viewer as the oppressor from whom, in the words of one postcard, South African sex workers will “claim back our own knowledge and expression.” That postcard is not pictured here because the woman featured in it stipulated, in keeping with the assertion printed next to her indicting finger, that it should only be shown within the context of the exhibition. It was explicitly not to be circulated in spaces over which she did not have control—an instruction that enacted her stated intent by interrupting the colonising power to propagate images of others without their consent.

In Figure 3, chosen by colleagues in Manila, the viewer is at first glance being posed the confrontationally personal question: “Aren’t you afraid of going to hell?” The accompanying



Fig. 4 Postcard chosen by researchers based in Chiapas, Mexico

text on the “reverse” side reveals, however, that the question has already been answered—the respondent is the person holding the sign. With the “you”/“I” roles flipped, the viewer realizes that they are the interrogator.

Agency

Representations of Black women “as agents and creators are conspicuous by their absence from Western visual history” (Buikema 2019: 13). The juxtaposition of the images shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, and their relational placing in the exhibition, challenged homogenising views of “Third World women” as passive and oppressed. These women are agentive culture-makers and drivers of industry.

Both postcards focus on laborious movement—albeit of quite different speeds. In Figure 4, we see hands stripping corn. This image could easily slip into an essentialism and the woman pictured is not named. The accompanying text takes ownership of interpretation, however, asserting the collective not the individual voice—of “our/we” not “my/I”—while instructing the viewer that the image does not depict an object or action, but an identity.

Figure 5, from Bangladesh, presents a differently agentive scene, of women’s work requiring strength and stamina, and that is not limited to the domestic sphere. Rahela’s accompanying words name what is hard about her work. She does not shy away from the prejudice and discrimination she faces, but denounces it—while outlining the strategies she and her colleague have devised in order to overcome them. Hers is a double resistance: to the colonising framing that brown women are waiting to be saved, from brown men, by white men (Spivak 1988) and white women (Ahmed 1992), and to the sexism she encounters in the workplace.

Reflexivity

I chose the image and caption in Figure 6 to emphasize the artifice of the exhibitionary mode that we used throughout the exhibition, presenting visitors with another, guiding perspective on how they might read the images in the space. I reflect now that I should have chosen a different quotation, one that more explicitly drew attention to the themes and histories I have discussed here.

My analyses of these six postcards, selected from thirty-six, are of course partial. I have not

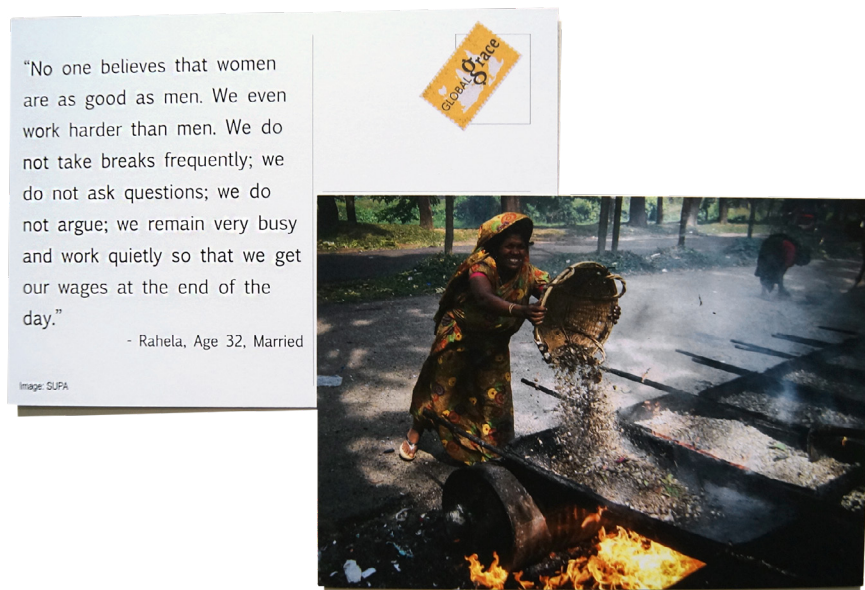


Fig. 5 Postcard chosen by researchers based in Sylhet, Bangladesh

chosen examples at random. Others in the collection I do not regard as subverting or contesting the colonial gaze. Reviewing our collective work, I am alert to choices and oversights that I made, or that others made and I did not question or catch, that serve to perpetuate colonizing views. Not all people quoted or featured in images are named, for example, when it is obvious that they would expect to be. It is not always clear if an interlocutor's quote matches a person pictured—and if not, if that is by ethical design or a troubling reductionism. I am now not sure if the stamp connotes benign conduit as intended or has rather become a gesture of propriety. I, and many of my colleagues, would probably make different choices if we were to recreate the exhibition. It is imperative to state these reflections and not obscure them if we are to learn from them.

Sumaya Kassim warns against complacency within any and all exhibitionary projects that aim to “decolonise,” noting that this complex set of ideas risks becoming “a petty curio with no substance” or worse—another colonial achievement (Kassim 2017). We must beware of how the *National Geographic* vision continues to shape ideas about which “documentary” photographs belong on

museum walls—or postcards. As we work with still and moving images across the project, each of us continues to grapple with a tendentious gaze that was always intended to be normalised and all-encompassing. Kassim concludes:

“[D]ecolonising is challenging. [...] It means acceding privilege, and that is almost always painful. Decoloniality is also challenging because it is necessarily unreachable, necessarily indefinable. The legacies of European colonialism are immeasurably deep, far reaching and ever-mutating, and so decolonial work and resistance must take on different forms, methods, and evolve accordingly. However, one thing that I am sure of is that decolonising is a process we must all work on together” (2017, emphasis original).

Collaboration remains central to our project, as does our embrace of experimentation as a route towards political change, believing with Trinh T. Minh-Ha that:

“To challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how a politics can transform reality. As this creative struggle moves onward, it is bound to recompose subjectivity and praxis. More often than not, it requires that one leave the realms of the known,

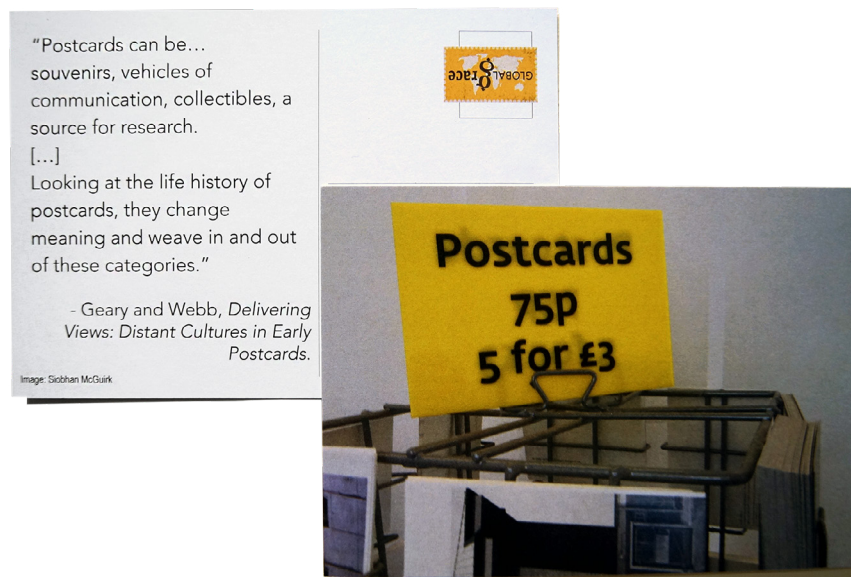


Fig. 6. Postcard chosen by researchers based in the UK

and take oneself there where one does not expect, is not expected to be" (1991: 2).

CONCLUSION

We have treated postcards—everyday objects, made to forge connections between people by providing a platform for only snippets of their stories—as suitable matter for gallery walls in order to challenge established understandings of what ethnographic exhibitions can, or should, display. Our experiments with postcards, as a concept and as a device, is reflective of our scholarly orientations. We recognize that research “findings” offer only partial and inconclusive glimpses from the field. They are neither comprehensive nor definitive, but rather complex and even at turns contradictory. We regard transnational, particularly south-south, exchange as imperative to the development of feminist solidarity and praxis and place value on the personal and affective connections forged in the process of conducting long-term collaborative research. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that transnational, multilingual and cross-cultural collaboration is fraught with crossed wires—and that our efforts to “decolonise” are always already constrained by funders’ expectation that exchange be mediated via the global north.

We continue to experiment with the concept and device of postcards as the project moves forward. For example, we have invited team members to share informal, personal writing in the form of digital “postcards from the field” on our open access website (globalgrace.net/postcards). Unlike “field notes,” which for anthropologists inescapably connote structured—if unorganized—topical insights, postcards promise conviviality, intimacy, no more than a partial glimpse. These digital postcards are designed as a forum in which to recognize and value those features of research rarely shared publicly in academic or professional spaces, but that have proven deeply productive in forging intellectual as well as personal connections across our transnational research teams: doubts, hopes, flights of fancy, still-forming ideas, lessons learned along the way.

Looking ahead to our final exhibition launch, we have embarked on a more ambitious experiment by inviting project members to make and send postcards to their counterparts overseas. These will be tailored by the sender for the recipient,

and potentially redacted for public display—as the addressees and senders decide.

We are interested in the different choices that might be made by team members tasked with selecting or creating, writing and mailing postcards to specific colleagues across the project. The request is a quite different proposition from creating digital files intended for public consumption and potentially limitless duplication. These bespoke postcards will emerge from a new context of deeper interpersonal and cross-project understanding, collegiality and friendship, forged over three years of working together. They will be personal and they will not be replicable. As such, and as objects for exhibition display, they will take on the qualities of “art postcards”—although we will not treat our postcards as precious as such terminology can imply. They will be stamped and mailed, reliant on effective international postal services to reach their intended destinations. They will be changed by their journeys and may arrive dented or scratched; with corners blunted; words smudged or obscured by bureaucratic stamps. We can only rest in the anxieties provoked by this ostensible gamble. Transnational communication and collaboration requires that we take risks—and accept that our ideas might not get to where we want them, or at least not in one piece. Moreover, these would not be “experiments” if we expected only “successful” outcomes.

The “deadline” for posting is months away, but the experiment proposed is already raising new questions about processes of transnational academic exchange: What different material and tactile qualities would these made objects amass? How might the physical journey of the object change its meaning, or rhetorical power? How differently might they be read, in the hands of recipients or on museum walls? How might the affective power of receiving (and of sending) such an object shape our professional, intellectually productive, relationships? Can such qualities be rendered understandable to exhibition audiences—or to project funders? If so, how? Would we anyway want them to be?

Our continued use of postcards, as a concept and as a device, has prompted different debates within and between project teams. Some colleagues continue to doubt that historical international postcard framings are open to subversion; that

the format cannot present ethnographic imagery otherwise. Others disagree, noting that not all anthropological research images must be “ethnographic”—and calling for more creative interventions. Others again have highlighted the democratizing power of the postcard: a familiar form that presents an opportunity to open up research process to broader audiences.

This debate is productive and should not be easily resolved. We must recognize that the spectres of World’s Fair postcards and *National Geographic* continue to loom large in our collective imagination. In our respective projects, not least in mounting our own exhibitions, we must embrace critical self-reflection and discussion in order to confront through dialogue and exchange, rather than avoid, such influences. We also must consider how the images we choose, from our privileged positions as academics/NGO staff, represent our interlocutors in ways that are different from how they might choose to represent themselves. The historical (and neo-colonial) uses and impact of postcards bring questions of consent, power, gaze, and representation into tight focus, but these are questions that we must also be asking of our written publications, conference presentations and other forms of research dissemination.

By remaining mindful and reflective regarding our use of postcards, we can become more alert to our research practices in general. Our experiments in producing and exchanging these microcosms of, or glimpses into our work, may help us to identify broader pathways to subverting rather than replicating traditional anthropological and colonial perspectives. These experiments engage questions of how researchers might differently visualize, articulate and share ideas about and from our field sites, in the dual contexts of conducting a collaborative and creative anthropology and of seeking to assert the value of transnational—particularly south-south—exchange within local and global academic, artist and activist communities. Without expecting conclusions, we will continue writing possible answers on our postcards.

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