

Chapter 4

Women's Quarters

It is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier . . . but it requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection.

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

How is this “secondary act of knowing or of reflection” that Barthes describes to be performed with respect to the colonial postcard if not by acknowledging, from the outset, that the latter is characterized by its extreme mobility as well as by its dubious and devious nature?

Falsely naive, the postcard misleads in direct measure to the fact that it presents itself as having neither depth nor aesthetic pretensions. *It is the “degree zero” of photography.*¹⁴ Common usage acknowledges this proclaimed “modesty”: to say of a photograph that it is like a postcard is, by contrast, to grant the good photograph (which a postcard is not) qualities such as depth, expressivity, and aesthetic dimension.

What has rarely been perceived, however, is that the negative qualities (banality, platitude, lack of expressivity,

etc.) generally attributed to postcards, and obviously proper to them, are the foundation of an *aesthetics* in the philosophical sense of the term. This aesthetics has the advantage of forcing reflection from the unexpected and inopportune return of criteria applicable to photography. Such a return is a source of constant temptation to the analyst because of the similarity of the two species.

Thus, beyond what is immediately noticeable, the colonial postcard delimits a field distinct from that of photography. And the distinction is not overcome through the opposition of public use versus private use, which is constitutive of it with respect to its specific destination.

The colonial postcard puts into play different motivations, different incentives, that it conceals even more easily because the innocuousness of its facade is

granted once for all. Proceeding under the cover of a mask, and setting its meaning into play at several levels, it suggests a sort of resistance by the constant reference to its referent. The postcard, like the photographer in this respect, "has something tautological about it: [in it] a pipe . . . is always and intractably a pipe" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 5). Because it has erased the traces, and above all the direction, of its *mise-en-scène*, the colonial postcard can successfully keep up this mirror trick (tautology), so that it presents itself as pure reflection, something it definitely is not.

And so, to take the staging of the *mise-en-scène* apart is to uncover the original triad constituted by the photographer, his model, and his studio. It is to catch them unaware at work on the near side of the referent, that is, before the advent of reflection.

The preceding series of postcards—the imprisoned women—occasionally does let through, albeit in most clumsy fashion, something of the photographer's sexual phantasm, not as the phantasm of an individual, for that would be only of anecdotal interest, but as a *collective phantasm*, proper to colonialism and produced by it.

There would appear to be a contradiction, a breach, here, since the colonial postcard is meant, by definition, *to limit itself to a photographic survey of society and landscape*. That at least is its ethnographic alibi, its avowed purpose. But

rather than a contradiction, in the case of the colonial postcard, it would be better to speak of a specific mode of operation that consists in the maintenance, though in constant scramble (the ruse), of a triple agency: that of the *avowal* (ethnography), that of the *unsaid* (colonial ideology), and that of the *repressed* (phantasm).

Proceeding in this manner, the colonial postcard will set up a *rhetoric of camouflage* in which only the agency of avowal will appear in the forefront, no matter what theme the photographer may select. Paradoxically, this omnipresence of avowal brings to mind the behavior patterns of disavowal, and it is well known what *they* signify. The captions of the postcard make this *disavowal* explicit. A photograph of a woman with her breasts bare calls forth the mind-boggling truism: "Moorish woman" or "Young Moorish woman" (pp. 24 and 26).

The reader may object, and with reason, that this is an extreme case and therefore one of rather disarming naïveté. Indeed, *all* of the avowal is not to be found in the captions.

The colonial postcard is inseparable from that which occasioned its existence, and therefore it offers to partake in the vast project of exploring the colony. Thus, taking its place among specialized monographs on defined topics, it proposes an approach that is more intimate and more directly visual. In addition, because of its accessibility in the colonial

world, it assumes the guise of an illustrated popular encyclopedia. This is one of the reasons why it follows the “progress” of colonization and why its Golden Age is between 1900 and 1930. The exotic postcard is the vulgar expression of colonial euphoria just as much as Orientalist painting was, in its beginnings, the Romantic expression of the same euphoria.

On the other hand, since it is now its own self-justification, the postcard is freed from the need to put itself in question by the telltale existence it leads. Its “realistic” underlay, indispensable to its continued upkeep and uttering of the avowal, allows it to obstruct the horizon of its productions, all of which are meant to convey a “truth” upon the colony.

When it is transposed into the world of women, this avowal (the ethnographic aim) must presuppose, to remain credible, an intimacy that was gained in, and over, the observed society, a total transparency, already established in the previous series of cards although in imperfect manner since the repressed manifested its return in the guise of exposed women.¹⁵

But no matter, the avowal cannot be stopped by such lapses without running the risk of coming to a premature end and thus revealing its falsehood, its duplicity.



Moorish woman.



Scenes and types. Group of Moorish women.



Scenes and types. Moorish women of Algiers. (Written on card: Anatoly's woman, R[. . .]'s woman.)

Women's Quarters



Algeria. Group of Moorish women. (Written on card: Don't get bored [signed:] L. Maurice.)



Moorish women in their quarters.



Algeria. Beautiful Fatmah.

The women's quarters that the postcard sets out to explore cannot sustain the illusion after a while, however, even though the ethnographic alibi seems to suit it perfectly.

Again, the model and the studio will greatly compensate for the weakness of the theme and the poverty of the imagination.

A few young women, seated on mats, posing in front of a hanging carpet will suffice to suggest the familiarity of the photographer with the inside of this female world. The forced smile is there to further emphasize the illusory complicity that the photographer steals from his models.

The postcards that exhibit this theme speak for themselves: for example, the squatting woman whose expression is the epitome of boredom while her companions stand forever at attention. It is easy to imagine the photographer moving among the models, issuing instructions on posture, and generally improving the group's photographic appearance, which, incidentally, calls to mind the passing in review of the troops so dear to colonial sensibilities.

Besides the obvious fact of their fabrication, these photos bring forth an illusion, the first victim of which is the photographer,¹⁶ who is content to be taken in. Like a new Alice, the camera operator has gone through the looking glass. But what he discovers, upon landing at the end of his leap, is only the re-

flection that he elicits himself and elaborates. What he brings back from his expedition is but a harvest of stereotypes that express both the limits of fabricated realism and those of models frozen in the hieratic poses of death.

To photograph these women in “their” quarters, “their” interior, is tantamount for the photographer, however, to have come, on discrete tippy toes, close to a highly eroticized reality of the Oriental world that haunts him: the harem. A lascivious world of idle women that lie adorned as if ready for unending festivities, the harem is deeply fascinating and equally disturbing. No doubt the conjunction of both of these responses is the basis for the photographic success of the postcard on p.33. Having closed in upon something other than the unrelieved and boring expression of a stereotype, the photographer manages to convey a little of his excitement, of his jubilant vacillation.

Is it the aesthetically perfect presence of these ten women, whose gazes converge upon the one who is looking at them, that holds our attention? A sort of calm aura of harmony and equilibrium gives the composition an ambience rarely found elsewhere.¹⁷

What is also striking about this postcard is no doubt its power of evocation, which turns it into a sort of masterpiece of the genre. When one looks at it, one cannot help but see it as a kind of photographic synthesis of Delacroix’s *Women*

of Algiers and of Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*. Such a “pictorialism,” to apply Barthes’s formula (*Camera Lucida*, p. 31), “is only an exaggeration of what the Photograph thinks of itself.”

For the colonial postcard, whose daily lot is the stereotype, this exaggeration turns to madness, harem madness.

Women's Quarters



Moorish women in their quarters.