

Dismantling the Gaze: Julia Margaret Cameron's Sri Lankan Photographs

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Although Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) has been acknowledged as one of the pioneering figures in the history of photography and many have examined her photographs for their beauty and mastery, her Sri Lankan pictures have remained largely ignored. They have been predominantly considered as insignificant, hardly comparable to Cameron's English photographs.¹ Despite the efforts of a few recent scholars who have tried to acknowledge the prints while according the work some complexity, issues of race, gender and class still remain insufficiently addressed.² Yet to conclude that these photographs are simple representations of the colonized is to disregard the tensions within the photographs, which simultaneously empower and disempower the Sri Lankan woman, appropriating her body but in turn granting her subjectivity. These photographs can only be understood by examining Cameron's own position in the colonies as a woman as well as a woman photographer whose status in Victorian society is ambivalent as she herself is somewhat of an outsider to England. Although her superior position to her photographic subject (the Sri Lankan) in terms of race assigns her an imperial gaze, and her profession allows her to access Sri Lankan women through her lens, Cameron occupies a dubious position in the colonies, especially considering the status of Anglo-Indians in Victorian society. Though she did belong to one of the prominent colonial families in Calcutta, and later immigrated to England, her colonial links still would have made her assimilation to Victorian society somewhat difficult.³ She is doubly surveilled as a threatening force, being a woman as well as a

¹ See Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work*; Joy Melville, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Pioneer Photographer*; Sylvia Wolf, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women*; Amanda Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*.

² Critics such as Joanne Lukitch and Victoria Olsen, for example, have attempted to re-read Cameron's Sri Lankan photographs taking into account the aspects of gender and race in the colonies.

³ Cameron came from a renowned family in colonial India. Her father, James Pattle, was a high ranking employee of the British East India Company while her mother, Adeline de l'Etang was from a long established French noble family. For more on Cameron's lineage, see Victoria Olsen.

woman with colonial affiliations who does not fall into the category of the helpless decorative white woman.

I wish to argue that Cameron the photographer visualizes her colonized subject differently from the stereotypical patriarchal colonial photographer, summoning a new mode of looking at the Sri Lankan. My aim is to show that as a photographer, Cameron does not necessarily wield a simplistic colonial gaze which attempts at the objectification and subjugation of the colonized body. I examine three of her photographs of a Sri Lankan woman taken during Cameron's four year stay in Sri Lanka which lasted till her death in 1879.⁴ These photographs clearly reflect that Cameron was engaged in a different project with her Sri Lankan prints. I will show that although they seem to conform to particular colonial stereotypes, and that on one level they do so, the woman model cooperates with Cameron to open up spaces of intimacy between the woman photographer and the native subject, threatening to disrupt the pleasure of the spectator who wishes to view the woman model as an erotic and exotic object.

In order to decipher Cameron's peculiar location in relation to her Sri Lankan photographs as well as to (re)view her pictures of the Sri Lankans, we must first situate her work within the larger discourse of colonial photography itself. Representations of colonized peoples reached their zenith in the late nineteenth century, when photographers traveled around the world, recording native peoples for the purposes of display in their efforts to create and support myths of "savagery" and "scientific" difference between the "natives" and embodiments of the Victorian culture.⁵ Colonial exhibitions became immensely popular in this period where "so-called savages or primitives were made available for visual inspection by millions of strolling and staring western citizens" (Corbey 338). These world fairs sought to provide visual justification for the imperial process, and photography served as a perfect medium to record colonized peoples under the guise of authenticity and objectivity.

Likewise, scenes in Sri Lanka were envisioned by colonial photographers from a position of cultural and political hegemony. Sri Lanka, or British Ceylon, occupied an altogether different space as far as the colonial imaginary is concerned. While British India became a space ridden with racial anxiety because of the Mutiny of 1857, Sri Lanka posed less of a threat and was relatively peacefully administered as a crown

⁴ Of the 26 Sri Lankan photographs that survive, ten are single portraits of local women. The women are mostly posed in their native day-to-day dress, except for a few where the women models are wrapped in robes. Among these are half-length portraits, three-quarter-length ones as well as full-length photographs. While many emphasize the faces and figures of the Sri Lankan women, some also depict women at work, carrying pitchers of water.

⁵ See Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism*, that the Orient is conceived in order to justify western dominance and is a mode of knowledge which constructs the non west as the "other."

colony by British officials with only a few native rebellions.⁶ By mid nineteenth century, the island's socioeconomic landscape had begun to transition from a colonial outpost to a plantation economy. The coffee industry was booming, and as the island became increasingly accessible and profitable, "desire to secure by legislation more and better communications to facilitate the export of coffee" (Bailey, 119) led to the improvement of roads and the construction of a railway line from Colombo to Kandy.⁷ John Falconer notes that the "construction of roads and railways, and the improvement of harbours led to the expansion of the plantation economy, bringing a large influx of Europeans and stimulating an interest in the island which was catered for by a variety of illustrated books" (39). Photography indeed substantiated and validated this economic enterprise, launching colonial Sri Lanka into modernity.

Falconer, in his discussion of major firms which dominated photography of Sri Lanka, describes resident photographers such as W.L.H. Skeen and Charles T. Scowen whose success was largely due to the economic revival in the island. As Falconer points out, the firm of Skeen and company "was started at an economically propitious moment" (42) and it produced a series of photographs illustrative of this coffee culture, creating "this branch of documentation their specialty" (42). Such images of trade and produce dominate nineteenth century colonial photography of Sri Lanka. But many photographers also traveled the country to classify and catalog exotic and picturesque scenery, historical sites such as ruins, monuments, holy places, and their inhabitants, hunting for saleable scenes.

The native people became marketable in this economy of circulation, where the inhabitants were photographed with an eye for the exotic. In an effort to capture each and every "type" of native, photographers sought them in various poses, either seated or standing.⁸ They are ethnographic in

⁶ The British consolidated rule in colonial Sri Lanka in 1815 after the conquest of the Kandyan Kingdom, and transformed the colony into a plantation economy with the introduction of coffee and cinnamon cultivation. During this period, two short-lived rebellions took place, one in 1818 and the other in 1848. While the rebellion in 1818 was a nationalist uprising by the chieftains in the Kandyan province, the 1848 rebellion known as the Matale Rebellion was organized by the peasants in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, in response to the obnoxious taxes imposed on the peasants by the colonial government. The Matale rebellion called for an end to British rule, but was violently crushed by the colonial government, which drew criticism from England. For more on the rebellions, see Patrick Peebles.

⁷ It was in the 1850s during British rule that the railway system was introduced to Sri Lanka under the patronage of the then Governor, Sir Henry Ward (1855-1860). It was initially built to transport coffee from the hill country to Colombo for shipment, and the Colombo to Kandy line was one of the main lines in the railways.

⁸ As Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson observe, "type" or "specimen" prints were crucial for ethnographic photographic practices in the colonies, and "a non-European person under colonial scrutiny was posed partially or even totally unclothed against a plain or calibrated backdrop to create a profile, frontal or posterior view"(3). Such prints could provide "documentary" evidence of various "inferior" native types, further justifying the colonial project.

flavor and people are reduced to racial types, documented in terms of the different communities—the Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Malays.⁹ The costumes and ornaments of these individuals are a focal point of interest and they are portrayed as bearers of specific cultural traits. For instance, photographs of up country and low country chiefs, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim men and women, abound. The Kandyan chiefs, with their elaborate apparel and accessories, are a staple in the work of many a photographer of the isle. As Ismeth Raheem and Percy Colin Thome point out, “the ethnographic theme, namely the material culture of remote and exotic peoples with their fascinating costumes and weird ‘rituals’, was a lucrative field providing a global market that [the photographers] exploited to the fullest” (46).

At first glance, it seems as if Cameron does indeed employ this technique of highlighting racial difference when she chooses to depict her Sri Lankan woman model as distinctly different from her European models. When staging the Sri Lankan, she discards certain photographic conventions that she adopts while living in England.¹⁰ Many critics such as Joanne Lukitsh have observed that Cameron’s Sri Lankan pictures differ in composition and lighting from her English prints. Cameron did choose to pose bare-chested men in Sri Lanka, as Lukitsh points out, a practice she never resorted to while in England. Victoria Olsen also notes half or full length prints of the colonized captured at a greater distance instead of close-ups of expressive faces, which outweigh Cameron’s English oeuvre, perhaps suggesting the distance between the photographer and the Sri Lankan subject. In order to demonstrate the particular vision articulated by Cameron, a critical analysis of one of her English prints is necessary in order to juxtapose it against Cameron’s Sri Lankan photographs.

In many respects, Cameron’s Sri Lankan pictures seem ethnographic when compared to her English photographs of women, which evoke a sense of religiosity and purity. Though Cameron’s English models were frequently her maidservants, just as her Sri Lankan models were mostly Tamil domestics who worked for the household, the English women are rendered as historical, religious, allegorical or legendary subjects such as the Madonna.¹¹ The Sri Lankan woman, featured in five of Cameron’s 26 surviving photographs of the colonized, has been stripped of such visual

⁹ The people of Sri Lanka are divided into four ethnic groups—the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Muslims, and the Burghers. By the nineteenth century, the Sinhalese had been divided into two groups—the “Kandyan” and “low-country” Sinhalese. The “Kandyan” Sinhalese of the Kingdom of Kandy in the highlands, which remained independent from foreign control until 1815, were more conservative culturally and socially, while the “low-country” Sinhalese of the plains and coast of Sri Lanka were subject to greater colonial acculturation. For more information, see Peebles, 6-10.

¹⁰ For a survey of conventions see Joanne Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron* 9-15.

¹¹ Colin Ford points out that Cameron’s most frequent female models, besides her nieces Julia Jackson and May Prinsep, were two of her maidservants, Mary Ann Hillier (1847-1936) and Mary Ryan (1848-1914). See Ford, 54-56.

trappings.¹² Whereas the English sitters are transformed into figures of mysticism inhabiting the heavenly rather than the earthly sphere, such as in the photograph *The Gardener's Daughter* (figure 1), the Sri Lankan woman is devoid of the necessary mysticism for such a metamorphosis.¹³



Figure 1. Cameron, Julia Margaret. *The Gardener's Daughter*. Science Museum, London.

The Gardener's Daughter (1867) depicts a full length profile of a young woman placed against a garden, a backdrop Cameron often preferred for some of her dreamy images of Victorian women. Modeled by Mary Ryan, one of Cameron's English maidservants, the woman is a picture of femininity. With a foliage arch behind her revealing the distant valley at the back, she looks away from the camera, and her downcast eyes gaze at the flower she delicately holds in one of her hands in a pensive expression. Her face is visible while her long wavy hair falls over her back, streaming down her long dress, and the distant expression in her eyes conveys an ethereal quality to the woman. The way she is positioned within the frame so that her face almost caresses the foliage guides the viewer to take note of her vulnerable countenance. Her expression of

¹² See a discussion of the Madonna prints in Cox and Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs*.

¹³ Reproduced in Lukitsh, *Cameron* 71.

sadness and a sense of solemnity capture the viewer. Lukitsh points out that in these images of single female figures amidst flowers, “a more diffuse lighting makes the overall image more harmonious, suggesting the symbolic connection between femininity and nature” (*Cameron* 11). She is depicted as gentle and mild, evoking a sense of humility and spirituality.

In contrast, the photograph of the Sri Lankan woman (1875-9) satisfies the European stereotype of the visual difference between the colonizer and the colonized in terms of dress where the corseted Victorian woman is held up as the ideal against the semi-exposed Sri Lankan revealing bare shoulders and arms (figure 2).



Figure 2. Cameron, Julia Margaret. *Woman, Ceylon*. Science Museum, London.

Cameron seductively uses the sari, perceived as exotic by the colonizers to cast the native as almost a semi-draped model.¹⁴ Such visual depictions of the woman conveniently play into the stereotype of the highly sexualized colonized woman who poses a threat to the white male. As James Ryan demonstrates, such images “found their greatest expression in the salacious and pornographic photographs of the colonial harem

¹⁴ For a discussion of measures adopted to photograph the colonial body, see Anne Maxwell, 38-59.

manufactured by European photographers” (53) as evidence of the hypersexual non-western woman. Women’s bodies did become the focal point of interest in colonial photography, and in this case, the significant lack of clothing holds Cameron’s attention.

The emphasis on the semi-nakedness of this woman not only hints at such a visual difference but also seems to enact violence on the Sri Lankan. The violence is aggravated by the fact that the gaze of the photographer is usually associated with that of a patriarchal gaze. Critics have attributed a male gaze to Cameron especially in her treatment of the English women who are cast as emotional, virginal and predominantly asexual. Amanda Hopkinson notes that Cameron “saw women very much as a male photographer would have done” (110) by casting them as figures to be ravished or venerated by a male audience. However, sexuality and sensuality are only implicit in the photographs of the English women and do not boldly emerge through the images, unlike her Sri Lankan portraits.

Of course such sexuality is disempowering for colonized people especially as male photographers focus on the female body as a sexualized object for their viewing pleasure. While colonized women were in certain instances forced to disrobe for photographs, such actions allowed the photographer to depict the colonies as a place of sexual excess where the women were licentious and willing partners for the European male.¹⁵ For instance, in late nineteenth century colonial portraits of Sri Lanka, in addition to images of native women representative of various ethnic communities and their respective attire, there is a substantial body of photographs of the “Rodiya” women.¹⁶ These women are exhibited as open, sexually free, and available, their near naked bodies a vehicle for the articulation of Victorian notions of difference. Such a spectacle is justified under the pretext of ethnographic interest in the “Rodiya” women, and the desire for the construction of the “Rodiya” woman’s body as erotic is concealed under the guise of anthropological interest in the outcasts of nineteenth century Sri Lanka.

To an extent, a voyeuristic gaze functions in Cameron’s Sri Lankan portraits when the photograph promises the viewer an intrusive look at her body. While the sari is the normal attire for these “coolie” women, the model appears uncomfortable, perhaps because she is aware of being watched and photographed. What we encounter in fig. 2, for example, is a half-length portrait of a young woman whose head is slightly turned sideways. Although she does not face the camera, her awareness of its effect is seen through her hand. She seems uncomfortable at this bodily

¹⁵ For a discussion of how certain natives like aboriginal people were forced to pose naked, see Maxwell, 140.

¹⁶ According to the traditional caste system of Sri Lanka, the “Rodiya” caste or the “untouchables” were socially, culturally and economically marginalized and exploited, ostracized and segregated from other castes/groups. They were excluded from villages and communities, and forced into begging and scavenging because of their caste status. They could only wear caste-specific attire, and during the Kandyan Kingdom both “Rodiya” men and women were prohibited from covering their upper bodies.

intrusion since her fingers are rigid, not relaxed. In fact, they jut forward in an awkward manner, tense and conscious that the photographic gaze, with its harsh lighting, acts as a voyeur cutting into her bare flesh. The way her thumb tries to conceal what it cannot is a sign of her apparent embarrassment at this display of semi nakedness.

The sense of violence and entrapment is apparent in the positioning of her hands. It speaks of her vain attempts to conceal her self. The irony is that the attempt to cover her nakedness directs the viewer's eye onto the very object it tries to conceal. Similarly the "unidentified woman standing by fence and vines" (1875-9) depicts a woman who is literally trapped against the hedge, half undressed while the lighting acts so as to further bare her body (figure 3).



Figure 3. Cameron, Julia Margaret. British, 1815-1879, Untitled, (Ceylon), c. 1875, Albumen print from wet collodion negative, 23.5 x 16.8 cm, Harriott A. Fox Endowment, 1970.844 , The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

The focus is definitely not on her face but on her body and the model is carefully staged, presenting the viewer with her form. At first glance, we see a three-quarter length profile of a young woman. But immediately we perceive her awkward pose. Although she gives the impression of leaning against a hedge, her posture is far from relaxed. Her body is almost

twisted, her hips facing the camera while her upper body is pictured sideways. Her legs open out, deliberately putting the body on display. The fact that she is arranged before the camera is suggested through the positioning of her body. Her arms are held at the same angles as her legs, creating an aesthetic effect, however inconvenient it is to the model.

While the two Sri Lankan photographs discussed above clearly focus on the face and the expression of the eyes rather than on the body, the picture of the “Woman, Ceylon” (1875-9) concentrates specifically on her body (figure 4). The lighting reveals the bare shoulders and arms to the viewer. The face is not clearly discernible although the light does slightly trace the outline of her features. Her expression cannot be distinctly seen, nor can her eyes. Although Cameron tries to emphasize the native woman’s hand with its numerous rings, the effect is that the viewer concentrates on the bare flesh. The light strongly cuts across her back, offering up her body further for voyeuristic pleasure and evoking sensuality. The rings and the chain around her neck draw the viewer’s eyes not to the jewelry but to the bare back that is dramatically illuminated.



Figure 4. Cameron, Julia Margaret. Woman, Ceylon. Gernsheim Collection. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

The violence is seen from the positioning of this woman's hands. She shields her body from the camera's intrusion by covering herself with her arms. Cameron's choice of frame heightens this effect as well. The round frame clearly leaves no room for the viewer to divert his gaze. He is directed to the center of the frame where Cameron places her model. The bareness of the body sharply focused by the light deepens this effect. Emphasizing the exposed skin speaks the language of sensuality and difference. These bodies become not only sites of pleasure for the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer but also sites of violence where the women become objectified.

Yet the manner in which Cameron casts Marianne North, the botanical painter who visited Sri Lanka in 1877, is unusual. Her portrait of North can be read as exotic when North is immersed in lush tropical surroundings.¹⁷ North, in her autobiography, describes Cameron's passionate interest in photographing her: "[Cameron] made up her mind at once to photograph me, and for 3 days, kept herself in a fever of excitement about it." (315) Cameron thus fits her English visitor into a familiar framework where Sri Lanka is a tropical paradise for the Western traveler. During this time, "photographers were seeking an ideal Ceylon for European audiences" and "the favorite themes were lush foliage plants and vegetation of an exotic nature to convey the ambience of an oriental country with a lush tropical climate" (Raheem and Thome, 17). Of course, what is significant in Cameron's act is the very fact that she does not place her colonized subjects in such tropical surroundings.

While there is no doubt that such photographs presenting Sri Lanka as a land of bounty were appealing to a European audience, Cameron's refusal to exoticize the landscape actually hints at a complexity in her Sri Lankan photographs. She did find the isle lush and exotic and its people simple: "My wonder for instance has been tamed but not my worship-The glorious beauty of the scenery-the primitive simplicity of the inhabitants & the charms of the climate all make me love and admire Ceylon more and more"(quoted in Cox and Ford 483).¹⁸ But only two of her Sri Lankan images could be remotely categorized as landscape photographs, and they too foreground a large group of estate workers against a plantation background instead of the scenic sights of the surroundings.¹⁹

Although Cameron's apparent disinterest in capturing the "natives" for exhibition seems to hint at her privileging the English models as fitting subjects for photography over the Sri Lankan, such an argument is problematic when one considers her photographic zeal in Sri Lanka as well as her commercial intentions in England. North's observation that

¹⁷ For a reproduction of the picture, see Marianne North, 314.

¹⁸ For Cameron's complete Sri Lankan oeuvre, see Cox and Ford.

¹⁹ Viscount Hinchinbrook, in his *Diary in Ceylon and India, 1878-9*, describes Cameron, immediately upon her arrival in Ceylon, eager for the exotic, making arrangements "for some snake-charmers to go through their performances" (6).

Cameron did photograph the “natives,” and Cameron’s haste to capture North all suggest that Cameron did continue her photographic practices in Sri Lanka. Further, by 1875 when she set out for the isle, the Camerons were in the midst of a financial crisis as their booming coffee estates were threatened with blight. A photographic project of the colonized people at this particular moment would have indeed been profitable.²⁰

Therefore, if the Sri Lankan portraits do not hold the same mystical quality as her English prints, and are more ethnographic, one wonders what prevented Cameron’s Sri Lankan photographs from entering the global market of lucrative prints. After all she was keen on the circulation of her English images. Cox and Ford note that “[h]er extraordinary rate of production in part signals her commercial intentions, as does the outpourings of breathless correspondence with family members and friends, which reveals a feverish preoccupation with the need to make a living and gain recognition for her work” (43).²¹ However, Cameron’s lack of distribution of her Sri Lankan photographs is not solely a marker of their inferiority. I contend that her diminished commercial interest in Sri Lanka seems to suggest that she aligns herself with the Sri Lankan by rejecting prevailing photographic conventions, which failed to take into account the feelings of the colonized.

Despite seeming to adhere to conventions of colonial objectifying of the “native,” it is also true that Cameron departs from touristic conventionalities of depicting the subject race. James Ryan demonstrates that “scenes of tropical vegetation—improvised with paint and plants in the studio as well as in outdoor locations—were employed frequently as backdrops for images of exotic women” (53) during the late nineteenth century. In such instances, the exotic and erotic collude and even the landscape assumes the form of “fleeting beauties to be conquered by the male and white power of endurance” (Ryan 53). The exoticism is heightened when the woman is set against such picturesque scenery. Ryan adds that the “stereotype of the sexually exotic Oriental woman” found expression in places like India where the photographers “exploited the existing associations between the Orient and sex” (53). Hence, both the feminized landscape and the eroticized woman inevitably become subject to the penetrating gaze of the European.

Cameron’s significant lack of such photographs speaks of her refusal to accommodate the aesthetic conventions of her time which made the Sri

²⁰ The plantation industry in Sri Lanka begins in 1825 with the planting of coffee by the British. However, in 1868, this booming industry comes to a halt with the spread of a leaf disease.

²¹ Cox and Ford note that despite lofty ideals, “Cameron expected much in return, not least to make a reasonable living from her efforts” (41). They add that “photography offered the possibility of a steady, if not spectacular, income” (41). They further state that her illustrations of Tennyson’s poetry certainly show that she “embraced [the growing] market in the early 1870s” (90). Sylvia Wolf confirms this by drawing upon Cameron’s annotated price list of photographs, noting her commercial intentions.

Lankan women available to a voyeuristic gaze. Her refusal to comply with these aesthetics confronts us in the form of “Woman, Ceylon” (figure 4). The glimpse of the arm of the chair on which the woman is placed is significant. Although the portion of the chair that juts forward could be mistaken for a bamboo shoot, it still sticks out especially when the viewer looks closely at her hand and the bangles that are illuminated by the lighting, which actually interferes with the idyllic setting of a garden. While the chair takes away from the aesthetic beauty of the photograph, it actually, in a strange fashion, attributes a sense of power to the Sri Lankan woman. In an era when the colonized subject was being meticulously staged in studios with props and the necessary paraphernalia, Cameron's model is made to stick out as it were. The Sri Lankan woman does not emerge from the vines but is positioned in such a way that the picture denies the viewer the uninhibited pleasure of devouring the native body. The de-aestetised photograph consciously disrupts the idyllic act of gazing at the “other.”

Interestingly, Cameron's photographs of the Sri Lankan woman have not satisfied many critics. Helmut Gernsheim dismisses the Sri Lankan pictures as “quite unimportant,” assigning them to an amateur (83). Amanda Hopkinson believes the Sri Lankan prints to be “surely among her least representative work” drawing a comparison with her English portraits (34). Sylvia Wolf states, “today we can't help but notice that, for Cameron, this ideal world of Arthurian ladies and Shakespearean heroines was not populated by women of color” (15). But while Cameron's avoidance of religious and allegorical representations of Sri Lankan natives could very well be because she did not comprehend the local religious traditions and mythology in order to pose them as such, one reason why these prints have been largely ignored is because Cameron does not conform to picturesque conventions. I argue below that she actually uproots the native from an ethnological setting, clearly signaling a departure from visualising the native as an exhibit on display.

Cameron creates a breach in convention when she separates the individual from the usual setting of an ethnological backdrop. Figure 3 exemplifies this well. The woman is pictured against a setting that is devoid of ethnological markers. It does not place her in Sri Lanka, thereby signaling Cameron's refusal to place and categorize the “native.” Actually there is little difference between the garden-like surroundings in her Sri Lankan prints and the garden backdrop of some of her English photographs.²² Such a departure from an exotic framework implies an intimacy between the photographer and the subject that complicates her attitude to the Sri Lankan photographs. Therefore, although the Sri Lankan photographs do on one level conform to colonial stereotypes, they are also extremely complicated pictures, signaling an ambiguity in Cameron in reference to her Sri Lankan photographs.

²² See portraits of Aletheia in Cox and Ford, 230-231.

Joanne Lukitsh, in her discussion of Cameron's Sri Lankan photographs in "Simply Pictures of Peasants: Artistry, Authorship and Ideology in Julia Margaret Cameron's Photography in Sri Lanka, 1875-1879" sees similar confidence in figure 2 of the "half-length portrait of woman." Lukitsh observes that the "low camera angle gives stature to her presence, even as this representation of her self-possession is undermined by the stiff gesture of the fingers of her hand" (5). She observes that Cameron is employing "mixed aesthetic modes" or "incompatible visual codes" in her Sri Lankan images when her "authority as a woman colonizer over the colonized subject she represented was partial and the Sri Lankan woman model's look evidence of a resistance to it" (5). Lukitsh registers such ambivalence in the representation of the Sri Lankan model as evidence of Cameron's incomplete authority over the native. Yet this interpretation leads the discussion away from a possible intimacy between the photographer and the photographic object, which is a central component in Cameron's Sri Lankan prints.

What is significant is that Cameron sexualizes the woman but does so in a fashion that challenges the stereotypical colonial gaze. She assigns an active role to the model. These photographs disable the voyeuristic viewer's power to gaze and then walk away from the photograph with satisfaction, under the illusion that he has been in control of the act of viewing. Cameron unravels this illusion of power by assigning the woman model a gaze that is preoccupied and outside the grasp of the viewer. Cameron makes a visual consumer of her woman model when the woman daringly engages in this act of looking.

In figure 2, the model is inaccessible precisely because of her gaze. She does not shyly look away from the viewer but deflects his gaze by guiding his eyes towards the direction of her look, a space he cannot even imaginatively penetrate. By looking away into the distance, she creates a visual space for herself in the process, which is beyond the sight of the spectator. Thus she disrupts the image of herself as the passive object and in turn frustrates her viewer as she refuses to cooperate with him and allow him uninhibited sexual access to visual gratification of her body. He is compelled to locate his voyeuristic gaze on a visual space that guarantees him no access, thus nullifying his gaze altogether. Hence, the focus of the photograph comes to center on the viewer's unease rather than the half-clothed woman model's body.

By dismantling the binary between the active viewer and the passive object, Cameron creates intimacy between the photographer and the woman model, assigning her the power to look, not by confronting the camera and in turn the viewer but by engaging with another object away from the grasp of the viewer, thus challenging his power to gaze. Therefore the object of the colonial gaze—the Sri Lankan woman—is displaced, as there is no sole viewing object or an exclusive viewer. Cameron maps out alternative objects/spaces that are not within the command of the spectator standing outside of the frame. In this process, she assigns a spectatorial position to her native subject apparently caught

within the frame, thus interrupting the whole framework. These novel spaces disclose alternative modes of visualizing the relationship between the photographer and subject.

The intertextual relationship between the photographs of the Sri Lankan woman is crucial in analyzing this connection. The multiple images of the Sri Lankan models suggest a depth in the colonial subject that hitherto had been unacknowledged by many colonial photographers. Such a series of photographs of an English woman came out of a long standing relationship between Cameron and the model. Cameron's detailed studies of her favorite niece, Julia Jackson, for whom she had a great regard are evidence of the photographer's fascination with her model.²³ Likewise, the Sri Lankan woman is not an ethnological exhibit but is an individual who has caught Cameron's avid interest. She becomes a woman Cameron looks at with pleasure, who commands sufficient allure to spur this woman photographer to focus on the Sri Lankan's figure, challenging any previous arguments that Cameron did not view her colonized subjects as likely models. Cameron pictures the woman in different poses and settings, in and out of the studio, rotating her, assigning her the power of the gaze and freedom of movement each time, yet dissatisfied with each attempt.

Such complexity embedded in the photograph can only be explained through the relationship between the photographer, and the woman model. Cameron problematizes the inevitable identification/collaboration between the photographer and the spectator by clearly assuming the role of the photographer but not that of the spectator. As a woman as well as a woman photographer who identifies with the colonized, her gaze is inclusive. Her multiple homes (India, England and Sri Lanka) grant her access to multiple sites of knowledge and multiple viewing positions. Hence her position as photographer is decentered. This is apparent from the manner in which she casts the woman by the vines (figure 3). Since Cameron's position is not centered, she is unable to fix her subject onto the photographic frame. Instead the native woman is seen to be moving away from the center of the picture to the left of the viewer. The model is not being contained by the photographer and therefore is not subject to surveillance where she must either accept or refuse the viewer's intrusive gaze. Cameron fashions other sites that the woman model can move to without necessary intrusion by the spectator, sites which only the photographer can visualize in this instance.

Cameron also hints at another visual space beyond the frame, especially when she does not envelope the woman in vine leaves and leaves one portion of the backdrop bare in figure 3. This blank space is highlighted by the way the bamboo shoots spring upward, and the photograph focuses on the bare background right above. While it definitely emphasizes and almost blends in with her bare back, this space

²³ In fact, these three images of the Sri Lankan woman share similarities with Cameron's prints of Julia Jackson taken in September, 1874, reproduced in Cox and Ford, 226.

speaks of another reality from which this model emerges. Thus she is not literally fixed in space and time in terms of the photographic frame. It attributes a sense of freedom to the woman. It hints at a past as well as a future. In other words, she has an identity of her own, and therefore is in no need of being assigned one. Her assured stride across the frame speaks of her confidence of that power.

Thus Cameron lays claim to a distinct gaze as she simultaneously assigns the woman model her own look. Yet the dilemma is whether Cameron can ever position herself as a spectator in the first place, even in terms of an artist. Pamela Gerrish Nunn, in *Victorian Women Artists*, discusses the sexual stereotyping that restricted the careers of Victorian female artists, confining their creative work to frivolous lady-like accomplishments. Nunn notes the difficulty women artists had in attaining professional stature, and observes that in the patriarchal society at the time “the identity of artist was not one which a female person could seriously or effectively inhabit” (6). Hence, it was not easy for women to occupy the masculine realm of professions. As Griselda Pollock points out, while women came to be seen predominantly in their reproductive roles, the artist was defined as “anti-domestic,” the result being this contradiction between the “ideological identities of the artist and woman” (49). Therefore, the woman artist must first resolve this inherent contradiction within herself whereby she is both passive as well as active.

Indira Ghose aptly points out that, “what needs to be scrutinized is the site from which women gaze, that is the position of power in which they are located” (9). As she further suggests, white women in the colonies could not assume the privileged status of the spectator or voyeur as they “were after all both observer and observed . . . subject to the regulatory gazes of their own patriarchal society” (Ghose 60). Likewise Cameron could not escape being subject to the scrutinizing gaze of patriarchal society monitoring her every action as a white woman in the colonies. But she cannot be relegated to the category of the stereotypical white woman traveler in the colonies, as she herself was a professional photographer who was no stranger to the Indian subcontinent.²⁴ Her Anglo-Indian origins deny her a simplistic gaze.

Racially she occupies an elusive space, having lived in both Anglo-India as well as Victorian England, and not belonging completely to either world. Her position is further complicated through her ambiguous racial identity. Victoria Olsen in fact traces “a high caste Bengali” woman in Cameron’s mother’s lineage, which explains Cameron’s olive skin. Olsen argues that while this “mixed racial heritage may have been perfectly acceptable in eighteenth-century Pondicherry” (14), “it may have not been

²⁴ Romita Ray points out that for most British women in the subcontinent, “sketching and painting were confined to genteel pastimes undertaken in privacy” although “a simple hobby to keep the eye and hand occupied proved to be an agreeable solution for adjusting to a foreign landscape.”(89) Cameron’s standing in terms of photography makes her a misfit amongst such women who were dabbling in such projects merely to while away the time.

quite the thing in nineteenth-century Calcutta.”(14) Olsen also adds that “gossip did circulate about the family’s mixed heritage: even as late as the 1840s an English visitor to Calcutta snickered about Pattle being a variation of ‘Patel,’ a common Indian surname” (14).²⁵

This predicament, in which Cameron is denied access to any gaze with conviction, situates her in a peculiar position as a woman with undesirable racial affiliations whose gaze is constantly being policed by her male counterparts. Cameron attempts to make her gaze partially that of the colonized, the result being that the Sri Lankan woman need not return the gaze of the white photographer as there is less tension between the two. This bond is obvious through the self-confidence she grants her model, a self-confidence Cameron partially holds emanating from her status as a professional woman photographer. This singular position grants her a different gaze, which potentially creates an intimacy between the subject and the photographer. This is not an intimacy enacted between a desiring male spectator and a willing female subject where the latter must succumb to the impositions of the former. Cameron redefines intimacy to an extent when she relinquishes her hold on the woman model and ceases to become watchful over her subject by letting the model assume her own look.

Thus, her portraits emerge out of certain anxieties that are embedded in the socio-cultural context in which Cameron is situated. She cannot simply be categorized as a colonial photographer especially because there are no indications on her part either to make photography a commercial venture in Sri Lanka or to send out her colonial portraits for display. Moreover, Cameron cannot maintain the distance necessary between the colonial photographer and the colonized subject as she herself constantly shifts ground from the position of photographer to that of the woman model. Her Sri Lankan portraits clearly demonstrate her struggle to distance herself from the colonized amidst her strong desire to identify with the woman and therefore not picture her at all in the sense of a detached photographer. Since Cameron inhabits an in-between space, she is unable to retain the distinction between her own self and the “other.” This threatens to disrupt her photographs, in which the photographic subject—the woman model—shifts back and forth from agency to powerlessness. For Cameron to visualize the colonized as the “other” is indeed a difficult task as she is always already “othered” in this Victorian discourse of difference. She does not occupy a stable self in order to picture the Sri Lankan.

Yet Cameron makes amends by somehow attempting to allocate different viewing positions to her model and experimenting with spaces within the photograph to locate the woman model. Therefore the woman’s need for her own space to articulate her own subjectivity within the photographic space becomes emblematic of Cameron’s own desire for such a site of expression. But it is crucial to understand Cameron’s

²⁵ Patel is a surname of most commonly Indian (Gujarati) origin.

location, which is Sri Lanka itself. Sri Lanka became a point of transition for many travelers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mainly a site for transit from one destination to another, usually from the center to the periphery.²⁶ It is then a peculiarly liminal space or an in-between space where Cameron finds herself. Cameron is also the paradigmatic liminal subject who has no unified sense of a racial or a gendered identity. She cannot be isolated solely as the conventional white woman in the colonies as she is a professional photographer, and as far as her racial self is concerned, she occupies an elusive space, having inhabited both Anglo-India as well as Victorian England, and not belonging completely to either world. A liminal space such as Sri Lanka, to an extent, provides this woman photographer with an alternative space to refine and redefine herself through her work, although she can never escape being subject to a myriad of gazes.

Being in the liminal space of Sri Lanka allows Cameron to rethink a different perspective. While standing on such a threshold transiting from one state to another, Cameron articulates a different outlook through her Sri Lankan photographs. There is a moment of disjunction when the boundaries dissolve, when Cameron is ready to move into a different viewpoint. Perhaps this very disjunction is the cause for the constant ambivalences in the photographs, where she tries to objectify her Sri Lankan subject. It is at these severing moments that the images foreshadow the sari clad “native” woman who is depicted as “improperly” dressed carrying traces of the primitive, needing the civilizing presence of the white European male.

However this is not to disregard the fact that Cameron’s particular look, despite the ambivalences, is a look that actually sees the colonized. While colonies were places for not only the visual consumption but also the literal sexual consumption of native bodies, the Sri Lankan woman’s body becomes the site of definition and affirmation of white male sexual potency and superiority.²⁷ Within such a context, most colonial photographers were preoccupied in their own subjectivities. This is not to say that their gaze is totally invalid, but that their gaze has overlooked the

²⁶ Raheem and Thome mention “Ceylon’s geographical location and the vital role it played in the Indian Ocean trade routes”(22) during the nineteenth century: “In the years before air travel, virtually every passenger flying between Europe and Asia (and also Australia) had to pass through the ports of Galle or Colombo before continuing their journey”(22).

²⁷ See George Calladine’s *The Diary of Colour-Serjeant George Calladine* for an account of how Sri Lankan women were subject to sexual exploitation in the nineteenth century. Calladine comments that “the 19th Regiment left more children than any regiment leaving the country before”. He describes how, when his regiment is about to leave Galle, they had “such a number of black women coming alongside, who were left behind, some with three and four children” (77). Also see Christopher Ondaatje’s *Wolf in Ceylon* for an account of how a Tamil woman is raped by Pablo Neruda, while he serves as a Chilean diplomat in Sri Lanka in the 1920’s, and how “his power as a white man in Ceylon” (127) facilitates his act.

photographic subject and has merely eyed the Sri Lankan woman in order to fashion their own redemptive narrative. Yet Cameron's look is far more complex, especially as any claim to either an imperial or male gaze has always been denied to her.

Norman Bryson, in a discussion of painting, distinguishes between the gaze and the glance, arguing that the gaze which is related to the term "regard," is "vigilant" and "masterful." The gaze indicates "an impatient pressure within vision, a persevering drive which looks outward with mistrust' and "actively seeks to confine what is always on the point of escaping or slipping out of bounds" (93). Thus Bryson theorizes the gaze as leaning towards "violence (penetrating, piercing and fixing)" (93). Such a phallic gaze is differentiated from the "glance" which is not as violent and probing as the gaze but is more "a furtive or sideways look", not disembodied from the act of viewing. The glance "does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own techniques does it exclude the traces of the body of labor" (94).

It is clear that Cameron does not enact Bryson's notion of the gaze as she clearly tries to avoid casting the Sri Lankan woman as a passive victim, subject to the visual thrust of the voyeur. Yet Cameron does not employ the notion of the glance either even though she keeps away from the "cold" and impersonal act of the gaze. While Bryson's conception of the glance is manifest in her work where the process of viewing is not erased and she is involved in the act of creation, evident in the manner in which she sees her own subjectivity through the model, Cameron's photographic representations go beyond the glance. Implicated in the glance is some sense of distance away from the subject that Cameron is clearly unable to maintain in her photographs. The intimacy between the subject and the photographer erases such a distance and hinders such a viewing of the colonized.

But Cameron need not necessarily look in order to visualize her woman model. On the contrary, she experiences this process of seeing by never participating in the act of looking. Perhaps this is why her photographs visualize the woman in unconventional ways. For instance in figure 3, the woman's head is cut off from the frame, which is unusual. Such cropping in a photographic portrait is awkward and defies the viewer's expectations. It could be assessed as carelessness or an error on the part of the photographer. Yet it also reflects an uncalculated process of seeing where some signs miss the eye of the beholder. If Cameron did look in the sense of analyzing the object, she would have incorporated such elements into her images. Yet seeing the woman implies an interest in certain elements and not in others. It also diverts power away from the one who looks to the one who is the object of that look. Whereas the gaze/glance suggests visual power embodied in the individual who directs his eye towards the object, seeing implies a shared sense of power. It is a shared activity where more power lies in the object, which permits the act of seeing. It is some element in the object itself that drags the eye and consents to the act of seeing.

This perhaps explains Cameron's fascination with the Sri Lankan woman's sense of motion. Cameron is not deliberately subjecting the woman to a debilitating gaze by fixing her body on to the plane of the photograph. The woman's body is not dissected on the photographic surface by a surgical eye, but instead granted motion indicating the proximity between the photographer and her subject. The body is unfixed, denying the spectator a stable vantage point, from which to control and savor the native woman's body and the motion allows the Sri Lankan woman to escape that debilitating gaze. Hence, Cameron acknowledges the native woman's subjectivity and the result is an unpossessive intimacy between the photographer and the Sri Lankan woman.

Cameron contests positions of mastery and domination when she defies the construction of Sri Lanka as a tropical and exotic site, embodied through the local woman. The intimacy and companionship between Cameron and her subject, however fraught, problematizes the acquiescence of the colonized subject, and frustrates orientalist fantasies of colonial difference. Therefore it is intriguing that, as a series of photographs which calls into question essentialist binaries, complicating singular notions of the colonial gaze, Cameron's Sri Lankan work has been disregarded. While such a move betrays an anxiety around the real or imagined role of the photographer in the colonies, it also signals an apprehension surrounding how the colonial photographer's gaze has largely been theorized, as masculine, homogeneous, and fixed, unhampered by shifting subjectivity. To acknowledge the opposing and conflicting identities in Cameron is to disrupt such hegemonic notions, opening up crevices that rewrite the relationship among the photographer, the colonial subject and the gaze.

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