The Heirloom as Evidence: Investigating the Colonial Trace
Preserved within my Family’s Sandalwood Box

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The Heirloom as Evidence
Investigating the Colonial Trace Preserved within my Family’s Sandalwood Box

Olivia Meehan

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis and Studio Art

May, 2022
Pitzer College
Claremont, California

Readers:
Susan Phillips
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Abstract

This paper accompanies my senior art exhibition *Picturing the Colonial Trace*. Pulling from a wide range of interdisciplinary scholars, I theorize the practice of critical white auto-ethnography through visual interrogations of family heirlooms. The heirloom as evidence holds within its form a colonial trace. I investigate this trace through my creative practice, revealing the environmental, economic, and interpersonal histories of the British colonization of the Indian subcontinent. My art disrupts my family’s narrative of a benevolent British Empire and redirects attention to the silences of my family archive. This thesis proposes a potential model for white scholars of Environmental Analysis to conjoin the study of the environment with the critical study of the self.
Acknowledgments

To my mother, Tara Meehan, thank you for your emotional vulnerability and for receiving the ideas of my project. You have always heard me, held me, and made space for me to grow.

To my maternal Grandfather, who wishes to remain anonymous in this project, but whom I know as Grumps, thank you for supporting me and nurturing the close-knit extended family whose love I feel lucky to have grown up within. I recognize the courage it took to engage in conversation with me about our history. I thank you for giving me your time and your trust.

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Introduction

*We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending, we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naiveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naiveté is always a mistake.*

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

This thesis arose out of a conversation with a friend regarding an intersection of our two histories: the British colonization of the Indian subcontinent. My friend, whose Indian Grandparents immigrated to Britain, challenged the way I spoke about my ancestors; high-ranking military officials occupying sections of India during the 19th and early 20th
centuries. This conversation revealed how little I had thought about the implications of my family history relating to wider historical processes. It also exposed how uncritically and blindly I absorbed and reproduced the historical narrative of a benevolent British Empire passed down to me by my relatives.

In my thesis, I undertake a critical white auto-ethnography grounded in the material and the visual realm. I focus on the material of *Santalum album* or Indian Sandalwood, arguably the most valuable wood in the world, and the source of my mother’s 19th-century sandalwood box.¹ (Figure 1) This box is a family heirloom passed down through generations, beginning when my ancestors were colonists in India.

As an Environmental Analysis major, I explore sandalwood as a material through its environmental history and ongoing environmental implications, understanding that an interrogation of the environment is an interrogation of colonialism.² Using a material lens, I conduct a single-commodity study of Indian sandalwood. I investigate Indian sandalwood’s history in conjunction with processes of dispossession and deforestation at the hands of the British Colonial Forest Administration’s legal system. Through unraveling these social and environmental histories, I lay bare how Interlocking Systems of Domination (ISOD); EuroWhiteSupremacy, Imperialist Corporate Capitalism, and HeteroPatriarchy, coalesce to create the myth of a benign British Empire, preserved in my family's sandalwood box.

As a double major in Environmental Analysis and Studio Art, I incorporate a visual lens into my analysis of the material. This paper accompanies my senior art exhibition, *Picturing the*

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Colonial Trace. (Figure 2 - 5) In my art, I use photography, video, performance art, and installation to explore the interpersonal, environmental, and economic histories contained within familial heirlooms. My art centers on a sandalwood box, its perfumed oil, and a photograph from my family album. I reframe these objects in order to physically unlearn familial narratives of a benevolent British Empire. Through this exhibition, I work within the tensions and contradictions of my own relationship to constructions of whiteness and British imperialism that haunt my maternal lineage.

Figure 2

3 Part of Pitzer College’s 2022 Senior Art Exhibition Shift + Ground. Picturing the Colonial Trace is displayed from 4/28-5/14/2022 and in Pitzer’s Lenzner Gallery.
Figure 5

4 Picturing the Colonial Trace includes 24”x32” and 16”x20” framed digital prints, video, projection, wood ash, late 19th-century carved sandalwood box from India.
Navigating the Terrain of Academic Discourse

I turn the lens of Environmental Studies in on itself, tracing the evolution of this field and highlighting the scholars who drive this evolution. I consolidate this transformation into three categories; Unearthing the White-Supremacist Underpinnings of Environmental Studies, The Ongoing Project of Environmental Decolonization, and Locating Whiteness Within Environmental Studies. Furthermore, I position the field of Environmental Studies in conversation with the work of scholars in other fields, most notably scholars of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory. By juxtaposing a variety of scholarship, I contextualize my Environmental Studies thesis, which suggests a template for other white scholars of Environmental Studies to incorporate critical white auto-ethnography into analyses of the Environment.

In the Environmental Analysis classes I have taken at Pitzer College, many of the professors critically examine the enmeshment between the environment and colonialism through centering texts by global and Indigenous voices of color that critique and broaden the field. The expansion of the ongoing decolonial project pushes against the confines of colonial epistemologies and language systems that form the substrate of the Eurocentric Academy. As a white, British-American scholar, colonial epistemologies also occupy my own mind. Primary among them is whiteness.

Recognizing the power of words to both perpetuate hegemonic systems and envision anew, I use the language invented in the tradition of Black radical thought throughout this thesis to interrogate whiteness in its systematic form. Cheryl I. Harris, a Critical Race theorist, and Law professor, aptly describes whiteness as a social construct in her seminal text for the Harvard Law Review “Whiteness as Property.”
[W]hiteness … is an ideological proposition imposed through subordination…. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.⁵

Harris exposes whiteness as a relationship protected by the law rather than a biological fact. The white race is as an invented race, created in Europe in the 17th century within the context of the Spanish and Atlantic slave trade. Who is considered white has evolved throughout history to match the description of the dominant class.⁶ Whiteness is an economic and interpersonal relationship systematically constructed through Eurowhitesupremacist scientific, religious, legal, academic and aesthetic systems. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a professor of Geography and American Studies, introduces the language of “Geographies of Racial Capitalism” into the discourse of whiteness. Whiteness arises out of the relationship of racial capitalism and geographically reproduces itself. Showing the chains binding slavery to race to unfreedom to labor, Gilmore underscores that capitalism is always already racial capitalism with its founding in colonization; an economic system that requires inequality to function.⁷ As featured in Sut Jhally's 1997 series bell hooks: Cultural Criticism & Transformation, bell hooks a renowned public intellectual, formulates the language of “Imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to embody the Interlocking Systems of Domination (ISOD) that govern world order; Imperialist Corporate Capitalism, Patriarchy, Heteronormativity, White nationalism, Christendom and EuroWhiteSupremacy.

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Unearthing the White-Supremacist Underpinnings of Environmental Studies

Systems of domination converge within the Academy in the early scholarship of the field. Foundational environmental literature imbues EuroWhiteSupremacist discourse on population control, emerging from the eugenics movement, into the bedrock of Environmental Studies.\(^8\) Notable among this literature is Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* written in 1969.\(^9\) Ehrlich’s book warned of the looming environmental risks of famine and other human disasters due to overpopulation, advocating for population control. Discourse on population growth props up systems of imperialist corporate racial capitalism as it focuses the blame on overpopulation, rather than the overconsumption of the elite. Other early environmental scholarship advocates for individuals to reduce their ecological footprint.\(^10\) Later scholars note that narrowing in on individual responsibility strategically takes the focus away from systematic structures: the ongoing Imperial corporate capitalist project of environmental abuse with its roots in colonial dispossession and racial capitalism.\(^11\)

**The Ongoing Project of Environmental Decolonization**

My thesis follows within the tradition of resistance exhibited by interdisciplinary scholars’ in their exposure of the field's imperialist underbelly.\(^12\) Octavia E. Butler's 1993


\(^12\) For more information, see W.A. Baldwin, “Decolonising Geographical Knowledges: the Incommensurable, the University, and Democracy,” *Area* 49, no. 3 (2017): 329-331; Tapji Garba and
post-apocalyptic novel *Parable of the Sower*, a Black environmental history set in California in 2024, crafts a narrative of natural disasters caused by ISOD. The narrative follows the Black female protagonist, surrounded by environmental and social collapse. The book’s narrative arc reimagines and prophesies a hopeful future of intersectional environmental justice and global food sovereignty. Robert Bullard’s 1990 book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, a catalyzing text of the Environmental Justice Movement, calls attention to how systems of domination systematically place the burden of Environmental pollution disproportionately on impoverished people of color. Contemporary scholars break out of inherited Euro-Western epistemological frameworks that constructed the field, creating and centering new language. Eurocentric frameworks include constructed binaries between human and nature, expanded upon in Argentine literary critic and semiotician, Walter D. Mignolo’s 2011 book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options.*

Furthermore, Charles C. Mann’s 2005 text *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* brings the Western binary of nature and wilderness into question through debunking the “Pristine Myth.” Another text driving this transformation is “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” published in 2012 by Eve Tuck, professor of Indigenous theory and decolonization.

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studies, and K. Wayne Yang, a scholar of Indigenous organizing and critical pedagogues. Tuck and Yang’s essay illustrates that decolonization involves financial and land based reparations as well as epistemological shifts. Furthermore, the text condemns the trend of predominantly white institutions decolonizing their pedagogy and subsequently proclaiming “white innocence,” a concept advanced by Afro-Surinamese Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker.


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21 Dina Gilio-Whitaker, As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020)
Kimmerer’s book practices reciprocal relationships between the human and the nonhuman, disrupting the western hierarchy of human over nature.22

My worldview is heavily influenced by A Growing Culture (AGC), a global organization working to unite the food sovereignty movement. Food sovereignty was first framed in 1996 by the international peasant movement La Via Campesina at the World Food Summit.23 Food sovereignty embodies the ongoing global struggles of peasants, farmers, fishers, Indigenous peoples and landless workers for control of their food, water, land, and livelihoods. A Growing Culture upholds the shared language of liberation theorized by peasant communities pertaining to our food system. La Via Campesina and other food sovereignty groups use the language of “peasant” rather than “farmer.” The etymology of the word farmer arises in the late 14th century defined as "one who collects taxes, etc.,” from Anglo-French *fermer*, Old French *fermier* "lease-holder," from Medieval Latin *firmarius*, from *firma* meaning "fixed payment."24 As raised by A Growing Culture, the origin of the word “farmer” is thus rooted in an unjust Eurocentric feudal land ownership system. While the term peasant was once a derogatory term used by elites to subjugate subsistence communities, it has since been reclaimed by grassroots groups around the world to describe peoples living in interdependent relationship to the land. AGC also uplifts the language of “Minority World” in place of “Developed World” and “Majority World” in place of “Developing World.” This language was first proposed in the early 1990’s by Bangladeshi activist, educator and photojournalist Shahidul Alam. Alam uses the term “Majority World” to highlight that the peoples from its countries “are indeed the majority of humankind.” In his article “Majority World: Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy" published in 2008, he

notes that language of “Minority World” highlights how a relatively small number of countries, whose history of colonization and neocolonial decisions affect the majority of the world's peoples, make up a small fraction of humankind. Alam underscores that the “term majority world… challenges the West's rhetoric of democracy. It also defines the community in terms of what it has, rather than what it lacks. In time, the [M]ajority [W]orld will reaffirm its place in a world where the earth will again belong to the people who walk on it.”

This ideological shift influences my analysis of rural Indians’ ongoing resistance to British Colonial Forest Management.

**Locating Whiteness Within Environmental Studies**

Interrogating whiteness, both systematically and personally, is an integral component of my Environmental Analysis thesis. Academics from a variety of fields have theorized the ways that whiteness operates environmentally. Harris analyzes environmental racism through the lens of “whiteness as property.” In the essay published in 2000, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” Laura Pulido analyzes Environmental Justice issues highlighting the spatial mobility afforded to whiteness. In the work “The Whiteness of Green: Racialization and Environmental Education” published in 2013, Sheelah McLean a Canadian scholar, similarly positions whiteness as a socio-spatial process.

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deconstructing the hegemonic coding of wilderness and the environment as a white space within
the Canadian educational and physical landscape.  

I enter into this thesis with a willingness to remain in the space of what the Black
American philosopher and scholar of Critical Whiteness Studies, George Yancy terms “white
self-criticality.” Yancy illustrates that such critique is a process of “self-interrogation” in the
form of “striving” and “quarreling” within oneself, termed “un-suturing.” In his 2015 book
White-Self Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism, Yancy writes

Being un-sutured… is a powerful process of being uncovered, open, and having
the capacity, even if it waxes and wanes, to avoid narrative closure, denial, and
evasion… Being un-sutured, however, is not just to remain open to being
wounded, but it is also to cultivate the practice of remaining with the opened
wound itself, of tarrying with the pain of the opening itself, the incision, as it
were.  

Yancy’s theorizing of “white self-criticality” emphasizes its ongoing and always already
contradictory nature. Thus Yancy calls for white people investigating whiteness to remain within
a state of “white crisis.” In his book The Image of Whiteness, white writer Daniel C. Blight terms
Yancy’s framework for white self-interrogation as requiring remaining within a Gordian knot, a
knot that is impossible to untie. Blight advocated for white people engaging in the work of
“white self-criticality” to refrain from cutting off the knot, and rather wrestle within it. Within
this work, there is no “arrival” or endpoint. In this spirit, my thesis attempts to explore my
imperial history vulnerably and continuously, while simultaneously exposing and remaining with
the contradictions that arise from my own interventions within it.

28 Sheelah McLean, “The Whiteness of Green: Racialization and Environmental Education,” The
29 George Yancy, White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?
(Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 11.
30 Yancy, White Self-Criticality, xvii.
31 Daniel C. Blight, The Image of Whiteness: Contemporary Photography and Racialization (self
32 Yancy, White Self-Criticality, xiii.
Katrina Browne, a white American educator, demonstrates Yancy’s framework of “white self-criticality” in her 2008 film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*. Self-directed and starring as herself, Browne follows her ancestors, the DeWolf’s, deep economic, political and psychological entrenchment within the slave trade globally and interpersonally.\(^{33}\) Thus, Browne looks within her autobiography cinematically, identifying how interlocking systems of domination coalesce within her history. Another scholar engaging in “white self-criticality” through an analysis of autobiography is Emily Lind, a white Canadian writer. In her 2021 article “Materialising the Decolonising Autobiography,”\(^{34}\) Lind argues that focusing on material culture within an autobiography reveals nuances of social class and gives voice to narrative silences contained within critically un-interrogated objects, thus interrupting the process of whiteness manifesting itself in material culture. Furthermore, Lind notes how an analysis grounded in the material can reveal the blind spots of purely theoretical analyses. In my thesis, I build on Browne, Lind, and Yancy’s frameworks. In my project, I engage in “white self-criticality” by visually exploring my autobiography, while grounding this exploration within the realm of the material of a significant family heirloom; the sandalwood of my mother’s sandalwood box.

Located autobiographically, my thesis builds on the work of other environmental educators highlighting the need to examine their own whiteness to give context to their pedagogical practice. Scholars highlight these intersections between environmental studies and the construction of whiteness by addressing positionality. White American scholars, Teresa Lloro-Bidart and Michael Finewood embrace the Black Feminist notion of intersectionality to interrogate white positionality within the field of Environmental Studies in their 2018 article


“Intersectional Feminism for the Environmental Studies and Sciences: Looking Inward and Outward.”\textsuperscript{35} White American scholar Eve Bratman and Haitian-American scholar William DeLince incorporate Lloro-Bidart and Finewood’s approach of "looking inward" as a means for researchers and academics to situate themselves in relation to structures of domination and engage in anti-colonial, anti-racist pedagogy as exhibited in their 2022 text “Dismantling white supremacy in environmental studies and sciences: an argument for anti-racist and decolonizing pedagogies.”\textsuperscript{36} Within this text, the authors address the intersectional influence of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation on their educational approach. Thus, the writers approach “autoethnographic reflections,” or “looking inward,” as an important disclaimer, providing context for dismantling white supremacy in environmental studies. These scholars frame the work of what I will herein refer to as “critical white auto-ethnography” as occurring inwardly, largely independent from academic work, all the while influencing it.

Building on my many frameworks gathered in this section, my thesis proposes white auto-ethnography as a key lens for critical investigations towards dismantling white supremacy in Environmental Studies. I theorize critical white auto-ethnography, grounded in the material and visual realms, as a vehicle through which to explore whiteness as a simultaneously imperial, economic and environmental project. Thus, my thesis offers an interdisciplinary model for white environmental scholars to critically study how environmental histories of whiteness operate within the autobiography, preserved within material heirlooms.


Demythologizing Family Scholarship

Indeed, the best form of atonement by the British might be... to start teaching unromanticized colonial history in British schools. The British public is woefully ignorant of the realities of the British Empire and what it meant to its subject peoples.

- Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*

The British education system systematically propagates historical amnesia regarding its colonial past. A 2020 global survey conducted by YouGov reveals in one of its questions that a third of British people believe that “countries that were colonized by Britain are better off overall
Another survey question reveals that 32 percent of British people are “proud of the British Empire,” and a further 37 percent view the British Empire as “neither something to be proud nor ashamed of.” The responses to this survey shed light on the strategic education of the British population at the hands of the British government surrounding the British Empire's economic, social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual looting of India and other colonized countries for its own profit. Grumps, my maternal grandfather, has embraced this institutional propaganda and perpetuates it through his positioning of our family history.

When I was 17 years old, Grumps organized, on the suggestion of my mother, a book titled *Our Family: A 100 Year Story.* (Figure 6) In the consultation of McKay Williamson, a creative agency, Grumps professionally published a hardback album laying out the story of his father, Grandi, and his mother, Granji. He gifted a copy of the album to me and all of my relatives in 2016. The book contains carefully preserved photographs of my maternal ancestors, my great grandfather Grandi’s military records, and diary pages from his outpost stationed in India, strung together by my grandfather's authoritative narrative voice. Through his curation of our long, meticulously documented history within the covers of this family album, my grandfather ingrained this narrative into the minds of every one of his descendants. Within the book, Grumps portrays my great grandfather as an adventurer, an explorer, a symbol of goodness, bravely fighting evil. Today, these narratives of my great grandfather, a white high-ranking British Military Official occupying India, conjure up different connotations. I continue to discover that these stories are about so much more than my personal family heritage.

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38 Booth, “UK More Nostalgic.”
I am entangled in the history of my family's military involvement in maintaining and expanding British colonial rule over different geographic locations, including India and Cyprus. I explore this legacy, implicating myself within the larger history of colonization and its neocolonial repercussions. Patriotism and a belief in the greatness of Empire are tangible in Grumps’ words, words which were, in turn, absorbed and perpetuated by me prior to undertaking this project.

In making this family album, Grumps clearly specified his goal to reproduce the spoken word into immortal text. He notes in an interview recording with a member of staff from McKay Williamson, "we are trying to achieve something that talks about our family heritage, really for the benefit of our children and grandchildren.” My grandfather created *Our Family: A 100 Year Story* to pass his understanding of our history to successive generations. In my art exhibition and this text, I intervene within and challenge my family's narrative, which represents the British Empire as benevolent. Moreover, I disrupt the patriarchal authoring of history and begin the ongoing process of intergenerational unlearning.

While my project is met with varying responses from different family members, it is undertaken in the spirit of knitting together rather than fracturing and has been received as such. Thus far I have shared my project with only my immediate family and my maternal grandparents. However, these conversations are continuous and I hope to weave my (un)learning into the fabric of my extended family's identity as well. How this will take shape and what actions can manifest from a project like this I have yet to find out. However, the interpersonal dialogues I have had so far have remodeled the notion of what family means to me. My love and respect for my family continues to deepen in ways I had not previously thought possible. The ongoing process of self-critiquing of whiteness and its imperial underpinnings has been
incredibly healing for me, in regards to interpersonal and familial relationships, as well as within my own relationship to myself. The construct of whiteness, with all of its systematic advantages, is psychologically parasitic to both People of Color, as well as to the white individual that benefits from it.

My Family’s Colonial Military History

The first line of Grandi’s [1906-1991] obituary describes him as "born and bred to serve the Raj." His father [1867-1954] was a colonist in India during the early 20th century. As a Lieutenant Colonel in the 97th Deccan infantry and British colonial administrator, my great great grandfather and his family occupied sections of the Hyderabad State, maintaining British rule over India. His father before him was a Surgeon General of the British Indian Army. This colonial lineage, overflowing with the doctrine of service to Crown and Country, persisted within the military occupation of my great grandfather, Grandi.

Grandi rose up the ranks of the military. Throughout his career, he occupied many positions of power, including, but not limited to; Second Lieutenant on the North-West Frontier (now a region of Pakistan), Independent Charge of the VIII Corps Troops of Royal Engineers building bridges across the Rhine during WWII, Chief of Staff of the Middle East Land Forces, Director of Military Intelligence in the War Office in 1959, and a Commandant of the Intelligence Corps.

Grump’s representation of our family history, documented in the album Our Family: A 100 Year Story, presents a narrative of a benign British Empire which my thesis works against.

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40 Grumps, Our Family: A 100 Year Story. (London: McKay Williamson, 2016). The “British Raj” refers to the period of direct british rule over the Indian subcontinent from 1858-1947. Also referred to as the “Raj” from Hindi rāj meaning “rule, dominion, kingdom.” Other common terms for British rule of India are “crown rule in India” or “direct rule in India.”
The military history of my maternal lineage gives context to my artwork, texturizing the artistic interventions I make within my family archive.
Developing a Critical Visual Lens: White Auto-Ethnography in the Creative Realm

[...] the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object.

- Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument*

I draw from a variety of fields – Cultural Studies, Curatorial Studies, Philosophy, Literary Criticism, Documentary Film, Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, and Archival Studies – weaving together the work of interdisciplinary scholars to develop a critical visual lens through which to make and view my art. I center the role of creative practice in auto-ethnography, visually intervening within this, my family archive. Through these artistic interrogations, I investigate the environmental, interpersonal and economic histories held within familial heirlooms.
In preparation for this thesis, I reopened the family album that I had not glanced at for several years. I structure *Picturing the Colonial Trace* around a photograph held in the first page of my album; a sepia photograph, circa 1907. (Figure 7) The photograph from my album is one that haunts me throughout this project. It is a picture of an Indian woman. She is standing behind a white woman in a long white colonial dress, holding a baby, who is wrapped in white linen. It is my ancestors that haunt me. The baby is Grandi, my great grandfather, and the woman is his mother, who was a colonist, occupying sections of central India during the early 20th century.

It was not until recently that the Indian woman became, to my eyes, the subject of this photograph. At 17, when I leafed through this book, I did not see her. Or I saw her, but she was lost among the shadows made by my white ancestors. In my exhibition, I recenter this woman in conversation with its digitally edited duplicate, in which I replace my white ancestors with a ghost like colonial trace. (Figure 8) I project both the original image and my digitally manipulated version onto opposing walls of the gallery space, bookending the rest of my photographs.

Throughout the work in my exhibition, and particularly in the context of these two images, I work from what Stuart Hall offers as a new view of representation: the theoretical assertion that “representation is constitutive.”  

This theory of representation empowers and places the focus on both the creator and the viewer in the act of making meaning. The new view resists Eurocentric notions of objectivity. Hall’s theory allows me to work with the colonial images in my family’s album, rather than keep them hidden away out of sight.

I position the family album and my mother’s sandalwood box, which I will introduce in the next section of my essay, as an archive, building off the celebrated art historian and curator,

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Enwezor writes;

… We have witnessed a collapse of the wall between amateur and professional, private and public, as everyday users become distributors of archival content across an unregulated field of image sharing. In this prosaic form, the photograph becomes the sovereign analogue of identity, memory, and history, joining past and present, virtual and real, thus giving the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artifact and the authority of a social instrument. 42

Enwezor’s theorizing of the archive broadens its traditional definition to include the family archive, the iphone photograph, and any other digital or physical photographic record. Thus, I categorize both the original family photographs and their scanned and digitized documentation in the pages of *Our Family: A 100 Year Story* as an archive. Michel Foucault’s 1969 book *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, works in the same vein as Hall’s notion of constitutive representation. Traditional historians present the historical archive as objective and indisputable fact. Contrastingly, Foucault asserts that “the archive cannot be described in its totality… It emerges in fragments, regions, levels.”43 Those working with the hegemonic archive use the medium to claim objectivity. Yet the files and images preserved within its ordered drawers and alphabetized systems communicate only the archiver, researcher, and historian’s subjective complications and recordings of history.

Given the predominance of whiteness in controlling the archive and thus constructing hegemonic history, these spaces represent most significantly a reflection of whiteness. In Toni Morrison’s 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison theorizes white literary representations of Blackness or Africanness as a fabricated Africanist

presence within the American literary landscape. She writes of the authors of this literary portrayal:

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the dears and desires that reside in writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of linging, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this.44

I apply Morrison’s literary theory to the visual landscape, specifically on to the photographic representation of the Indian woman standing behind my white ancestors found in my family album. What does this visual construction reveal about whiteness?

In my artwork, I question the strategic composition of the image in my family album. In his seminal documentary series, Exterminate All the Brutes, Haitian filmmaker, Raoul Peck states, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences. It is an exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others. In this fabricated narrative, not all silences are equal. Our job as filmmakers, writers, historians, image makers, is to deconstruct these silences.”45 Incorporating close narration into my analysis of the image, I deconstruct the power dynamics between the images’ inhabitants, giving voice to the silent relationships that construct whiteness in the photograph.46 Within this method, I critically imagine the colonial power dynamic of whiteness wielded within the construction of this image. I work from Foucault’s

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45 Exterminate All the Brutes, Episode 2, directed by Raoul Peck, HBO Max, 0:33.
assertion of “the indignity of speaking for others” imagining only the narratives and actions of my ancestors.  

In the family photo, the body of the photographer is left out of the frame, allowing for the image to present as unconstructed. (Figure 7) However, the photographer’s trace is evident throughout. The hat that my great grandfather wears as an infant is too large for his small head. It is not a child’s hat. Who does it belong to? It is a pith helmet, the British Colonial uniform of the child’s father, my great-great-grandfather. Perhaps he took it off his head, and plopped it on the baby’s head, calling him, “a little British soldier.” Perhaps, he is standing just outside of the frame. Perhaps he took the photograph.

Within the picture of my ancestors, whiteness constructs itself through the white bodies’ relationship to the body of the Indian woman. This photograph is a relationship between people. Discussing Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s photograph Mirror Study, George Yancy expands the self-fashioning of whiteness in Daniel C Blight’s 2019 book The Image of Whiteness

[The] white gaze feeds off Black bodies and bodies of color to survive… [A]n anti-Black white racist world produces forms of contiguity that presuppose an ontology of no edges, where white bodies are always already touching Black bodies… white seeing is actually a sight of white unseeing, where the Black body is already unseen from the beginning, which means that whiteness also functions as a site of the unreflected, the unconcealed to itself.  

Blight expands on Yancy’s point, noting that “Black bodies ‘support’ white bodies; that whiteness requires Blackness to survive.” Within the context of my own colonial family photograph, Yancy’s and Blight’s discourse underscores the ways in which the colonial

48 For further visual representations of children’s assimilation into colonial military spaces, see Shirley Temple’s Wee Willie Winkie, directed by John Ford (1937, 20th Century Fox).
50 Ibid., 192.
photographer positions the Indian woman in relation to my white ancestors to strategically give meaning to their whiteness.

This colonial photograph embodies the meaning of whiteness as a relationship. The Indian woman stands behind my white ancestors, shedding light on the power dynamics of race and class saturated within the photograph. The height of the camera and its downward angle, paired with the Indian woman’s position further back in space, renders her body smaller than that of the white woman, giving the white woman more property space within the frame. Furthermore, the ayah holds an umbrella above the heads of my ancestors for purely symbolic reasons. The shade of the umbrella does not fall on the white woman’s face, nor on that of the baby. This prop therefore acts as an signifier of service, further allowing whiteness to claim the dominant position within the space of the frame. The colonial photograph thus visually affirms whiteness as property through its strategic construction. From a visual standpoint, these spatial, interpersonal, and symbolic components of this image’s composition coalesce to construct whiteness. From this reading, the camera emerges as a colonial technology in the hands of the white photographer.

My ancestors’ names, dates of birth, and life stories are methodically documented in the album’s pages. Photographs of Grandi with politicians and British military officials are carefully annotated, naming each figure in the photograph. However, my ancestors left the name and story of the Indian woman out of any familial record, thus rendering this woman invisible in our historical narration. Instead, my family references her as the ayah, or nursemaid.

The word ayah stems from the Portuguese aia, cognate with Spanish aya and Italianaja, “nurse,” initially from the Latinavia meaning “grandmother.”51 European colonizers imported the word to India, popularized by the British Officials who settled in India and employed Indian

women as child caretakers, and in the instance of a childless family, as personal ladies’ maids to
the wives of colonial British administrators.\textsuperscript{52} The position is typically contracted by a low wage.
Colonial employers paid ayahs less (6-12 Rupees per month) than higher-ranking male Indian
servants such as butlers and accountants (10-12 Rupees per month) embedding a gendered
inequality on top of the already inherently unequal financial and interpersonal dynamics between
the British and their Indian employees.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, there are many instances of employers
withholding wages from ayahas, particularly when the ayahas traveled abroad with their colonial
employers. These women exhibit their agency, contesting this abuse: an example of this
exhibited in 1831 when “Jaunee Beebee filed a petition…against her British employers for
detention, mistreatment, and refusal to pay her passage back to India.”\textsuperscript{54} As there is no
documentation surrounding the employment contracts between the Indian women in my family
photograph, I am unable to confirm the nature of their financial relationship. However, the visual
positioning of this woman in the photograph as well as her role within the domestic space of the
British colonial household is deeply rooted in unequal power structures of race, class and
gender.\textsuperscript{55}

In my art, I build on Hall, Foucault, and Enwezor’s theories of constitutive
representation, and subjective readings of archival images, centralizing my own interpretation of
the contents of the photo by repositioning this image within the context of my show. This spacial
intervention leans into the multiple meanings that images might have both to me and to viewers
of my exhibition. I am inspired by the many artists featured in the 2008 exhibition \textit{Archive

\textsuperscript{52} Indrani Sen, “Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in
Colonial India,” \textit{Indian Journal of Gender Studies} (November 2009): 305,
https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150901600301.
\textsuperscript{53} Swapna Banerjee, “Ayahs in British India,” \textit{EHNE (Encyclopédie d’histoire numérique de l’Europe)}
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Sen, “Colonial Domesticities,” 305.
*Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument,* curated by Enwezor, who visually intervene in the hegemonic archive “inventing “counter-archives and thus counter-narrative(s).”

In the exhibition’s accompanying text, Enwezor theorizes how the show pushes against the traditional notion of the archive as stagnant and fixed documentation of the past, re-envisioning it as “an active, regulatory discursive system,” ripe for being utilized in artistic inquiry.

Enwezor’s positioning of the archive as an active system holding within itself the potential for intervenors to utilize it disruptive ways builds from Jacques Derrida in his seminal book on the archive; *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* written in 1995. Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong further expand Derrida’s text in their 2016 essay ‘Utopian archives, decolonial affordances Introduction to special issue,’ introducing the concept of the “utopian archive;” an archive that holds within it latent hopeful action. Basu and Jong speak to transforming the colonial archive neglected by post-colonial society into a living, “utopian archive.” The “utopian archive” lends itself to “the recognition of past suffering and the creation of futures of hope” by imagining the “affordance of an object” and the “repertoires of action” that the archive holds within itself, a similar undertaking to the artists in Enwezor’s *Archive Fever.*

My exhibition confronts my family album with a “counter-archive,” formulating a “counter-narrative” to the myth of a Benevolent British Empire. I binarily oppose the image from my family album with a digitally manipulated version. In this new image, I replace my ancestors with an ominous colonial trace. (Figure 8) There is not enough digital information in the photograph to erase my ancestors. Complete erasure of their presence in India will never be

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60 Ibid., 11 and 16.
possible. The colonial trace embodies the ongoing ripple effects of British Imperial conquest and its looting of India which are very much still felt today by Indians. Britain as a country, and its white inhabitants immensely benefit both structurally and individually from the wealth extracted from India under colonial rule. Furthermore, the psychological profits pillaged from the country and its people to construct whiteness continue to benefit me and my family, and the white race as a whole. In repositioning the Indian woman as the subject of this image, the photograph reads differently. The expression on the woman’s face, which was once fixed on the baby’s face, shifts as she looks towards this colonial trace. In presenting these two images in conversation, I expose whiteness’s use of bodies of color to construct itself in my family photo. Simultaneously, read within the pixels of this haunting presence is the lingering ramifications of British Colonization of India, infused into the land, economies and psychologies of both British and Indian people.

The archive traditionally serves as an information file. The outside structure of an archive, such as a family album, allows for those extracting data from their mind to preserve it. Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong’s work examines the implications of this outer structure on the archival material itself. They note, pulling from Derrida’s notion of the archival structure, “there is, in fact, no separation between the archival substrate and the ‘content’ that it bears: the archived past is knowable only through its material, visual, sonic or performative trace.” Basu and Jong expound on this theory of enmeshment between the archival content and the place of dwelling, noting the common design of such spaces as “impressive buildings of Neoclassical design that assume authority by indexing the Ancient Greek Polis,” exposing how “the archive
itself is not a piece of data, but a status.”
 Thus, Basu and Jong call for breaking out of the
traditional archival structure; to appropriate the archive and embody what Walter Mignolo terms
“epistemic disobedience” to resurrect living utopian archives and decolonize epistemologies. In
my art, I break away from the confining archival substrate of the family album. I take the
photograph out of the album and project it on the gallery wall. Through repositioning these
objects in new locational and discursive spheres, I call into question the status of the family
archive itself, allowing for new articulations from the objects previously captured within it. In
projecting these images, I lean into the intangibility of its digital manifestation, emulating a
memory-like quality that I cannot capture, store or archive. My family presented my history to
me as fact, a positioning cemented within the permanent structure of the family album. However,
it is really just a hoarding of stories, told over and over again, constantly evolving and slipping to
reveal desires and anxieties of whiteness. These stories are also attached to my mother’s
sandalwood box.

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 16.
Deconstructing the Sandalwood Box

My mother’s box is carved from the fragrant heartwood of the sandalwood species *Santalum album*, also called Indian sandalwood. The surface of the box is delicately carved into with repeating floral motifs. On the top of the box, the figure of Ganesha, a Hindu deity, sits in the center, surrounded by attendants. (Figure 9) The box, once in the possession of my great-great grandfather who was a colonist in India, now belongs to my mother. It originally contained glass bottles of sandalwood perfume, a fragrant oil extracted from the sandalwood tree. As Indian sandalwood is a naturally aromatic wood, when you open the box, a strong fragrance of sandalwood arises from it. Many of my relatives grew up interacting with this box before it came into the possession of my mother. Although they have not seen the box in many years, an image of the box triggers sensory recollection. I focus on this box as it holds emotional weight in the imaginations of much of my family.

Another common name for this wood is white sandalwood, after the sapwood’s pale color. This nomenclature is fitting, given the popularity of the scent of sandalwood in the white imagination, both within my family, as well as on a broader scale. Sandalwood is a common
scent in much of the white world due to its global propagation through British colonial trade and later widespread appropriation by white practitioners in massage rooms and yoga studios. However, the wood’s rich history and ongoing religious, spiritual and medical uses span back through time, as cited in the world's earliest medical texts.

These texts cite how the fragrant sandalwood, used in local medical traditions, cures a plethora of diseases from warding off malaria with the heartwood’s smoke to treating fevers and scabies. While Indian sandalwood’s indigenous ecological range falls within Lesser Sundas and southern India, the wood and its scent was widely used. During the end of the Vedic Period, c. 1500 - c. 800 BCE, doctors known as Vedic Priests or Vaidyas propagated India’s medical traditions, of which sandalwood was a core component, incorporating spiritual therapy into their practice. As Indian sandalwood’s popularity grew, it became more closely associated with elite life, evolving into an object of luxury in trade. Royals across the subcontinent smeared their bodies with sandalwood paste, and adorned their bodies with sandalwood oil for its healing properties. Furthermore, elites constructed their funeral pyres with the fragrant wood, a sacred ritual that has been widely popularized for millennia in India. This tradition was notably used in the case of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who was cremated on a sandalwood pyre. Indian wood carvers

67 Ibid., 3. For further reading, see Krishnaraj Iyengar, “Sandalwood in Indian Culture” in Indian Sandalwood: A Compendium, eds., A.N. Arunkumar, et al. (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 45, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6565-3. In referring to India prior to British colonization of the subcontinent, it is important to acknowledge that the fixed political boundaries of India today are historically recent. Prior to the British invasion, many dynasties ruled ancient India. The many Empires comprising its land morphed and evolved as a result of local wars between rulers. The history of this part of South Asia dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, lasting from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE, that spanned from today's northeast Afghanistan, through much of Pakistan, into western and northwestern India. The Indus Valley Civilization is considered the one of the world’s oldest cradles of innovation and creativity. It is from within this civilization that the art of perfumery was first invented.
have long worked with this soft wood, incorporating the wood into temple doors, and crafting Hindu deities.  

The pungent fragrance of sandalwood positions the wood’s oil as one of the oldest known perfumery materials, and also contributes to its high demand across continents for a variety of purposes. However this growing desire for its unique and long-lasting fragrance also resulted in its high price. Thus, as a resource, Indian sandalwood lies at the heart of numerous political and military struggles for power and wealth. My mother’s 19th-century carved sandalwood box sits within the context of sandalwood’s spiritual, religious and political uses, and its positioning as a luxury for the elite.

I focus in on this object from my family archive as a window into a colonial past—and perhaps more importantly, my present as prescribed by this past. The sandalwood box sat proudly on a shelf in my living room, presented alongside ornately framed photographs of my maternal ancestors. The living room shelf, located in a room in which my parents often entertain friends and family, is a space of public display. The shelf, as a structure, acts as an archiving site for my mother’s familial possessions, images, and heirlooms. For my mother, it is both a form of self-presentation and historical self-positioning. I approach my family archive, unlearning my grandfather’s narrative and the many ways it reproduces itself in the spaces of our house. As I open the box and bow my head to smell its insides, its fragrance rises up, overwhelming my senses. Closing the box, I examine the intricately carved elephant head of Ganesha. The eyes of my ancestors, who were allowed to look straight into the camera, now look back at me.

In my exhibition, Picturing the Colonial Trace, I (re)present the box in the gallery space. (Figure 11) As a historical object, when I place this 19th-century box within the context of the

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69 Ibid., 8.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 20.
gallery, it takes on a museum-like quality. The museum, like the family album, is an archiving technique. Mainstream museums regularly present historical artifacts devoid of context, systematically invisibilizing the power dynamics regarding how the object arrived in the museum in the first place. My mother’s sandalwood box presents the same questions. Absent within my family archive are specifics regarding how this box came into my ancestors’ possession. While power dynamics certainly played a part in the box’s acquisition, I can only guess if my ancestors received the box as a gift, purchased it, traded it, or looted it.

In my art, I visually reference the hegemonic museum as a system of erasure through placing my mother’s sandalwood box on a pedestal, and, in my photographs, positioning the box floating within a monochrome yellow; a pale yet muddy color that evokes the stale, aged quality of air trapped too long within the unopened confines of an archive storage box. (Figure 10) However, my intervention within my family’s archive begins to visualize the systematically concealed context that this object lives within; Indian sandalwood’s environmental, interpersonal and economic histories.

I cover the pedestal with white cloth, emulating the white fabric worn by the three figures in my family photograph. Within this context, the covered pedestal takes on a corporeal quality. As an extension of both the white dresses of my ancestors and the white dress of the Indian woman, the box exists as an limb of my ancestors colonial position in India, and the many power dynamics this position involved.

The box’s position sitting on the pedestal positions it as a valuable, inaccessible object. When presented in a museum, objects such as this are often accompanied by a “DO NOT TOUCH” sign, bridging the divide between the object and the individual surveying it. My mother’s sandalwood box was presented in a similar manner in our house. Placed on a shelf
among other decorative objects, the box was seldom opened. When I took the box from the house in preparation for this project, my mother asked me to “please be careful with it.” While she was happy to support the use of her box in my art practice, she still values the box as a precious item imbued with emotional significance. In my exhibition, I instruct the viewer interacting with the sandalwood box to “PLEASE OPEN AND SMELL.” In doing so, I dethrone the box as an object out of reach, offering it up for public scrutiny and interaction. Furthermore, I shatter the fourth wall typically constructed between historical objects and their audience. The scent of sandalwood that has, for so long, captured the attention of only my family, now exists within a larger community discourse.

I mirror the opening up of this family heirloom for public scrutiny in my own presentation of my family history. This art exhibition embodies an ongoing dialogue — one with no endpoint. The self-critique of whiteness and its imperial underpinnings is always already contradictory in nature. I plan to fold the reactions, critiques, and feedback to my work into potential future iterations of this project as I continue to evolve what it means to publicly engage with this heavy history and its current implications.

Figure 10
Figure 11
Follow the Scent: The History of Sandalwood in the Hands of the British

[T]here are some lessons that material objects can teach us that we struggle to learn otherwise.

- Emily R.M. Lind, “Materialising the Decolonising Autobiography”

The myth of a benevolent British Empire feeds parasitically on family heirlooms and albums sitting proudly in my house, critically un-interrogated. In my exhibition, Picturing the Colonial Trace, I take the box off the shelf and the photo out of the family album, constitutively representing the family history in conversations with the silences it contains. Pronounced among these silences is the environmental history of Indian sandalwood, and its intersection with rural Indian forest dwellers under the British Colonial Forest Administration. The demand for Indian sandalwood, and its subsequent high value, played a role in Britain's colonization of the Indian subcontinent, their monopoly over forests, and their implementation of sandalwood oil factories, leading to the eventual endangerment of the fragrant wood. In my exhibition, the viewer sees both the framed photographs of my mother’s box, and on the opposite wall, framed images of tree stumps. (Figure 12) In binarily opposing the box with the material of wood, I ground my family’s heirloom in the exploitative environmental histories entangled within it.72

Unraveling this box’s innocent positioning within my family’s imagination reveals sandalwood’s colonial environmental history; one of land-grabbing, deforestation and overexploitation at the hands of the British colonial government. Building off the research of two scholars; Ezra D Rashkow and Ramachandra Guha, I present a critical material history of the

72 My photographs of tree stumps document the Claremont trees that fell in the 2022 wind storm. Although these trees act as a symbolic stand in for sandalwood trees, the presence of these native oak trees and non-native eucalyptus trees within my exhibition underscore my position as a settler on Tongva Land.
British Empire, structured around one of its most valuable commodities: *Santalum album* (*S. album*) or Indian sandalwood, the wood of my family’s fragrant sandalwood box. My historical analysis centers on *S. album* grown in the Kingdom of Mysore, modern-day Karnataka. As 70 percent of Indian *S. album* comes from the state of Karnataka, my family’s sandalwood box was likely carved from trees in this region.⁷³

Figure 12

I ground this Environmental Analysis thesis, as a critical white auto-ethnography, in the realm of the material. I use a material lens in my exhibition; I work with the material physically and analyze my art's material properties and associations. However, I also work through a material lens to historically analyze my mother’s box, on which my artistic practice centers. Colonial heirlooms hold colonial histories. By conducting a single-commodity study of Indian

sandalwood, I connect my family's history to the cultural, legal, epistemological, and economic institutions inextricably intertwined within colonial heirlooms from my archive.

Most pronounced among these institutions is the Indian Forest Department and its practice of colonial forest management. Pulling threads of the arguments of Rashkow and Guha, I weave together a colonial history of my mother’s sandalwood box to provide a critical platform for an analysis of my art. Paying attention to the language of the legal arguments Colonial Forest Administrators used to gain authority over the bulk of India's forests, I compile Rashkow and Guha's analysis to outline how the British positioned constructed EuroWhiteSupremacist orientalist narratives pertaining to Indian sandalwood’s designation as a ‘royal tree’ as legal Truth to push forward imperial financial interest at the expense of land and food sovereignty for rural Indians, resulting in the eventual endangerment of Indian sandalwood. Furthermore, I argue that the legacy of the colonial Forest Department is one that Indian farmers and landless workers are still actively struggling against today in contemporary grassroots food sovereignty movements.

Rashkow and Guha outline how prior to the British presence in India, forests were commonly used and autonomously managed. A complex web of customary relations within and among villages provided access to resources within these forests while ensuring an ecological equilibrium. Forests and Indian sandalwood trees, which grew plentifully in the Kingdom of Mysore, were a precious resource. Monarchs had long traded the fragrant wood to amass wealth. However, neither the tree nor the forests in totality ever came under the ownership of Indian rulers prior to the British East India Company’s involvement in the area. In 1792, The British used military pressure to push Tipu Sultan, ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore in South

India, to declare the sandal tree a ‘royal tree,’ thus establishing a monopoly on its wood within his territory. Apart from banning the cutting of *S. album*, this decree did not disrupt or infringe on traditional village management systems, and the forests were still commonly used.

The history of Indian sandalwood is a history of colonization. Rashkow notes that Tipu Sultan’s impelled decree of the sandal as a ‘royal tree’ came towards the end of the four Anglo-Mysore Wars, fought between 1766 and 1799. He outlines how these wars, fought for economic gain, can be understood as primarily trade wars between the British and the French, in which Mysore was a French ally. Within the balance sheet, *S. album* was a key player. Britain's triumph over the state of Mysore positioned the country to colonize larger sections of the south of India, ultimately leading to their rule over the whole of the country. Rashkow, a leading scholar in the history of *S. album*, asserts in his paper “Perfumed the Axe That Laid It Low: The Endangerment of Sandalwood in Southern India” that “(a)lthough one cannot argue that it was sandalwood alone that led the British to battle local rulers in southern India, … establish a puppet monarchy when Sultan was defeated (the Wodeyar Dynasty), and thereby dominate Mysore for some 150 years, sandalwood certainly spurred colonial intervention.” The powerful fragrance of *S. album* latched itself within global imagination compelling the British to capture and conquer the ground it grew on. Within this colonial context, the scent arising from my mother’s box develops a sinister undertone.

I read in between the woodgrain of my mother’s sandalwood box, revealing a complex and exploitative colonial history pertaining to British Colonial Forest Management. Guha

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78 Rashkow, “Perfumed the Axe,” 48.
exposes how the establishment of the sandalwood tree as a Royal Monopoly was a strategic move made by the British that set the stage for a British monopoly over the forests of India. With the solidification of British rule over India, establishing the British Raj in 1858, the Crown's economic gains rested on the ability to expand the railway network. This development was essential as it enabled commodity transportation, thus increasing the market. Control over forests was integral to this project. The colonial government needed large quantities of fuelwood and construction timber to build the railways. Thus in 1864, the British established the Indian Forest Department. As Guha outlines, with legislative backing, the Forest Department quickly passed several Acts to increase its control over forest resources. Most notable among these was the 1878 Forest Act, which granted the British total control over vast swaths of forest land at the expense of rural populations who had previously coexisted with this land. As the 1878 Forest Act gave forest administrators authority to police transgressions of the act, Indians now faced the punitive measures of the British, criminalized for practicing their traditional way of life.79 One of the core advocates for the 1878 Forest Act was senior civil servant and conservator of forests, B.H. Baden-Powell.80 As outlined by Ramachandra Guha in his 1990 text "An Early Environmental Debate: The Making of the 1878 Forest Act," Baden-Powell and other Forest Department Officials used the precedent set by Tipu Sultan's decree banning the cutting of S. album to argue that former rulers of India had reserved the right to complete control over forests and the

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80 Guha, “An Early Environmental Debate,” 68. Baden-Powell’s advocacy for the State’s complete control over forest areas was called the annexation position. As Guha outlines, the heated debate surrounding the 1878 Forest Act split into three positions: annexation, pragmatic, and populist. The pragmatic position argued for state control of certain precious sections of the forest, with other areas remaining under the management of villagers. The populist position argued for continuing traditional management networks and continued that villagers should maintain complete sovereignty over the forest. I highlight these three positions and the impassioned debate among them to illustrate that many vocal critics of the annexation position advocated for the sovereign rights of rural populations.
resources within them.\textsuperscript{81} Guha quotes Baden-Powell's argument from the "Defects of the Existing Forest Law;" "the state had not, it is true, exercised that full right: the forests were left open to anyone who chose to use it: \textit{but the right was there}."\textsuperscript{82} Thus, the British used a law passed by Tipu Sultan only through their own military and economic pressure to justify their further consolidation of economic resources, highlighting the manipulation and legislative gymnastics exercised by the Forest Department to expand its power.

Integral in the success of the legal argument put forth by Baden-Powell and other Forest Department Officials was the EuroWestern construction of ‘Oriental Despotism.’ ‘Oriental Despotism,’ positioned by European thinkers as a fundamental theory, asserted that rulers in the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa were consistently despotic, governing through total power and monopolizing all resources for their benefit.\textsuperscript{83}

The constructed idea of ‘Oriental Despotism originates in the work of Plato and Aristotle. Early proponents of this idea founded the myth of ‘Oriental Despotism’ on the belief that the Greeks were ethnically superior and predisposed to be free, unable to be sustainably ruled by a tyrant. In binary opposition, the Greeks represented the Persian enemy as a ‘barbarous’ people, destined for enslavement at the hands of their despotic Persian ruler. This notion was picked up by Italian cosmographer Giovanni Botero (1540–1617) who, with the aid of European travel writers, later expanded this Eurocentric theory to other Asiatic governments, including the Mogul Empire in India.\textsuperscript{84} The notion was further popularized on the ground in European

\textsuperscript{81} Guha, “An Early Environmental Debate,” 68.
colonies, as it became a vital conceptual and legal tool for Britain to justify their colonization of India and overthrow of Indian Rulers.\textsuperscript{85} Thus, against the backdrop of ‘Oriental Despotism,’ Britain constructed itself as a benevolent governing force, saving Indians from a fate of tyrannical rule.

Guha connects Baden-Powell’s language advocating for complete state control of the forests to the notion of ‘Oriental Despotism.’ According to Guha, Baden-Powell strategically represents Tipu Sultan as a despotic ruler. Baden-Powell positions Tipu Sultan’s decree of \textit{S. album} as a ‘royal tree,’ a ban edict only passed under the influence of the British, as proof that Indian rulers possessed an absolute right to the forest and all its resources, a right that in turn, passed to the British. As quoted in Guha’s text, Baden-Powell asserts, without any empirical evidence, that “the right of the state to dispose of or retain for public use the waste and forest area is among the most ancient and undisputed features in ‘Oriental Sovereignty.’”\textsuperscript{86} In this quote, Baden-Powell projects Eurocentric constructions of despotic monarchy onto a long lineage of Indian rulers, fabricating history to support Britain’s imperialist agenda.

Baden-Powell carved constructions of whiteness into the soft surface of my family’s sandalwood box. Baden-Powell's language reveals how colonization involves both military conquest and ideological conquest. 'Oriental Despotism' arises out of the larger Eurocentric discourse of Orientalism. As outlined by Edward W. Said, in his foundational 1994 book \textit{Orientalism}, European thinkers invented Orientalism in the 18th and 19th century to construct Europe's identity in relation to and through motivated Western representations of the East.\textsuperscript{87} Through the representational techniques of Orientalism, such as art, literature, travel writing, and

\textsuperscript{85} Sharma, “The Socio-Economic Bases,” 133.
the colonial camera, Europe constructs the East to be regressive, unable to modernize, and irrational (the notion of 'Oriental Despotism' working within this representational paradigm). In binary opposition to the East, the West positions itself as the embodiment of reason, innovation, and liberalism, associating with Greco-Roman antiquity and its notions of high culture. As a core technology of colonization, ideological conquest worked to shape public opinion. British Imperialism, therefore, positioned itself as the inevitable divine responsibility of the West, and, as British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling so bluntly put it in his 1899 poem that became the anthem of colonialism, the "White Man's Burden." Whiteness, presented as an omnipotent dominating force, continued its EuroWhiteSupremacist mission; military, economic, linguistic, and cultural conquest. Thus, tracing the history of Indian sandalwood in the hands of the British reveals how orientalist notions of white superiority saturated legal landscapes, exhibiting the colonial government’s systematically rotten core.

The rich red wood of my mother’s box holds within it the history Cultural Genocide. The British colonial Forest Administration practiced the tactic of Cultural Genocide, an organ of the ideology of white supremacy, in their actions toward the many rural Indians living in economic, social and spiritual co-existence with India’s forests. The Forest Act of 1878 enabled the British to steal the land of rural Indians. As outlined by Guha, this act of colonial land-grabbing cut Indians off from their primary source of food and means to sustain their livelihoods, systematically criminalizing their survival. The widespread land-theft that resulted from the Forest Act of 1878 serves as an example of Eurocentric notions of property and ownership.

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90 Guha, “An Early Environmental Debate,” 83.
positioning themselves as superior to the centuries-old customary rights of communal land use within and among villages. Britain’s perceived superiority regarding forest management builds again upon the EuroWhiteSupremacist epistemological constructs of the East as regressive and the West as enlightened. In addition, Britain's dismissal of rural India's traditional management systems illustrates another example of ideological conquest upheld by legal systems.

As outlined by Guha and Rashkow, the colonial forest administration exploited *S. album* as much as the market would allow. This market sought not only the wood of the sandal tree but also its perfumed oil. In 1915, the British set up India’s first Sandalwood Oil Factory, propagating this scent on an industrial scale into the global markets in aromatherapies from shampoos and soaps, to cosmetics and perfumes. Post-independence, the sandalwood market had rapidly expanded to meet a globalized and industrialized world. Retaining the exploitative forest management system exported to India from Europe, along with the British instituted commercial oil factories, the Indian government overharvested the sandal tree to meet the growing demands of the market, leading to *S. album's* endangerment in 1974. In response to its endangerment, harvesting and trade of Indian sandalwood are now illegal.  

*Picturing the Colonial Trace,* centers histories of deforestation held in the wood of my mother’s box. Demand for the perfumed sandalwood oil represented in the two videos of my installation led to sandalwood’s endangerment. While the scent of Indian sandalwood is consumed globally, white people’s appetite for this scent is immense. In my video I illuminate white consumption of this scent, applying the oil to my neck in quick repeated motions for the duration of the 4:30 minutes.

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91 Rashkow, “Perfumed the Axe.”  
92 Sandalwood incense and sandalwood infused soaps, perfumes, body lotions, and shampoos have long lined the isles of corporate chain stores throughout the U.S. Due to Indian sandalwood's endangerment, many of these products contain only a chemically reproduced sandalwood fragrance.
As my finger makes contact with my neck again and again, a red trace appears: The gluttony of whiteness made visible on my white skin. The colonial axe fells tree after tree. The crazed consumption of Orientalism present throughout my history eats away at me. Oil collects on my
body, materializing a shiny surface on the skin, an oil spill, a thick sheen of overconsumption. The red trace grows stronger under the unsatisfied pressure of my finger. The skin takes on putrid yellow undertones, transforming the light pink background from sweet to sickening. I deface the white skin compulsively. The harm present within this video and the rotting quality of my skin underscores how the white desire for the scent of *S. album*, facilitated through Imperial Corporate Capitalism, is inextricably intertwined within the wood’s exploitative history of deforestation, and dispossession.

The cultural genocide perpetrated under the Colonial Forest Administration led to ecocide. Rashkow notes, "villagers possessed traditional environmental knowledge relating to sandal cultivation that the British plantation managers and foresters did not…. perhaps if British silviculturists had studied village-level sandal cultivation, they could have solved their problem far sooner." Rashkow illustrates how the Colonial Forest Administration could never propagate *S. album* trees due to its mono-cropping approach imported to India from Europe, which involved removing all other tree species and intensively farming only Indian sandalwood. In response to the failure of this Eurocentric scientific approach, colonial officials blamed rural Indians, now banned from their forests, for leaving the forest in a decaying state. However, as Rashkow notes, the *S. album* tree grew most abundantly within the vicinity of villages, highlighting the mutually beneficial relationship between humans and trees.

The perceived superiority of European knowledge constructed through Orientalism also pertained to environmental practices. Baden-Powell’s rhetoric echoes the categorization of rural Indians as possessing no environmental knowledge. As stated earlier in this section, Baden-Powell proclaims “‘the right of the state to dispose of or retain for public use the waste

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93 Rashkow, “Perfumed the Axe,” 56.
Within this colonial language, Baden-Powell categorizes "waste" as land that is not actively economically exploited as inefficient. Therefore, the colonial perspective views the environment only through a monetary lens. The European colonizing science of forest management forced onto Indian forests systematically denies the ecological equilibrium cultivated between humans and nature and judges all traditional ecological practices as backward, insufficient, and financially bankrupt. However, the colonial government's failure to propagate sandal trees using a Eurocentric approach to forest management and the sandal trees' eventual decline explicitly outlines how environmentally and socially bankrupt Western constructs of the human-nature divide are. This Imperialist Corporate Capitalist paradigm places humans over the environment, seeing the earth as a spending account from which to withdraw endlessly. Furthermore, *S. album*'s plentifulness under localized Indian management, and Britain's subsequent inability to cultivate Indian sandalwood in a mono-cropping system, also illustrate that environmental "sustainability is a byproduct of justice." By stripping rural Indians of their right to food and land sovereignty, and managing the forest through Eurocentric scientific techniques, the British ensured *S. album*'s eventual decline.

To this day, Indians actively resist the colonizing techniques of European Forest Management. As Indian historian and environmentalist Ramachandra Guha asserts in his seminal writing *"The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India"* published in 2001, “The history of state forestry is indeed a history of social conflict.”

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fervently struggled for the right to retain food and land sovereignty in the face of colonial land-grabbing. As noted by Guha, the many rebellions against colonial forestry in India each involved uprisings of thousands of rural Indians across hundreds of acres of forest.\textsuperscript{98} While the British forced the large majority of India’s forests under state control, traditional ecological knowledge persisted within the cracks of this colonial system. Furthermore, many contemporary grassroots groups continue to fight against inherited colonial forest management systems.

Among these resistances is the year long 2016 protest by the The Korku tribes people in Madhya Pradesh’s Betul who sought to reclaim sovereignty over their Satpura forests stolen by the British Colonial Forest Administration.\textsuperscript{99}

Investigating my mother’s sandalwood box yields the histories of interlocking systems of domination, exposing the links between material culture, ecology, colonialism and constructions of whiteness. The exploitative force of Imperial Corporate Capitalism manifests itself through the history of the box. As a highly valued economic resource due to its desirable smell, Indian sandalwood spurred British colonization of large sections of the Indian subcontinent. The EuroWhiteSupremacist orientalist narrative pertaining to the wood’s designation as a ‘royal tree’ was used as legal match to light the blazing fire of Colonial Forest Management systems, culturally and physically dispossessing rural Indian’s of their land. This Eurocentric science

\textsuperscript{98} As cited by Guha, uprisings occurred in Chotanagpur in 1893, in Bastar in 1910, in Cudern-Rarnpa in 1879-80 and again in 1922-23, in Midnapur in 1920, and in Adilabad in 1940. Guha, “The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India,” 216.

\textsuperscript{99} As reported by Neeraj Santoshi in the Hindustan Times, youth protestors shackled themselves and gathered outside of the district collector’s office protesting an instance the previous year in which Indian Forest Officials had demolished their dwelling units and uprooted hundreds of trees planted over the years. The Korku tribes people held “banners that read, hum adivasiyon ko ghulam gosshit karon, (declare us, tribals, as slaves.. ) [citing that] they did not want to live under the illusion that they were living in an independent India, where people’s rights are trampled upon.” Neeraj Santoshi, “MP: These Tribals Wish to be Called ‘Slaves’ in Free India,” Hindustan Times, February 25, 2016. https://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/mp-these-tribals-wish-to-be-called-slaves-in-free-india/story-oKRlcL79FrhtydyGHVWFNI.html (accessed May 1, 2022).
founded on a constructed human nature divide dismissed traditional ecological knowledge, implementing mono-cropping systems that, paired with consumers’ growing global taste for Indian sandalwood’s scent, eventually lead to *S. album*’s decline.

Furthermore, along with its historical entanglement within legal constructions of whiteness, my mother’s sandalwood box also preserves and constructs whiteness within our family. As an heirloom, the box is significant in the imaginations of my maternal extended family. The box exists to them as a beautiful object from our history, signifying their appreciation for Indian culture. As the box sits un-interrogated within our family home, it sings a seductive song of a benign British Empire to me and my family’s ears. In this sense, the box acts as a signifier for whiteness as a form of ideological colonization, both to foreign territories, as well as within the minds of my own family. The box is a container for the myth of a benevolent British Empire, and whiteness is the box’s biggest beneficiary. In my exhibition, I represent the ways that whiteness constructs itself within the space of the box. (Figure 14) In my photograph, I position the place of whiteness within this box as impermanent, filling the box with snow. Unraveling my family’s historical amnesia regarding the British Empire through tracing the material history of Indian sandalwood disempowers this box as a container for whiteness. As the white snow melts however, it leaves behind its colonial trace. (Figure 15)
Intergenerational Unlearning

The emotional significance of my family's sandalwood box is particularly strong for my mother, Tara Meehan. When my mother was 23 years old, my own age, she chose this aromatic sandalwood box as her urn. She wrote “For Tara’s ashes” on a sticker and pasted it on the bottom of the box, thus passing her emotional weight onto me. What does it mean for a mother to ask a daughter to bury her in an object that is so loaded? In light of the conversations we had surrounding this project, she recently revoked this wish.

I document my mother’s cremation wishes in my exhibition, photographing the base of the box. (Figure 16) In conversation with this image, I place a large pile of ash in the middle of the exhibition floor. (Figure 17) The ash sits stationary within the gallery connecting each of my pieces through its central position. I made the ash from branches of the fallen Claremont trees depicted in my photographs. I collected, cut, and burnt this wood in a ritualistic fashion. This strenuous burning practice, repeated over many nights, slowly produced its residue. This action carries a component of destruction that encapsulates the always already contradictory nature of white-self critique. Furthermore, the physical effort exerted in this ritual and its repetitive nature created an important space of reflection for me. Symbolically, the ash in the gallery holds many meanings. It is the colonial trace of a history of deforestation and dispossession at the hands of the British. It is the ash of my mother, placed on the floor instead of within the sandalwood box. It is the ashes of my white ancestors whose bodies I digitally obscured. It is the myth of a benign British Empire, burnt and disintegrated. It is the death of historical amnesia, and of naivete as an excuse. It is the death of white guilt and its accomplice, inaction. But within the center of this ash, unbeknownst to anyone but myself, there is a small pile of soil. Ash, in the presence of soil,
stimulates growth. The many symbolic deaths in my project lay potential pathways for individual and familial regeneration.

Figure 16

Figure 17
My exhibition, *Picturing the Colonial Trace*, contains a second video featuring myself, my mother, and my maternal grandfather, Grumps. (Figure 18) In his video, I invoke the haunting traces of my family's colonial history. The video opens with a scene of each of us holding the box, while looking straight into the camera. Lifted to chest height, the emotional and physical weight of the box in each of our hands is carried through the duration of the video. I apply sandalwood oil to my grandfather’s neck delicately. The video cuts to me as my mother applies it to my outstretched hand. Switching to my mother, my grandfather adorns her with oil in a similarly attentive manner. Within the context of my show, these motions reference the body positions of servant and master. (Figure 18) As sandalwood oil was likely applied to my ancestors by the family ayah, I allude to the gender, class and racial power dynamics at play in this relationship within my own performance art. The six minute video continues to cut between myself, my mother and my grandfather, the application of oil becoming increasingly rough. My grandfather smears the oil over his daughter's face, my mother pushes my cheek with her hand, Grumps’s skin grows red as I coat his face with oil forcefully. (Figure 19)

My grandfather does not like to act. So he closes his eyes when it all gets too much. My mother says, “watch out for his eyes. Be a little more gentle with your grandfather, please.” The switch from applicators’ attentiveness to inattentiveness of white comfort is central in this video. Through this denial of the sitters’ comfort, I disrupt the historical amnesia that allows my family to sit comfortably within a house and a mind brimming with the cherished remains of their ancestors’ colonial conquests. This discomfort counters the myth of a benevolent British Empire surfacing instead the colonial and neocolonial consequences of Britain’s financial, environmental and cultural conquest of the Indian subcontinent.
This video subverts British Imperial propriety. My grandfather, who embodies to the utmost degree a stoic British decorum, felt as though the harsh motions I was asking him to perform disrespected my mother. (Figure 20) Whose body deserves respect? Which countries have the right to sovereignty? My video unsettles British Imperial respectability, so often entangled with wealth extracted from other countries. In persuading my grandfather and my mother to apply oil to their daughters’ faces aggressively, I allow these parties to reckon with the harm done to India at the hands of the British through their own mishandling of their family. (Figure 21)
This is not a passive performance piece. The multi-generational nature of this performance allows me to challenge the narrative of the family history passed down from grandfather to granddaughter. I start the video by applying oil to Grumps, disrupting his patriarchal monopoly over this story. Each of us maintains eye contact with the viewer in the first half of the performance, putting us in direct conversation with audience members. In meeting the gaze of the audience, we each possess a level of agency, underscoring our willingness to partake in this process of intergenerational unlearning. This eye contact also recognizes what is done and being done to our bodies and the symbolic meaning it holds.

Figure 21
I look at the camera to say I am accountable. I look at the camera to begin to witness what whiteness has done and continues to do. Hands wipe away the innocence of whiteness, leaving behind a shiny sheen. And through these motions, I tell a story. And through these motions, I flesh out the cruelty of theft, of dispossession, of grabbing land and raping it to fill the silk-lined pockets of the upper class, whose decedent halls I still reside within.

As our motions escalate, the hand lowers the eyes downward towards the box. The atmosphere shifts from one of conversation between audience and participant, to a more private internal reflection. (Figure 22) The final scene shows only me, looking at the box. The weight of the box in my hands is heavy to my heart. There is a sadness in this moment that is important to pause on. Because critically examining my history is a sad and anguished process. But this video is looped and my sorrow transforms into action as I continue the ongoing process of unlearning and learning anew.

I present this thesis as an opportunity to strengthen family ties through the act of reckoning. Sandalwood oil applied to the skin has healing properties. Each of our hands physically unravels the myths held within our colonial history.

This can be an act of familial healing if we have the courage to see it as such.
Ongoing Investigations

My thesis suggests a model for scholars of Environmental Studies to merge their study of the environment with study of the self in relation to constructions of whiteness through Interlocking Systems of Domination. Interrogating familial colonial heirlooms is an avenue for this pursuit. EuroWhiteSupremacist narrations of history live on in how they are passed down to us through inherited objects. The heirloom is evidence; it holds within its form a colonial trace. My creative practice explores this trace, revealing its environmental, economic, and interpersonal histories of British colonization of the Indian subcontinent.

Weaving together a diverse range of interdisciplinary scholars’ theories around the process of “white self-criticality,” the act of representation, the space of the archive, and the practice of working in autobiography, I use the site of my family history to practice a critical white auto-ethnography, grounded in the material and visual realms. My work attests to the ways in which heirlooms preserve whiteness. Exploring the history of sandalwood reveals that its environmental history is also one of colonial constructions of whiteness.

My art exhibition Picturing the Colonial Trace and this accompanying essay throw a wrench in the reproduction of my family's hegemonic narratives and brings attention to the silences preserved within my family archive. My exhibition's artistic juxtapositions, digital manipulation, performance art, and spatial interventions shed a different light on colonial objects. I grapple with my history, presenting new pathways towards unlearning its hegemonic reproduction in the familial space.

My project is inherently ongoing, and the conclusions I draw will continue to shift and evolve in the face of its reception, both within my family and in larger public discourse. Throughout this multifaceted interrogation of my history, I have only scratched the surface of my
family archive. But in developing this critical framework, I lay the foundations for continuous investigation.
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Unearthing the White-Supremacist Underpinnings of Environmental Studies


The Ongoing Project of Environmental Decolonization


Locating Whiteness within Environmental Studies


**Interrogating the Autobiography**


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**Developing a Critical Visual Lens**


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