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Absent Intelligence

When English mathematician and computer science pioneer Alan Turing first posed his question, "Can machines think?", in 1950, he was not referring to machines possessing consciousness (Turing 1950). Instead, he wondered whether machines could convincingly simulate human thinking and behaviour. With the Turing Test, he suggested that intelligence could be demonstrated solely through successful imitation, reframing it as a performative act rather than an inherent property.

In contemporary discourse, as large language models have grown in scale to produce systems like ChatGPT and Claude, Turing's performative threshold has not only been met but exceeded. Questions that were once philosophical abstractions, such as Turing's, have fueled confusion amid grandiose science fiction narratives of machine consciousness. This is part of a recurring phenomenon in which each technological moment produces its imaginaries that distort public understanding of the actual systems at hand. Through the increased attribution of human-like qualities, research shows these systems become easier to trust, confide in, and open up to (Gambino et al. 2020). Anthropomorphic familiarity, combined with systems designed to listen, adapt, and reflect the user back to themselves, can create the illusion of neutrality while obscuring the ideological and political structures built into them.

As an artist and researcher working amid this atmosphere of speculation, I wondered: Is AI a neutral tool? Could I learn anything about my identity as a Saudi woman through AI?

Much like Flusser's own accounts of displacement and the disorienting effects of migration (Flusser 2003), my sense of identity became increasingly fractured migrating to the US from Saudi Arabia at the young age of 13. Twenty years later, I was interested in exploring artificial intelligence as a tool to reconnect with my cultural background and visualize my ancestral past, which existed primarily in childhood stories and in the realm of imagination and longing.

After interviewing my mother and tracing our family history back to the nineteenth century, I learned that my ancestors migrated across the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia (regions that include parts of present-day Iraq). Because our family archive contains little to no photographs, I began searching online for visual material corresponding to each decade of my mother's story, gathering

images from museum and institutional archives. I looked for anything that might offer insight into how these regions and periods were lived: how people dressed, the textures of their environments, and the rhythms of everyday life.

This search proved difficult, particularly when it came to finding images of native self-expression. In the Arabian Gulf or Khaleej, many forms of memory, especially women's histories, family lineages, and everyday cultural knowledge, have often been told through oral storytelling rather than preserved in formal archives. As Jood AlThukair notes, oral archives have long served as a vital source for historicizing local narratives, even while remaining vulnerable to forgetfulness, fragmentation, and institutional neglect. What appears as archival absence is not necessarily the absence of history itself, but the result of what official archives were built to preserve and what they were willing to let disappear (AlThukair 2025).

I quickly realized that much of the digitized historical visual record of the Arab world emanates from imperial contexts that deliberately constructed the East—the "Orient," the "Other"—as a site to be surveyed and controlled. Edward Said described this scholarship as Orientalism: a Western way of seeing and representing the "Orient" that claimed to describe it objectively, while producing it through the needs and logic of empire. For Said, Orientalism was not merely prejudice or fantasy, but a structure of knowledge and power that rendered Eastern societies exotic, static, and available to Western interpretation and control (Said 1978).

One of the first archives I found was that of Gertrude Bell[1], the British explorer and archaeologist who traveled extensively across the Arab world and worked closely with Lawrence of Arabia. Many of her photographs, taken in northern Saudi Arabia and southern Iraq, regions where my family once lived, focus on Bedouin life and culture. While invaluable as historical documents, Bell's photographs and writings are inseparable from the colonial framework in which they were produced (Bell 1927). In her letters and journals, Arab societies are repeatedly framed as politically immature, culturally static, and in need of British oversight. These inscriptions shape not only how the subjects were seen, but how they were archived. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in *The Rani of Sirmur*, colonial archives do not simply preserve history; they organize it through the language, priorities, and administrative logic of the empire. When the written record is produced primarily by colonial officials, the colonized subject appears only through those structures of mediation, often as an object of governance rather than as a speaking subject (Spivak 1985).

[1] The Gertrude Bell Archive is digitized and available at: https://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/

Figure 1: Original photograph from the Gertrude Bell Archive

I then drew material from the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection at the Getty Museum, which includes works by a range of European photographers who traveled through the Arab world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similarly, these images reinforced how photographic representation was filtered through colonial curiosity and their aesthetic conventions. The photographs depicted repeated staged scenes of exoticism: figures posed dancing, smoking hookah, or performing caricatured identities produced for colonial consumption (Behdad and Gartlan 2013). Many photographs in this archive were produced by Lehnert & Landrock, a commercially successful photographic studio founded by Rudolf Franz Lehnert and Ernst Landrock, active in Tunis and later in Cairo, that became widely known for circulating romanticized visions of the "Orient" to European markets. Through postcards and prints, the studio redistributed these images, often retitling them, reassigning ethnicities, altering physical features, and leaving subjects unnamed. Notably, this representational logic was not limited to European photographers. Some commercial studios based in Beirut, Jerusalem, and Cairo, including Armenian photographers working within regional image economies, often reproduced the same Orientalist conventions, showing how deeply these modes of representation had become embedded in photographic practice itself and in market demand.

When I later tested these archival images with computer-vision models, the AI systems frequently misclassified, generalized, or stereotyped the subjects they analyzed. Many veiled women were not recognized as women at all, while several of Bell's photographs depicting Bedouin figures were inaccurately tagged with modern-day warfare labels such as "soldier," "army," or "military uniform."

This potentially suggests that the training data had absorbed a conflict saturated image history of the Arab world, causing even non-military Bedouin figures to be interpreted through the language of warfare.

Figure 2: Original photographs from the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection, Getty Museum

These failures revealed the prejudices embedded within contemporary commercial AI tools and, more broadly, the limitations of the datasets and informational structures on which they are trained. There was a deeper structural problem: whose images are preserved, and how historical imbalance continues to shape both archival memory and algorithmic interpretation.

As AI draws its so-called "intelligence" primarily from the internet, the corpus from which it learns is neither neutral nor universal, but an aggregation of what has been documented and digitized. It is overwhelmingly shaped by Western frameworks. Cultural specificity and historical nuance, particularly from non-Western contexts, remain largely absent from the record. In this sense, Turing's performance theory reactivates the imperial visual archive: historical records have now become data points, feeding the training sets through which AI systems learn to see, classify, and evaluate.

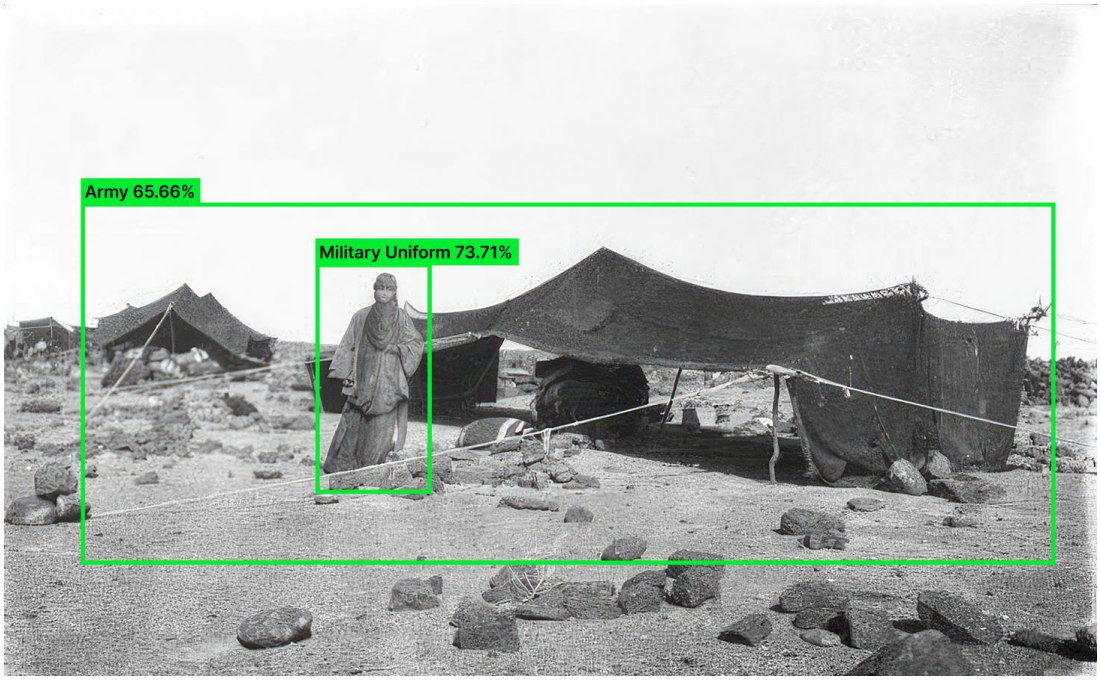

Figure 3: Computer vision technique applied to Gertrude Bell Archive original photograph

I created *Salaf (Ancestors)*[2] to surface my learnings: the issues of limited data training and how AI perceives cultural identity in a generalist and reductionist way. Using an AI segmentation technique[3] on the Getty Museum archive, I intentionally extracted and removed the orientalist, stereotypical figures, producing what I describe as an absent dataset. Because the original photographic presence reflected neither my own history nor the lived reality of the people depicted, their removal created space for different modes of seeing.

Viewers confront assumptions on two levels: first, those embedded in their own visual imagination, shaped by how these images have dominated Western perceptions of the Arab world; and second, those encoded in computational systems trained upon dominant images. *Salaf (Ancestors)* reveals how biases compound across these layers, from historical record and cultural memory to algorithmic knowledge.

This dataset is also meant to train AI on empty images and resist the reproduction of orientalist narratives, offering a method to disrupt AI's role in amplifying historical distortions.[4]

[2] *Salaf (Ancestors)* documentation and selected works viewable at: https://www.noufaljowaysir.com/work/salaf
[3] AI segmentation is a convolutional neural network trained to identify and isolate human figures from photographic backgrounds, allowing for their precise extraction while preserving the original compositional structure of the images.
[4] *Ancestral Seeds* documentation and selected works viewable at: https://www.noufaljowaysir.com/work/ancestral-seeds

Figure 4: Salaf (Ancestors) Dataset

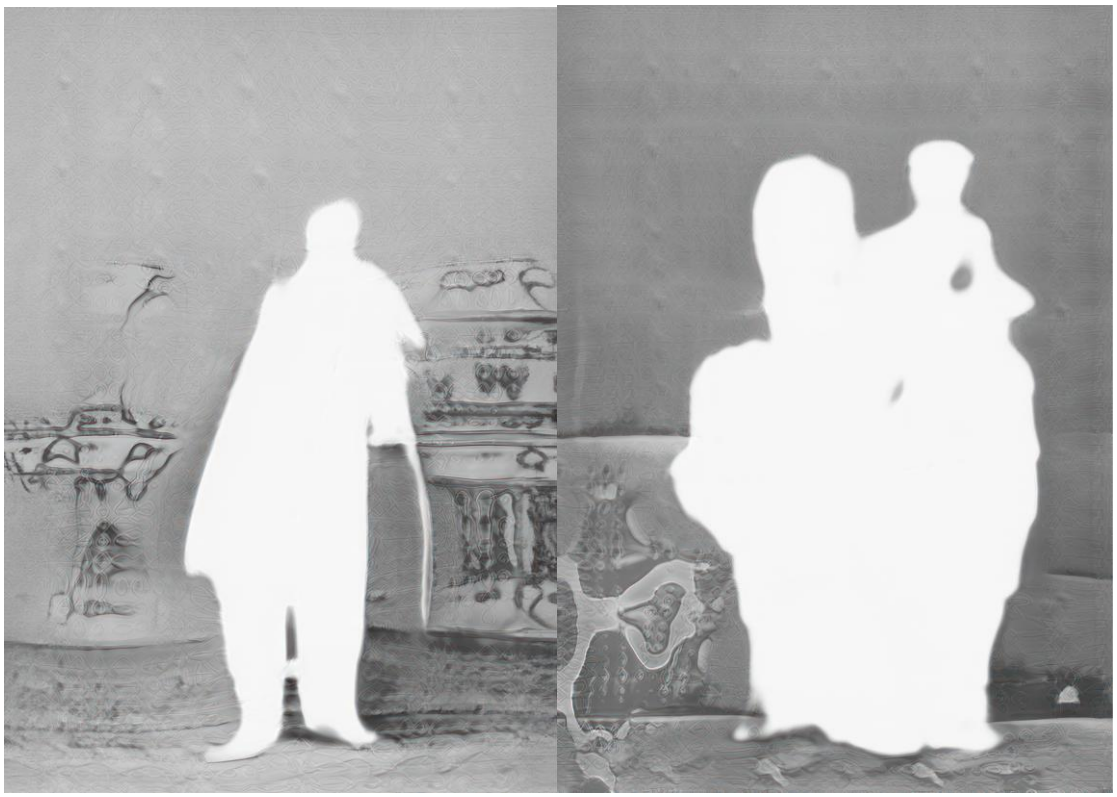

Figure 5: Ancestral Seeds - Generative images trained on the Salaf (Ancestors) dataset

In the spirit of Vilém Flusser's theory of the apparatus, artificial intelligence here operates not as a neutral tool, but as a system that is trained and has been built on centuries of hierarchical thinking and domination. Technical images are produced by apparatuses, and these apparatuses are themselves products of applied scientific texts; they are therefore never independent of the wider political, economic, and social formations from which those texts emerge (Flusser 2000). Contemporary AI extends this logic. It inherits and automates ideological constraints not only from its source material, but also from the technical systems that determine what can be recorded and made machine-readable in the first place.

Coming from the Khaleej which historically relied more deeply on oral storytelling to transmit knowledge and history, my work foregrounds how dominant definitions of "intelligence" are narrowly constructed. Large language models are built from writing and other textualized forms of data; knowledge transmitted orally cannot enter the model unless it is first transcribed, formalized, and encoded. As a result, other oral forms of knowing are systematically marginalized or rendered invisible. This reveals how artificial intelligence reproduces existing hierarchies of knowledge rather than offering a neutral or universal account of the world. By foregrounding these exclusions through artistic practice, I seek not only to document what AI fails to see, but to insist that intelligence itself—whether

human or machine—cannot be separated from the cultural systems and power structures that define it.

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