Jananas and Ethnographic Museum Art

Objectification in Un-gendering, decolonizing, and denationalizing

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This paper engages with two related ideas and concludes with more questions than it answers. First, drawing from my ethnographic work with jananas in Lucknow I show how the processes of un-gendering, decolonizing, and denationalizing are tied together. Jananas are same-sex desiring men often married to women, some jananas support themselves and their families with sex-work, and most fulfill gendered roles that masculinity expects of them in their cultural context. Gender defines their lives as much as law does. Section 377, a colonial era law enacted by the British in 1860, made any sexual interaction between same-sex desiring people punishable by law. Section 377 was repealed in India in 2018 leaving behind decades of violence against jananas and similar groups. The decolonizing of the janana project is ongoing.

Second, the paper complicates the questions of what we see when we see a piece in a museum and questions who 'we' are when an engagement with a museum or ethnographic space begins. I analyze five pieces from the World Museum Rotterdam South Asia collection and show how objects interact with meaning that we might provide them, without knowing their place in their original contexts. How do we gain insight into un-gendering objects or representations when we interact with them in different settings, settings that are unfamiliar to us? How do we un-gender, decolonize, and un-nationalize an object without knowing more than we are told about it? Through a study

of five objects and reading these objects from the lens of my work with jananas, I think through how un-gendering, decolonizing, and denationalizing can be situated in the context of objects, people, and ideas that these objects represent.

Key words: objects, representation, jananas

Introduction

As I think through museum experiences, I first think how many 'We-s' I am part of—I was raised in India, and I can claim a collective Indian 'We,' exemplified by usages such as, 'We are Indian'; I can claim myself as a female and cis-gender 'We,' discursively enacted by phrases such as, 'Women like money. We should earn more'; I can also claim a scholarly 'We,' put into play by language such as, 'We cannot prove this hypothesis without more data'; I am a citizen of the United States and I can claim a United States 'We,' articulated perhaps as, 'We celebrate holidays with needless buying'; I could associate myself with other 'We-s'; I am constituted by all of them although not every identity or political boundary choice that these 'We-s' indicate is relevant at all times. For example, my American citizen 'We' is irrelevant and foreign to my Indian 'We' although they are both part of 'I/me'. In writing this piece, I think about all 'We-s' that constitute my 'I'. Being part of the experience of being in a museum as well as an ethnographer translates to interacting with its displays/art/artifacts/objects/people as a 'We' that is constituted by many identities and one that responds intellectually to the museum as part of these identities. I invite the reader to reflect on their 'We-s' and if and how their 'We' or 'Us' or 'Our' interacts with my 'We' or 'Us' or 'Our'.

My favorite museum experiences are ones where the ordinary is presented as extraordinary. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* or On Kawara's date paintings swept the carpet from under my feet.

I could not figure out what to do or say or think when I came across these works for the first time. While this type of museum experience instills curiosity, there is another type that invites a different type of engagement with the museum space. One of my relatives, a well-traveled homemaker with no formal education in museology, after a visit to a museum in London complained to me about how much the British took from India and how they should return it all. Museologists and art historians grapple with this question constantly. My relative, a lay person dealt with their sentiments about nationalism when they saw Indian art in a museum in London[1]. Their investments notwithstanding, our interactions with museums can create a gamut of experiences; as such my contributions in this piece engage with two related experiences—how we see representations of objects including photographs in a museum and form opinions about who the Other is, how they live, and how we translate our understanding of the world, and transfer it to an object. This comment, which I make with the help of five posters from the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen South Asia collection, occupies the first half of this paper. I also briefly comment on how to un-gender and decolonize a museum space. I will juxtapose my comment on the five images with my own work with jananas in India to emphasize issues related to representation and raise questions about how to decolonize and un-gender a museum space as well as a people who have non-normative identities such as jananas. Jananas are men who desire men and sometimes engage in sex work. Much of my early research was based on the janana community. Putting images from Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen South Asia collection in conversation with jananas is an exercise in problematizing what we see when we engage in looking at a familiar or unfamiliar 'object'. It is also an exercise in presenting competing and sometimes conflicting narratives on an 'object'. Ahuja (2021) considers such presenting of conflicting narratives to be an important exercise in "communicating the story

1 I insert this anecdote about my relative's experience in a museum to exemplify ways in which lay people interact with museum spaces and exhibits. I do not take or represent a political position here.

of the museum". How can thinking around janana who are a people with everyday lives come into conversation with objects that hang in a museum? I juxtapose these entirely different experiences, the experience of being a janana and the experience of being in a museum and interacting with an object, for two reasons. First, both these experiences need to be decolonized, un-gendered, and denationalized. Janana lives need to come out of their brush with colonialism and the lasting damage it caused. Their lives need to be understood outside of gender. Objects in museums need to be decolonized, un-gendered, and denationalized in several layers ranging from how and why these objects are where they are to how they are presented to us today. Second, both these experiences need to be read as relics of a complicated past and a present that needs ongoing change, attention, and care.

Jananas

As same sex desiring men jananas may assume a feminine role with a male partner but may also have a heteronormatively masculine position in society (e.g., be married to a woman and exercise the traditional male role in the family). In this section I engage with thinking about representing jananas, and considering if jananas and objects in a museum can be un-gendered, decolonized, and denationalized.

Jananas are often victimized and inhabit specific spaces on the socioeconomic continuum in Indian and South Asian communities. Most jananas are men who have uneven sources of income, and some engage in sex work for income and/or for pleasure. I started working with jananas in 2003 in Lucknow, India. From 2003 to 2008, I spent summers working with a nonprofit focused on HIV/AIDS prevention. My engagement from 2008-2018 was limited to shorter visits when I was in India and I stayed present with jananas in Lucknow until 2018. My ethnographic work with jananas posed many challenges but none as pertinent as how to do justice to a community that is on the bottom rung of economic and social

ladders while simultaneously writing a book about them that would invariably benefit me more than it would benefit jananas. I am, by all measures, a middle-class woman. I might even pass as an upper-class woman in India due to my engagement with the West. Most jananas, by all measures, are below the poverty line.

I am reminded of an incident in 2016 when I was in Lucknow, and I called jananas who I had known for more than a decade to meet me at the non-profit office. I have discussed this incident and others in my book on jananas (Nagar, 2019). When I arrived there at eleven in the morning, I was the only one in the office. The two jananas I had invited came about forty minutes late. While both had precarious financial conditions always, they looked particularly run down. Imrana, the person I had called, talked to Anuradha and mentioned that I was in town; Anuradha wanted to meet me. A janana is assigned as male at birth but in their janana personae they use feminine gender markings. In all my writing about jananas, I honor their choice. Anuradha's clothes were dirty. To anyone reading this, dirty clothes mean a trip to the laundry to wearing fancier or less-appropriate-for-the-occasion clothes for however long it takes us to do laundry. Anuradha however only owned one pair of clothes and she was wearing that pair. On the morning she was supposed to meet me, she washed her clothes and tried to dry them. In most contexts, clothes are air dried in India. Anuradha wore wet clothes and walked eight kilometers to talk to me.

After this gesture anything I do or say about jananas becomes miniscule in my eyes and should in the eyes of my readers.

Researchers doing ethnographies guide us towards ethical practices that can ensure fair treatment and representation. In recent years scholars have advocated for collaborative ethnographies (Nagar, 2014) where researchers and informants write together so the distance between an informant's presentation and a researcher's representation is shortened. Beyond all the academic discussions about jananas, there was an everyday-ness to janana lives that to them was part of living life. Let us consider

this brief excerpt from an interview I did in 2012:

Example 1[2]

1.	Garima: satre pehan ke humne	Garima:In women's clothes
2.	khangra nahi kiya hai	I have never done sex work
3.	hum aaj tak satron main	to this day in women's clothes
4.	khangra nahi kiya hai	I have not done sex work
5.	toli badhai jab bhi gaye hain	When I have gone for toli-badhayi[3]
6.	koi giriya laga bhi hai	even if I have found a giriya
7.	satron main khangra nahi kiya	I haven't done so in women's clothes
8.	holi main jo hai ye kaam hota hia	These things happen during holi
9.	holi main paanch sau hajar rupaye	During holi, Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000
10.	giriye dete hain ye maruti vale	giriya give us and men come in cars
11.	humne bola nai	I have said
12.	**hum apne kapdo ki ijjat rakhte hain**	**I keep the dignity of my clothes**
13.	**pant booshit main hum**	**In a pant and shirt I can**
14.	**kuch bhi kar lete hian**	**do anything [meaning sex]**
15.	**par salwar suit main, sadi blouse main**	**but in a salwar suit, in a sari**
16.	**ya lehnga chunni main**	**in a lengha chunni**
17.	**hum kuch nahi karte hain**	**I don't do anything.**
18.	to humne char baagh main kiya hai	When I did sex work in Charbagh
19.	to hum pant shirt pehne rehte the	I used to wear a pant and shirt
20.	upar se suit pehan lete the	I would then wear a tunic
21.	upar se salwar suit pehan lete the	I would wear a tunic over my pants
22.	hamare bahut log ate the vahan	Many people came (for sex) there
23.	lekin kisi se apne par kaam nahi hota tha	But no real sex happened there
24.	kaam hota tha sirf upar hi upar se jo hai	Everything happened over clothes
25.	koi vo nahi hota tha	no sex [penetration] happened
26.	aur bahut hi hum log	All of us
27.	kamate the achcha khasa	we made a ton of money there
28.	payal log jati thi	then Payal and all would come
29.	soni jati thi	Soni would come
30.	hum log ka paisa cheen lati thin	and they would steal all our money

2 Glossary of Hindi words used in this example in the order in which they appear: *toli-badhayi:* the ritual dancing and singing by hijras at Hindu weddings, childbirth, and other auspicious occasions; *giriya:* male partner to jananas. Jananas use this term for a boyfriend, a client, or any male person attracted to jananas; *salwar suit:* a type of clothing including a long tunic and pants worn by South Asian women; *sari:* a type of clothing worn by South Asia women; *lengha chunni:* an ornate skirt and blouse worn by South Asian women; *Holi:* a harvest festival celebrated in north India, commonly known as the festival of colors in the West; *Charbagh:* name of the railway station in the city of Lucknow where I conducted fieldwork.

3 Toli-badhayi is most often associated with *hijars*, [hijras] another and more well-known gender and sexuality-based community in India. Historically, hijras have been identified as the 'third gender,' a term that is today considered Westernizing, and as such inappropriate (Towle and Morgan 2002: 469). This designation has been disputed by many scholars including myself.

Example 1 is from an interview I did about a decade ago. During this interview, the janana and I were sitting in the non-profit office in the afternoon and I had asked something about cruising. Most of the time I was doing fieldwork, jananas volunteered more information than I had asked for. In this instance, Garima started telling me about her own rules when it came to sex work and cross-dressing. Usually, cross-dressing is not a part of being janana and jananas, if they cross-dress do so away from the public eye. As Garima says, such things, that is, cross-dressing, happen during the festival of Holi which is sometimes celebrated in ways that break gender norms. To Garima, cross dressing has other meanings. She did not have sex with men if she was wearing clothes traditionally worn by women. To Garima there was a dignity of clothing that she had to maintain and that meant not having sex when she cross-dressed. The honor code of sorts that Garima followed was important to her. This less than one minute snippet from a conversation was revealing in other ways—there is an everydayness to sex for jananas. While in on of itself, that is not a revelation, for jananas, who at the time of this interview still fell under the purview of Section 377[4] which made "carnal" intercourse punishable by law, the nonchalance about place, clothing, types of sexual interactions that can happen with clothes on, the dignity of maintaining norms associated with clothing and sex, the festival of Holi, the earnings associated with sex work, all of it is every day to a janana even if it is exotic and novel to someone unfamiliar with the janana context

Jananas were objects in relationship with ethnography. As the translator of their lives and concerns, I have enormous power over representations related to jananas. Every mistake is mine as it should be and every representation should be judged against my motives. While academics work within the bounds of ethical fieldwork and ethnical representation, are there ways of presenting jananas as

4 Section 377 was a colonial era law put in place in India in 1862 which made any sexual acts "against the order of nature" punishable by law. Section 377 was the law of the land till 2018 when it was repealed. Since jananas and other sexual minorities in India continually suffer from lack of privacy, they were often attacked by this law. I have written about the realities of Section 377 for janana lives in Nagar 2019.

non-exotic, as every day, as human being living lives with struggles and triumphs, heartaches and victories, and everything else in between?

Objects

Museums translate objects and experiences for us. There is rarely a piece that does not have some description attached to it, and objects that are from cultures, countries, communities different from our own or from a different era than ours, are often translated in more detail than a contemporary painting. The complexity of a translation is that someone provides it. The questions this raises has to do with authority—the person who translates an object for us[5] should have the understanding of the history and culture of the object to do so. As museums across the world re-evaluate their acquisitions and collections, the question becomes even more pertinent. If a collection or an object in a collection is to be translated for the general public, who should have the authority to provide this translation? It would appear that the answer would have to be someone with a strong grounding in the time period and the cultural, historic, and social contexts the surround the collection or the piece. In this section, I think through pieces that are part of the world museum collection and ask questions about what decolonizing and/or un-gendering these pieces could look like.

The latter part of this article deals with four poster images, three which cannot be published externally.

5 Ahuja 2021 speaks to the difficulty of translation as well as language politics when it comes to describing objects to different communities of people. Specifically, Ahuja pays attention to translating objects of Indian heritage to an Indian audience and the difficulty this entails. I invite the reader to reflect on which 'Us' we are part of and which 'Our(s)' we can claim.

Figure 1 Raja Ravi Varma, Temptation, 1896. Published by Ravi Varma Press.

Image RV-04-69 is titled *Temptation*. The image is from the famous painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Ravi Varma is known for painting religious figures, deities, and scenes from Hindu religious texts. Image RV-04-69 is based on the religious text Ramayana. In the image, we see a woman draped in a saree looking away while a man dressed in a Hindu sage's garb looks at her. This scene is from one of the most critical moments in the Ramayana. The God Ram, Sita's husband, is in the forest hunting while he charges Lakshman, his younger brother, to look after his wife's safety in the jungle, where the three have been exiled for fourteen years. Ravana, the villain in the epic, takes this opportunity to kidnap Sita and deceives Lakshman who then leaves to protect his brother Ram. Lakshman draws a line in the dirt and tells Sita not to cross it until he or Ram return. When Ravana comes to Sita's door

looking for alms and in the garb of a sage, Sita crosses the line Lakshman drew to give food to Ravana. Crossing this line known as *Lakshman Rekha* or Lakshman's boundary is a warning. That Sita crossed the Lakshman Rekha is a lesson which tells us to listen to those above us and in charge of us. While Sita is not blamed for the transgression, her actions are a cautionary tale. Sita worked within the confines of her gender. She was the lady of the house, a Brahmin came to her door asking for food, and she gave him food. She was supposed to do so. She still failed because she did not follow the exact directions of not crossing the line that her brother-in-law left for her. Sita's transgression is judged in gendered terms. She was under the protection of Lakshman, he did what he could to protect her in his absence, she did not listen, and she suffered. In fact, in a couplet[6] right after this scene when Ravana kidnaps Sita and escapes with her in his flying device, Sita says:

Ha lachaman tuhaar nahi dosa
So phal payo, keenahu rosa

Oh! Lakshan! The fault is not yours
I suffer now because I made the mistake

My modern sensibilities see this story in entirely gendered ways, yet Ravi Varma's work cannot be translated in gendered ways. Or can it? In fact, the title of the painting suggests a gendered take. Why temptation? Was Sita tempted or did she do exactly what she was supposed to. She performed her duty which was to give alms to anyone who comes to her door? Is there any way to look at this form of art and not see the representations of women in gendered terms? What are some mechanisms one can employ to un-gender Sita's representations? What could be some ways to do this without inciting the fury of the religious right which often sees figures like Sita, whose life was devoted to sacrifice for her husband Ram,

6 This couplet is from *Ramacharitmanas* 'the story of Ram' as told by Tulsidas (mid 1500s-early 1600). While many tellings of Ramayana or Rama's story are popular in India,

as imitable by modern women. While the subject of the text of *Lakshman rekha* is not contemporary, its subtext is still relevant. Two weeks into the turmoil caused by the national lockdown during COVID-19 in 2020, Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India, addressed the nation on April 2. This address to the nation, his third in two weeks, was meant to be a 'pick me up'. In this 11.25-minute speech, Modi made references to specific Hindu religious texts and practices. To illustrate that social distancing is the best way to fight the disease, Modi referenced the *'Lakshman rekha'* part of a subplot in the story of Lord Rama. To Modi, the six feet of distance we were to keep from each other during COVID-19 was a *Lakshman rekha* that should not be crossed and if it was, the consequences would be as disastrous as they were for Sita. This statement by Modi also shows how a Hindu narrative often becomes an Indian narrative[7]. Hinduism and Indian nationalism often become one as well as we see in other posters below.

Image 7158-337 is an advertisement poster for 'The Fine Knitting Mills' dated 1950-1986.

Given the broad time range, the image was produced anywhere from three to thirty-nine years after India became an independent country in 1947. The first time India tried to gain independence from the British was in 1856 in a failed attempt by then monarchs to overthrow British control. The fight for independence had various turns and tribulations and it lasted roughly nine decades and multiple generations. Independence from British rule is a part of India's identity as a nation. Indian independence also came at a price. India was divided into India and Pakistan on August 15, 1947, and the migration of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India and Muslims from India to Pakistan led to unspeakable levels of violence and chaos. Anywhere from 200,000-2 million people died and women were the most effected victims. In many instances the tales of violence were literally written on women's bodies. In the backdrop of independence, India was personified as Mother India

7 I have commented on this aspect of Modi's dealing with COVID-19 in India in Nagar 2021.

and worshipped as such by some citizens of the newly formed nation. There are temples dedicated to *Bharat Mata* 'Mother India', and one of the most common slogans people shout at political rallies and during gatherings on national holidays is *Bharat mata ki jai* 'Hail Mother India'[8].

Image 7158-337 depicts the figure of Mother India presented like other Hindu goddesses. Mother India in this image wears a crown, like most Hindu goddesses do, her right-hand gestures blessings to anyone who seeks them, her left hand carries a flag, and she is superimposed on to the lower half of a map of India. Under Mother India is a male child dressed as a soldier also holding the same flag that is in Mother India's left hand. The soldier carries a gun and what appears to be a quiver. The male soldier protects his vulnerable Mother India. The map of India in the image is that of "undivided" India. "Undivided" India can refer to pre-1947 India which consisted of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It might also refer to the pipedream of the Hindu right who wants to assimilate Pakistan and Bangladesh into India, both territorially and religiously. Given such background information, how should one view this piece? How do ideas of womanhood, motherhood, and women and mothers needing protection from armed men play out in imagery such as this one? Can we truly decolonize, denationalize, or un-gender this image? Perhaps we cannot, but what we can attempt to do is understand as much of the imagery as possible and its representations so as to provide multiple narratives that question established narratives of the images. To decolonize, denationalize, or un-gender a collection or an object, as Ahuja (2021) suggests, is to accommodate conflict and complexity. For an urban Indian, which I am, the images I present here are not ethnographic, to a Western audience, they are. Decolonizing image 7158-337 could mean recognizing the sheer effort it took for India to become an independent country and perhaps within the context of the Indian independence movement, recognizing

8 The information in this paragraph is generally accepted historical data. Please see Bose and Jalal (2017) and Satia (2019) for more detail.

how nationalism is driven ideologically and can cause damage to the fabric of a nation if not presented with an eye on the multiple narratives that it entails.

Image 7158-397 shows Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India from 1966-77 and 1980-84. She was assassinated in 1984 by two of her bodyguards. Indira Gandhi was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the architects of the freedom movement. Her politics were framed by her association as a young girl to both Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. She was also responsible for one of the worst attacks on Indian democracy when she declared a state of emergency in 1977 and arrested journalists and leaders of the opposition. Indira Gandhi was incredibly popular in India and won a national election after she had imposed the state of emergency, which had led to the curtailments of many rights Indians enjoy as citizens of a democracy. In image 7158-397, Indira Gandhi is seen superimposed on the map of undivided India: there is a halo behind her, and her head is covered by her saree. Gandhi was by all measures a "modern" Indian woman, which in some ways translated to not wearing her saree over her head, which is what more "traditional" women did. In image 7158-397, however, Gandhi's head is covered and her hands are joined together. Such gestures are often interpreted as prayer or as someone greeting a crowd or an individual. To this day, many political figures will get images taken with their hands joined for advertisements and in manifestos and in so doing they appear friendly, humble, and ready to serve. Gandhi's gesture indicates such political advertising. She smiles, offers a greeting, and her image is superimposed on a map of India, representing the country and its people. We also see two children, a young girl and a young boy, under the map of India and Gandhi. The children's hands are joined as well, and they face each other. The image appears to indicate that they are praying to Gandhi, but I interpret it as the children praying for India as Gandhi looks onto a bright future for the country and children of the country.

This type of imagery suggests that this poster was part of

a series of posters meant for political campaigns during elections. Breaking the messaging conveyed in this poster would require denationalizing it, that is, looking at it from a lens that is not a nationalist one. The question we might want to ask before we begin the exercise of denationalizing would pertain to the nation-state and all that entails. For countries like India with large landmass, colonial histories, and diversity of religion, class, caste, social structures, and ethnicity, a nation-state might provide a sense of unity. It might also work to erase diversity specially when it comes to minorities that are already threated. A pertinent point to note about this poster is Indira Gandhi presented as someone to pray to, a goddess by all measures as the halo suggests. If a woman is presented as a goddess, she ceases being just a woman. This is important because in the realm of gender politics, and imagining an un-gendering, we must realize that women need to be deified to rule over a country, they need to be presented as divine, men can rule just as men.

Image 7158-453 shows four political figures arranged as if the last one were preceded by the first three in a line of succession. The person on top is Mahatma Gandhi, the one slightly under him is Jawaharlal Nehru, the one below Nehru is Lal Bahadur Shastri, and the last person below Shastri is Indira Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi is regarded as the Father of the Indian nation. Gandhi was instrumental in India becoming an independent country, but he did not seek political office. His political successor was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India. Jawaharlal Nehru was Mahatma Gandhi's successor. Who would succeed Nehru was a more complex question. India is parliamentary democracy which means that people choose a political party which then chooses a leader.

After Nehru's sudden death, Indian National Congress chose Lal Bahadur Shastri as the person who would lead the political party as well as the country. Shastri was a popular leader but his tenure as Prime Minister was short lived. Upon his death in 1966, Indira

Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, who served as a Minister in his government, was chosen as the leader of the party and the nation. It is widely believed that Indira Gandhi, who was then seen as a quiet and young female politician, could be manipulated easily by the party elders. She was referred to as a *'goongi gudiya'* or dumb doll. Indira Gandhi, however, turned out to be an astute politician who waged a war against Pakistan and took many 'bold' and somewhat unpopular steps. Image 7158-453 shows Indira Gandhi as a natural successor to the three immensely popular men and political figures. The poster also presents a dove, a symbol of peace, and says *'shanti doot'* messenger of peace in Devanagri, the script used to write in Hindi. The presence of the words and the message of peace in the poster indicates that the poster might have been made sometime in 1971 when India was engaged in a brutal war with Pakistan and modern-day Bangladesh, which was then East Pakistan. This poster has undertones of colonial India and breaking from that mold. The poster also speaks to nationalism and gender-based discrimination yet is overtly speaks to none of these issues. The presence of Mahatma Gandhi, who never held political office, but is the most celebrated Indian freedom fighter, indicates a nod to India's colonial past. The images of the leaders are presented against a dark cloud-like background which could also indicate how they are seen as the light against the darkness of colonialism. Peaceful transition of power is indicated by an impression of succession from one leader to the next. Indira Gandhi stands smiling in the image and every male leader has their eyes averted but Indira Gandhi who looks directly at the viewer and exudes confidence. The image says that it is she who will bring about peace to the nation and perhaps to the region. Indira Gandhi being a woman and the first and so far only female Prime Minister of India whose tenure ended almost four decades ago, was never presented outside her gender. How does one begin to view women and their professions separately? How does one un-gender work and professional lives?

Image 7158-400 is dated from 1950-1986. It is a common image and posters like this can be found in shops for Hindu temples within the home space[9]. This image is of *Gau-mata*, also known as *Kamdhenu*, the sacred and revered cow who was capable of providing whatever the owner of the cow desired. In image 7158-400, the cow sits under images of the gods Bharma 'the creator', Vishnu 'the maintainer' and Shiva 'the destroyer'. It appears that the cow, which is itself painted with images of various Hindu gods and goddesses, is being blessed by the three powerful gods. The cow is a complex animal for India. Some Hindus, and certain practices of Hinduism, consider the cow to be a sacred animal. The sacredness of the cow most likely emerges from the type of iconography we see in image 7158-400 which presents the cow as a figure that contains the qualities of several gods within itself and is blessed by Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh. In recent years, with the advent of the Hindu nationalist party, the Bhartiya Janta Party, in the central government and several state governments in India, the discussions about the sacredness of cows have gone from religious and ritual-based reverence to borderline lunacy[10] and bigotry[11], and Muslims and Dalits[12] have been murdered or beaten because of cows. While the image we see above does not speak to these types of realities associated with cows in contemporary

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9 Most upper-caste Hindu homes have a temple area dedicated to various Hindu deities. The temple area usually has several idols and often has color printed images of deities as well. Images like gau-mata can be found in such temple areas.

10 There are faith traditions within Hinduism that propagate the usefulness of all things cow, including fecal matter and urine. While an overwhelming majority of people find this ludicrous, some people, like Mr. Surendra Sing, in the story referenced here, who holds political office, have taken things to a different level of ignorance.
Akela, Anil. May 8, 2021. *BJP MLA recommends drinking cow urine to stop Covid spread, demonstrates on camera.* India Today
https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/bjp-mla-bairia-surendra-singh-cow-urine-gaumutra-to-stop-covid19-on-camera-1800129-2021-05-08

11 In recent years Muslims have been lynched as a result of cow-related incidents. Raj, Suhasini. September 30, 2015. *Mob in India Kills Muslim Man Over Rumors of Cow Slaughter.* New York Times
https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/asia/india-mob-kills-muslim-man-cow-slaughter.html

12 Dalit is a reclaimed word that signifies lowest caste Hindus. Because of their low-

India, it does point to the complexity of what objects and images can stand for. This type of image is also rather common and every day in north India but when presented to a non-Asia/South Asia audience, the image becomes exotic. Its everydayness which is situated in its religious meaning as well as its contemporary manifestations, some of which are bigoted and violent, is lost in translation. Is there a way of experiencing image 7158-400 that is situated outside its foreignness? Can all that this image entails be communicated in the brief time a visitor interacts with this image in a museum collection? Does all that the image entails need to be communicated to the viewer?

An important facet with the images we have discussed in this section is the authority of interpretation and perhaps the most relevant knowledge with respect to these images is that they can and do have several interpretations (Shoenberger, 2021). De-colonizing them should mean recognizing this fact at the very least. De-colonizing collections must also mean ways of looking at objects in a museum from a non-Eurocentric lens. It means recognizing the possibility and the reality that worlds and worldviews existed and exist beyond the Euro-centric world and these worlds and worldviews are not curiosities but lived experiences of everyday human beings.

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caste status, Dalits fall under the most-underprivileged groups in India. Due to centuries of oppression by upper caste Hindus, Dalits are assigned professions associated with cleaning. Contact with carcasses is part of cleaning.

Kateshiya, Gopal B. *Gujarat: 7 of Dalit family beaten up for skinning dead cow.* Indian Express.

https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/gujarat-7-of-dalit-family-beaten-up-for-skinning-dead-cow-2910054/

Conclusion

My dilemma while working with jananas and while writing about jananas continues to be about how much I gain from them and how little they gain from me. So far during my career I have written a dissertation, four papers (excluding this one), a book, and presented at numerous conferences on topics related to jananas. These writings and presentations landed me a tenure-track job and eventually tenure, one of the most priced comforts of academia in the United States. What did jananas gain from associating with me? From where I see it, nothing. There is, of course, this production of knowledge which we argue, does everyone good. But it does not do good in ways that buy someone food or an extra pair of jeans? It does good in the way that it might broaden someone's understanding of how fluid gender identities can be. The museum experience can echo these feelings. When presenting ethnographic objects, how does the museum serve? Whose translation does the museum keep?

I end this paper with the promise with which I stated this paper: I ask more questions than I answer. I hope that the questions I ask here and that we continue to ask in the context of museums, objects, and ethnographies can pave the future for spaces where problematizing information is the goal. The images I engage with here and jananas have lives that are complicated by gender, colonialism, and nationalism. Presenting objects as part of a larger system within which they operate might be a way to un-gender, decolonize, and denationalize.

All contributors called into the Un/Engendering research project were asked to think outside their respective specializations. Without their courage, openness, humility, and without the peer reviewers' generous attention, such an interdisciplinary project could have never taken place.

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Images

All images that cannot be shown are in the holdings of the NMVW.
https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/

Figure 1: Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll. nr. RV-04-69.

We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.