Colonizing the Coffee Table: The Erasure of Difference in the Representation of Women in National Geographic Magazine

Jessamyn Neuhaus
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Author(s): Jessamyn Neuhaus

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*National Geographic* Magazine  
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Jessamyn Neuhaus  
The Claremont Graduate University

How would you like it, Karen baby, if some photographer from Kenya marched into your kitchen and your bathroom and snapped photos of you at your colorful native pursuits? American woman wearing hair dryer. American woman at appendage-coloring rite. American man shortening grass in ritual area.

—Marge Piercy, *Vida*

Mention the *National Geographic*—It identifies you.  
—Advertisement, 1950

A few years ago I stood on the banks of the holiest river in the most sacred city of India. I had wanted to see this place since I was nine or ten years old and had glimpsed a photograph of worshippers at Banaras, on the Ganges, in an old copy of *National Geographic*. The vivid color photograph stayed with me, a glimpse into an exotic world dramatically different from my daily experiences in Portage, Michigan. This moment challenged the boundaries of my world and made me want to explore beyond my own white, financially secure, well-educated family and neighborhood. In this essay, I problematize the consumption of images produced by the magazine that so inspired me. For although it has been virtually ignored by scholars engaged in the fields of cultural studies and visual representation, my own experience points to the way this publication constructs deeply significant encounters with Otherness for its white readers. Furthermore, *National Geographic* is undoubtedly the most extensively circulated, non-televised depiction of the so-called Third World in United States households and primary schools. It is the third most popular publication in this country, behind *T.V. Guide* and *The Reader’s Digest*. It is thus a highly informative site for investigation into how the dominant discourse in the United States constructs a racialized, gendered, sexualized Other, vis à vis the production of photographic images.
Any scholar somewhat familiar with the ever-growing field of postcolonial criticism, upon scanning NG photographs from the early post-World War II period, will be immediately struck by the magazine’s blatant exoticification of the Other. Also clearly evident is the way United States anxiety about the process of political decolonization in the late 1940s and 1950s is assuaged by NG’s emphasis on “happy natives.” In pictures from this period, Africans, Asians, and South Americans, eager to join the march of progress, smile for the unrepresented white man behind the camera. Criticism of this kind of photography has concentrated upon uncovering the imperialist gesture of photographing a colonial subject, that is, how the photographer may project white anxieties and desires onto the photographed. There is no question that racism informs the images and the reading of NG. But in this essay, I argue that representation of the Other within the pages of NG magazine only superficially distances the photographed subject. The more subtle project which undergirds the photography of NG is to reassure the U.S. reader that fundamental cultural difference and global socioeconomic power relations are insignificant compared to essential human values. It is this far more insidious, and indeed, American, discourse of “the human family” that allows colonialism to grace the coffee table.

National Geographic’s cameras actually erase difference, not foreground it. I am particularly concerned with the erasure of difference in photographs of women’s bodies. Not coincidentally, this is also the point of greatest exoticification: the bare-breasted woman of NG is one of the most widely recognized images of sexualized Otherness in U.S. popular culture. But a close reading of the representation of women in NG reveals an underlying belief that women are essentially alike. This is not to say that the highly sexualized stereotype of the black woman is not readily illustrated by many NG articles and photos. But NG ultimately depicts Third World women as fundamentally the same as its white women readers. Thus, only a few roles are available to the women pictured in NG. They may be beautiful objects or loving mothers, hard at work in the domestic sphere. The women most often pictured within the covers of National Geographic suffer a fate similar to women depicted in Cosmopolitan or Good Housekeeping. The essence of “woman” is her desire to be beautiful and her desire to participate in a nuclear family. Postcolonial realities, like Third World women themselves, are domesticated and airbrushed.
For viewers of National Geographic photographs, “artistic” pictures of women play a specific role in erasing difference. Photos of women in certain proscribed positions, i.e., pretty and decorative or domestic and maternal, elicit a reading which depoliticizes the highly political. The photographs of women in NG most often seek to obscure the concrete consequences of U.S. military, cultural, and economic involvement in other countries, including the presence of the NG photographers themselves. This “beautifying” of the contemporary world is what makes it difficult to discern any fundamental shift from colonial to postcolonial publishing policies at NG.

NG’s longevity is made possible by retaining, from its inception in 1888 to the present day, a discourse that appears to respect and dignify difference. The National Geographic Society claimed, in 1896, when the magazine published its first photo of a bare-breasted woman, that such photos appeared purely in the interests of scientific accuracy. NG, according to their own rhetoric, sought to nonjudgmentally depict less “civilized” societies as they “really” lived. While there are fewer and fewer published photos of the bare-breasted “native woman,” the goals of NG, which first captured her on film, remain virtually unchanged: to reduce the complexities of encounters with Otherness into a picturesque, frozen, unthreatening tourist event. Moreover, NG does not act in a vacuum. Their policies are in an active dialectic with U.S. culture. NG is both informed by and shapes the society en large. By examining photos and photo captions from the Vietnam war to the present, I will demonstrate how millions of readers escape real confrontation with postcolonial realities by consuming NG’s representation of women. I’ve chosen this time period because the Vietnam war irrevocably altered NG rhetoric. After Vietnam, NG could no longer pretend happy ignorance of world events. But while National Geographic now includes stories on environmental issues, and, occasionally, the toll of war and poverty, the photographs of women in NG continue to seduce the viewer into an unthreatening world that reiterates preconceived notions of gender and absorbs the complexities of difference into a melting pot spread to global proportions.
I. The Not So Candid Camera: Gender Norms and the “Kindly Nature” of National Geographic Photography

This is not travelogue, it is not journalism, it is not an art magazine, it is storytelling.

—Photography editor, National Geographic

Edward Said’s Orientalism, and his more recent Culture and Imperialism, are cornerstones of postcolonial studies. Yet his keen insights into the way Western culture anchors itself in imperialism and political, economic, and military conquest of the third world, focus exclusively on so-called “high” culture, i.e., Austen, Verdi, Kipling, Yeats, and so on. Scholars who engage in postcolonial criticism neglect popular culture, arguably more influential in the United States than Jane Austen. The result, comments Amy Kaplan, is an “ongoing pattern of denial across several disciplines: the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism.” Examining the National Geographic is one way to begin to rectify this denial. The fact that NG has escaped academic scrutiny points to its power as an everyday part of U.S. culture. I agree with Roland Barthes when he writes in the preface to Mythologies:

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. . . . I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse, which, in my view, is hidden there.

In this essay, I turn the mythologist’s eye, influenced by postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and social history, toward the “ideological abuse” in the National Geographic, and the way it functions as part of our “daily banality.”

The National Geographic Society was founded as an amateur scientific organization in 1888. It emerged at a critical moment in Western history, when museums, colonial expansion, natural history, modern anthropology, photography, and other institutions began to define Otherness in earnest. In “Through a
Colonizing the Coffee Table

Lens, Brightly: The World According to National Geographic,” Scott Montgomery comments that “Having emerged from this time, National Geographic has remained wholly, one might say biblically, loyal to these origins.”8 This loyalty becomes clearer in light of Grosvenor’s seven principles.

After Alexander Graham Bell took over the society in 1898, he hired Gilbert Harvey Grosvenor a year later to help build circulation of the Society’s magazine.9 Grosvenor sought to make the magazine more accessible to the general public, promoting NG as a combination of science and entertainment, and thus assuming a powerful position in U.S. popular culture as “both a broker and a maker of scientific knowledge.”10 In 1915, Grosvenor presented seven principles to the Board and later printed them in the magazine itself. They called for absolute accuracy, beautiful illustrations, timely stories of permanent value, and avoidance of anything trivial, partisan, or controversial. Number six elucidated the humanist, liberal mission of the magazine: “Only what is of a kindly nature is printed about any country or people, everything unpleasant or unduly critical being avoided.”11

It is this guiding principle, shaping both text and photographs in the magazine, which offers the clearest insight into how NG functions in the postcolonial world. For although NG, in many ways, still adheres to Grosvenor’s other principles, it is number six that has fostered its huge circulation. Montgomery emphasizes the importance of this “kindly” philosophy to an analysis of NG. He writes that it

has acted at the true unyielding principle of rule since the founding of the journal: “The kindly nature of all that is.” It is this, above all—its unmitigated success in a century saturated with horror, death, war, on an unprecedented scale—that makes this magazine such a singular, formidable presence in Western culture.12

But I would add that it is not only this “principle of rule” that makes NG such a presence. The vivid, color photographs, and certain composition and layout techniques, evoke a reader response that ensure “unmitigated success.” In a culture where watching (mainly television) is by far the predominant leisure activity and where intellectual and popular discourse constructs knowledge around metaphorical and literal sight, the photographs in NG must necessarily be its primary text.
I do not have room in this essay to do justice to the theory and criticism of photography and the camera that has been produced the last twenty years or so. But it is important to note here the body of thought that argues that photography is essentially a capture, a violation. As Susan Sontag writes in one of the best known treatises on photography: “To photograph people is to violate them . . . by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.”13 Though a photograph can only be a representation, it is most often read as containing literal meaning: the viewer understands the photo to hold a slice of reality. Thus, a photograph is particularly vulnerable to the power/knowledge equation. To possess visual knowledge of the subject of a photo is to assert power over the subject and thus objectify it/her/him.14 Feminist film theory has emphasized the role of an essentially male gaze, which objectifies all women, turning femaleness into spectacle for consumption.15 Foucault offers a slightly more nuanced definition of the gaze, whereby normalization and hegemony is maintained by a discourse of self-exposure.16 To be known (and hence, controlled) is to be seen.

This is the power relation at the heart of National Geographic photography. While I am not convinced this happens uniformly at every photographic site, I believe this occurs all too frequently in the photographs that are published in this magazine. NG implies that their readers may absorb truths about the Other, about “different” ways of life, by viewing beautiful, focussed, well-composed photographs. Seeing will produce definitive knowledge. But the knowledge that NG photos produce depends upon a context of traditional humanism. NG practices a “kindliness” that relies on a notion of universal human (read: Western) values to frame photos and promise the (white, U.S.) reader increased information about the world. As Lutz and Collins comment: “Clearly, photographic practice at National Geographic is geared to a classic form of humanism, drawing readers’ attention through its portrayal of difference, and then showing that under the colorful dress and the skin, as it were, we are all more or less the same.”17 The photographs of NG, more than any other aspect of the Society, seek to reassure their readers that knowing the Other is no more difficult than gazing upon a smiling face or mother and baby, with a minimum of concrete information or context. These photographs represent a world view whereby knowledge is equated with recognizing how our human similarities transcend difference, rather than recognizing the socioeconomic factors which shape the postcolonial world.
To this end, the photographs between the familiar yellow covers of the *NG* are the epitome of what I term tourist photography. It is no coincidence that photography and tourism evolved together. Capturing one's trip on film has become the definition of travel. Sontag comments: "Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter." The photograph provides the tourist with a comprehensible event. Tourism, and its photography, demands meaning, but with a minimum of individual experience.

In his essay "Exotic Friends, Evil Others, and Vice Versa," James Guimond describes the process of constructing meaning out of tourist travel:

In tourism, cultural differences are heavily emphasized at the same time that they are, supposedly, implicitly transcended. Foreign cultures are presented to tourists in their most exotic and picturesque forms... Yet tourists often persuade themselves that they have been able to penetrate these exotic, external cultural forms, not by learning much of the foreign society's language, history, politics, or religion, but instead by having a few "candid" or "firsthand" contacts with its inhabitants, talking with friendly cab drivers or shopkeepers who speak a little English, or taking snapshots of children who are happy to line up and smile for a few pesos or dinars.

Guimond goes on to explain how *NG* stresses this same kind of superficial knowledge:

Thus many tourists depart with the reassuring belief that, beneath their exotic exteriors, these foreigners are nice people who are not significantly different from the folks back home. Similarly, many magazines, particularly the *Geographic*, heavily emphasize the exotic aspects of foreign cultures, even as they also often give their readers exactly these kinds of simulated, "candid" contacts with their subjects.

What *NG* represents then is the American urge toward the melting pot. Tourism secures the Other a smooth and pale place in the melting pot by promoting the notion that seeing equates understanding, implying that there was never much difference in the first place. As Patricia Raub comments in "The *National Geographic Magazine*’s Portrayal of Urban Ethnicity":

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In *Geographic* articles, the distinctive customs and colorful life-styles of ethnic city dwellers add flavor to the American "melting pot"; just as the "exotic" traits of Third World peoples contribute color to the "tapestry" of mankind. Seldom are these folkways discussed within the context of the social and cultural structures that produce them. Instead, they appear in isolation, as curiosities for the entertainment of the armchair tourist.22

Tourist photography does not disturb firmly anchored preconceptions because viewers cannot locate new information, cannot be in an experience which seeks to simply highlight the exotic and colorful. Colorful sight-bites comprise the tourist experience.23

*NG* photography reiterates, in particular, a set of preconceptions built around gender roles. Criticism of representation like the photos in *NG* has concentrated on how the white colonial and neocolonial camera eroticize and exoticify women of color. But, as Lutz and Collins argue, *NG*’s humanist photography also seeks to portray all women as essentially the same:

Primarily, however, the *Geographic*’s idealization of the world’s people extends to women in egalitarian fashion. To idealize “the other woman” is to present her as like, or aspiring to be like, her American counterpart. The other woman is exotic on the surface (she is dressed in an elaborate sari and has a golden nose ring) but her difference is erased at another, deeper level (she is really just a mother, and like the American woman, interested in making herself beautiful through fashion). The woman’s sameness in difference allows us to avoid the sense of threat that confrontation with difference presents and allows us to pursue the illusory goal of wholeness [emphasis added].24

How are women “idealized” in *NG*? The women of *National Geographic* are, first and foremost, beautiful. Thus they fulfill two important functions. Firstly, their beauty reinforces the notion that women are static objects available to the viewer’s gaze. Secondly, they beautify potentially unbeautiful situations, where the realities of political and economic policies, civil strife, national debt, exploitation of natural resources, U.S. military intervention and so on, make a far less picturesque scene.25 Female beauty overwhelms difference (and any responsibility or unease that a U.S. reader might feel). These photographs of women domesticate difference and make it, purely, pretty (Often, in the process, women are “lightened.”)
Racial difference is “whitewashed” in order to conform to a beauty standard where light is all right).

It is the photographs in NG, not the text, which accomplish this task. Montgomery has noted that the “sudden power of photo-perfection” in the NG “far transcends the ability of words to soothe and protect.”26 In reading NG, I would add that the inverse is true as well.27 In my analysis of the post-Vietnam NG, the captions and text often contradict the message of the photo, but the powerful color and limited meaning of the photograph always wins the reader’s eye. The power of the photo also transcends the ability of the words to disturb or expose. Barthes argues that a caption fixes understanding of a photograph, acting as “a kind of vise which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating.”28 But while some captions in NG may act as a vise on meaning, the post-Vietnam photos more often contradict the meaning hinted at in the captions or the text. Though no part of NG offers a truly complex commentary on the subject matter, the writers and caption writers are less likely to be, in Montgomery’s words, “biblically loyal” to the late-nineteenth-century origins of NG.

A NG photographer interviewed by Lutz and Collins noted an example of this common discrepancy between text and photo in the magazine. He showed them a photograph of an African family in a 1988 issue on population and explained “The story is about hunger, but look at these people. It’s a romantic picture.”29 The undeniable power of NG to shape and reflect U.S. cultural values is most evident here. Readers cannot dismiss NG as being stuck in the early 1900s because, within its text, it resists Grosvenor’s injunction against anything controversial or unbeautiful. Yet it never fundamentally challenges its policy of liberal “kindliness” because its pictures conform to the magazine’s original rhetoric of the human family, where only colorful, surface differences separate people. NG assumes, like the tourist industry itself (with echoes of the colonist shouldering the white man’s burden), its absolute right to be anywhere in the world.30 What makes it a slippery cultural icon, a naturalized part of U.S. society, is how its readers perceive the magazine as a truth-teller. And the truth of the bold, overwhelming photos supersedes the socioeconomic, political, and military realities hinted at by the texts. “Universal” human values, undisturbed by the corporate global order, are the most significant aspect of life in “other places.”

Though I concentrate on post-Vietnam photos, I’ve found two examples of photos that illustrate my point and were published in NG during a period of active
decolonization around the world—the late 1940s and 1950s.* A 1944 article entitled “Bare Feet and Burros of Haiti” juxtaposes two photos that fill an entire page.31 On the left, a shirtless, dark-skinned man works on a wood carving. On the right, a fair, smiling woman poses with hibiscus. The caption under the photo of the woodworker tells us that tourists eagerly buy these cheap curios, while the caption under the woman informs the reader that this is a representative of Haiti’s elite. Unmoving, posing, and made-up, the woman beautifully belies the implications of being a member of the elite. She performs the woman’s standard function of static model, while the man next to her engages actively in his environment. The bright colors of the woman’s “costume” easily overpower the all-brown tones of the picture next to her. The message of the page shifts from a depiction of the economic context of Haiti to a picture of a pretty girl. Clearly, the caption writers did not mean to offer a truly thoughtful analysis of those economic conditions. Yet the text does hint at a more complex reading, an alternative meaning, which the photo drowns.

In the 1946 “Yap Meets the Yanks,” editors utilized the same juxtaposition of active male/posing female.32 On the left, a “coffee-colored” man sips from a rough cup. On the right, a fair, bare-breasted woman with flowers in her hair touches her shoulder coquettishly. Her caption reads “Clothing Shortages Mean Nothing to a Tenaku, a Yap Belle.” The caption later informs the reader that “Tenaku” is the mother of two children and “was shot in the left foot by a stray bullet from a plane strafing a Japanese headquarters.” Her smiling feminine beauty completely negates this fairly disturbing information. The photo shows the woman’s breast and the reader remembers the breast, not the injured foot. Military activity may deeply affect the life of this “Yap belle,” but her smiling face belies that reality. It is a picture “that seems to make everything come out all right.”33

However, I do not want to overstate these examples. Overall, during this period, the texts and photos in NG were very much in synch, blatantly promoting American military intervention and the “civilizing” influence of U.S. cultural values in the Third World. During the Vietnam war, and after, NG’s story changed somewhat. I am interested in the tension, illustrated in the above examples, between the information contextualizing the photo and the readability of the photos itself. This tension characterizes NG photography during the Vietnam war and after.

*National Geographic does not usually allow their photographs to be republished. My request was denied.
II. Feminine Beauty in National Geographic Coverage of the Vietnam War

To experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it necessarily wrongly.

—Nietzsche

During the Vietnam war, NG published some of the most vivid examples of photos that obscure the realities of the postcolonial world. NG magazine did not attempt neutral coverage of this war; the writers were clearly interested in promoting United States involvement. But while stories on the Vietnam conflict were similar to NG’s highly selective coverage of the Korean war (the emphasis on the benevolent presence of United States soldiers, for example), there was a subtle but important difference. United States involvement in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s represented a shift in the rhetorical strategies, the narrative format, of NG: unlike the very limited coverage of other international conflicts, the stories on Indochine and Vietnam acknowledged, to a certain extent, the widespread suffering occurring in these regions. Montgomery argues that NG narratives—the written text accompanying the pictures—are always cliché-ridden and “utterly fixed.” But while NG writing tends toward the simplistic, by the 1960s the text had assumed subtleties that escape Montgomery. In order to maintain journalistic credibility, NG could not, in the highly skeptical Vietnam era, pretend complete ignorance of the ravages of war.

However, these acknowledgments occurred only within the text or captions. The photographs retained their “kindly nature,” depicting not soldiers or wounded civilians, but “everyday” life. Everyday life, in most NG photographs, meant simple, beautiful scenes, carefully composed and encouraging a simple, uncritical response. The continuing debate over the meaning of the Vietnam war for U.S. history demonstrates just how complicated this event was and remains, yet NG photographs strove to depict what they had always depicted: naturalized natives unaffected by political turmoil and difference absorbed in the entirely readable image. Photographs of women continued to fit this formula. Collins and Lutz have pointed out how a disproportional number of photos in a 1961 NG article on Vietnam focussed on “beautiful young women, with captions describing one with a ‘face as radiant as the moon’ or generalizing to ‘the grace and charm of Vietnamese women.’” In the following three examples, photographs of women
have been utilized by the editors to ensure the negation of the more disturbing story—both of the written text (which offers a relatively more thoughtful account of the events being depicted) as well as other potential readings of the photos.

An early 1950s article on the escalating violence in Southeast Asia tempers heavy-handed Red Scare rhetoric with calm and carefully composed photographs of smiling and relaxed civilians. The editors of “Indochina Faces the Dragon: France and Her Former Protectorates Fight Side by Side to Stem the Menace of Communist Forces in Southeast Asia” (1952) offer a photographic representation of their subject that implies a timeless, exotic life that remains untouched by the political and social upheaval of decolonization and civil unrest. The most striking example is a photo of two women standing on a small bamboo bridge. They look directly at the camera and are smiling widely.39 Their picture takes up almost the entire page, but the small caption at the bottom is an important clue to how the photograph functions. The caption reads: “Girls in Gay Hats, Split Dresses, and Satin Trousers Reflect None of Viet Nam’s [sic] Tragedy.”40 The caption focuses the reader’s attention on the women’s clothing as the most significant aspect of the photo. The gay exotic costumes signify the simple, eager to please Oriental girl, happily untouched by the realities of the war-torn countryside.

But the caption does not completely ignore those realities; its message is more complicated. It continues: “Though violence and terror threaten everywhere, life’s routine goes on. Crisscrossed bamboo stakes mark the approach to a roadside watchtower in the Makong Delta, one of the thousands guarding the main highways.” This is the small print, figuratively and literally, to the photograph. The little bamboo bridge looks simply scenic in the photograph, like a prop in an advertisement for rice or coffee.41 But the caption informs us that bamboo stakes like these are in fact deeply involved with the realities of war.

This is one of the cleverest examples I’ve found of how NG relies on the readability of portrait-type photography of beautiful women to overwhelm the viewer and obscure any other message, even if the written caption itself hints at a more complex reality than can be shown. By using this photo in this format, NG may evoke and then soothe the reader’s anxiety. The potentially disturbing image that could be shown here is overwhelmingly negated by the simple, clean lines of the photo, wherein the feminine models (we read them as modeling, even if they are not “really” professional models) pose for appraisal. Clothing—“gay hats” and “split dresses”—defines these women, They are, literally, unmoving, and uninvolved an any activity except standing still to be inspected.
While their “satin trousers” are markedly different from the wasp-waisted dresses in fashion for U.S. women at this time, it is not difference that the photo reinforces. The women here perform the “classic” function of women in art: they are beautiful objects. They are not active participants in their landscape; in fact, “violence and terror everywhere” leaves them untouched. Superficially, the photos of these “girls” in their exotic costumes, others the subjects, distances them from the viewer. But on closer inspection, this photograph reiterates the gender norm in U.S. culture, whereby popular discourse constructs women as spectacle and decoration, apolitical.

A later example from the Vietnam era illustrates how NG evokes the second role symbolically available to the photographed woman—motherhood—to reiterate Western values at the site of the Other. Again, NG makes no pretense about neutral reporting—the story is entitled “American Special Forces in Action in Viet Nam: How Coolness and Character Averted a Bloodbath” (1965). But again, even though the article is replete with American propaganda, the text and captions do acknowledge the disrupted lives of the people of Vietnam and the toll of war. It is the photographs that ease the U.S. reader into an uncritical view of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, which reassures the armchair tourist that the folks over there appreciate our help.

Toward the end of the article, spread on the top three-fourths of two pages, is a photograph of an unidentified, dark-skinned woman with two children. One breast is bared for a nursing infant, while she gazes downward into the laughing face of her other child. Again, the caption tells us a great deal about how this photo functions: “Mountain Madonna, with one child at her breast and another laughing into her face, sees her way of life threatened.” It goes on to detail how hill people have been forced into refugee camps. While the second half of the caption informs the reader, in a fairly neutral manner, of the struggles facing women like this mother, this is not at all what the photograph tells us. This is a photo of a “mountain madonna,” serenely nursing her baby, beautifully fulfilling a woman’s most “natural” role. Immersed in the gaze of her happy, apparently trouble-free child, she is oblivious to the military realities that “threaten her way of life.” The photograph accomplishes (at least) two functions. First, it overwhelms the information in the article and in the caption that hints at (though does not critically address) a more complex reality than shown in the photo. Second, it depicts an entirely decipherable representation of a woman. The photo makes
sense because it affirms a humanistic “universal:” the feminine desire to mother, to offer a breast for sustenance.  

I draw my final example from a 1967 article entitled “Behind the Headlines in Viet Nam.” The lead-in photo for the article shows a wide expanse of river, taking up the entire page, framed by a green branch and a bright red flower. In the bottom left hand corner, two women in flowing clothing stand idly. One faces away from the camera, while the other’s long black hair obscures her face. The caption reads: “Flame-tipped bough hangs above girls of Hue wading in the River of Perfumes.” Interestingly, the first paragraph of the article, printed on the right hand side of the page, begins on a critical note:

When my friend Thien, a Vietnamese editor, asked if he could speak quite frankly, I said yes, please do.

“Well,” he said, “you Americans send many soldiers to fight for our country, but you really don’t know very much about our people.”

Quite frankly, I had to admit that he was not entirely wrong.

But the photograph that frames this text also overwhelms it. The calm of the water and, more significantly, the decoration of the girls, tells the reader something quite different than the quote from “Thien.”

This photo, like NG itself, seeks to demonstrate the “timeless” quality of the native. The title embedded in this photos implies that the “girls,” and their simple, peaceful pose, will reveal more about the country of Vietnam than other news reports. The beautiful girls are a truth that supersedes the war. Their graceful tip-toeing among the rocks in a glassy river will, promises the converged message of photo and captions, reveal everything the reader needs to know about the Vietnamese people. The photo will address the lack of knowledge so politely pointed out by “Thien.”

The very next photograph in this article strives for the same effect—the beautiful objectification of women in order to demonstrate a native naturalness that imply an echo of U.S. womanhood. The photo shows two smiling women posing by an old temple. One holds a large straw hat. The caption reads: “oblivious of war that swirls to the city’s edge, young women stroll in Hue’s Citadel, seat of Viet Nam’s last ruling dynasty.” And in case that isn’t clear enough, the caption ends “Here the author found a Viet Nam of serenity and beauty seldom reflected in the daily headlines.” Here the author also found a blameless, timeless, ahistorical juncture, where the realities of U.S. military presence in Vietnam are
merely flitting shadows across a laughing woman’s face. Again, the women here are only beautiful objects. They do nothing but pose, invite a look, and are, in fact, “oblivious of war.” They reify the idealization of womanhood sought by anxious editors in a time of rapidly changing sex and gender norms and a deeply troubling war.

A final example from this article is a full-page photo of a woman in a yellow outfit, on the street, isolated by the photographer, and standing out from her schoolmates, who wear white and are not facing the camera. The woman in yellow clutches fruit and is smiling broadly, looking back at something out of the reader’s range of vision. The caption simply describes these feminine specimens: “Flowing hair, draped over shoulders, and ao dai, gossamer gowns split to the waist and worn over trousers, identify Hue schoolgirls; one carries grapefruit. Besides claiming Viet Nam’s handsomest palaces and tombs, the city boasts of having the prettiest girls.”50 Removed from any context whatsoever, smiling and carefree, hands full of nature’s bounty, the woman pictured here not only encourages an uncritical look at Vietnam, but also conforms in every way to U.S. gender norms. Thin, full-busted, young, smiling, light skinned, prettily dressed, and posing, she is isolated in the frame like a spokesmodel for grapefruit. She performs the photographic function of beautiful object, available for viewing.

Post-Vietnam issues of NG do not repeat the blatantly pro-American rhetoric of these articles. The war changed many aspects of United States popular culture and, most significantly for NG, ushered in an entire generation of more demanding media consumers. “Happy-speak” reporting no longer sold. But, as I will show in the next section, photographs of women in NG continue to provide the same kind of touristic view of beautiful women, where women from around the world are only faint echoes of the models and mothers so widely depicted in U.S. media.

III. Pretty Woman: Depoliticizing the Postcolonial World

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

In the 1970s, there was a smattering of articles in the mainstream media devoted to a supposed shift in National Geographic editorial policies.51 The civil unrest of the Vietnam war era had irrevocably altered the nature of United States discourse and the National Geographic Society felt pressure to present more
“newsworthy” material. The editor in the late seventies, Gilbert M. Grosvenor, grandson to Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, made this position clear by declaring in 1977, “We have an obligation to cover the world as it is. We would lose credibility if we didn’t.” He added “But we really haven’t changed that much. We would be damn fools to do so.”

Though the contrast between the “kindly” coverage of the world in the pre-Vietnam era NG and the realities depicted every night on the local news broadcasts was simply too marked to escape comment, the Editor realized only superficial changes would be necessary to retain credibility. While internal debate among Society Board members indicates their reluctance to enact even minor changes, the force of Grosvenor’s argument won out. A magazine that presented itself as dedicated to scientific accuracy could no longer continue, after the Vietnam war, to depict only what was pleasant and not unduly critical. Thus, NG “preserves the sense that it has a grip on reality, while retaining its message that all is fundamentally right with the world.”

In the following photographs, anything disturbing or discomforting about reality dissolves in the full-color glamour of beautiful women and girls or mothers prettily attending to their children.

The November, 1989, cover of NG is a good place to begin. In this photo, a young girl stands in a rough raft, ankle-deep in water. She holds a pole and is looking at something to the photographer’s left. Her face is wreathed in a large smile. To the right, capital letters announce the name of the article this photo ostensibly signifies: “VIETNAM: Hard Road to Peace.” Indeed, the girl’s circumstances seems difficult; her clothes, upon close inspection, look dirty and worn. But the viewer’s eye must be drawn to her pretty, light, smiling face. The smile outshines the message of the title. Vietnam may be traveling a hard road, but this pretty little girl’s expression, her big smile of even, white teeth, shows only happiness and contentment. Twenty years after the war NG seeks another depiction of Vietnam that finds a peaceful, quaint country “behind the headlines.”

A 1991 article entitled “The Eloquent Surma of Ethiopia” is another example of the magazine’s insistence upon the power of the photo to portray a world, a people, untouched by the disquieting realities of the postcolonial world. Ironically, the editors do not even dignify the “eloquent” Surma people with an article. The story consists of large, lush photos, depicting the colorful lives of these natives, i.e., lip plates, large ear piercings, body painting, and violent stick fights, with small captions to explain the photos and relate short quotes from unidentified Surma informants.

The photos seem to almost completely squeeze out the
captions, which are constricted in space and content, by the huge, artistic photos. At first glance, this article seems the epitome of exoticification of the Other; it pays glowing tribute to primitive body decorations and the dramatic difference between “us” and “them.” It is the photos of the women that, upon closer reading, indicate that the subtext of this article is to reassure the reader that while these people may look shocking, their non-Western ways are really not so different from our own neighborhood.55

The photos in this story almost exclusively depict the female subjects as either engaged in beauty rituals and ornamentation or as merely posed subjects for the (unseen) photographer.56 One two-page photograph foregrounds young women decorating their faces while boys loll on the farther shore. The caption only tells us that these girls are “developing their painting skills.”57 Another two-page spread is devoted to the women’s ornamentation. Two smaller photos are overwhelmed by an entire page, with no captions to mar the composition, of a head shot of the “the largest example” of the lip plate the photographers saw.58 In the other two photos, a woman crafts a lip plate, while a laughing infant on her lap reaches for the plate. The second photo shows a woman, watching her own hands as she removes her lip plate. The caption gives only a little more information than the photos—the size of the lip plates connote how many cattle a husband must pay for his wife and “At about age 20, a woman’s lower lip is pierced, a painful process that can lead to infection.” The caption barely hints at the complex social and economic significance of the plate, but the photos, especially the large, portrait-style one, overwhelm even that hint. This woman may look odd, the photo tells us, but she is as an object of the camera’s gaze, isolated from any context; she is a thing of beauty, even in her exotic decoration. On the other page, the photo of the woman with her child reassures the reader that while the lip plate that stretches this woman’s face might shock you, you will recognize the happy, loving interaction she shares with her baby. And you might not understand why a woman would have a pierced lip like this, but you can understand her pretty, self-absorbed feminine fussing about her appearance.

A final example from this article will illustrate, even in this highly constrained piece, the disjunction between caption and photo. A small, square photo of two young women, with bare breasts, and posed against a thatched roof, is captioned “For girls, innocence disappears at puberty when they must begin wearing an apron of iron beading weighing about ten pounds to discourage sex.”59 Though hardly a nuanced account of Surma gender norms, the caption does
indicate a custom that is perhaps disturbing and inexplicable to the U.S. reader. However, the photo assuages that disturbance in its calmly ordered frame. One young woman looks steadily into the camera as the other turns a pretty profile. The skirts, described as heavy and cumbersome, appear as merely shiny beads around their waists, arranged decorously over their thighs. They are beautiful young girls, modeling for a photographer who seeks to show them not “wearing an apron of iron beads” but exotically decorated, and posed for leisurely surveillance.

A recent article in *NG* undertook coverage of a conflict that has received fairly widespread media coverage. Entitled “Struggle of the Kurds,” this 1992 article is a good example of some of the more controversial or newsworthy stories appearing in *NG* the past twenty years or so. While several of the photos in this article effectively convey the toll of military action in the area, the photos strictly limit the representation of women. A full-page photo of a woman rocking her infant in a cradle slung from a tree is captioned “Lives hang in the balance as Sbry Ahmed cradles her son Howkar in what is left of Qalat Dizah. The Iraqi government has imposed a strict blockade of food and fuel now as Free Kuridstan . . .”[60] Leaving aside the cutesy parallel between the hanging cradle and “lives in the balance,” this caption offers significant information about the political realities of this region and the consequences for those living there. But the huge photo depicts a calm domestic scene, another unidentified woman bending over her work in the background while Sbry Ahmed bends lovingly over her son. The recognizable feature of this photo—the mother-child bond—overwhelms the meaning in the caption—disrupted lives, hardship. The “struggle of the Kurds” cannot begin to be elucidated by this photo.

*NG* does not so much ignore the lived, concrete experiences of peoples outside the United States,[61] shaped and, at times, shattered by postcolonial economic and military realities, but rather, glosses them over, beautifies them. These pin-ups absolve our roles as photographers, consumers, and tourists in a postcolonial world. They tell us what we have always known, about the world and about women.

Conclusion

There’s not enough stress placed on the value of these, different cultures. That they really are valuable. And I get more of the impression that they’re—they might be—quaint and interesting and
folklorish and of interest but not of intrinsic value to us as a human population on the face of the earth. That in fact, they’re dispensable.
—DR-4, respondent to survey on NG’s photographs

In the 100th anniversary celebration issue, the editors of NG published a 1972 photograph of a bare breasted woman from the Tasaday—“a Stone Age tribe of cave dwellers found in the wilds of the Philippine island of Mindandao”62—nursing her child. After this caption, there is a paragraph explaining NG’s history of publishing photos of barebreasted “native” women: “The portrayal of native women in their natural mode of dress in the magazine became a hallmark—and a source of countless jokes. For generations of impressionable youngsters, these pictures, along with those depicting other exotic scenes, constituted their first exposure to non-Western ways.”63 National Geographic, one hundred years after its inception, refuses to admit to a reading of their naked beauties that suggests anything but purely scientific curiosity and a desire to portray non-Western ways with respect and empathy. This is an instance where the caption does freeze the image; it demands we see nothing but the beautiful mother and child. They are completely isolated within the frame and the photographer remains an invisible, unfelt presence, while the realities of the postcolonial world appear to be far from the “wilds” of Mindannao.64

Once again, NG employed a simple, posed photo of a woman doing what all U.S. readers can understand and appreciate: A woman being beautiful and natural, and caring for a child. Though the caption explains that, for the photographer, visiting this island was a “mind-blowing” experience, there is nothing in this photograph to blow the viewer’s mind. We see only what we have always seen, and we leave the yellow covers with the comfortable feeling that, in our open-minded attitude toward non-Western ways, we appreciate the colorful diversity of our human family. As Lutz and Collins write on the photographs in National Geographic:

They do not caricature or denigrate the non-Western world in the ways that other popular culture forms do—Indiana Jones films, evening news’ rendition of Arab terrorists, or cartoon cannibals, for instance. Neither do they portray people as powerless victims. Their tone is respectful. Yet this humanism cannot find in the third world anything more than a pale reflection of American values. For others to be equal, they must be more or less the same. Their rituals are strikingly
beautiful, but they do not suggest a radically different religious philosophy . . . Mothers in Africa may carry babies on their backs or in strange baskets. But this does not suggest a radical difference in how mothering is constructed; under the surface it reveals the universality of the mother-child bond. And so on and on—differences that could tell us something important about history, differences that could be turned critically on practices in our own society become construed as superficial, even if attractive, flourishes that can be pulled back to reveal confirmation of important Western values.65

And what better site to demonstrate those values than a woman’s body? Just as photographs and media everywhere in the United States inform the viewer what a woman should look like and what roles she should fulfill, so NG reassures the American reader that around the world, women are doing their job.

I do not want to argue that every picture of a woman in National Geographic demands this kind of response. The complexities of photography, as well as the reader/consumer relation to media, precludes such a simplistic assessment.66 Nor do I wish to be included with those feminist theoreticians who dismiss the notion that resistance may be enacted by utilizing the performative qualities of femininity.67 Finally, I do not want to echo some postmodern theorists whose arguments seem to make the Other so unknowable as to be a different species than white Americans.68 But I do want to insist that, on the whole, photographs of women in the National Geographic magazine assert the supremacy of U.S. values, values about gender roles, feminine beauty, and difference. And it is this difference, as Lutz and Collins point out in the above quote, that might actually teach us something about practices in our own society.

Montgomery writes that the National Geographic never leaves the viewer “alone or unguided, abandoned at the windy edge where the natural world falls off from allure and sentimentality into an impenetrable resistance (to the mind, to language) into a momentary unutterable is-ness.”69 An alternative to the images presented in NG would attempt to visually represent that moment of utter confusion, when the world overwhelms and the viewer cannot easily articulate her experience. I have in mind the anthropological method of “thick description” made famous by Clifford Geertz. In Geertz’s conceptualization, culture consists of “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.”70 A photographer might attempt the same kind of “reading over the shoulders,” and collect the events of daily life, in an mass of almost uninterpretable details.
One cannot photograph the postcolonial world, and invite thoughtful response to the complexities of travel, of contact with cultures and countries other than one’s own, by assuming a tourist stance behind the camera. Instead, as Iain Chambers suggests, one must not expect to “come home.” For Chambers, travel that faces rather than erases difference, which acknowledges the fluid and confusing hybridity of identity, offers a more conscionable way for the First World citizen to journey in the postcolonial world. He argues:

To travel in this zone, without maps and charts, is to experience the dis-location of the intellectual subject and his—the gender is deliberate—mastery of the word/world . . . In this disjunctive moment, the object of the intellectual gaze—the cultures and habits of the “natives” of local, national, or global “territories”—can no longer be confined to an obvious chart of map, and there freeze-dried as a fixed or essential component of “knowledge.”

The viewers of National Geographic who never “travel” beyond the comfort of its yellow covers will not face this challenge to their knowledge. Women will continue to pose, static and consumable, open and naturally flirty. And the Other, always beautiful and always female, will remain fixed beneath a “kindly and uncritical” gaze.

Notes

I must note that although this paper is highly critical of National Geographic publishing policies and the subsequent consumption of its images of women in particular, I am aware that like any other popular culture text, NG may be utilized by reader/consumers at more than one site, in more than one way. That is to say, there may be subversive possibilities here that I do not address in the paper. I relate my own experience with the NG in order to briefly illustrate one way that NG may function in contradiction to a hegemonic reiteration of racism or sexism. (See Jeana Wooley’s essay Black, White, Other, Lise Funderburg, ed., New York: William Morrow, 1994, for an example of a contradictory reading of NG.) Thus, this paper does not assume that white, “mainstream” subscribers to NG cannot find complicated messages about Otherness in the photos of this magazine. I do, however, focus on one specific way that NG does reinforce the status quo and will leave the question of contradictory subversive readings for a later essay.

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Graduate Cultural Studies Conference at Bowling Green was also helpful. I am also grateful to my parents, Dr. John Neuhaus and A Lori Neuhaus, who were part of that audience and offered much support and encouragement.


2“The women of the world are portrayed in sometimes striking parallel to popular images of American womanhood of the various periods of the magazine’s production—for instance, as mothers and as beautiful objects.” Lutz and Collins, 167.

3“While is may make mention of poverty, illiteracy, or homelessness among the inhabitants of Mexico City, Hong Kong, or Calcutta, it seldom links these conditions with a world economic system that has forced these populations into a second-class citizenship.” Patricia Raub, “The National Geographic Magazine’s Portrayal of Urban Ethnicity: The Celebration of Cultural Pluralism and the Promise of Social Mobility,” *Journal of Urban History* 14 (1988): 367.


8Montgomery, 12.

9Lutz and Collins, 22.

10Lutz and Collins, 24.

11Lutz and Collins, 27.

12Montgomery, 14.


17Lutz and Collins, 61.

18Urry, 136.
19Sontag, 10.
20Priscilla Boniface and Peter J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in “The Global Village”* (London: Routledge, 1993), 158. See also Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), on tourist knowledge: “It is, above all, to see in the journey only a verification of the self and the same, a confirmation that refuses to register encounters with the obscure, the inscrutable, the unknown, the unspoken. It is to assume that all is light and there is no mystery . . . .” 31.
22Raub, 346.
23At the same time, I am not arguing that this happens with all tourists, at all sites. Nor do I want to oversimplify the complex economic realities in countries where many people rely on tourism to earn a living. However, having been a tourist myself, I cannot ignore the fact that, as a whole, tourism (as a white American) is conducive to this kind of superficial understanding.
24Lutz and Collins, 167.
25Montgomery, 30.
26Lutz and Collins, 23
29Lutz and Collins, 165.
30Boniface, 34.
31Oliver P. Newman, “Bare Feet and Burros of Haiti,” *National Geographic*(September 1944).
32David Duncan, “Yap Meets the Yanks,” *National Geographic* (March 1946).
33Ritchin, 54.
34For a striking example of NG blinkered reporting, see Robert H. Mosier, “The GI and the Kids of Korea: America’s Fighting Men Share Their Food, Clothing, and Shelter with Children of a War-torn Land,” *National Geographic* (May 1953).
35Montgomery, 27.
36Lutz and Collins, 100. I differ slightly from Lutz and Collins. While they emphasize the way *National Geographic* claim to “innocent” photographs made a political statement, I find the disjuncture between the text and the photographs an even more significant, and unique, aspect of Vietnam war photography in the NG.
37“. . . every picture is so finalized, so bloated by technique, by the event of its own witness, that nothing remains for the mind except obedience.” Montgomery, 26.
38Lutz and Collins, 100.
39See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove P., 1967). Fanon notes the importance of “the grin” in the construction of the Black Other (49). His own
term for the happy acquiescence to colonialism is “Sho’ good eatin’!” and he argued that it was this grinning and bowing that was the cornerstone of subjugation: “... I discovered my blackness, my ethnic character, and I was battered down by tom toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin.’” 112. See also Lutz and Collins: “The smile is a key way of achieving idealization of the other, permitting the projection of the ideal of the happy life,” 96. And Montgomery writes, commenting on the need for criticism of NG, that “the smile should be inverted,” 9.


41See Lutz and Collins, 176–7, for a brief discussion of the way the evolution of commercial photography influenced NG.

42Race is also a factor in the level of activity portrayed by photographs in NG. See Lutz and Collins: “Individuals coded as black were most likely to be depicted in high levels of activity—engaged in strenuous work or athletics,” 61.


44See Lutz and Collins, 169–71, for a discussion of NG’s use of mother-child photographs during the 1950s. They argue that widespread postwar anxieties about women’s roles and the burgeoning cult of domesticity of the time deeply influenced NG’s choice of photographs. They also draw a parallel between the photos in NG and a well-known cover of Life magazine in 1956, where a white woman and her young child gaze into each other’s eyes. The headline reads “The American Woman: Her Achievements and Troubles,” 170.

45Sochurek, 58.

46See Alice Walker, “Giving the Party: Aunt Jemima, Mammy, and the Goddess Within,” MS., May/June 1994, for a discussion of the significance of milk-giving in the construction of a racialized, sexualized other. Note also the use of the term “Madonna”—the ultimate trope of motherhood nurturing the world. I am indebted to Kelly Austin for this insight.


48Lutz and Collins use the term “the halo of green” (109) to describe the NG’s tendency to present Third World people as connected to nature.

49White, 4.

50White, 12.


52MacDougall, 8.
53 Collins and Lutz, 279.
55 This is probably the boldest claim in my essay. These photos are indeed deeply shocking at first. Even the most astute reader may see only utter difference in the photographs of the Surma. But I believe that to be comprehended at all, these pictures must in some way reiterate our (U.S.) notions of gender. That is to say, extreme body manipulations on a male body cannot be depicted by NG because that would elicit a far more unsettling reading. I cannot argue that the photos here of Surma lip piercing do not reinforce first and foremost the idea of the “primitive.” There can be no question that profoundly racist conceptualizations of African peoples strongly influence this article. But I also want to suggest that there is nothing in these photos that truly challenges the humanism of the magazine’s stated and implicit mission. Decontextualizing the body manipulations of the Surma and “artistically” rendering them along accepted lines of gender allows the U.S. reader to leave the magazine ultimately unaffected.
56 This article emphasized the non-intrusive, welcomed presence of the photographers. The back cover “On Assignment” feature that presents a few paragraphs about the photographer’s experience and adventures, characterizes these two authors as being “kindred spirits with a deep love for Africa.” One of the interactions between the photographer and a Surma is described in this way: “Chinoi, a big, wild-looking fellow, was gentle and sweet with us. Angela healed his sore knee with hot water and an ointment” (85). This is more than a little reminiscent of the pre-Vietnam NG coverage of wars that portrayed all American GIs as helpful, respectful, and necessary to the well-being of the “other” country. Another example: “One day one of Kolaholi’s wives, her plate removed, kissed Carol, who experienced an extraordinary warm, wet sensation from her cheekbone to her chin” (88). The photographer receives a kiss not unlike one she might get from her loving St. Bernard pet. Again, it is not only racism that prescribes this infantilizing and dehumanization of the Surma people in this article. The writing is also shaped by the mission of the magazine that claims a neutral, even benevolent, position to the societies it depicts.
57 Beckwith and Fisher, 86.
58 Beckwith and Fisher, 88.
59 Beckwith and Fisher, 97.
61 See Raub for an account of NG’s portrayal of the Third World within U.S. borders.
63 McCurry.
64 Though National Geographic maintains that the Tasaday were an “authentic” tribe, most scholars and journalists now recognize this group of people as actors who played the part of a “Stone Age” civilization. It was a complex hoax orchestrated by the
Philippine government. This of course adds another layer of irony to the magazine’s publication of the photograph in 1988.

65Lutz and Collins, 277.

66See Constance Penley, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” Cultural Studies, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), for a good example of a critique that takes this factor into account. For an example of a NG article that seems to defy my characterization of its photography, see Jodi Cobb, photographer, “Hong Kong: Plight of the Boat People,” National Geographic (February 1991).

67See Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993), as possibly the best-known argument against that line of feminist theory.


69Montgomery, 19.


72Chambers, 95.