

Fashioning the Other: Representations of Brazilian Women's Dress in *National Geographic*, 1888-1988

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Abstract

As a popular 'scientific' journal, *National Geographic* is a substantial source for the formation of many Brazilian stereotypes in the 19th and 20th-century American popular imagination. Analysing how *National Geographic* divided, organized, charted and narrated Brazil, through its visual and textual representations of Brazilian dress, reveals the oppressive arrangements of race, gender, sexuality and identity that masquerade as objective knowledge rather than subjective expression.

This paper will apply and develop Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' to examine *National Geographic's* representations of Brazilian dress and adornment from 1888 to 1988, within the context of the geo-political relations between Brazil and the United States. Pratt defines 'contact zones' as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'. Here we can understand 'contact' not as a static, deterministic state but as an intricate and, crucially, *continually shifting* process of cultural exchange, one that is characterized by conquest and colonisation. Representation in such a zone emerges as a complex cultural process, in which meaning is not inherent in the clothing itself, but has been fashioned by *National Geographic* in response to modulations in the balance of power between North and South. Whilst the site of contact continually shifts, the determining of its outcome remains the same: the textual and photographic propagation of Western hegemony over the 'Other'.