

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'.

1. Introduction

As a popular 'scientific' and educational journal, *National Geographic* has positioned itself as a voice of authority within mainstream American print media, offering what purports to be an unprejudiced 'window onto the world'. By the nature of the genre, newspapers and magazines are usually compiled for sporadic reading, easy digestion, and to be quickly discarded, but in *National Geographic*, feature articles are lengthy and intended not for a quick glimpse, but for extended reading and reflection. This paper will examine the role that Brazilian women's dress, and the representation of Brazilian women's dress, have played in *National Geographic* as a means of framing and solidifying an idea of Brazil in the American popular imagination.

It will approach dress not simply as cloth but as a system of communication, whose many meanings are not fixed but continually informed and to an extent, even performed, by its visual, material, and textual representation. Although images of Brazilian men's dress do exist in *National Geographic*, it is through the wealth of information on Brazilian women's dress that one can discern how differing modes of femininity are used to communicate larger cultural values, corresponding with Vron Ware's argument that depictions of femininity articulate 'powerful, if subtle, racist messages that confirm not only cultural difference but also cultural superiority'.¹

In 1936 the President of the *National Geographic* Society (1920-1954), Gilbert H. Grosvenor, affirmed the importance of the *National Geographic* photograph: 'Even more important than their aesthetic appeal is the educational, scientific and historical value of THE GEOGRAPHIC's [sic] pictures.'² What Grosvenor seemed unaware of is that the act of making a photograph automatically de-contextualises what is in front of the camera and places what is photographed into new contexts. Photography renders to visual representation a distinctive realism, in the sense of making real, that paintings and drawings cannot produce; as Susan Sontag acknowledges, whilst a drawing is always understood as an interpretation, a photograph is often treated as a transparency, even though it is, 'as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are'.³

This paper will apply and develop Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' to *National Geographic's* treatment of Brazilian women's dress and adornment from 1888 to 1988. 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'.⁴ Here we might 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 colonization. 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 America and Brazil. This paper will identify three particular periods in which the 'contact zone' can be seen to have operated in three differing ways.

2. 1888-1938: *National Geographic* and an Ethnographic aesthetic

Although *National Geographic* was established in 1888, the first year that the magazine reported on Brazil was in 1906, when three articles were published. This coincided with the third Pan-American conference, which was held in Rio de Janeiro in July 1906. Pan-Americanism had emerged at the close of the nineteenth century as America actively sought to expand its commercial, social, political, economic and military contact with the nations of Central and South America. A narrative of American expansionism was mythologized in *National Geographic* by articles that stressed active, masculine pursuits in the Amazon region. See for example: 'Exploring the valley of the Amazon', 'Through Brazil to the summit of Mount Roraima', and 'In Humboldt's Wake', referencing the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who was renowned for his romantic descriptions of lush vegetation curving and swelling in the tropics.

Within this locale, Brazilian women were presented as exotic specimens, divorced from culture and civilization, awaiting discovery and interpretation by visiting American men. As Gillian Rose contends, 'Woman becomes Nature, Nature becomes Woman, and both can thus be burdened with men's meaning and invite interpretation by masculinist discourse.'⁵ Naturalizing Brazilian women, by emphasizing their nudity as a visible marker of primitiveness, reinforced a dynamic rhetoric of difference between fully clothed civilized American males and partially clothed uncivilized Brazilian females. Indigenous women's lack of dress placed them as objects of fascination and racial inferiority, justifying American dominance in Brazil, a location perceived to be ripe for commercial exploitation and economic expansion in the early decades of the twentieth century. This is exemplified by the writings of Theodore Roosevelt, who participated in a scientific expedition in the Amazon region in 1913 to 1914. According to Roosevelt: 'This country and the adjacent regions, forming the high interior of Western Brazil will surely someday support a large industrial population and will be a healthy home for a considerable agricultural and pastoral population.'⁶

In *National Geographic*, photography provided an order to the unfamiliarity of indigenous women, influenced and reinforced by its use in science as an observational and recording tool for Euro-American exploration, surveillance and classification. A clear example can be seen by comparing a *National Geographic* photograph from 1926, with a slave daguerreotype produced by Swiss Natural Historian Louis Agassiz in Brazil in 1865. In both photographs, difference is easily established by the formal and standardised mode of photographing the subject, which tends towards that of the anonymous type: the figure positioned centrally in the frame, facing the camera head on and gazing directly into the lens. Compositional effort on the part of the photographer is reduced, and variability in the resulting photograph rests on the particularities and peculiarities of the subject and her immediate environment. These images invite more attentive viewing from the audience, who becomes aware of cultural difference as provided through veritable physical characteristics.

Another *National Geographic* photograph 'documents' the provision of clothing to three anonymous women. Two of the women are now fully clothed, whilst one is still partially naked except for a cloth covering her bottom half. The accompanying caption reads: 'The ladies at the left, having just been garbed for the first time in their lives, look askance at their still naked sister'.⁷ These women *were* previously dressed, just not in a Euro-American style. Their adoption of Western clothing is understood as a sign of their receptiveness to reculturation in accordance with American standards of development, whereas notions of passivity, childishness, and backwardness, intrinsically linked to the concept of shame that is associated with nudity in the West, isolate the partially naked woman as part of a supposedly inferior group. The exploitative and reductive shot of her, head shyly tilted down and nakedness fully exposed to the camera, underscores her position as a dehumanised object. Norman Denzin writes that the camera operates 'as an extension of the oppressor's control over the oppressed', through the ability of the photographer to enforce his licence to control the actions and movements of the Other.⁸ Many more photographs like this appeared in *National Geographic* until 1933, the year that Franklin Roosevelt took office and stressed reciprocal trade

agreements between America and Brazil. As both countries worked to recover from the economic destitutions of the Depression, there was a lapse of six years in the magazine's coverage on Brazil.

3. 1939-1945: *National Geographic* and a Fashion aesthetic

The outbreak of war in Europe signalled an intensification of Roosevelt's 'Good Neighbour' policy of 1934, which had emphasized a less interventionist approach to relations within the Western hemisphere. A shift in the treatment of Brazilian women's dress took place in *National Geographic*, which provided a new means of encoding America's imperial ambitions, and continued until peacetime in 1945. A new style of fashion photography emerged which focused on white middle-class Brazilian women living and working in urban centres such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, and drew upon documentary images of New York City produced by, for example, American photographer Berenice Abbott in the 1930s.

A clear example can be seen by comparing a *National Geographic* photograph from 1939, with an image of New York City taken by Abbott in 1938. Shot from a distance, both photographs emphasize modernity and progress through dynamic architecture and busy streets, populated by workers and shoppers dressed in Western-style fashions. In *National Geographic*, Brazilian women's adoption of Western dress was the ultimate expression of Brazil's capability for political change, progress, and Americanization in other spheres, extendable to her potential to join the Allied war effort. There is a sense of rhythm and drive that connects these photographs to contemporary American fashion imagery produced by practitioners such as Martin Munkacsi, Louis Dahl Wolfe and Toni Frissell in the 1930s and 1940s. This can be seen by comparing a *National Geographic* photograph from 1939, with an image of Diana Vreeland taken by Munkacsi for *American Vogue* in 1936. In both photographs the dominant female figure, admittedly exaggerated by Munkacsi for dramatic effect, strides purposefully forward. She is dressed in expensive Western tailoring, with a clutch bag tucked under her arm, and a hat jauntily perched on her head. At one with the city, she is the sartorial embodiment of emancipation, modernity, and progress. Inscripting the *National Geographic* photograph into the genre of fashion photography marks a change in the way that we view the subjects. As opposed to the objectifying gaze of ethnographic photography, which rendered its indigenous subjects passive, the 'snapshot' aesthetic of fashion photography foregrounds the white subject's potential for activity. Different photographic genres guide the reader's interpretation of images, suggesting here a contrast between the *inactivity* of inferior indigenous women, and the *activity* of superior white women in Brazil. As Linda Steet has pointed out in her examination of the magazine's coverage of the Arab world, different levels of civilization and different styles of femininity are measured by, 'evaluating the position of women against a "specifically white femininity"'.⁹ Images such as these stressed a dominant American sense in *National Geographic*, and were mobilised during a period when developing theories of race and eugenics reinforced the notion of the intrinsic superiority of the white race, above all other races.

After America's entry into the war in December 1941, Brazil played a significant role as a source of vital war materials, and as an aid in helping to maintain military security.¹⁰ Once Brazil had formally declared war on Germany and Italy in August 1942, an idea of Brazilian women's dress, which was heavily influenced by contemporary ideals of American fashion and femininity, was amplified and consolidated in *National Geographic*. A clear example can be seen in a photograph from 1942. Lined up in pairs with military precision, a group of fit, healthy young white Brazilian women drill at the inauguration of Sao Paulo's Stadium. Dressed in white plimsolls, socks, polo shirts and dark shorts, they are primed and ready for action. Their adoption of sportswear feeds into contemporary American fashion trends, as can be seen in a 1941 *Vogue* advertisement for *Best and Best's* line of Americana clothing, designed for women engaged in active pursuits, or taking on a broader range of work tasks. The caption that accompanied the *National Geographic* photograph reinforced this idea: 'Freed from the traditional *chaperon* of Latin America is the maid of modern Brazil.'¹¹ Yet there is a visual symmetry between this photograph and the one printed on the adjacent page in *National Geographic*, which depicts large quantities of Brazilian beef lined up in rows drying in the sun. Aligning Brazilian women with national industry has a dehumanising effect, showing that there is still a degree of conquest, whether conscious or unconscious, that pervaded the magazine's representations of Brazilian women's dress during wartime.

4. 1946-1987: *National Geographic* and a Snapshot aesthetic

One phenomenon of the 'contact zone' is the 'anti-conquest' narrative, which Pratt defines as 'strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same

moment as they assert European hegemony'.¹² Pratt explores the underlying desire of 'anti-conquest' writers to provide the intellectual apparatus of European capitalist expansion, whilst avoiding or even challenging 'older imperial rhetorics of conquest'.¹³ The war marked the transformation of America into a leading global superpower, with strategic interests that extended beyond the Western hemisphere. There was a lapse of 8 years in *National Geographic's* coverage on Brazil, echoing the waning American public and political interest in Brazilian affairs in the immediate aftermath of the war.

The magazine returned its gaze to Brazil in 1952, reflecting America's growing concern over the rise of Communism in Latin America. There was a focus on indigenous women living in the Amazon region and a distinctive 'snapshot' aesthetic was used to photograph them, which contrasted markedly with the measured and preconceived strategies formerly employed to document indigenous women in the pre-war period. Off-kilter composition and the un-posed manner of individuals or groupings suggest these photographs appear more by happy accident than by calculated design. The subjects *seem* to have forgotten the presence of the camera and the composition is casual: a mark of the photographer's supposedly authentic connection to indigenous women, as someone who has gained knowledge otherwise inaccessible to outsiders, and is able to photograph them from a *supposedly* informed, albeit outsider's perspective.

Charlotte Cotton notes that 'the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject'.¹⁴ An example of Cotton's assertion can be seen in the apparent artlessness of a *National Geographic* photograph from 1959, which captures the author and his wife, dressed in ceremonial feathers, being carried on the shoulders of tribe members during, as the captions informs us, their inauguration as tribal ambassadors.¹⁵ The ostensibly unselfconscious, day-to-day nature of the photograph seems to confirm the idea that we are looking at a spontaneous moment in the life of the subjects, emphasizing that these are real people and real life situations that *National Geographic* is documenting. Nevertheless we can see a 'contact zone' in the form of the author's perspective, which both manipulates and highlights Otherness; despite his integration into the tribe through the adoption of indigenous dress, there is a world of difference between him and the remainder of the tribe. Dressing up for the author is a form of recreation, which masquerades as an appreciation of indigenous society, but is undercut by the author's ability to assume and exploit the duality of his identity. As Homi Bhabha has argued, mimicry 'is the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power'.¹⁶ This photograph functions under the quasi-ethnographic pretence of the author as participant-observer, as someone who is intimately connected to the Other, and as such provides an example of the 'anti-conquest' narrative in operation.

In addition to the persistent naturalisation of the photographic activity, indigenous women's dress was captured from an observational perspective that suggested it was a cultural artefact in need of being saved, and that *National Geographic* had the authority and responsibility to undertake this assignment. The 'salvage paradigm', to use Christopher Pinney's term, finds its parallel in Pratt's observation that, in their writing, colonial travellers frequently split 'contemporary non-European peoples off from their pre-colonial, and even colonial, pasts'.¹⁷ This she characterises as a form of 'archaeology' in which actual living people are recognised not as part of the present, but of another pre-European era. This is exemplified by Claude Levi-Strauss's memoir *Tristes Tropiques*, which recalled his explorations of the Brazilian interior in 1955.¹⁸ Levi-Strauss lamented the loss of differentiated tribal cultures as a result of contact with a potent monoculture. His desire to rescue in writing a disappearing people finds its equivalent in a *National Geographic* photograph from 1971, entitled 'The Three Graces'.¹⁹ Encoding the three women within a Euro-centric framework is a form of Othering, the association with Greek myth implied both backwardness and potential, since Greek culture provided the basis for and measure of European civilisation, but it was also a conventional way of using recognisable tropes to interpret a still unrecognisable culture.²⁰ The caption informs the reader that the women 'wore necklaces of dyed nutshells and almost nothing else'.²¹ Whilst *National Geographic* was responsive to generalised sartorial indicators of indigenous women, it was unaware of the highly nuanced symbolism, the result of adaptations to their changing lifestyles, which governed the styles, patterns, materials and colours of their dress. By discussing indigenous women's dress in the ethnographic present as if it had remained untouched since ancient times, *National Geographic* made manifest the maxim expressed by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, that:

one means for determining if fashion in dress exists as a concept among a group of people is to consider fashion in relation to the lifespan...If people in a society are generally not aware of change in the form of dress during their lifetimes, fashion does not exist in that society.²²

5. Conclusion

This paper has identified three particular periods in which the 'contact zone' can be seen to have operated in three differing ways throughout a century of *National Geographic's* representation of Brazilian women's dress. In examining the subjectivities of the *National Geographic* photograph, it is important to recognize the limitations of my own interpretations, which are inevitably guided by, and constructed through, my experiences of living and writing within the 'contact zone'.

Notes

¹ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 13-14.

² Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, 'The National Geographic Society and its Magazine', *National Geographic* 69: 1 (January, 1936): 128.

³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), pp. 6-7.

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: travel writing and transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

⁵ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.

⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1914), p. 217.

⁷ Albert Stephens, 'Exploring the valley of the Amazon in a hydroplane', *National Geographic* 69: 4 (April, 1926): 360.

⁸ Norman Denzin, 'Reflection on the Ethnographer's Camera', *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 7 (1986): 121.

⁹ Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 111.

¹⁰ Joseph Smith, *Brazil and the United States: Convergence and Divergence*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

¹¹ Herbert Phillips, 'Air Cruising Through New Brazil: A National Geographic reporter spots vast resources which the Republic's war declaration adds to strength of United Nations', *National Geographic* 72:4 (October, 1942): 519.

¹² Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

¹³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

¹⁴ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004), p. 137.

¹⁵ Harold Schultz, 'Children of the Sun and Moon', *National Geographic* 115:3 (March, 1959): 358.

¹⁶ Homi Bhaba, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds., Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 153.

¹⁷ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 45-56; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 135.

¹⁸ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Atheneum, 1974)

¹⁹ Jesco von Puttaker, 'Brazil protects her Cinta Largas', *National Geographic* 140:3 (September, 1971): 440.

²⁰ Christine M. Guth makes this point in discussing European traveller's responses to Japanese customs and arts in the second half of the 19th century (Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoos: tourism, collecting and Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004, p. 31).

²¹ Puttaker, 'Brazil protects her Cinta Largas', 440.

²² M. E. Roach-Higgins, Joanne B. Eicher, and Kim K. P. Johnson, *Dress and Identity* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995), p. 395.