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Title of extract: **Comfortable Strangers**

Name of Author: **Lutz, C. and Collins, J. L.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Reading National Geographic. Lutz, C. and Collins, J.L.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **University of Chicago Press**

Pages scanned: **1 - 14**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Heritage Representation AHAN7028**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

Date authorised: 02.10.12

Moodle/Powerpoint

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Comfortable Strangers: The Making of National Identity in Popular Photography

There they all flock to see, not really a world brought to their door, but themselves in every foreign and domestic disguise; themselves as they might be, convincingly photographed where they are not.

(Wescott 1928:18)

Over the course of the past century, *National Geographic* magazine has come to be one of the primary means by which people in the United States receive information and images of the world outside their own borders. While *National Geographic* covers a range of topics—including the geographic and cultural wonders of the United States, wildlife and nature stories, and accounts of exploration of space, the oceans, and the polar ice caps—a good portion of its text and photographs is devoted to images of the peoples and cultures of the third world. *National Geographic* identifies itself as a scientific and educational institution, and it is also located in a long tradition of travelogue as it sends its staff on expeditions to bring back stories and photos of faraway people and places. While these photographs and stories of curious and exotic practices can be perused and marveled at by readers in the privacy of their own homes, they draw people into contact with a much wider set of cultural ideas. More than simple documents,

both text and (to a less obvious extent) photographs call up and then reinforce or challenge shared understandings of cultural difference. ✕

Each issue of *National Geographic* magazine is seen by an estimated thirty-seven million people worldwide. Its subscription rate is the third largest for magazines in the United States—following *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest*. The magazine is used by schools as a teaching tool; it is subscribed to by middle-class parents as a way of contributing to the education of their children; its high prestige value affords it a place on coffee tables; its high-quality printing and binding and its reputation as a valuable reference tool mean that it is rarely thrown away, more frequently finding its way into attics and secondhand bookstores.

This book is concerned with *National Geographic's* contribution to one particular arena of popular culture—the promulgation of images of the world outside United States boundaries. It starts, not from the proposition that there is a “real” third world out there that better documentarians could find, but from the understanding that identity formation draws on images of the other. As Clifford has emphasized, the content of categories such as the non-Western or the “primitive” change over time as they are used to “construct a source, origin, or alterego, confirming some new ‘discovery’ within the territory of the Western self” (1988:212). The term “non-Western,” which bounds this project, is admittedly awkward. We use it in line with the evidence that all non-European peoples seem to play a similar self-contrastive role in a fundamental process of identity formation in middle-class, Euroamerican readers. In using this category to examine how cultural difference is construed, we follow the important ideological line that Europeans have drawn through the Mediterranean Sea (Amin 1989), separating themselves from all others. Nineteenth-century “Hellenomania,” which claimed Greece as the source of Western culture, has helped solidify the line, as has the postwar NATO alliance. The category non-Western is not meant to erase the diversity and complexity of cultures that actually exist or to discount the important distinctions that white, Western readers can and do make within the category.

In this sense, our book is not at all about the non-Western world but about its appropriation by the West, and *National Geographic's* role in that appropriation. It is not about how “realistic” Western images of that world are but about the imaginative spaces that non-Western peoples occupy and the tropes and stories that organize their existence in Western minds. The question then becomes, How do the images purveyed by *National Geographic* affect this space? Do they congeal popular

paradigms of evolutionary ascendancy? Do they emphasize contrastive work and evaluation? Or do they compel empathy and identification? Do they in some cases do both, drawing attention with an exotic element, and then—having captured their readers' attention—inviting them to imagine how they might feel in the setting depicted? We are further concerned with the *varieties* of identification that may be evoked. Does the identification rely on static humanistic principles that assert universal sameness across boundaries of race, class, gender, language, and politics, or on a progressive humanism that seeks to understand and historicize the differences that separate interconnected human beings?

As outlined in the preface, the concerns that motivated these questions were practical and political. They originated in a search for ways of teaching about the third world that did not objectify and were not paternalistic but that fostered both a sense of how lives around the globe are interconnected and a capacity for empathetic understanding. These and other issues have sparked interest across the social sciences and humanities in the question of how people represent various kinds of human differences—racial/ethnic, gender, historical and class—to themselves and each other. Most important is the fact that those understandings or strategies for describing human differences have helped create and reproduce social hierarchies. At the least, those hierarchies have created small humiliations and rejections, and have lessened opportunities. At the worst, they have abetted wars of extermination, lynchings, and rape. Representations may be deployed for or against such horrors or indifferently in relation to them, but they are never irrelevant, never unconnected to the world of actual social relations. Images of the non-Western world draw on and articulate ideas and thus, like all conceptual work, become cultural and historical, mutable and political in intent and/or effect. There are, we will argue, more or less harmful ways of viewing differences.¹

Coming to political consciousness through the period of the Vietnam War, we were acutely aware of the power of photographic images to

1. An impressive literature on ethnocentrism first helped us to formulate our ideas about interethnic understanding, including Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950); Forbes (1985); Lambert and Klineberg (1967); LeVine and Campbell (1972); and Preiswerk and Perrot (1978). We have also learned much from more recent studies that take a more textual and interpretive approach to examining difference, including those by Bhabha (1983); Gates (1985); Gilman (1985); Haraway (1989); Tiffany and Adams (1985); and Trinh (1989).

evoke both ethnocentric recoil and agonizing identification. Malcolm Browne's famous photo of a Buddhist monk's self-immolation in Saigon was profoundly disturbing to Western viewers, who could not fathom the communicative intent of such an act. Huynh Cong Ut's 1972 photograph of children fleeing a napalm attack evoked both anguish and a sense of responsibility. Close-ups of individual soldiers and interpersonal acts transformed the war for many Americans from an abstract conflict over principles into a human nightmare—the My Lai massacre, a police chief executing an alleged terrorist at point-blank range, a mother holding a blood-drenched, jet-strafed child (see Moeller 1989). It was our awareness of the power of these photographs to mobilize and raise questions that led us to ask about the impact on popular consciousness of the steady, continual, accessible flow of images from an institution like *National Geographic*.

Whose Representations? Power and Geographic Knowledge

A long line of commentators, among them Debord (1983) and Ewen (1988), have argued that the image is central to contemporary society, that photograph and film have taken over from written texts the role of primary educator. To understand how people are acculturated to a particular set of views about the third world, these commentators might suggest, one should look first to television, film, and mass circulation photographs in magazines and textbooks for their content and their effect on readers. Images have been important in the cultural construction of ethnic/racial difference from the earliest periods of European contact with others (Bucher 1981; B. Smith 1985), but never more so than now, when people give more time to television news than to newspapers, when newspapers have less text and more images than in the past, and when Hollywood films (often with ethnic or racial subthemes) have become more spectacular and more widely and frequently viewed than ever before. Other examples include the immense popularity of the picture magazines *Life* and *Look* in midcentury and of the *National Geographic*, whose subscription rate grew from two to ten million subscribers from the mid-1950s through the 1980s.

Taking the photograph as a central feature of contemporary life, we can go on to ask *how* photographs signify. Rejecting the idea that photos are simply objective documents that signify no differently than does any unmediated experience of the visual world, we find that a number of major works by art historians and others have described the intricate,

subtle, and fascinating ways in which photographs can communicate or evoke ideas—ideas replete with feelings. We draw extensively on the insights of those theorists, including Benjamin (1985); Geary (1988); Sekula (1981); Sontag (1977); and Tagg (1988). Our perspective on the photograph attends to formal features of the shot such as composition and point of view, but we interpret them in the historical and cultural context that gives the photograph and its elements their meaning and significance.

The National Geographic Society, which produces *National Geographic* magazine, is a powerful institution. Located in Washington, D.C., it cultivates ties to government officials and corporate interests. It justifies its self-image as a national institution on the basis of its reputation for purveying important scientific knowledge about “the world and all that is in it” and for safeguarding important American values and traditions. The latter include an informed or knowledgeable citizenry, particularly in an epoch in which many have been devoted to the idea of America's global responsibilities. In fact, however, *National Geographic* magazine is no forum for the free exchange of ideas about or from the third world. It is a glossy, stylized presentation of a highly limited number of themes and types of images. As such, it is clearly located within what theorists of the Frankfurt School called mass culture—materials created and disseminated by powerful interests for the consumption of the working classes. In categorizing the magazine as mass culture, we are not counterposing popular ideas about the non-Western world to a more legitimate set of high cultural or elite ideas. We are pointing to the nature of its photographs as mass-produced images sold to a reading (viewing) public.

Since the writings of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s, the term mass culture has been used to refer to the commercial production of art and entertainment by powerful culture industries. The reputation of the *National Geographic* as a vehicle for scientific information makes it less obviously a member of this set of cultural products, but examination of its connection to prevalent and historically specific ideas will make clear the relevance of the concept of mass culture for an understanding of its relationship to power and culture.

Far from representing the voices and tastes of the popular classes, or even registering their desires, mass culture was seen by Frankfurt theorists as degenerate and manipulative. To the extent that people accepted and participated in the products of mass culture, they were duped and misled, encouraged to develop a false understanding of their situation in

a capitalist society. For adherents of such a view, mass culture represented production *for* the masses by dominant classes, while popular culture referred to the remnants of autonomous culture produced by working-class communities.

A number of theorists have questioned the absolute terms in which mass culture was thus cast. Enzensberger (1974) argued against the claim that mass culture uniformly imposes false consciousness. Its strategies succeed, he contends, because they appeal to the real needs and desires of the popular classes. While these desires may be distorted by the "consciousness industries" of advertising and mass media, Enzensberger argued that they are real, autonomous bases for political behavior.

Fredric Jameson (1983) took the position that mass culture is neither entirely manipulative nor entirely authentic. Rather, in his view, it operates by arousing fantasies and desires within structures that defuse them. Mass culture could not do its ideological work, he argued, if it were not at some level utopian. It could not manage desires and anxieties about the social order if it did not deal in fears and fantasies that are recognizable. As Stuart Hall has said, "Alongside the false appeals, the foreshortening, the trivialization and short-circuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding" (1981:233). For theorists like Jameson and Hall, mass culture becomes an arena of struggle—a battleground for the hearts and minds of the working classes. While culture industries seek to purvey dominant ideologies, the people to whom their messages are directed sometimes struggle to appropriate, subvert, and use the commercially produced images to their own ends. At the least, the works remain subject to their consumers' interpretations.

More fine-grained analyses of culture industries have been concerned to specify which classes, or fragments of classes, use the industries to express their perspective, who the proposed audience is, and who responds. We argue that while the messages contained in *National Geographic* photos are highly specific in terms of the world view they encode—that of the white, educated, middle class—they speak to, and draw into their vision, a far larger group, extending from highly educated professionals and managers through white-collar clericals and technicians into the working class and lower ranks of the service sector. The magazine claims to articulate a *national* vision, addressing the concerns and curiosity of all U.S. citizens.

Clearly, as Bourdieu (1984:21) has noted, the fact that a wide range

of classes and groups adopt a social product may conceal the diversity of uses to which it is put by these groups. Upper-middle-class professionals may approach the magazine with the critical confidence of those who have traveled and thus possess independent sources of verification (available to the working classes most often through tours of duty in the military). Still, the upbeat and magnanimous style of the magazine hails these diverse readers and invites them to look out at the rest of the world from the vantage point of the world's most powerful nation. For the National Geographic Society, creating this sort of national vision both expands its market and increases its clout as a scientific-educational establishment. It also makes it a worthy object of study.

The place of *National Geographic* in American culture is unique in several respects. There are now many mass media products that play with the ideological line between fact and fun, including the so-called infotainment programs, dramatic "re-creations" of news events, gonzo journalism, but none has the cultural legitimacy of the *Geographic*. This legitimacy, given it by its connections to the state, national identity, and science, has also been achieved by the stability maintained in the size, format, and appearance of the magazine. And the costliness of the paper and binding almost pushes the *Geographic* out of the category magazine (with its somewhat lowbrow connotations) and into the category book or encyclopedia.

Among popular magazines, the *National Geographic* sits near the top of the hierarchy of taste or status. Among all cultural artifacts, it would be considered high middlebrow, according to the culturally constructed taste hierarchies that Bourdieu (1984), Levine (1988), and B. H. Smith (1983), among others, have described for French and American society. Those hierarchies assert that some cultural artifacts are intrinsically more valuable than others (for example, classical music over pop, oil painting over photography), when in fact the value of the artifact can be seen as the complex outcome of its histories of use, the class and gender (Morley 1986) of those who consume it, and so on. The hierarchy shifts over time—Shakespeare was in the nineteenth century considered popular fare (Levine 1988)—and is context-sensitive, for people can disagree about details of hierarchical arrangement. Still, there is broad, if not universal agreement over its nature. Most important, it affects who reads the *Geographic*, how they read it, and how the makers of the magazine proceed with their job.

The special cultural niche occupied by the *Geographic* is also indexed by the degree to which the magazine has been *ignored* by academics and

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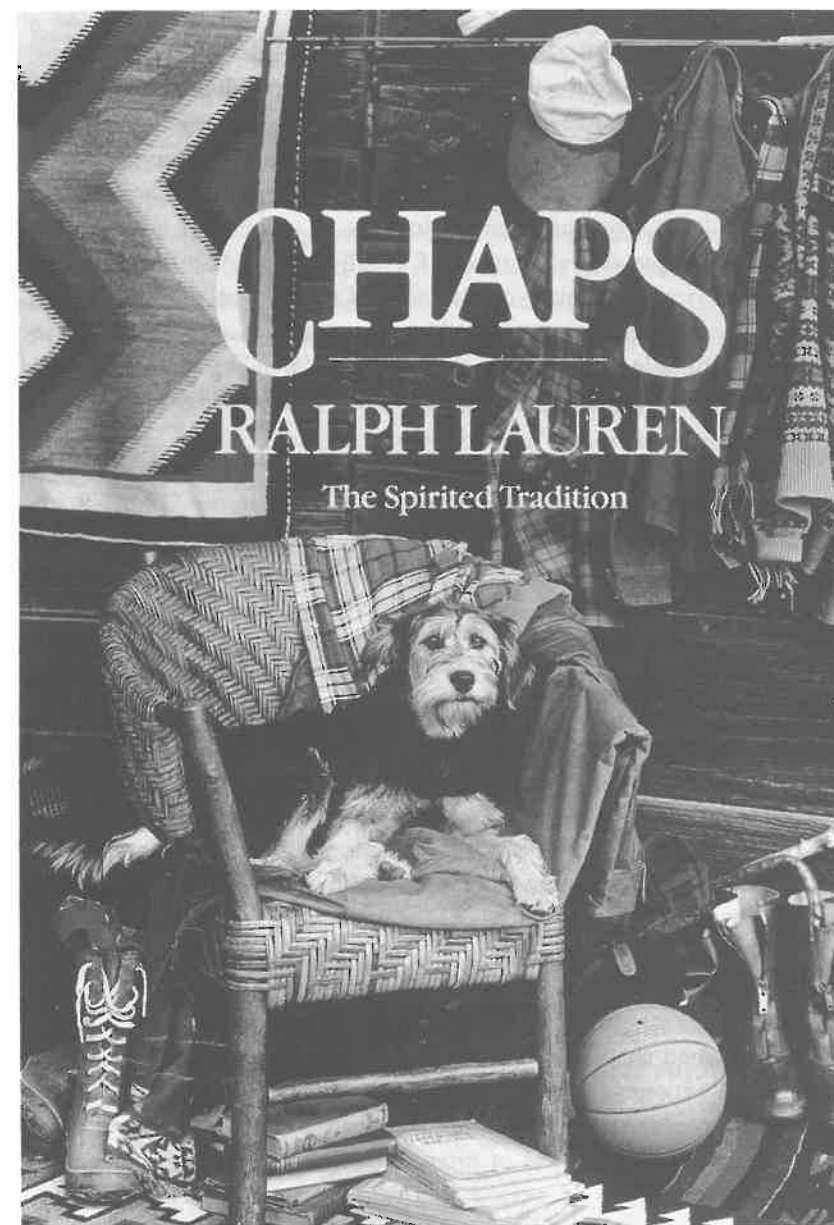
other writers on the subject of photography, mass media, or culture in general. The silence is striking. Histories of photography or even of photojournalism in America typically fail to mention it. Research on mass media has focused on single Hollywood movies or soap operas with smaller audiences than the *Geographic*. Why should this be? We can begin to answer the question by looking at Frith's (1986) typology of cultural artifacts (see fig. 1.1), which makes useful distinctions in focusing on the social class of consumers and on whether the primary self-image of the artifacts' producers is in art or in profit making.

		PRODUCERS	
		Artists	Profitmakers
CONSUMERS	Middle and upper classes	A High culture: Mozart C.D. <i>National Geographic</i>	B Middlebrow: CBS News
	Working classes	D Popular culture: street musicians	C Mass culture: Roseanne

Figure 1.1. Typology of cultural artifacts (adapted from Frith 1986)

✂ *National Geographic* is produced by a group whose identity is in neither art nor profit, although it is obviously concerned with both in some sense. The scientific and educational thrust of the institution makes it straddle the significant boundary between art and profit. Its consumption by a spectrum of Americans that runs more toward the upper part of the social hierarchy (the subscribers are wealthier and better educated than the average American) places it in the middlebrow category or somewhat higher—between, say, Dan Rather and Mozart. This is evidenced by the respected place it has in professional waiting rooms and its frequent role as a symbol of good taste and wealth in advertising scenes. Each of the boxes in the chart has a kind of gender as well as a class status, with mass culture being associated with the feminine because—in stereotype—it is sentimentalized, it is merely consumed, and it requires less intellect (Modleski 1986a), and high culture with the masculine for the opposite reasons. The *Geographic's* gender associations are masculine, both because of its content (adventure, science) and its cultural power and position.

Analysts of popular culture have tended to study material lowest on the cultural hierarchy of objects, such as popular television comedies or romance novels, while traditional sociology of culture has focused on



An advertisement for Ralph Lauren, inside front cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 1990—one of a number of ads we found in which the *National Geographic* is used as a marker of good taste and upper-middle-class lifestyle. (Photo: Bruce Weber, courtesy Ralph Lauren)

the culture that is seated squarely within box A (Frith 1986). The lack of attention to the *Geographic* may be accounted for by the fact that it is neither an academic observer's "us" nor a "them," neither the "self" nor the "other" for those academic commentators who speak about the world of culture from an identity in Box A right next door to the magazine. Critique or celebration of a cultural object often seems to entail a comparable evaluative treatment of the audience for it (Levine 1988:66). Academics seem to have been less ready to accord such treatment to the middle-class readers of the *Geographic*. The power and importance of the magazine and its photographic ideas could not be greater, however.

The post-World War II history of the *National Geographic* speaks to the evolving patterns of culture and social relations in the United States during that period. The National Geographic Society has its own special history, values, and explicit mission, which we will detail, but the magazine staff applies a range of values that have matched and changed significantly with those of their readers. The turbulence and promise of the second half of the twentieth century in the United States run through the pages of the magazine, although sometimes in studied reaction against its historical context rather than a mere reflection of it. In international relations, the period is one, above all, of the rise, consolidation, and partial thwarting of American hegemony. The cold war, decolonization, Vietnam, and the rise of the officially sanctioned anxieties about foreign terrorists have clear implications for how the third world is portrayed. So, too, does the domestic history of the civil rights and women's movements, of American religiosity, and of the Reagan administration's re-legitimation of a view of the class system as the survival of the fittest. The *Geographic* has responded to these events and associated cultural ideas, and it has helped shape the way its readers think about them. Changes in the social experiences of the magazine's readership have also helped give the photographs their qualities and their popularity—changes relating to the rapid expansion of international tourism, rising education and income levels in one period followed by stagnation in the next, residential patterns of suburbanization and continued racial segregation.

Denning (1990) has argued that in late capitalism there is very little cultural production other than in the form of commodities. Thus the drawing of dichotomies between mass and popular culture, between the ideological and the utopian, misses the point. What becomes important, in this highly commercialized world, is not so much the contrast between mass culture and authentic culture as the analysis of how particular

cultural forms operate in their social context. Denning criticizes research that simply links or associates a particular form with a social class or movement, seeing it as reflecting in an unproblematic way the interests and concerns of that class. While it is important to understand the class interests and political agendas that shape production of a work, this understanding is rarely adequate to account for the content of the work itself. Denning also criticizes students of mass culture, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who interpret cultural products mainly as markers in class conflict or as symbolic capital. In such approaches, he argues, the content of cultural products and activities evaporates.

The National Geographic Society may be assigned a position within the class structure and foreign policy interests of the United States, as will be demonstrated in chapter 2. Yet the photographs it circulates through the American public are not perfect reflections of these interests. They derive some of their content from the autonomous concerns of the photographer and some from the situations photographed. They are viewed by readers with diverse preoccupations, who understand and interpret the pictures in a variety of ways. Some readings reinforce American illusions of cultural superiority and paternalism, while others entail an engagement with the subject photographed, an identification across cultural boundaries, the awakening of a curiosity that may be politically invigorating.

The Complex Life of Images

This study takes as a starting point the Gramscian notion that hegemony is not so much a structure as a process. Cultural products have complex production sites; they often code ambiguity; they are rarely accepted at face value but are read in complicated and often unanticipated ways. For these reasons, we have structured our study of *National Geographic* photographs so as to gain insight into the process by which its images are formed, selected and controlled, purveyed and read. Our approach contrasts with previous work on cultural artifacts that has focused on one of three areas. (1) Some studies focus mainly on the production site itself and the intentions and struggles within media and other organizations, from those making television news and documentaries (Gans 1979; Silverstone 1985) to the multiple sites at which the Olympics are put together (MacAloon 1987) or the worlds in which art is produced (Becker 1982). (2) Other analysts take their own reading of the significance of the artifact both in and of itself and in relation to its historical

or cultural context. These studies have ranged from Hollywood films (Traube 1992; Modleski 1988) to advertisements (Goffman 1979) to journalism (Parenti 1986). (3) Still others focus on reader or consumer response to a wide range of cultural artifacts from individual television programs such as *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz 1990) to romance novels (Radway 1984). Our attempt to examine the *Geographic* from all three perspectives has meant that our work—and the chapters that follow—have been divided into three distinct phases.

The Process of Producing Images of the Non-Western World. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the National Geographic Society as a social institution. Chapter 2 reviews the history of the organization and its relationship to some aspects of the changing American scene of the twentieth century, the way it has defined itself in various historical periods, and its construction of a particular audience for itself. It examines the complex ways in which the society has framed its mission: as science, but also entertainment, and as a quasi-official educational enterprise. It looks at how the society's work fits within a set of other genres and practices that structure our understanding of "otherness"—museums, exotic collections, the midways and expositions of the late nineteenth century. Finally, it looks closely at some of the negotiations and struggles that have gone on within the society over what its mission ought to be.

Chapter 3 looks at the contemporary practices of producing photographic imagery at the National Geographic Society. Based largely on interviews conducted with photographers, editors, and other staff members, it details the production process from the inception of an idea for a story, through its photography, layout, printing, and other critical junctures. Here we argue that though *National Geographic* photographers often have an independent and critical vision, both the charge they are given regarding what to produce and the subsequent editing processes mean that what is printed in the magazine has only an indirect and attenuated relationship to the photographer's original intent. Producing pictures, captions, and layout is a social and creative act in which negotiation and unacknowledged struggle result in the ultimate artifact, rather than a singular plan deliberately followed through.

The Structure and Content of the Images. A second set of our research activities focused on the attributes of the cultural products—the *National Geographic* photographs themselves. We looked at them analyti-

cally in relation to the larger wholes of the genre and its sociocultural context. To learn what the pictures could signify about the third-world peoples they portrayed, we examined closely six hundred randomly selected photographs from 1950 to 1986. We focused on this period in search of the ways that the social upheaval surrounding the escalation and end of the Vietnam War, as well as the civil rights and women's movements at home, affected the images produced at *National Geographic*. We did not believe that the representations generated by the institution would be invariant; we wanted to know how they changed in response to events that affected the lives of readers both directly and through their experience of other media. Through processes described in chapter 4, we chart the tendency of the magazine to idealize and render exotic third-world peoples, with an accompanying tendency to downplay or erase evidence of poverty and violence. The photographs show these people as either cut off from the flow of world events or involved in a singular story of progress from tradition to modernity, a story that changes with decolonization.

In chapter 5 we look at differences in the amount and kind of photographic coverage of particular regions and countries. There we argue that a complex of strategic and cultural factors combine to create a waxing and waning of American and *Geographic* interest in particular groups. The special place of the Pacific in American geography is examined in some detail, as is the power of racial feelings and ideas evident in the photographic treatment of Melanesia and Micronesia. Chapter 6 looks at the particular ways that racial and gender ideologies are deployed, particularly the complex messages the photographs send about how sexuality, gender, and color are involved in the struggle for social progress that is one of the magazine's favorite themes. An American postwar history of race and gender relations is a valuable reference point for what was done in the magazine during the same period. Chapter 7 bridges the three parts of the book, examining the intersections between the structure of the photograph and the "looking practices" of the magazine staff and the readers. These looking practices are highly conventionalized, and some aspects of photographic structure and viewing may be contradictory in their implications.

How Readers View the Photographs. A third set of research activities is concerned with the practices through which *National Geographic* photographs are read or understood. Chapter 8 turns to the analysis of

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interviews with *Geographic* readers, actual and potential, from New York and Hawaii; it focuses particularly on the responses of these readers to a randomly selected set of *Geographic* photographs. We watch for the degree to which readers' responses accept or parallel the communicative intent of the *Geographic*. When photos are presented to them without captions, do they, on their own, find evolutionary chronicles embedded in the photographs? Do they draw conclusions about the universal humanity that underlies superficial human difference? We also examine the use of evaluative strategies, cases of empathy and identification with those photographed, and the attribution of feeling to the subjects of the photos. In chapter 9 we explore the implications of a critically and politically informed understanding of how *National Geographic* photographs circulate in this society. We discuss further what the pleasures of the magazine consist of, what makes some photographs critical of and others supportive of existing arrangements, what kinds of representations encourage understanding and empathy and what kinds foreclose it, and how some photographs can awaken curiosity about unfamiliar ways of life while others foster categorized stereotyping.