Local Culture in Global Media: Excavating Colonial and Material Discourses in *National Geographic*

This case study of National Geographic’s August 1999 “millennium” issue interrogates the representational politics of the magazine’s narratives on globalization. The essay’s textual analysis, which is based in the insights of semiotic, feminist, and Marxist critiques of consumer culture, accounts for multiple media texts and historical contexts that filter the magazine’s imagery. Drawing from postcolonial theories of gender, Orientalism, and nationalism, the analysis explores the disturbing ambivalence that pervades the Geographic’s stories on global culture. Critiquing discourses of gender, the author shows that the magazine’s interpretation of global culture is suffused with representations of femininity, masculinity, and race that subtly echo the Othering modalities of Euroamerican colonial discourses. This article undermines the Geographic’s articulation of global culture, which addresses Asians only as modern consumers of global commodities, by questioning the invisibility of colonial history, labor, and global production in its narrative. The conclusion argues that the insights of postcolonial theories enable critics of globalization to challenge the subtle hegemony of modern neocolonial discursive regimes.

Cultural criticism manifests in two forms in our intellectual pursuits. In one form, we intentionally craft projects and carefully select the texts we wish to critique. In another form, when research “happens to us,” the objects of our analyses are thrust upon us and forcefully demand our attention. This essay’s analysis of *National Geographic* magazine’s features “Global Culture” and “A World Together” is an example of the second kind of project. Soon after its publication, students, friends, and family, who were aware of my interests in gender, postcolonial studies, and global media, urged me to read the August 1999 issue of the Geographic. Email messages from women friends animatedly inquired about my opinions of the magazine’s cover, a dramatic and colorful photograph of two South Asian women. Copies of the magazine arrived in my mail with a range of scribbled comments: “Women rule in global culture!” “Amazing photos of Asia?” and “Unpack this!” In response, this
essay interrogates representations of globalization emerging from one specific site of authority in the popular domain—National Geographic magazine, an artifact that “straddles simultaneously the worlds of academia, art, and popular imagination” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 4). Drawing from postcolonial critiques of Orientalism, nationalism, and gender, my analysis of the Geographic's discursive strategies focuses attention on the intricate, hierarchical structures of gender, race, and class that became entangled with the magazine's neocolonial rendering of global culture.

The disciplines of journalism, mass communication, and rhetorical studies have been slow to recognize the analytical possibilities of postcolonial theories and approaches that have gained currency in the fields of English, anthropology, history, and women's studies. In a debate over the relevance of postcolonial theories for global communication research, Kavoori (1998) argues that postcolonial approaches are inadequate to the task of challenging the neocolonialist practices of transnational capitalism. Kavoori suggests that the term “postcolonial,” with its troubling ambivalence and fashionable marketability, inhabits the same ideological space as the term “globalization,” which has become a seductive mask for the inequalities created by global capital. In her response to Kavoori's dismissal of postcolonial approaches, Shome (1998) counters his criticism by arguing that Kavoori's monolithic, essentialist discussion of the term “postcolonial” fails to recognize the rich potential of postcolonial studies as a radical/political critique of contemporary media culture. Concurring with Shome, I argue that communication studies, contrary to Kavoori's assertions, can fruitfully deploy the deconstructive insights of postcolonial theories to challenge the colonialist assumptions that underwrite the neocolonial discursive regimes of globalization.

Although global consumer culture has attracted unprecedented academic attention in the last decade, surprisingly few scholars have critiqued the rhetoric of popular discourses on globalization that are disseminated by global media. As a key inhabitant of the global mediascape, National Geographic magazine is itself a significant player in the very burgeoning global culture that it chose to comment upon in the August 1999 issue. With a worldwide readership of thirty-seven million, National Geographic magazine's subscriber rate is the third largest for magazines in the United States, only behind TV Guide and Reader's Digest (Fannin, 1999, p. 29). Since the founding of the magazine in 1888 by a select group of geographers, military officers, cartographers, naturalists, biologists, and engineers (Bryan, 1997, pp. 24–27), the National Geographic Society's presence in the global media landscape has expanded far beyond the magazine. Capitalizing on the potential brand
recognition promised by the *Geographic* magazine’s reputation and credibility among global middle- and upper-class audiences, the Society has launched other successful media ventures such as the magazine *National Geographic Traveler*, the television series *National Geographic Explorer*, and National Geographic Cable Channels Worldwide (Donohue, 1998).

With the recent spate of cultural studies work on popular media, often framed by scholars as a protest against the earlier celebration of high culture, artifacts of middlebrow culture that circulate among more elite audiences have escaped critical analysis. In the case of *National Geographic*, cultural anthropologists have been far ahead of media scholars in scrutinizing the magazine’s pivotal role in producing representations of the non-Western world for Euroamerican readers (Lutz & Collins, 1993; O’Brien, 1994). Policing the boundaries of discourse in the public sphere, middlebrow print media like the *Geographic* influence the worldviews of their elite and largely male audience members, who wield power in the global commercial and political arenas. Actively promoting its reading audience as a highly desirable market to potential advertisers, the online version of the *Geographic* claimed that its readers were among the most “overwhelmingly well-educated and affluent” consumers in the world. Considering the *Geographic*’s position of respectability in the hierarchy of popular print media and its cultural legitimacy as an authentic source of Third World ethnography, this magazine’s interpretations of globalization deserve serious scrutiny. How does the *Geographic* portray the impact of Western consumer modernity on non-Western cultures? What representations of femininity, masculinity, race, and nation become alloyed with global culture in the magazine’s arresting photographs? What troubling aspects of globalization does this magazine, which purports to be an authoritative window on the world, ignore and disavow? This essay’s textual analysis of the *Geographic* magazine’s rhetoric on globalization is based in the methodological insights of semiotic, feminist, and Marxist critiques of media representations and commodity culture.

The first section of the essay provides brief background details for the *Geographic*’s stories on global culture. The next two sections examine the representations of femininity and masculinity, embedded within particular configurations of race and class that shape the magazine’s interpretation of global culture. The following section deconstructs the aura of marketable consumer diversity that permeates the magazine’s kaleidoscopic collage of colorful ethnicity and gender. In conclusion, I argue that postcolonial theories of representation empower media critics to disrupt and denaturalize the subtle hegemony of the discursive myths that constitute the logic of globalization.
Architects of Globalization in
National Geographic

In National Geographic's August 1999 issue, an assistant editor on the magazine's staff, Joel Swardlow (1999), produced the photographs for the first brief pictorial cover feature on "Global Culture." A much longer story on the global village "A World Together" immediately follows the story on global culture. Erla Zwingle, a former editor at the magazine, researched and wrote the text of "A World Together" and Joe McNally, a frequent freelance contributor to the Geographic, produced the photographs for this story on the global village (Zwingle & McNally, 1999). Erla Zwingle's story "A World Together" spans three regions: the United States (Los Angeles), China (Shanghai), and India (Bangalore, Mumbai, and New Delhi). The stories "Global Culture" and "A World Together" are a total of 33 pages long and contain 21 photographs including the cover image framed by the Geographic's well-known bright yellow border. Seven of the 21 photographs are 2-page spreads and the remaining are smaller images. There are a series of small features and columns that precede the cover stories including Millennium Moments, Geographica, Point of View, Forum (Letters to the Editor), On Screen, and Earth Almanac, which have small photographs accompanied by extended captions.

Gender, Tradition, and Global Modernity

In an increasingly competitive media market, the covers of magazines, displayed at various retail outlets, seek to instantly capture the roving eyes of new readers. The August 1999 National Geographic's striking cover, with its contrasting patches of bright yellow, red, and black colors, carries full shots of two South Asian Indian women sitting close together on a raised marble platform. The words "Global Culture" appear in large yellow type at the bottom of the cover. Unknown to readers, the unusual August 1999 cover of the magazine was part of a milestone event in the economic history of National Geographic. Although the Geographic has repeatedly staked claim to the status of "journal" on its covers and was historically available only to those readers who were members of the National Geographic Society, the magazine "went newsstand" in 1999 in an effort to boost readership. As a product that was circulating in its new distribution mode, the August 1999 "newsstand-reincarnated" cover thus marks a subtle shift in the Geographic's marketing outlook—away from "journal" and towards "magazine."

Globalization, Modernist Binaries, and the Feminine Signifier

The Geographic's August 1999 cover dramatically deploys women's bodies as detailed blueprints, maps that busy readers could use to in-
stantly trace the passage of non-Western cultures from tradition to global modernity (see Figure 1). In the magazine's sharply polarized, binary rendering of the "new and hip" as radically different from the "old and outmoded," one woman symbolizes ethnic tradition and the other global modernity. The Geographic's semiotic coding of the past and future, which invokes the cultural politics of age, class, motherhood, and feminine fitness, ensures that readers can instantly differentiate the inertness of tradition from the vitality of the modern. The non-Western women on the cover also narrate a linear tale of progress, as the Geographic magazine reader's eyes move from left to right, they would travel from tradition toward modernity.

An older middle-aged Indian woman, with streams of white and orange flowers pinned to the hair at the base of her neck, symbolizes tradition. The deep red silk sari with a gold border, the gold necklaces around her neck, and the thick gold bangles on her wrists clearly mark her as a traditional upper-class woman, who can easily afford these luxury commodities. The older Indian woman's body and posture also announce her alignment with tradition. She is heavyset, almost stocky, and her sari demurely covers her large breasts. Her feet are placed moderately close together and her folded hands rest in her lap. Avoiding the direct eye of the camera, her face, with the trademark dot of Hindu tradition etched between her eyes, is turned sideways as she bestows a tender maternal
gaze on the young woman sitting beside her. The traditional Indian woman’s maternal gaze renders her as a more accessible object, one that seems familiar to Western readers. Emulating other images of Third World women in the Geographic that have celebrated the mother-child relationship (Lutz & Collins, 1993, pp. 168–169), the traditional Indian woman’s nurturing gaze reaffirms the timeless universality of motherhood, a cultural template that ensures empathy among Western readers.

In contrast to the gentle passivity and the slack middle-aged body that index tradition, bold assertiveness, feminine youthfulness, and an androgynous firm body register cosmopolitan modernity in the cover image. These biological and emotional transformations in the modern, non-Western woman’s physical appearance and personal demeanor appear to be wrought by Westernization. The young, slender Indian woman sitting next to the middle-aged woman has short, shoulder length hair framing her face. The marked absence of the dot on her forehead as well as her clothing, instantly herald her identity as a modern woman. She is dressed in a black, shiny PVC catsuit, unzipped down to the middle of her chest to display her small, almost flat breasts, while her feet are encased in sharply pointed black boots. Disdaining the gaze of the older woman directed towards her, she defiantly stares at the camera and claims her personal space with arrogant confidence. Her legs and feet, unlike the older women’s feet, are splayed wide apart and her knees point in opposite directions. Her left arm is poised akimbo style while her left palm grips her hip in a strong masculine gesture.

The cover photograph’s projection of a dyadic, but unequal relationship between a traditional older woman and a modern young woman resonates with another gendered image of global culture inside the magazine (see Figure 2). Displaying modernity as an emotive state that is filled with youthful exuberance, a slender 17-year old Chinese girl, Zhou Die-Die, dressed in form-fitting, black athletic clothing, dances in a narrow Shanghai street. Her supple body’s posture—outstretched arms, flung-back head, curved right leg, and arched right foot—and her oblivious immersion in her dance of modernity draw attention to her experience of passionate abandonment. In a diametrically opposed mood, several older women (with not so slender bodies) surrounding Zhou Die-Die, stand stiffly in solemn silence while they watch her performance with rapt attention. Reiterating the ideological chain of meanings released by the cover, which conflates older women with motherhood and tradition, another photo shows Zhou Die-Die hugging her mother, who, according to the caption is “too critical of fads like midriff-baring shirts.”

Colonial Legacies, Gendered Modernities

The Geographic’s use of women’s imagined subjectivity as indices of national tradition or global modernity does not signal the creation of a
new representation that can illuminate vividly Western culture’s liberating effect on the non-Western world. Predating the *Geographic*’s cover, nineteenth century debates over modernity and tradition, which were waged in Europe’s colonies also harnessed womanhood as an ideological vehicle to advocate for and argue against the progress promised by Western imperialism (Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991; Moghadam, 1994). In colonial India, on the one hand, British administrators and Orientalist scholars claimed that a benevolently interventionist colonial state could liberate native (Hindu) women from the oppressive practices of their highly patriarchal cultures (Mani, 1991). Accordingly, the colonial administration sought the support of elite Indian males to enact legislation that would outlaw select upper-caste rituals that victimized a small section of Hindu women. Such colonial discourses that advocated Hindu women’s liberation from “barbaric” native traditions also justified and buttressed the modernizing mission of British imperialism in India. On the other hand, Indian male nationalists, who sought to counter these charges of barbarism, began to construct Hindu womanhood as the symbol of India’s superior morality and rich traditions. Positioning Indian women as the locus of India’s authentic moral essence, nationalist ideology glorified Indian women as devoted wives and mothers (Chatterjee, 1989). In fact, if the *Geographic*’s cover is read against the patriarchal fabric of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India, the iconic
cover image of the modern Indian woman would only reinforce regressive nationalist discourses on gender and global culture. As these religious nationalists would argue, the radically transformed, Westernized Indian woman " flaunting" her body and "rejecting" her mother's love would prove that the purity of traditional Indian culture (read Indian women) and the strength of the family (read motherhood) are dangerously threatened by the contaminating influences of global culture.

A postcolonial feminist reading of the Geographic's cover could also suggest potential possibilities for reversing the conjoining of a middle-aged woman in a sari with docile tradition and a young woman in a catsuit with robust liberation—women who the magazine's contents page indicate are "seemingly a world apart." The caption to the 2-page reproduction of the cover within the magazine informs readers that the older woman Nakshatra Reddy is a biochemist and that the younger woman, her daughter Meghana, is a model and former host on the music video channel VTV. Scrutinizing these two women's professional lives, one might argue that it is easier for young women like Meghana to gain success in the commodity rich arenas of global fashion and entertainment, which create a constant demand for women's thin bodies. As feminists have argued, the pervasiveness of a certain brand of "empowered" modern femininity in consumer culture represents a subtle repackaging of patriarchy for capitalism. Far from promoting liberation, such imagery continues the "ancient" tradition of devaluing women through the sexist glorification of a certain brand of physical attractiveness. Negating her metaphorical association with tradition, the older woman, working in a "hard science" field that is still dominated by men worldwide could conceivably serve as a positive, global role model for women's liberation. She could represent the tremendous progress middle-class Indian women have made since the doors of education were first opened to admit girls into the public sphere in the nineteenth century. Additionally, when portraits of women in saris are situated outside of discourses of liberation, they preclude the possibility that non-Western women in traditional clothing may be vocal advocates of progressive modernity and cultural change.

Although the disturbing gender politics in the Geographic's cover photo invents oversimplified binary distinctions between tradition and modernity, the cover's assertive and sophisticated young Indian woman also generates a new and unusual representational space for India in Western popular consciousness. As Lutz and Collins (1993) point out, unlike the caricatured representations of Third Worldness in mainstream news media and Hollywood films, some of the Geographic's most memorable images strive to narrate the complex diversity of non-Western cultures. In the case of India, Western media have for the most part ignored urban
India's vibrant, cosmopolitan culture. Apart from a few media images that have deviated from the mold, mainstream media coverage of India in the West has inevitably recycled a routine catalog of stories on exotic customs, ancient traditions, caste, natural disasters, poverty, and the oppression of Indian women (Cecil, Pranav, & Takacs, 1994).

The young Indian woman costumed in Western clothing on the Geographic's cover highlights the culmination of a newly emerging representation of cosmopolitan India and Indian women in Western media. With the exception of one image of an upscale shopping mall in Bangalore, the other three images of India in the August 1999 Geographic's story on the global village starkly reproduce the dominant aesthetics of Western news media representations of poverty in India. Recording the cramped living conditions of Mumbai's urban poor, the largest of these images shows women watching a flickering television screen inside a one-room dwelling while men surrounded by darkness huddle outside on the street to play cards. Over a 40-year period, from 1960 to 1999, the Geographic's cover images of India have also, for the most part, emphasized overlapping themes of nature and travel, religion, endangered lifestyles, and ancient history.

The confident energy radiated by the cover's modern young woman provides a stark contrast to the poor, remote, gentle, and mysterious Indian women, who have frequently peppered the Geographic's visual imagery on India. Photographs of cosmopolitan Indian women have only recently crept into the magazine. For example, in the most elaborate story on India, (the May 1997 Geographic which marks 50 years of Indian independence) only one photograph of three women designers working in the Mumbai fashion industry allows readers a glimpse of middle- and upper-class life in India. Four Geographic covers that have appeared in the last 40 years (1985, 1971, 1963, and 1960) use images of Indian women to illustrate exotic tradition, pastoral life, religion, and the mystery of India's ancient past. For instance, the April 1985 Geographic's cover photo of Tahira Sajjad dramatically recalls nineteenth century Orientalist imagery of the forbidden, erotic world of docile female courtesans and harems. Clothed in a gauzy, embroidered purple silk churidhar and kameez, a young and attractive Sajjad, adorned in ornate jewelry, plays a stringed musical instrument while her darkly outlined eyes look away from the camera. Similar colorful images of Turkish, Arab, Indian, and Moroccan women performing and serving food and wine in elaborate clothing and jewelry appeared on early European tradecards and postcards. As Lavani (1995) notes, these proliferating Orientalist images of the exotic feminine that fueled the emerging libidinal economy of European consumerism were central to a Western politics of imperial desire.
Feminine Celebrity, Masculine Power, and the White Male Gaze

Beyond the cover, other striking photographs amalgamate the aura of glamorous femininity with the energy and fluid mobility of global culture. Conflating the allure of feminine celebrity with the exhilarating transcontinental sweep of Western mediascapes, a 2-page spread positions Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh (costar of the 1998 Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*) next to the well-known Hollywood sign in Los Angeles while she holds a rope and precariously swings in midair. Using a spectacular technique of visual display, the photograph compels the reader to trace the entire length of her upraised, slim, naked right leg from thigh to foot. Like the trendy young Indian woman on the cover, Yeoh is slender, beautiful, and glamorous. Clothed in a silky grayish feminine dress with her feet encased in strappy, spike-heeled sandals, she clearly reproduces current Western ideals of beauty. Michelle Yeoh’s image of global culture, displaying her “fearlessness and athletic grace,” as the caption informs readers, recuperates the ambivalent gender politics that shadow the modern female hero of Western popular culture. The masculine power of popular culture’s strong woman is subtly cocooned by the vestiges of patriarchal femininity. Exemplifying a new configuration of liberal feminism, Peta Wilson in *La Femme Nikita*, Pamela Andersen in *Baywatch*, and Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* videogames fight and overpower evil even as they entice audiences with their blond hair, large breasts, thin bodies, and staged moments of feminine vulnerability. Although Yeoh’s body performs a reckless feat of physical courage that is typically coded as the essence of heroic masculinity, her face narrates a story of sexuality for the consumption of the male gaze. Her slightly open mouth, partly closed eyes, windswept hair, and her gently raised left hand touching her neck mirror numerous images of women’s sensual “bedroom” faces advertising perfume, cosmetics, and lingerie. Yeoh’s face could be smoothly superimposed on the bodies of models selling *Victoria’s Secret* underwear.

The Western male gaze also forcefully patrols Yeoh’s attempts to transgress her historically conscripted gender role as the docile Asian woman, who regularly graced the *Geographic’s* advertising imagery in 1929 (O’Barr, 1994). Another small photograph shows Yeoh and Joe McNally, the *Geographic* photographer, suspended from a helicopter. Reproducing gender and race hierarchies, the photograph positions McNally, dressed in a sober tan professional aviation suit that covers his entire body, on a higher level than Yeoh. Sitting in a relaxed posture, he holds his camera and looks down on the Asian actress who looks up at him and literally offers herself to his gaze. Manipulating her body into a carefully crafted and unnatural pose, Yeoh’s naked leg stretches toward the photographer while her right hand, which is carefully placed over her stomach, points toward her crotch.
Deconstructing the Limits of New Age Global Culture

A final image of global culture appears in the story “A World Together.” In this lavish photograph bursting with rich color, Los Angeles artist Nicole Baum, dressed in a deep pink robe and chunky silver jewelry, draws an intricate East Indian pattern with Mehndi paste (also known as henna) on the eight-month pregnant stomach of Dara Poprock Brown (see Figure 3). Recalling Pier1 Imports and Pottery Barn’s “tropical” catalogue images, Baum and Poprock Brown are shown on an ornate daybed covered with a delicately textured woven ivory bedspread, and pillows encased in lacy ivory covers support Brown’s gently inclined head. Brown’s slender White pregnant body is spread out horizontally across the bed while a translucent strip of pale fabric wound around her body barely conceals her breasts, hips, and upper thighs. In an interesting reversal of Western multiculturalist media practices that strive to increase the visual presence of women of color, Poprock Brown’s partially clothed White body denotes a representational milestone for the Geographic, which has historically excluded White women from its displays of female nudity (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

When we scrutinize new age practices, such as the Mehndi pattern on Poprock Brown’s body, through the lens of postcolonial theory, we begin to see the limits of the rhetoric of progressive diversity promised by the fragmented incorporation of non-Western culture in First World na-
tions. In the caption to this image, we are told that “borrowed culture” often serves personal ends because Brown, who wanted to feel beautiful during her pregnancy, sought out the novel experience of decorating her stomach with Mehndi (p. 32). The popularity of Indian-inspired feminine fashion—Mehndi, nose rings, bindis (mark on the forehead between the eyes), and toe rings—was sparked and promoted by the appearance of these exotic adornments on the bodies of White women celebrities. In the late nineties, singers Madonna, Gwen Stefani of the pop group No Doubt, and Sting and his wife Trudi; as well as actresses Nicole Kidman, Liv Tyler, and Lucy Lawless (Xena, Warrior Princess) have worn East Indian jewelry and sported ethnic body art or markings. Like the National Geographic, although in a much more blatantly exultant tone, the Sunday Telegraph hailed the wave of cross-cultural dressing by celebrities as a symptom of the “rich decorative mood sweeping through fashion” (Campbell, 1998, p. 5).

However, such celebratory media reports of New Age culture in Euroamerican contexts camouflage the historical context of racialized appropriations of ethnic body art, markings, and artifacts to signify the natural, mystical, and raw qualities of the non-Western Other’s sexuality. Advocating more nuanced interpretations of Orientalism as a mobile and heterogeneous discourse, Lalvani (1995) argues that proliferating Turkish, Asian, and Middle-Eastern motifs—turbans, head-dresses, carpets, fabrics—in nineteenth century European consumer culture animated the sensual pleasures of consumption and structured the imaginary economy of desire and fantasy. Lalvani writes that these incomplete and fragmented Orientalist motifs, stripped from their original contexts and deployed in arbitrary fashion, signified contradictory impulses in colonial discourse: contain the threat posed by the colonized and reinvent the Western Self through consumption of the non-Western Other. Extending postcolonial theories of Otherness to the current fascination for Mehndi and other ethnic fashion in the United States, Durham (2001) asks an intriguing question: “How does the dislocation of the symbols of Indian femininity contribute to the discourse of Orientalism that remains part of Western culture?” (p. 202). Interrogating “hip” consumer practices, which delink Indian feminine markings from the “actual bodies and cultural histories of Indian women,” she writes that the erasure of Indian women as carriers of their own ethnic markings represents a new and pernicious form of exploiting Asian women as intangible, disembodied signifiers of exoticism. Durham argues that the inscription of “empty and expendable” ethnic markings on White women’s bodies as signs of progressive fashion reproduces Orientalist ideologies of Asian women’s sexuality (mute/passive and wild/uncontrolled) and dissipates the troubled politics of immigration and racism.
Fortifying the visual image's hegemonic packaging of Mehndi as a benign artifact of global culture, the text's tone and narrative details gloss over race, gender, and class inequalities to glamorize the exploitative manufacturing of ethnic culture for profit (p. 16). In the story's commentary on body art in Los Angeles, the writer's description of her interview on a "sunny, September afternoon" with French artist Pascal Giacomini in his "spacious frame house in West Hollywood" warmly invokes his upper-class identity. In a tone inflected with language that manufactures Otherness, the writer divulges that Giacomini drew Mehndi "swirls down the bare arm of a Hispanic girl" and that he took the writer's left hand and "drew a sinuous uncoiling circle" while he informs her that even his "Guatemalan maid" was a Mehndi artist. We learn later on that Giacomini has developed a "Mehndi kit" that he has sold successfully at hundreds of outlets because Americans are "incorrigibly curious and ravenous for novelty" and "love to experiment with ethnic food, clothes, words" (pp. 16–17). The Geographic's upbeat account of Mehndi production by a French artist, juxtaposed alongside casual references to Guatemalan maids, contributes further to the accommodationist celebration of racial diversity as the discovery of unusual consumer experiences.

**Consumerism as Revolutionary Practice in China**

The Geographic posits that the path to liberation for Asian women, who desire a shift from accommodation to revolution in their lives, is located in their willingness to embrace the active agency which global culture awards its loyal female audiences. Sharing a vignette from Shanghai, the writer narrates the story of Dr. Li Ping, a cardiologist, who has discovered the profits of selling Amway cosmetics door-to-door, an entrepreneurial route to fulfilling the doctor's dream of building her own clinic. The writer accompanies Dr. Ping on one of her sales visits to a friend's home. The narrative reveals that while applying cosmetics to her woman friend's face, Dr. Ping first lectures her friend with the words, "Age will destroy our skin." The doctor then offers her friend skin advice prefaced by the statement "I'm a doctor so I have knowledge of beauty," immediately after which the client, who declares her faith in the high-priced cosmetics recommended by a medical expert, orders several items. The Geographic writer describes the modern ritual of the cosmetics sale in Shanghai as a morning that passed quickly and "seemed so unremarkable that I had to remind myself how revolutionary it all really was" (p. 26). The Geographic's story telling technique persuasively markets the mobile success of the American dream in China to echo the fictional tales of cosmetic advertising where the regressive politics of gender and beauty recede into the shadows of the nether world.
Dr. Ping’s sales strategy of first arousing anxiety and then offering scientific reassurance resembles the persuasive pitch embedded in advertising mythologies. Commercials for cosmetics based on the logic of the “fear appeal” first depict aging as an irreversible, antagonistic force that targets women and then extol the marvels of science, carefully distilled in skin care products, as magically capable of delaying nature’s attack on youthful beauty.

The Black Female Body as Aesthetic
Trope of the Periphery
While Asian women’s representations infuse global culture with the ambience of glamour and freedom, the Geographic opportunistically mines Othered tropes of Black femininity drawn from mainstream news images to underscore the global economic power of the U.S. film industry. In a 2-page photo, a Black woman sitting on a bench at a Los Angeles bus stop appears to be a few feet away from a large, lighted poster advertising the film Armageddon. Dressed in soiled clothing, the Black woman has dirty socks on her feet with no shoes, and she gazes sideways at the film poster, which displays the face of a young White woman, actress Liv Tyler. The caption lyrically explains, “A life in which socks make do for shoes is far more than a Los Angeles bus stop bench away from the deep pockets of U.S. movie studios.” After this brief acknowledgment of the wide gulf between the rich and poor, the rest of the caption details production costs and ticket sales of the film Armageddon to convey the global dominance of the United States film industry. In the Geographic’s sole image of a poor Black woman, the politics of race and class are transformed into poetic and aesthetic resources that enable the photographer to vividly code the seductive power of global culture. The catalog of symbols that index her marginalization—dark skin, shabby casual clothing, grimy socks, shoeless feet, and her presence in the racialized space of inner city America—intensify the classic (read upper-class) beauty of White actress Liv Tyler. As the poster dialectically interacts with the blurred image of the disenfranchised Black woman, it reinforces Tyler’s luminescent visage (wide-eyed face, thin nose, and pink lips) and her aura of celebrity stardom as daughter of rock singer Steve Tyler. The text provides no commentary about those left behind in the periphery by the sweep of global culture, which permits all consumers easy entry into its fantasy world, but allows only a few the privilege of profiting from its promises of material wealth.

Ultimately, in the absence of text that endows women with power, the Geographic’s facile accounts of women as symbols, consumers, peddlers, and mute victims of global culture become the dominant narratives of femininity. Investing male voices early on with authority, the writer quotes sociologist Mike Featherstone on the first page of the story “A World
Together” in the caption to the photo of Michelle Yeoh. Apart from Featherstone, six other men's voices are included within the text of the story, with five paragraphs devoted to Alvin Toffler's views on global economic and cultural change. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, briefly cited in one caption, is the only woman among the eight sources in the story who share their expert knowledge on global culture (Zwingle & McNally, 1999).

Masculinity, Hypervisibility, and Marginality

Rhetoric of Authoritative White Masculinity

The United States of America, tightly wrapped within the intertextual fabric of vigorous and confident White masculinity, greets readers in the August 1999 issue's first editorial photograph. The signature red, white, and blue colors of the American flag appear on the painted face of a young White male Mardi Gras celebrator. The man's upraised face, firmly closed lips, and direct solemn gaze recapture media images of heroic military masculinity to signal patriotic pride and loyalty to the nation. His cowboy hat and the casually knotted scarf around his strong neck metaphorically link the vitality of American nationalism to pervasive cultural myths of rugged frontier masculinity. The text of the caption reiterates the visual image's construction of hyper-patriotic American masculinity. When interviewed by the photographer, the young man eloquently dismisses his personal identity as inconsequential because self and nation converge at the site of the flag, an artifact that celebrates the glory of his identity as national citizen: “My name doesn't matter, I'm just an American... I love my flag and I'm proud of it.”

In yet another photograph that deploys the trope of masculinity, the figure of a rich, visionary, and disciplined White male operates as a perceptual filter to convey the power of Western media. The first photograph in the story “A World Together” shows American filmmaker George Lucas standing in front of a cinema theater. The words “Star Wars” in bold red appear above the entrance to the theater building while products of his fertile imagination—a smorgasbord of iconic toy figures from the 1999 Star Wars film—scattered in front of the theater titillate fans. The Star Wars characters and fans in the background coalesced to surround Lucas with an aura of confidence and authority. Lucas' external appearance captures the qualities of remote assertiveness and quiet control that define ideal Euroamerican masculinity. Lucas is dressed casually in a simple checked shirt, blue jeans, and a deep brown leather jacket. He stands upright with his shoulders squared, his legs planted apart, his arms close to his body, and his hands stuffed into the front pockets of his jeans. Uninvolved in the busy scene of his own modern
mythmaking, his sober and serious face, which has no hint of an obedient smile and his dispassionate direct gaze subtly signal his unwillingness to perform for the camera and suggest his ability to control his own representation. Fusing the story of Lucas' global success into the stirring fables of empire and Greek mythology, the caption notes that he (the emperor-subject) stands among "denizens of his elaborate galactic saga," and compares him to the Greek epic poet Homer. Informing readers that Star Wars had "earned more than 4.5 billion dollars in profits since 1977," the caption celebrates the filmmaker's impressive economic power (Zwingle & McNally, 1999, p. 13).

The text of the story "A World Together" reasserts the productive energy of Western masculinity to imbue Euroamerican men with the qualities of innovative entrepreneurial creativity and skillful mastery over Asian practices. The writer introduces readers to Tom Sloper in Los Angeles, a "computer geek" and "mah-jongg fanatic," who ingeniously merged his passion for technology with his deep fascination for "ancient" Chinese games by designing a software program called Shanghai Dynasty that enables players to enjoy virtual mah-jongg on the Internet. Conveying a sense of awe that valorizes Sloper's wondrous ability to constitute transnational communities in the cybersphere, a lengthy passage details his lively interaction with mah-jongg players from Germany, Wales, Ohio, and Minnesota. Readers also quickly learn that Sloper was no dilettante dabbler in Eastern culture; he could play eleven different styles of mah-jongg including the most challenging of all, the Japanese style. Similarly, the writer molds French artist Giacomini, the developer of the Mehndi kit, into the carefully orchestrated role of a cosmopolitan trendsetter whose enthusiastic embrace of Asian culture offers evidence of his cultural dexterity.

Colonial Hierarchies, Asian Masculinities

In contrast to its rhetoric on White masculinity, the Geographic's narratives of non-Western masculinity display an array of representational strategies that index the vulnerable and feminized position of Asian manhood in order to heighten the power differentials between Western and Eastern cultures. An intriguing photograph that follows the first editorial image of the patriotic American man is visibly intended to provoke sympathy for marginalized non-Western peoples living in the peripheries of global culture. Recuperating binary popular culture techniques that oppositionally cast weak victims against formidable enemies (David versus Goliath), the Geographic draws upon the calculated image of a hapless male child to illustrate uncorrupted native culture buckling under the immense power of American global commodities. The photograph shows a brown-skinned boy with black hair, a descendant of the Olmec people, who lives on Mexico's coastal plains. The photog-
rapher captures the boy in the process of submitting his body to ritual preparation for worship of the jaguar, the powerful lord of the Olmec spirit world. Simulating the fear-inspiring imagery of gun victimhood that proliferates in hypermasculine violent films, the mouth of an empty Coca-Cola bottle, held by an adult hand and inclined downwards, makes contact with the boy’s nude upper body. The boy’s torso smeared with clay, full pouting lips, pensive eyes pointing sideways, and slender arms awkwardly held at a distance from his hips, compellingly code his innocent docility. Ostensibly, as the caption informs readers, the open mouth of the bottle, dipped in ashes, imprints circles on the boy’s body so that his skin will resemble a jaguar’s coat. For the casual reader, however, the threat of global culture manifests through a Coca-Cola bottle that menacingly extinguishes indigenous culture, whose defenseless fragility is embodied by the “native” boy who lacks the will and strength to push away the bottle. Poignantly emphasizing the qualities of passivity and powerlessness, another image headlined in the language of feminized violence, “Malaria Ravages the Yanomami” (maidens also get ravaged), reveals a thin Yanomami boy from Venezuela receiving a malaria shot. Using the nude male body as a signifier to harness difference and “natural” submissiveness, the unclothed image of the Yanomami boy calls attention to his thin brown-skinned chest. His bowed down head held by an adult hand and his right arm firmly clasped by the woman injecting him reinforce his subordinate status as a compliant subject needing authority and control.

The most spectacular 2-page photograph of adult Asian men in the story “A World Together” testifies to the Geographic’s undisputed professional competence in the sphere of photojournalism. In this image, the photographer illustrates the collaborative production of global culture through the representation of an artistic project crafted by Chinese and Italian artists. The inviting visual feast of brilliant patches of gold and exuberant smiling faces scattered throughout the photograph is, however, subtly undermined by the relentless deployment of the trope of the feminine to infantilize and emasculate Asian men. Eight Chinese male acrobats stand in a backstage setting at the Shanghai Grant Theater while they prepare for an operatic performance with singers from Italy. Echoing a popular culture representational style that proliferates in the enclave of femininity, the Chinese men unselfconsciously display their partially nude bodies (chests, stomachs, arms, and hands), and on a close scrutiny the reader would discover that their thighs and legs are encased in flesh-colored tights. The men’s skimpy traditional Egyptian costumes—a piece of gold cloth tied around their waists with a strip dangling between their thighs—firmly inserts these Asian men into the cultural fabric of womanhood. The elaborate jewelry—ornate gold-colored anklets,
arm bands, wristbands, headbands with gold and black tassels, and a circular flat necklace—which adorns these men’s bodies heightens their decorated nudity, thus producing a feminized positionality that affirms their status as the colorful ethnic Other. Unlike the fully clothed Western men, who radiate pride, dignity, and sober confidence, all the Asian men in this photograph smile widely for the camera while two men on the far right simulate exaggerated grins with their mouths stretched and teeth bared. Invoking the pure joy and spontaneity of childhood, all the men in the foreground seem playful with their arms and elbows raised in midair. Their hands balled into fists beckon readers to join them in a mock fight. The caption’s semantic framing reinforces the link to childhood by explaining that the Chinese acrobats were “gleefully ready to swell an operatic procession” (Zwingle & McNally, 1999).

Another prominent image of global culture associates Asian male subjectivity with exotic religious traditions, sacrifice, and other worldliness, as opposed to the aggressive masculine power and prestige acquired by conquering the material world. The first image after the photograph of filmmaker George Lucas depicts a group of Asian monks dressed in saffron robes while they eat their breakfast at a Denny’s restaurant. Although this image of Buddhist monks is not disturbing in isolation, when placed in tandem with the Geographic’s representations of physically strong and economically powerful White men, it irrevocably meshes with the magazine’s wider discursive regime of infantile Asian masculinity to quietly smuggle in yet another feminized narrative on Asian male subjectivity. Excluded from the grand narratives of patriotism or material progress, the Theravada Buddhist monks in their deep orange “feminine” clothing (loose robes) are constructed as gentle and submissive men, who have renounced dominant narratives of male success because they lack the drive to achieve physical power or global fame. Ultimately, despite the colorful hypervisibility of Asian boys and men in the Geographic, the first portrait of George Lucas, which connects White masculinity to discourses of power, wealth, and historical agency, scripts a chasm of difference between East and West.

Postcolonial approaches to race, nation, and cultural representation reveal that the intricately layered alignment of Asian men with a feminized position in the Geographic is anchored to the troubled historical discourses of Euroamerican colonial modernity. In her pioneering historical work on the ideological underpinnings of British imperialism, Sinha (1995) unearthed one specific construction of colonial masculinity, which affirmed and reproduced ideologies of European racial superiority. Examining a range of historical documents, she argues that representations of the perverted and effeminately feeble Bengali man (sometimes generalized to all middle-class Indian men), who was a contrast to
the strong, assertive, and logical manliness of the upper-class Englishman, were fashioned by the colonial elite to counter the threat of “native” men’s mutinies and risings. In the case of the Buddhist monks, the mapping of religious asceticism onto the bodies of Asian men also reproduces the gendered asymmetry of Orientalist representations of the East. In the binary oppositional narrative of East vs. West as spiritual vs. material, the spiritual, conjoined with fatalism and mute acceptance of nature was gendered feminine, and the material, constituted by logic, aggressive questioning of destiny, and the desire to conquer, was identified as masculine (Prakash, 1990, Said, 1978). The Geographical’s configuration of Asian masculinity is also consonant with New World narratives of Asian men in the United States, discourses of Othering that challenge the separation of race and gender oppression in theorizing marginality. The Asian man’s femininity in nineteenth century newspaper, film, and cartoon images became a critical hinge to anchor the production of racial difference and distinction (Dicker, 1979; Lim, 1994; Mark & Chih, 1993).

Reiterating Physiarity in Black Masculinity
Unlike the images of Asian men, the Geographical solicitously attempts to suture its representation of Black masculinity to narratives of global celebrity, but its only photograph of a Black man revives the limited accounts of Black male empowerment routinely celebrated by mainstream media. In the photograph of Michael Jordan, his ghostly presence in China is captured not in flesh and blood, but on inanimate cardboard. A life-size cutout of the basketball star stands upright in a Shanghai stadium. The circuit of Black masculinity as athletic success in the Geographical’s interpretation of global culture capitulates to the colonial construction of African masculinity, which projected physical aggression and “raw” hypermasculinity onto African men, qualities that supposedly transmute into productive energy when tamed by the rigors of modern sport. The semiotic coding of the Geographical’s lone image of Michael Jordan within the logic of unintended, inferential racism acquires significance only when it is inserted into the abundant, constant flow of media images that perpetuate uni-dimensional images of Black men as inherently capable of conquering combative, physically demanding sports. The Geographical’s image of Jordan in Shanghai, acting in concert with other images designed for popular consumption, reinscribes sport as one of the few entry points into a “global” Horatio Alger Myth for Black men. As Stabile (2000) argues, such narratives of athletic fame have troubled implications for perceptions of Black men’s potential: “African-Americans possess bodily capital rather than the entrepreneurial cunning of an Andrew Carnegie or Ted Turner. Their impulsiveness, or excess energy, must find an appropriate physical outlet—it must be disciplined—or else it runs the risk of turning into senseless, undisciplined violence” (p. 32).
Furthermore, the *Geographic*’s representation of Black masculinity also rearticulates dominant media images of Black Americans that oscillate between the twin poles of spectacular success in athletics and entertainment and abject failure related to crime and poverty (Stabile, 2000). The only other image of the Black community, besides the cutout of Jordan, is a photograph of a poor Black woman that is saturated with semiotic signs of dark urban “inner-city” poverty, imagery that reconstitutes the inferential racism of mainstream media discourses on the pathology of violent Black crime and welfare queens. Rising above her poverty and camouflaging histories of racial oppression and institutional racism, Jordan’s Black masculinity, interpellates readers as the trademark of individualized routes to class mobility. What remains camouflaged are histories of racial oppression and institutional racism. In the *Geographic*’s ironic, interlocked crafting of Black empowerment versus marginality, Jordan’s celebrity endorsement of Nike, intended to encapsulate the high-quality craftsmanship of Nike’s shoes, vividly marks the Black woman’s “shoeless” poverty.

**Consumption Over Production, Capital Over Labor**

Global consumption, framed in the language of touristic yearnings, ignites and fuels the *Geographic*’s interpretation of global culture. In the leading paragraph, which simulates the writer Erla Zwingle’s voyage of discovery, she describes her sense of breathless wonder over the incongruity of contemporary cross-cultural consumption practices. Awed by the mobile traffic of exotic global commodities, the writer records the consumption of Italian pasta in Denmark, Lebanese cuisine in India, Italian espresso in London, and flamenco in Japan. Claiming that globalization has effected a powerful transformation in the lives of global communities, Zwingle argues that contemporary life is in the “throes of a worldwide reformation of cultures, a tectonic shift of habits and dreams” (Zwingle & McNally, 1999, p. 12).

**Repressing Colonial History, Reifying Technology**

Tracing globalization’s origins to a linear narrative of cumulative technological inventions beginning with the postal service and ending with electronic media, the *Geographic* projects a genealogy of technological determinism for global modernity. The magazine’s representation of global consumption practices as exciting, revolutionary phenomena propelled by the historical genius of Western technology suppresses another historical subtext, one that was instrumental in creating the teleology for modern globalization—the colonial history of Western economic expansion and imperialism. The *Geographic* writer’s fascination for glo-
abal consumption linked to images of "tectonic shifts" does not account for the histories of European colonialisms that facilitated the political, economic, and imaginary conditions of possibility for the proliferation of current global economies. Although major transformations have occurred in the manifestations and scale of modern globality, traces of the capitalist business principles that stoked the global economies of colonialism—movement of raw materials, human resources, and labor across and within geographic borders as well as the creation of markets for manufactured goods—strongly linger in modern multinationals' business strategies. Furthermore, transnational elite consumers' appetites for authentic objects and experiences from distant lands, which the writer claims was a characteristic of contemporary global culture, pervaded the imaginary realm of European material culture during the era of colonial modernity. As Lai (1995) notes, in the nineteenth century, when Europe was beginning to experience the discipline and mechanical rhythms of the industrial revolution, the sphere of Orientalized consumption, saturated with signifiers of exotic Asian and African colonies, became an alternative space of fantasy and unleashed desire. Similarly, Lears (1989) argues that the material economy in Europe was fused with libidinal desire for the forbidden enticement of colonized cultures, "The nineteenth century market was a liminal space linking East with West in a profusion of exotic images that surrounded consumer goods in an aura of sensuous mystery and possibility." (p. 77).

**Corporate Localization as "Native"**

**Resistance to Global Homogenization**

Reviewing the impact of globalization on cultural diversity, the writer optimistically argues that "resourceful, resilient, and unpredictable" cultures in different locales challenged the homogenizing impulses of Western commodities. Zwingle's comments about "actively resistant" local cultures surviving the steady onslaught of Western global culture responds to recent arguments of scholars, who have advocated against envisioning non-Western audiences as passive consumers of Western culture (Ang, 1996; Hannerz, 1997). However, the evidence the *Geographic* writer marshals to support her thesis of lively local resistance in Asia invigorates corporate notions of consumerism as an effective mode of opposition against global cultural homogenization. Crafting a story that transmutes into a triumphal celebration of the market, Zwingle draws from corporate discourses on diversity to inventory multinationals' tolerant, accommodating attempts to customize their products in order to appeal to diverse local consumers: McDonald's mutton and vegetarian fast food to satisfy Indian consumers, the Barbie doll's numerous colorful national and ethnic avatars, Revlon's new range of cosmetics for dark-skinned women in hot climates, and MTV's hybrid localized productions. Attesting to the local efforts of multinationals to
“go native” as conciliatory practices that code subservience to the powerful wishes of non-Western consumers, the writer argues that ethnic marketing actively counters the charges of “imperialist cultural pollution” that conservative Indian politicians levy against foreign companies.

Deconstructing corporate discourses on localization, postcolonial critic Indrepal Grewal urges scholars to be cautious about the progressive implications of the transnationalization of multiculturalism through the ethnic marketing practices of global corporations:

Multiculturalism, as it has been understood in the context of the United States, is no longer a claim on civil rights, but also circulates globally as consumer culture in which ethnic immigrant and White consumers create negotiated lifestyles from the American lifestyle that is so much a part of late twentieth-century U.S. capitalism. (Grewal, 1999, p. 802)

Drawing on materialist critiques of transnationalism to analyze consumption practices in postcolonial cultures, she warns consumers and scholars in First World nations against capitulating to the progressive patina of corporate discourses that have appropriated the activist slogan “Think globally, act locally” to further their image as socially responsible “local” partners in a global economy. In her critique of the Indian Barbie doll’s multicultural marketing, Grewal argues that Mattel’s deployment of national diversity, far from revealing Indian consumers’ active local resistance to a global “America,” instead illustrates the creation of new consuming subjects in Asia. In effect, South Asian citizens are witnessing their transformation into lucrative global “niche” markets, carved up by the demographics of gender, class, and age. Similarly, the Geographies examples of modifications in global commodities demonstrate that global consumption practices are mediated by ethnic, racial, and national differences, however, multinational corporations’ localization strategies to increase sales in world markets do not offer evidence of the cultural resilience of Indian or Chinese citizens. On the contrary, as many corporations have begun to experience saturation in their sales in the United States, the middle-classes in East Europe and Asia have become new, unconquered subjects awaiting their training as American style consumers. Masquerading as mannequins for global diversity, product modifications are often touted by corporations as proof of their commitment to preserving local cultures.

Replenishing Colonial Ideologies of Progress, Renouncing Labor and Production

Quoting from The Communist Manifesto on the first page of the text in the story “A World Together,” the writer claims that globalization heralds Marx and Engels’ prophecies about the demise of national econo-
mies that would be replaced by global industries, much better equipped
to fulfill world markets' desires for novel experiences and products
(Zwingle & McNally, 1999, p. 12). Curiously enough for a text that
invokes the prescience of Marx, whose scathing critiques of capitalism
have inspired numerous studies on the exploitation of labor and corpo-
rature imagery's manipulative techniques, the Geographic's narrative care-
fully avoids critical commentary on the less than savory practices of
"efficiency" that shape global production. Instead, in a style reminiscent
of successful corporate public relations techniques based in product
insertion, the reader encounters benign and celebratory signifiers of cor-
porate America floating throughout the editorial text. The Hollywood
sign on the hill dominates the background to Michelle Yeoh's image, a
United Colors of Benetton plastic sack innocuously appears in the back-
ground scene of the Chinese acrobats, and Coca-Cola claims the entire
lower half of a corrugated metal wall in a Mumbai slum.

The most insidious image, the photograph of a dancing Zhou Die Die
in a Shanghai street, elaborates a hegemonic story of Western demo-
cracy and individual freedom in Asia facilitated by global capitalism. This
image suggests that with the advent of global culture, symbolized by
Nike, young Chinese citizens, previously repressed by communism, scar-
city in consumer commodities, and the traditional constraints of Confu-
cianism, are now able to luxuriate in the personal liberty forged by their
allegiance to capitalism. Drawing attention to Zhou Die Die's chest, the
hard to escape corporate logo of Nike, the ubiquitous swoosh sign, is
inscribed in white on her black sports bra. Her flung back head and her
eyes looking upward at the sky announce her abandonment and joy, and
evoke nostalgic associations with the undiluted happiness of childhood
while "Nikeless" older Chinese women quietly watch her. The invisibil-
ity of text detailing the problems of globalization, when situated within
the context of images that blur the boundaries between editorial and
corporate communication, compound the Geographic magazine's com-
plicity with multinationals' promotional goals.

Portraying corporate America as a benevolent participant in the de-
velopment of the non-Western world, the Geographic's story further re-
plenishes neo-colonial ideologies of the progressive global transforma-
tion promised by Western style capitalism. The text details the active
role of multinationals in facilitating economic growth in China and In-
dia: General Motors' 1.5 billion dollar investment in a new plant in
Shanghai; urban development in Shanghai as a result of foreign invest-
ment; the popularity of Cosmopolitan and Elle in China; Gucci's sur-
prisingly booming sales in Shanghai; and door to door sales of Amway,
Avon, and Tupperware as new routes for Chinese women to gain pros-
perity. In the Geographic's sanitized discussion of labor, multinationals,
which are excised from the “profitable” conditions of exploitation that the developing world has presented, become exciting sources of rapid class mobility for Third World workers. An Indian entrepreneur, Rajan Bakshi, animatedly reports that foreign companies have increased professional opportunities for Indian workers. Praising the initiatives of multinationals in accelerating Indian women’s visibility in the global public sphere, he proposes that foreign companies offer new options for Indian women, whose only other alternative would have been to suffer gender discrimination in domestic companies. On the Geographic’s website, McDonald’s is hailed as a haven for Indian consumers seeking sanitary food and clean bathrooms, and as a refuge of secular modernity for women in “traditional cultures,” who fear the taboos of being seen alone in male public spaces.

The Geographic’s narrative on global culture, which privileges the consumerist platform of consumption, conceals the very practices and realities of labor that multinationals’ propaganda routinely attempts to keep out of sight. Far before they were interpellated as target markets of global culture, many Asian citizens, particularly those not included in the elite consumerist caste, encountered globalization as workers being sought after by United States’ corporations that were in hot pursuit of plentiful and cheap labor. For example, young Chinese teenagers in the Geographic’s 1999 issue are assiduously stitched into a seamless narrative of global consumer happiness as participants in Nike’s dance teams and basketball tournaments, however, when Nike entered mainland China in 1978 to open its first overseas factory, Chinese citizens were first and foremost regarded as sources of cheap labor. Nike has since then opened factories in Korea and Taiwan, and currently more than a third of Nike products are produced in Indonesia and Vietnam, where the daily wage for workers is a meager $1.50. In Indonesia, a “friendly” government, eagerly seeking the benefits of global corporations’ investments, actually set the minimum wage below the poverty line (Katz, 1994). Other United States’ corporations including Walmart, Gifford, Kentucky Fried Chicken, J.C. Penney, and the Disney Store have also been documented as less than perfect global citizens in their overseas labor practices in Asia (Stabile, 2000). Reports of corporate abuses of labor in Asia have documented unsafe work conditions, low health and safety standards, lack of benefits, exploitation of child labor, and harsh management tactics.

In the Geographic’s canvas on global culture, multinationals, represented by the elite high-tech computer industry in India (not the garment industry), are conjoined to progressive agendas of non-Western women’s empowerment. The logic underlying Geographic’s vision of corporate America as agents of Asian women’s liberation from their oppression by domestic Indian corporations morphs into a modern manifestation of colonial discourses that also projected the ideology of West-
ern culture as the savior of non-Western women who endured the abuses of their "barbaric" cultures (as Gayatri Spivak has succinctly summarized, this is the colonial paradigm of "white men saving brown women from brown men"). Although the magazine suggests that multinationals are exciting resources of professional opportunity that enable Indian women workers to increase their economic power, the more pervasive experiences of Asian women in global corporations have been far from exciting or equitable. At the Yue-Yuen factory in Mainland China, for example, 90% of the workers were women who had to "obey a long list of rules concerning fraternization with men and curfews" (Katz, 1994, pp. 179–180). Malaysian women in the electronics industry, considered prized workers because Asian women were believed to be more docile and nimble than men, have repeatedly suffered emotional and physical abuses from their supervisors (Ong, 1987).

The Geographic's resounding silence on global labor practices perpetuates the neocolonial ideology of American corporations as magnanimous global citizens, which empower developing countries to "catch up" with developed nations. As Stabile (2000) argues in her case study of Nike, the disappearance of labor exploitation in media imagery is critical for transnational corporations to persuade consumers that consumption is an ideal means through which they can experience their identities as liberal, multicultural citizens. It becomes easier for multinationals to suppress the contradictions between their images as philanthropic institutions and their less than equitable labor practices overseas when respected magazines like the Geographic assist in maintaining the benevolent veneer of global capitalism. Ultimately, the Geographic's narrative on global culture reasserts the methodology of commercial media imagery that fosters commodity fetishism by suppressing modes of production: "The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real solid relations objectified in them through human labor, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolic social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level" (Jhally, 1989, pp. 221–222).

Postcolonial Approaches, Globalization, and Communication Studies

Communication scholars have only recently begun advocating for the transformative possibilities that postcolonial theories and approaches offer to rhetorical studies, feminist communication research, and audience studies (Ganguly, 1992; Hegde, 1998; Juluri, 1998; Shome, 1996). Outlining the ways in which postcolonial approaches can advance rhetorical studies beyond the significant challenges posed by postmodern and feminist theories, Shome (1996) argues that a "promising collusion
between rhetoric and postcolonialism” is vital to dispute the legitimacy of neocolonialism’s hegemonic discursive regimes. Extending these recent efforts to build bridges between communication research and postcolonial studies, this case study of *National Geographic*, a magazine that constructs itself as “objective” documentary, demonstrates the value of postcolonial approaches for the disciplines of journalism and photojournalism. By historicizing the *Geographic* magazine’s text on globalization, this essay deconstructs the ways in which modern media continue to reproduce the hierarchical relations of race, gender, and nation articulated in Euroamerican colonial ideologies.

Applying the vocabularies of postcolonial critiques, which have previously dominated analyses of film and literary texts, to journalistic texts and images empowers media scholars to disrupt the hegemony of dominant discourses that shape conversations over key cultural and economic developments in the global public sphere. Mass media have become key sites where the misty smog that envelops the process of globalization is repeatedly manufactured and distributed. Piercing the shrill exuberance of those who stand to benefit the most from the new pace and mobility of global modernity, Bauman (1998) points out that the term “globalization” has become a “fad word fast turning into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries” (p. 1). Contemporary media texts often associate globalization with the positive energy of vibrant individualism and empowerment combined with the solidarity of progressive collectivism, themes that corporations harness to sell commodities. The *Geographic*’s accounts of globalization joins numerous multicultural lifestyle accounts in the popular media that traffic in the production of diversity as aesthetic, culinary, travel, or consumer experiences. Although the *Geographic* is only one site in a larger discursive field where globalization is crafted for popular ingestion, as a credible window of science on the world, it is a trusted voice among the myriad moments of popular reiteration which give the prevailing order of globalization its cloak of inevitability.

Moreover, this analysis shows that traditional approaches based in the identification of blatantly sexist and racist stereotypes in media content may not be equipped to deconstruct the subtle mechanisms of Othering that structure the neocolonial discursive regimes of globalization. How do postcolonial theories of representation, with their rich historical insights into racial and gender difference, disperse the thick mist of innocent, multicultural realism that surrounds the *Geographic’s* rendering of global culture? From a more traditional vantage point of locating negative stereotypes, the modern Indian woman daring the camera, the young Chinese girl dancing with abandon, the Malaysian actress suspended in midair, the laughing and spiritual Asian men, and
the athletic Black man, would be diagnosed as positive images that challenge the invisibility and passivity of non-Western subjects in popular culture. However, when refracted through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, these positive images begin to narrate another story. Only young, slender non-Western women wholeheartedly devouring Western culture gain individual freedom, power, and rebellious pleasure. Older women who endure traditional costumes, inflexible overweight bodies, and the burdens of motherhood do not gain the same benefits. For non-Western men in the Geographic, postcolonial history indicates that not only invisibility, but also feminized hypervisibility can reassert mute and vulnerable positionalities (Schein, 2000, p. 234).

A postcolonial perspective can also detect the implications of the Geographic's associational network of mutually interactive racial images of Asia and Africa that are woven into its narratives on globalization. The representational order of the Geographic's images subtly articulates the racial ideology of the evolutionary continuum, which was designed by European scientists and anthropologists at the height of colonial expansion. Consolidating the modern European self, the colonial paradigm of the ladder of human evolution positioned Africa at the bottom rung, Asia in the middle rung, and Europe at the top. While languorous White women in the Geographic luxuriate in the freedom of pursuing ethnic culture and attractive Asian women express independence and style, a Black woman becomes the canvas on which the magazine etches poverty and disenfranchisement. Additionally, the absence of Africa from the magazine's stories on global modernity symbiotically interacts with the spectacular visual presence of Africans in the story "Vanishing Cultures," which follows a few pages after the story on global culture. The opening photograph of Africans in the story on vanishing cultures indexes Africa as an ancient, "natural" space that is still inextricably trapped in the past. The photograph shows two Ariaal warriors in traditional clothing while the caption informs readers that "age old cultures are besieged by modern pressures. In Kenya, Ariaal warriors cling to a nomadic existence" (Zwingle & McNally, 1999, p. 63). As the casual reader browses the magazine, Asia becomes aligned with the vitality of modern progress while Africa remains anchored to the amorphous state of extinction and the ephemerality of a culture that cannot be assimilated into modernity.

The complex texture of contemporary media culture demands that we account for the intersections and tensions among the imperatives of production, text, and audience reception. Further research on the impact of the Geographic magazine's institutional history and production processes on its "millennium" cover stories would enrich this essay's textual approach to globalization. The nonprofit status of the National
Geographic Society; the elitist White Southern culture that shaped the magazine's founding and expansion; age-old editorial policies of minimizing controversial material; professional negotiations among picture editors, layout artists, and caption writers; the priorities of visually driven media; and color photography's demands for "spectacle" are complex factors that may have influenced the final contours of the stories that appeared in the Geographic's August 1999 issue (Lutz & Collins, 1993; S. Raymer, personal communication, April 18, 2001). A media reception study that explores the intricacies of readers' multiple interpretations of the Geographic's discourses on globalization is another promising direction for future work. The rich critical vocabulary of postcolonial approaches can, however, resuscitate the potential of textual critique to crack the ideological surface of neocolonial representations in popular discourses on globalization. This essay's analysis of globalization in National Geographic illustrates the urgency of postcolonial critique in an era when the problematic texts of global media circulate in numerous local contexts.

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