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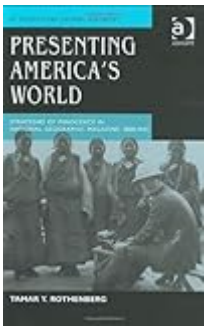

Tamar Y. Rothenberg. *Presenting America's World: Strategies of Innocence in National Geographic Magazine, 1888-1945.* Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. 202 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-4510-8.

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The Guile of Innocence

Tamar Y. Rothenberg tells a sweet story about her grandparents, attributing her curiosity about other cultures, in part, to their postretirement travels and their frequent gifts of dolls in native dress. Yet, her more compelling motivation in launching this engaging research and writing project comes from her candid and ingenious discovery that many people associate the early period of the editorial evolution of *National Geographic* with the publication of photographs of bare-breasted women from third world countries. Rothenberg's research, however, showed that association to be perception, not reality. Nude or nearly nude shots appeared only sporadically and sometimes, Rothenberg notes, readers would have to wait several issues to "get their next peek" (p. 22).

The subtitle of Rothenberg's book, *Strategies of Innocence in National Geographic Magazine, 1888-1945*, is also revealing in this regard. Rothenberg draws on the work of Mary Louise Pratt. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Pratt examines European travel writing since the eighteenth century and defines strategies of innocence as "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment they assert European hegemony" (p. 6). Drawing on this theoretical framework, Rothenberg argues that *National Geographic* framed American identity through a rather contradictory editorial approach. On the one hand, she argues, the magazine's content substantiated the civic and technological superiority of the United States; on the other, it supported a benign innocence of community that softened the accountability of its citizens. Thus, the reader could view images without responsibility. After all, *National Geographic* presented "the world and all that is in it" (p. 11). At the same time, aligning with Pratt's definition, *National Geographic* proactively asserted the hegemony of the United States.

The magazine nurtured the reader, as a member of the National Geographic Society, to develop a particular national identity that embraced not only innocence, but also the perception of an "imagined community" of Americans (p. 41). Rothenberg cites the argument of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1991) that diverse citizens can share a common cultural base through

consumption of national media. Rothenberg elaborates on several essential strategies of innocence, with science rated noteworthy among them. *National Geographic* presented itself as a scientific authority, and purported exploration and its derivative knowledge to be in the service of empire building. Further, the magazine promoted itself as an altruistic, educational organization, without political influence, while at the same time packaging a definite political agenda in its pages.

The five-chapter book is concise, yet comprehensive, in describing that editorial agenda, and each chapter is targeted in its mission to show *National Geographic* as a major participant in defining the cultural mindset of U.S. global hegemony. The first chapter examines the early history of the National Geographic Society and the development of the magazine. Just one decade into *National Geographic* history came a critical turning point in the 1898 Spanish-American War when the editors broadened their definition of geography to include human and political interaction–" 'humanized geography,' " as they termed it (p. 11). Within this context, Rothenberg shows how wholesome exotica and erotica paradoxically became possible, probable, and acceptable in the magazine's articles and photographs.

As part of the growing hegemony, chapter 2 highlights the relationship of *National Geographic* with the U.S. government. As the magazine's first paid editor, Gilbert H. Grosvenor, commented in 1916, " 'The National Geographic Society is generally regarded as semi-official' " (p. 50). Grosvenor used that rhetoric, at the time, to promote the magazine's patriotism and to advocate that the society should help the government purchase (and conserve) acreage near Sequoia National Park. Indeed, good ol' boy networking was apparent within the ranks of the society. Alexander Graham Bell, who became president of the National Geographic Society in January 1898, succeeded the society's inaugural president–and his father-in-law–Gardiner Greene Hubbard. Bell hired Grosvenor, who shortly after married Bell's daughter Elsie and who remained editor for more than fifty years.

The third chapter examines how the magazine's photography became the cornerstone of the magazine's success. The magazine promoted its photographs as scientific documentation–true reality. And, this reality was perceived and shared by photographers and editors alike. Rothenberg illustrates with precision how science and art functioned as two complementary, and also often contradictory, strategies of innocence. For example, the photographs of those aforementioned bare-breasted women lacked sexual context because they simply served as scientific exhibits. They were types, or classifications, of natives, not even to be identified by name.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of how the magazine positioned the subject of geography some two degrees away from its classic photographs of nearly nude women. In this chapter, Rothenberg documents the selectivity and importance of photography within the magazine's pages through the experiences of photographer Maynard Owen Williams. Williams worked on nearly one hundred articles between 1919 and 1960. In 1945, Williams, who considered himself a conscientious photographer, was taken aback when he pointedly received an advance copy of a memo to photographers from *National Geographic* editors. The memo instructed photographers to write " 'full captions' " consisting of the "'what, where, when, and why"' of each photograph (p. 125). Significantly, for Rothenberg's argument, those instructions left out the "who." Human subjects from other cultures presumably came under the categorization of "what." Like his editors, Williams disliked ugly "'historical facts,"' and he admitted he "'felt a bit ashamed"' when he photographed opium smokers and dealers in the streets of Liangchow. He said, "'It was a relief to turn to a jolly cobbler"' (p. 106). Smiling faces were better to shape the innocence of the American view of the world.

The final chapter profiles Harriet Chalmers Adams, who contributed twenty-one articles between 1907 and 1935. Again, Rothenberg skillfully uses this *National Geographic* loyalist to personalize the magazine's formula for presenting its agenda through science and travel content. Adams brought courage and Latin America expertise to her assignments. And, Adams garnered authority in the masculine arenas of exploration, geography, and commerce. Still, she took care to give the editors work what she hoped would " 'reflect glory on the National Geographic Society, which has so befriended me' " (p. 134).

Although the focus on Williams and Adams is methodologically strong, Rothenberg admits the selection of these contributors was forced because their work was accessible to scholars. Despite such apparent obstacles to accessing archives, though, Rothenberg did a solid job of researching and interpreting the developmental history of *National Geographic*. She also looked beyond the accepted assessment that *National Geographic* magazine is the most visible and popular expression of geography in the United States. The book is an interesting, critical, and admirable contribution to the Re-materialising Cultural Geography series from British-based publisher Ashgate.

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