

## WHAT WOULD I BE WITHOUT YOU?

The significance of offering a coherent, alternative interpretation of *National Geographic*, specifically, lies in understanding and treating this kind of mainstream educational material on a serious level of critical engagement. Too often the requirements of rigorous critique practiced in other areas of study, such as literature or film, are not applied to the area of popular educational texts and visual images. As Elizabeth Ellsworth and Mariamne Whatley point out: "Research into the ideological work of educational media has been virtually nonexistent."<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing and analyzing such educational materials, materials that must be redefined in light of their ideological interests and consequences, contributes to work in critical educational theory. Examining *National Geographic* offers a view of the interrelationships among popular education, schooling, mass media, and dominant ideology. These interrelationships are neither haphazard nor new, as is evidenced by this study.

From the outset, it must be made clear that I am not attempting to construct an encyclopedic record of *National Geographic*'s textual and visual representations of Arabs. Such a project would amount to little more than a cumulative index of the sort that the magazine itself produces regularly. Rather, this study should be understood as discourse analysis, with popular Orientalism as its primary

concern. Edward Said says, "Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West."<sup>2</sup> This book aims to understand what this political doctrine looked like in its popular configurations; therefore, articles and pictures selected for close attention in this project are those lodged within Orientalist discourse. I am not interested in the possibility of finding a sentence or page or article or picture that could stand as an example of the magazine's representing Arabs outside of Orientalism. I am interested in Orientalism. The portrayal of Arabs that unfolds in this study cannot be erased, softened, or minimized by collecting counter-representations that could be read as complimentary or sensitive to Arabs. Representations do not cancel one another out like a math equation. Therefore, a collection of both so-called positive and negative images of Arabs would not mean that the overall portrayal in *National Geographic* is a balanced one. That is to say, a racist statement is not balanced by also finding a non-racist statement. For example, saying that Arabs are naturally violent is not made less racist by also saying that Arabs are fine coppersmiths.

Additionally, as a feminist researcher, I have read for patriarchal discourse running through and alongside *National Geographic*'s popular Orientalism. Again, I did not pursue the possibility of finding examples of non-sexist photographs or text because I am interested in examining patriarchal discourse. If analyzing representations could be reduced to mathematical treatment, then we could determine how many pictures of fully clothed women cancel out one photograph of a bare-breasted woman and read the final numbers to decide whether *National Geographic* was a gender-sensitive journal. But then again, even our math equation would rest first upon finding agreement over interpreting the equivalent value of a picture of a bare-breasted woman.

Just as this book is not concerned with counter-examples, let there be no confusion that, as this study demonstrates, *National Geographic* is positively steeped in Orientalism and patriarchy. Citing exceptions would in no way negate the rule of these discourses. I have determined what is typical in the representation of Arabs, and it is that which I am presenting—not the atypical. How did I establish the typical?

The sheer quantity of a century of material on the Arab world in *National Geographic* makes identifying the typical quite a task. Once the initial sorting was accomplished, texts and photographs that best exemplify designated themes or categories—the most typical of the typical, if you will—were chosen. (These photographs were later sifted again based on practical publishing concerns.) Handling the mass of material produced by the long period of time and wide geographical area that this study covers was made messier by *National Geographic*'s particular

style. This style is an eclecticism that gathers a diverse range of subjects within one magazine issue and, further, covers a given subject by stringing together a wide range of topics. For example, the contents of typical *National Geographic* magazine issues containing articles examined in each of the four time periods of this study are:

- August 1925—"Waimangu and the Hot-spring of New Zealand"; "Tripolitania, Where Rome Resumes Sway"; "Under Italian Libya's Burning Sun"; "Toilers of the Sky"; "From England to India by Automobile"; and "The MacMillan Arctic Expedition Sails."
- December 1946—"Oregon Finds New Riches"; "Where Rolls the Oregon"; "Syria and Lebanon Taste Freedom"; "Ali Goes to the Clinic"; "Paris Lives Again"; "Mending Dykes in the Netherlands"; and "Fairy Terns of the Atolls."
- January 1966—"Saudi Arabia"; "Stalking Seals under Antarctic Ice"; "Profiles of Presidents: Part V"; "Finding Rare Beauty in Common Rocks"; and "Brazil's Waura Indians."
- May 1988—"Wool: The Fabric of History"; "India's Unpredictable Kerala"; "Supernova—Death of a Star"; "The Persian Gulf: Living in Harm's Way"; and "Fleas: The Lethal Leapers."

Between the covers of one issue, *National Geographic* offers its readers an array of completely unrelated subjects. Clearly, there is no common theme at work in the articles and photographs about Oregon, Arabs, Paris, dikes, and birds collected in a single issue. The magazine's contents are typically a pot-pourri, with something for everyone. Given this characteristic of the magazine, it is with absolutely no loss of context that articles on Arabs have been extracted from their particular *National Geographic* issues and gathered together here for examination.

Although I organized the book's chapters chronologically, I did not tie myself to a rigid movement through a century of *National Geographic*'s history. Beyond not wanting to produce what Said would call a "mindlessly chronological order,"<sup>3</sup> I gave serious consideration to developing a research design around themes of Orientalism in the manner of Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem*. His work on French postcards of Algerian women is arranged according to topics such as Women's Quarters; Couples; Inside the Harem: The Rituals, Song and Dance; and The Figures of the Harem: Dress and Jewelry.

Deciding that the specific needs of this project would not be served by adopting either a straight historical or thematic approach, I chose to combine the two

by looking at themes within time periods. So while preserving the tone of different time periods, we can simultaneously hear certain themes echoing through the whole one hundred years. This keeps a sense of the magazine's and the Arab world's histories, but does not mindlessly chain us to it. It allows us to follow the themes of Orientalism and watch them function, rather than chop everything up according to a tedious timetable that would result in great loss of meaning. That settled, the quantity and eclectic material of *National Geographic* made additional demands on the course of research and presentation.

A second layer of eclecticism appears within the articles themselves. Assorted pieces of information are collected and arranged in *National Geographic* articles, with a heavy reliance on abundant subtitles—on average, one subtitle per half-page of text. Each article on the Arab world examined in this study touches on anywhere from half to all, or more, of the following array of topics: food, architecture, markets, landscape, ceremonies, behavior, sanitation, economy, trade, family, political system, history, marriage laws and customs, dress, physical and mental characteristics of the people, manners, crafts, natural resources, animals, religion, tourist facilities and sights, climate, education, and entertainment. Such a string of topics, multiplied hundreds of times, obviously creates a bundle from which to sort and select. (I did put this eclectic store of data to additional use as a source for the chapter titles and subtitles that are quotations from *National Geographic*.) Before describing criteria for my overall selection process, I must first introduce another layer of complexity that influenced the lines of this study.

Further discontinuity or fragmentation is met because *National Geographic*'s visits to Arab countries do not follow any regular patterns. For example, within the period of my study, 1888–1988, the last article on Libya was published in 1944. Among articles on Algeria, two appeared in 1943, but in the 1970s and 1980s there was a lapse of fourteen years between articles. In 1982, there were three trips to Egypt, but none between 1967 and 1977. In 1958, there were three trips to Iraq, but there have been none since 1985. The last article on Syria appeared in 1978. Between 1967 and 1985, there was only one article on what was then the People's Democratic Republic of Southern Yemen. Tunisia was covered four times in 1911, but not at all between 1946 and 1960 and was last visited in 1980. The very first article on Kuwait appeared in 1952, and so on.

Thus, there is no pattern to Arab world coverage in *National Geographic*, which means that this study is also, necessarily, devoid of such a pattern. The magazine does not dole out equal space or treatment to the various Arab countries, nor does it conduct regular visits. This is not surprising, because *National Geographic* is an educational journal covering "the world and all that's in it," not an international airline. But this means that the book does not plot straight