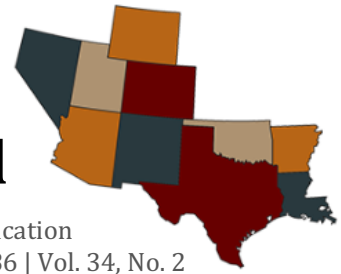


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Streets and Statues in Black and White: Deconstructing America's Racial Reality in *National Geographic*

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In March 2018, *National Geographic* admitted for the first time in its 130-year history that “for decades our coverage was racist. To rise above our past, we must acknowledge it.” In acknowledging that past, it offered a special issue focused on race, which kicked off its yearlong series of reporting, “Diversity in America.” This paper offers a textual analysis of two articles that appeared in the April 2018 edition. One article focused on the rising anxiety of White America, apparent in the debate over confederate statues. The second article features streets named for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an offering timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the civil right leader's assassination.

Keywords: National Geographic, diversity, race, journalism, visual communication, magazine, social construction, Memphis, civil rights

It's been 115 years since W. E. B. DuBois (1903) wrote “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Some might say those opening words in Chapter 2 of DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk* ring true now in the 21st century. In March 2018, *National Geographic* admitted for the first time in its 130-year history that “for decades our coverage was racist. To rise above our past, we must acknowledge it” (Hawkins, 2018). The words were used in the headline of an article by *National Geographic* editor Susan Goldberg, who led her staff in producing a Special Issue on RACE with the goal of having “a saner conversation about what is race and what isn't race.” The leadership of one of the nation's premiere magazines saw the color line as a problem in its coverage.

More than two decades since President Bill Clinton encouraged communities across the country to become involved in a “National Conversation on Race,” a similar call was being issued again. This time the call came from a magazine, which used its Special Issue in April 2018 to kick-off a yearlong “Diversity in America” series which provided multimedia coverage of racial, ethnic, and religious groups that examined their changing roles in 21st century life. The call from *National Geographic* came in a year where battles over statues and monuments had shined the spotlight on the issue of race while actions of activist athletes had taken a stand against police shootings of unarmed motorists and questioned, and in some cases, prompted policy changes.

Considering the 2018 context for the SPECIAL Issue of *National Geographic* and its admittance, this paper offers a textual analysis of two articles that appeared in the April issue: one focused on streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other featured voices in the debate over statues of Confederate war veterans as an indicator of “rising anxiety of White America.” While the first article exemplifies *National Geographic’s* ongoing world of taking readers around the world through pictures, the second article takes a more domestic turn as it captures the lived experience of those concerned about changing racial demographics. Before setting our theoretical framework for this analysis, it is important to briefly review the literature on both media coverage of race and the scholarly treatments on *National Geographic*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covering Race in Magazines

One of the earliest studies on race in magazines sought to determine whether Negroes¹ and whites were differently portrayed in magazine pictures. The researchers analyzed selected issues from 1949 and 1950 of the following magazines: *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *The New Yorker* as well as *The Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Colliers* (Shuey, King & Griffith, 1953). Findings of the 292 magazines examined found just ten of 213 pictures in the magazines showed one or more Negroes in the highest of occupational categories or “Above Skilled Labor.” Three of those were men engaged in baseball, boxing or track and seven were as entertainers (acting, dancing or playing a musical instrument). No Negroes were pictured as skilled or clerical workers.

Another study of magazine portrayals focused just on *Life* magazine, which aimed to portray the contemporary scene, recording and commenting on the unexpected and mundane in America. Sentman (1983) focused on the magazine’s portrayals of the black community between 1937 and 1972. The content analysis of coverage in magazine issues in five-year increments showed that except for 1937, coverage of black everyday life was markedly absent. And, despite an increase following the Civil Rights movement, coverage of black Americans constituted a minute portion of *Life’s* content (p.508). In 1937, Black Americans appeared on two *Life* Magazine covers: one as black children playing in an open city fire hydrant and secondly when a black man drove a load of watermelons to market (p. 506).

Using Sentman’s content analysis categories, Lester & Smith (1990) content analyzed pictures in three major magazines for 11 sampled years—1937 through 1988---showed African American increased visibility in all photographs (Lester & Smith,1990). But, the years 1937 to 1952 were viewed as “Stereotyping” while the years of 1957 to 1972, the magazine photos were viewed as civil rights. African American magazine portrayals from 1978 to 1988 were presented as “working within the

¹ The word “Negro” is used here, as it was the term used to refer to African American when the article cited here was published in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1953.

system.” The content analysis of pictorial treatment of African Americans in five year increments from 1937 - 1988 in *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines reflected the pre-and post-civil rights era, and the Kerner Commission’s influence on media coverage.

Beyond these three magazines, Stempel’s (1971) in his study of *Life*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report*, found that while there was concern about black visibility in the five news magazines, there was a clear indication of an increase in black visibility from 1960 to 1970 (p. 339).

Researching the *National Geographic* Tradition

As a subject of scholarly inquiry, *National Geographic* has been the subject of at least a half-dozen scholarly articles in monographs, academic journals and books in this century alone (Darling-Wolf & Mendelson, 2008; Hawkins, 2010; Mendelson & Darling-Wolf, 2009; Parameswaran, 2002; Schwartz-DuPre, 2010; and Todd, 2007). That’s not including Lutz & Collins’ (1993) book, *Reading National Geographic* or Bryan’s (1987) comprehensive volume on the magazine published on the occasion of the magazine’s centennial. In it, he explained that since 1888, the *National Geographic* Society had been offering “a window on the world” to millions of its members even before the time of color photography, movies and television (Bryan, 1987). In the preface to their well-known book-length study, anthropologists Catherine Lutz & Janice Collins (1993) noted that “to study *National Geographic* is to study not a single cultural artifact but a powerful force in an ongoing cultural discussion of issues...Its role is not simply to form an educated public, it can also provide support for American state policies and of voting and consumer behavior” (p. xiii).

As a literary scholar and educator, Hawkins (2010) drew upon the *National Geographic* Society’s archive of unpublished readers’ letters as her book focused on the magazine’s rise to iconicity in the first half of the twentieth century. It showed how members of the Society responded to the magazine’s public image. In arguing for her title, *American Iconographic*, Hawkins explained that *National Geographic* is an icon that produced other iconic “types”—images of the far-flung and exotic, women of color, photographer adventurers, and picturesque nature photography” (p.13).

Arguing that more than any other publication, *National Geographic* has taught Americans about the world around them, Darling-Wolf & Mendelson (2008) produced an entire monograph based on their investigation of the local reception of a story written, photographed and edited by *National Geographic*’s American staff and then translated and re-edited for the Japanese language edition. The December 2003 story, “The Samurai Way,” as reported in the American edition, emphasized the continued impact of Samurai on contemporary Japanese while the Japanese version showcased the foreign origin of the story and included a sidebar providing historical context (p. 296).

Elsewhere, the same authors of the “The Samurai Way” monograph published a separate study of *National Geographic*’s use of pictures and text in a photo story in a way to produce meaning for readers. They created three versions of an October 2003 article, “Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia,” one with the 27 photos in the original article and captions, one with text only and one with both photos and captions (Mendelson & Darling-Wolf, 2009). This study found that journalistic articles about culture do have the power to inform readers and unsettle stereotypes, especially for participants who only read the text of the story. At the same time, photographs, especially when they are seen on their own, were more likely to resonate with and confirm stereotypes than to contradict or complicate them (p. 812).

In her 2002 case study of *National Geographic*'s August 1999 "millennium" issue, Parameswaran's (2002) textual analysis focused on two feature articles – "Global Culture" and "A World Together. Employing textual analysis, Paramaeswaran interrogated representations of globalization emerging from the publication that had been identified previously as an artifact that "straddles simultaneously the worlds of academia, art, and popular imagination (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 4).

From South Asia to Afghanistan—the term "Afghan Alibi" was given by Schwartz-DuPre (2010) to the genre of articles published Post-9/11 that invested in the relationship between U.S. representations of Afghan women and imperial policy. In one study, she focused on the iconic June 1985 *National Geographic* cover photograph of Afghan Girl, which talk show host Oprah Winfrey declared was the most recognizable picture in the history of *National Geographic*. Schwartz-DuPre (2010) examined her veil, childhood, eyes, anonymity, refugee and femininity as six visual signifiers that mark the "image as victim" and at the same time rhetorically constitute public support for then President Ronald Reagan's initiative to arm Afghanistan.

Yet another academic examination of *National Geographic* focused on images from the continent of Africa and tourist texts. This study focused on a trio of magazines packaged together for delivery to subscribers—the September 2005 edition of *National Geographic* with a cover title, "Africa: Whatever you thought, think again, *National Geographic Traveler*, which included an *African Safari Guide in its "Quest for Retreat" and National Geographic Adventure*, which promised "The Best of Africa! Including 25 Surefire Adventures You Can Do Now.

National Geographic: A Mea Culpa

In her editor's note, which circulated online weeks before copies of the print magazine arrived at newsstands, Susan Goldberg made mention of her own diversity being the first woman and the first Jewish person to serve as editor since the publication was founded in 1888. She noted, "it hurts to share the appalling stories from the magazine's past. But when we decided to devote our April magazine to the topic of race, we thought we should examine our own history before turning our reportorial gaze to others." In reporting on Goldberg's announcement, Hawkins (2018) called the admission "an extraordinary concession" from a magazine that has faced criticism over the years for reporting on the world through a "narrow, white, Western lens."

Social Construction of Reality as a Theoretical Framework

We live in a social world. Worldviews and societies understanding of the world is largely shaped by how they perceive their changing environments. This issue of perception led the researchers to embrace Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) Theory of Social Construction of Reality. For Berger and Luckmann, society and culture are "human products" (p. 106) that continuously influence their producer(s). They posit that we consider the social world as the result of conscious processes of "externalization, objectification, and internalization" (Gabriel Bernard Tait, 2013) and analyze common activities that people carry out in society and its interaction with roles that social institutions play in people's everyday lives.

Combining the theory with media and journalism practices, Adoni & Mane (1984) explain that the role of the mass media in the process of social construction of reality holds a central place in

communication research. The process of reality construction is defined as social because it can be carried out only through social interaction, either real or symbolic. Bock (2015) observes how the production of news is not gathered in a vacuum. For Bock the news and the stories that are reported do not reflect an objective reality but are instead a social construction derived from human practices (p. 207). In the social construction of reality, human beings act both as the creators and as products of their social world (p. 325). Several studies have applied aspects of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) social constructivist framework (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Obregon & Cura, 2003; Tuchman, 1978; and Wasburn, 2002). Most recently, *Cultural Sociology* published an interview with Luckmann on the process of creating his seminal work. In the interview, Luckmann clarified his intended meaning of the term "social construction." He says rather than "construction," he would prefer to use the term "building" since "construction" often can be misinterpreted (Dreher & Vera, 2016).

Related to that social constructionist perspective is Volf's (1996, pp. 250-58) concept of "double vision" as a way to understand other cultures (and races) and potentially prevent cultural (and racial) misunderstanding. According to Volf, when it comes to knowing the social world it is inherent that we view those different than ourselves as "others." Tait (2019) explains Volf's argument that we should try to see the world "from there," AND "from here." Seeing "from here" comes naturally. That's how we see from our own perspective, guided by our own values and interests that are shaped by overlapping cultures and traditions we inhabit. In order to see "from there"—we have to step outside ourselves (p. 251). Moreover, Volf highlights that otherness in its worst form draws negatively on distinguishing how communities are different, and creates a gulf in learning about the other.

METHODS

To understand the Special RACE issue of *National Geographic*, a textual analysis of two articles featured in the special issue was conducted. The unit of analysis was the article as it appeared in the printed magazine and the accompanying photos, infographics and sidebars.

A text is something from which we make meaning. According to McKee's (2003) *Beginner's Guide to Textual Analysis*, textual analysis is a methodology that is a way of gathering and analyzing information in academic research. Because there is no simple, single correct interpretation of reality, it becomes very important to understand how media texts might be used in order to make sense of the world in which we live.

Textual analysis differs from content analysis in that it is an interpretive method that allows the researcher to take account of all aspects of content including omissions (Lester-Roushazmir & Raman, 1999). It links conditions of production and reception to the analysis of content. Beyond the manifest content of media, textual analysis is generally a type of qualitative analysis that focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text (Fursich, 2009). It is often chosen by cultural media scholars to overcome the common limitations of traditional quantitative content analysis such as limitations to manifest content and quantifiable categories. It allows the research to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text (p. 241).

When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text. According to McKee (2003), we interpret texts in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them. And, by seeing the variety of ways in which it is possible to

interpret reality, we also understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices.

Textual analysis proceeds from a long initial soak in the material to an extremely close reading of a specific text as defined by the research (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999). Next, comes the “close reading” of the text involved, noting visual and stylistic features (such as placement, length of story, adjacent materials). Then, as Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman (1999) did in their textual analysis of *Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s* “News for Kids” section during the Centennial Olympics, the two articles were examined for use of devices such as metaphor, simile, allusions, tone, themes, recurring patterns and omissions.

As McKee (2003) explains in his *Beginner’s Guide to Textual Analysis*, there are three levels of context: 1) the rest of the text 2) the genre of the text, and 3) the wider public context in which a text is circulated. The more you know about the context of a text—at all these levels—the more likely you are to produce reasonable interpretations of a text.

“Streets in His Name”

In the tradition of *National Geographic* offering “a window on the world (Bryan, 1987)” the article with the headline “Streets in His Name” takes readers around the world to see how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was honored with more than a thousand roadways bearing the slain civil rights leader’s name. Of all of the articles in the magazine’s Special Issue, this was the timeliest as the issue is dated to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the April 1968 assassination of King at a Memphis motel. Running just three pages, the article is shorter than other pieces that appeared in the Special Issue. Yet, it addresses a number of topics in a way that some of the longer articles did not. First and foremost was the manner in which the named streets were established. The author, Wendi Thomas, begins noting how quickly some places around the world began putting up “Martin Luther King, Jr.” on street signs while it took years to accomplish the same feat in the country where King lived. Thomas’ article draws contrasts between the public opinion of King when he was alive and that same public opinion today. A third element is the fact that Thomas challenges the often-cited stereotype that streets with the name “Martin Luther King” ran through bad neighborhoods saddled with decay and blight. Employing the research of a University of Tennessee demographer, the article compares the business activity along streets named for the slain civil rights leader and other main streets.

As much as the article package might be viewed as primarily about street names, Thomas focuses her attention more on the legacy of King and how it plays out in the place where his life ended—Memphis. Readers learn more about how the civil rights leader became known as Martin (instead of Michael) and the circumstances surrounding his death on April 4, 1968.

The six photos accompanying this article help to globalize the discussion about race as they show various places with streets named for Dr. King. From Ermelo, South Africa to Port-au-Prince, Haiti to New York City, the captions accompanying the pictures speak to the impact that merely naming the roadway Martin Luther King, Jr. had in communities around the world.

“Dawn of The White Minority”

Appearing at roughly the centerfold of the magazine on page 79, “The Rising Anxiety of White America,” contains several entry points for readers to understand what magazine designers elsewhere have dubbed the “dawn of the white minority.” Those latter words are used on the cover and in the table of contents. Thus, the reader has to go further into the article to see that much of it addresses the ongoing debate about statues and monuments and Confederate war generals. While the words “The Rising Anxiety of White America” are printed on a white page with only a secondary headline “Demographic changes rippling across the country are fueling fears among some, who see their culture and standing threatened,” a full-page photo of a young red-haired woman is shown standing outside of her Hazleton, Pennsylvania home, where a confederate flag is flying. Only a small portion of a U.S. flag is shown in the corner of the full-page photo.

The story, which was written by Michele Norris, former host of National Public Radio’s All Things Considered and founder of the Race Card Project, contains a text narrative that begins and ends in Hazleton where the main subject, Sally Yale, a 53-year-old white resident whose grandfather came to Hazleton from Italy in the early 1990s and Americanized his name from Yuele to Yale. But along with reporting from a New York-based professor who has conducted demographic research on his hometown of Hazleton, the article takes readers to New Orleans where former Mayor Mitch Landrieu is featured for championing the removal of Confederate monuments throughout the city, which is now 59% black. At one point, Norris, an African American woman, shifts her writing into the first-person as she reports on what surprised her about the response to the Race Card Project, which she started in 2010 to foster honest conversation in what some claimed was a post-racial America following the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first bi-racial president. She reported that tens of thousands of people have submitted six-word stories on post cards and through a digital platform.

Aside from the textual narrative, readers can also access this discussion about two types of visuals offered by the magazine—a map of the United States covering two pages showing the percentages of non-Hispanic white children with the title “The Changing Complexion of Youth” and a half-dozen “photo stories,” mostly of white Hazleton residents. The first photo of Bob Sacco, a white male Hazleton resident who bartends and is quoted as missing “the good old days.” On the next page, one finds a photo of two men in the barber’s chair at a Latino-owned Hazleton barbershop who are close friends—one a 26-year-old white male who says he voted for Donald Trump and the other a Puerto-Rico born 37-year-old who did not vote. The third photo shows action at an all-purpose community center as two stars of the popular stunt-fighting smackdown compete at “The Sanctuary in Hazleton,” one wearing an American flag bandana while the other wears trunks with the flag of the Dominican Republic. The fourth photo of the Hazleton Area High School football team shows some of the team members with their hands over their chests presumably during the national anthem, while the caption makes references to the dramatic change of demographics where the school is 58% Latino and 38% white. The remaining photos depict an interracial homecoming queen and king and residents and a confederate statue in New Orleans. It’s quite clear that these photos and their captions could guide the reader through a journey about changing racial dynamics for whites in Hazleton and elsewhere without having to read the story text.

The use of Hazleton is noteworthy in similarity and “storyline” to another East Pennsylvania town—Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, which was a town of European immigrants, but experienced a wave of new residents, who were Hispanic. The hate crime murder of one of those Hispanic residents, Luis Ramirez was featured in the 2012 film “Shenandoah Pennsylvania” and as a feature in CNN’s *Latino in America* series in 2009

DISCUSSION

TAKEAWAYS ABOUT RACIAL REALITY

In 1993, scholar Cornel West wrote the seminal text *Race Matters* to begin a discussion about the current state of race, culture, religion and the social economic status of blacks in America. West (West, 1993) set the framework challenging society to “engage in a serious discussion of race in America,” to examine the “flaws” of the country (p. 3). In the quarter of a century since *Race Matters* was written, events that are widely reported in the media reveal society is still grappling with social constructs related to race. When a media outlet with a 130-year-old history takes a step back from a tradition of reporting that reflects racial exclusion rather than racial inclusion, evidence exists that race does matter. Now, instead of reinforcing negative tropes that have traditionally excluded and exoticized cultures and persons, *National Geographic* is the scope of its coverage to provide a nuanced perspective on changing racial demographics like those in the Eastern Pennsylvania town of Hazleton or New Orleans, Louisiana. By embracing white and non-white residents’ social realities in their community where racial, cultural and social demography has shifted, the coverage in this Special Issue reflects the fact that race does matter. At the same time, in taking readers to cities around the world where Martin Luther King, Jr.’s name is on street signs while explaining the different journeys to those signs being erected, the magazine showed that race matters.

This study utilized two articles from a Special Issue, which is actually part of a yearlong, ongoing examination of the larger topic of diversity. But, even as that larger topic is unpacked in later months, the articles in the April 2018 issue on race are a prelude to important ongoing work to better understand how people construct their realities and what role race, ethnicity and culture will play in that construction. The framework of social construction of reality highlights as much as we want to perceive objectively. We are all constructing narratives about how we understand them, and how we understand them is based on our involvement with society. The reality is the “Browning of America” (Montanaro, 2016; Sundstrom, 2008; Martin 2013; and Uriarte, 1991), as argued over decades, is here now. But, society is still evolving.

The Rest of the Story

As much as readers can learn about race from the two articles that were analyzed in this study, these texts reflect just a small part of the comprehensive, cross-platform offering in Special Issue. Elsewhere in the same magazine, one finds reports on the growing acceptance of marriages across racial lines in a photo essay titled, “The Many Colors of Matrimony,” along with a sidebar examining marriage statistics since the landmark *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision that struck down state laws banning interracial marriage. Also featured is a story on the science of race including interviews with geneticists and anthropologists and packaged with a photo collage of six people who had their DNA tested with *National Geographic*’s Gene 2.0 DNA Ancestry Kit. A collection of images of people who

were racially profiled during a traffic stop is paired with a report produced by the Undeclared, an ESPN website exploring the intersection of race, culture and sports. An article called “A Place of Their Own,” Morehouse College, Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University are profiled as examples about resurgence in historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) interest. But, all of those articles likely won’t provoke as much dialogue and discussion as the cover story featuring 11-year-old black and white fraternal twin girls from Birmingham, England.

Future research could unpack not only the texts in the remaining articles in this Special Issue, but it could probe the visual cues in the images offered with each news report. Furthermore, no attempt was made to analyze the companion multimedia elements that *National Geographic* provided on its website. The connections to other media organizations such as ESPN’s The Undeclared and The Race Card Project are also worth noting when examining the cross-platform approach to researching race and ethnicity.

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