

WHITE GAZE

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THE SEDIMENT OF WHITENESS¹

Introduction by Michelle Dizon

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

I.

There are literal aspects to the white gaze—many of which are represented in this volume: a white photographer shooting their subaltern subject, a white writer steering the meaning of a picture, a white scholar constructing knowledge about the world. But the white gaze does not only belong to white people. Việt and I both grew up with *National Geographic*. We consumed it as white people did: as a first view to a vast and wondrous world. It was a consumption that lived, paradoxically, alongside our colonial histories. As Filipino immigrants and Vietnamese refugees to the United States, our life worlds were ravaged by whiteness—the manifest destiny and “benevolence” that excused the dispossession, exploitation, and massacre of our peoples, the continuing neoliberal policies that maintain the destruction of our homelands, and the struggles our families waged to survive in America. Thus, *White Gaze* emerges from a contradiction: on the one hand, the white gaze is the way we have been and continue to be constituted as Filipina and Vietnamese subjects in the United States—all of the tired tropes that have shaped our lives and continue to move with us through the world. On the other hand, the white gaze is the whiteness that has sedimented inside of ourselves—all of the ways we have internalized its position, its power, its authority, its knowledge, its scope, and most importantly for this writing, its blindness, despite ourselves.

It is too easy and too difficult to leave the images contained in this volume in the past. Too easy because through 21st-century eyes, the racism seems so rudimentary that we can congratulate ourselves on our distance from it. Liberal whites might pat themselves on the back for recognizing the abhorrent representations in these images, a racism that they *would never* embody. People of color might feel relief that society has progressed to a place where such images are not normalized; they, *thankfully*, do not see themselves reflected. Yet both reactions depend on a philosophy of history in which the past can be distanced from the present, and in which the movement of time is seen as a forward trajectory toward the ethical development of humanity. It is my assertion that such a philosophy of history, in its linear motion, is integral to a geography of whiteness. It keeps us from asking difficult questions about how the past lives in the present. It keeps us from understanding that each of our movements ripple from the future. It keeps us naive to the political work of images, dumb to their ideological production, and fearful of losing all that we’ve gained by accepting the blind spots of whiteness as our truth.

White Gaze is a struggle over geography. It emerges from the histories of chattel slavery and settler colonialism that have ravaged our lands, our ancestors, and our life worlds. It is engaged with “ideas, forms, images, and imaginings”—all of the ideological geographies Edward Said identified as

constitutive to imperialism. It also expands our understanding of geography to attend to both its outer and inner lives, to ask how geographies live inside of us and map our psyches. The images contained in this volume are not to be relegated to the past, but insistently of the present. They lay the ideological foundation for contemporary racialized vulnerability. In order to understand this, we must dispel the assumptions we have about three terms that we think we know: images, representation, and property. It is our basic understanding of these terms that construct the fantasies of racial capitalism.

In what follows, I will develop a method for thinking about images, not in the content that they show, but in the multiple forces and conditions that rupture an image's surface. These ruptures reveal deep materialities and dynamics of power and position that are normally thought to be extraneous to an image's meaning. They lay bare the fantasy of subaltern empowerment and the horizon of inclusion toward which neoliberal discourse would like for us to orient our demands. And they reveal a double articulation that is central to the production of whiteness—namely, that at the same time our images are welcome and we are invited to inclusion, we are being appropriated and even owned through an understanding of property that has emerged with and through colonial modes of appropriation.

II.

We can look to the discourse of *National Geographic* to understand the terms—image, representation, and property—more concretely. In April 2018, *National Geographic* published the first of a yearlong series on race. Susan Goldberg, the magazine's Editor in Chief, penned an introduction entitled "For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It," which lays out how *National Geographic* will examine their own history of racism as a necessary prelude to speaking about race in the world. This re-examination, aided by the analysis of John Edwin Mason, Professor at University of Virginia, contextualizes *National Geographic* in colonialism and directs our attention, not only to the racial stereotypes that dominate the magazine's discourse, but also to the historical erasures that are equally telling of the magazine's racial politics. Mason writes, "It's possible to say that a magazine can open people's eyes at the same time that it closes them."²

While Goldberg desires to unearth *National Geographic's* past racism, her perspective is limited by the liberal fantasy of subaltern empowerment and the insidious legacy of positivism that govern her worldview. This is illustrated in the representations that leave her aghast, as opposed to those she celebrates. For example, Goldberg writes about an article that leaves her "speechless"—a photo from 1916 with two aboriginal people captioned "South Australian Blackfellows: These savages rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings." She contrasts such an image with a 2015 *National Geographic* story about Haiti where Haitians between the ages of 14 and 30 were given cameras to "document the reality of their world." As a remedy to the racism and erasure of *National Geographic's* past, these "young Haitians" (I put this in quotes because the infantilization of adults as "young" seems specious here) with cameras represent a form of subaltern empowerment: the capacity for the youth to represent themselves. Furthermore, it seems to celebrate the magazine for coming so far from the rhetoric of the stupid savage. All the while, we understand that the stupid savage was also a form of inclusion for its moment.

Yet what is laid bare by Goldberg's celebration of "young Haitians" are the dynamics of power and position that underlie the images. What celebrating the instance of "young Haitians" with cameras

does is elide are all of the invisible steps of the process, steps that in fact need to be invisible in order to produce a fantasy of subaltern empowerment. Who chose the “young Haitians”? Who bought the cameras? How did the cameras arrive in their hands? Who taught them how to use the cameras? Who collected their images? Who cropped and color-corrected their images? Who chose which images would appear in the magazine? Who wrote the copy? Who is the audience of the article? How is this address reflected in its “voice”? Goldberg’s celebration is premised on the understanding that these “young Haitians” are innocent or untouched by the desires of *National Geographic* and its audience, as opposed to what is surely true—that they were performing for the white gaze, offering scenes to meet the desires of its producers.

The liberal fantasy of subaltern empowerment cannot ask these questions because they go to the heart of the material inequities that exist. They reveal that, in fact, the “young Haitians” *are not* necessarily “documenting the reality of their world,” even if their eyes are behind the lens. In fact, they might be making and performing a world to satisfy the white gaze. As such, the liberal desire for these “young Haitians” to share their world is paradoxically and simultaneously undercut by the visibility that their representation in the magazine supposedly offers. In the inequity of this power and position, also lies the appropriation of the image of “young Haitians” for a magazine whose economic life depends on first, expanding their readership for a new generation, and second, continuing to produce images of “the world” which, adapting to the conditions of the turn of the 21st century, must do so through the language of inclusion.

The first step toward making more complex our understanding of what an image is, means to shift it from a static frame to an unfolding and iterative event whose substrate is always the materials conditions that make the event possible. A political understanding of images requires that we approach each image as a rupture, produced by the multiple pressures that constitute its frame. These pressures might include the formal properties of an image—composition, depth of field, tonal range, framing, lighting—for such visualities certainly influence the way that an image makes meaning. But they also include elements that are often considered extraneous to the image. What were the conditions that made this image possible? Who is looking at whom and what defines this relationship? What is included and what is left out? What are the ways this image lives? Who is viewing it and how does this audience define certain parameters for address? What are the streams into which the image enters? How does the text come to anchor the image ideologically? How do new and different pressures of history re-work the dynamics of the image? Once we understand images as ruptures, so too can we begin to understand the nature of the sediment that remains.

III.

The white gaze has appeared in our lives as kind of insistent, omnipresent demand to address ourselves to and to become legible for the white world. Its most insidious operation is that it becomes installed in our psyches as desire itself—a desire for whiteness that unconsciously drives the terms of one’s life, who one loves, where one lives, what one wants to be, what one lives for, and what one thinks it is possible to do. At a certain point, one realizes that one is not only a victim, but an agent in this madness—not only had I *been* erased, but in fact, *I had done the erasing*. And by erasing myself, or alternately, broadcasting my suffering in the multicultural parlance that gains one entry into all of the good things of life, I have amassed access and opportunity, comfort and belonging, wealth and status.

I have been able to survive and better yet, even climb the ladders that define success in this world, all the while burying the parts of me that, against my will, refuse such submersion.

The geographies of whiteness not only divide the world with walls, treaties, laws, guns, but also become mapped in our psyches—as power and privilege, mobility and property, accumulation and knowledge—all of the ways in which whiteness means so much more than the color of one’s skin. Even if one has done consciousness work, it still leaves a residue, despite oneself. This is the sediment, what remains of whiteness, even though we think we have worked hard to expunge it. Like a chameleon, it remakes itself, blends into the scenery, scurries through cracks, and sits in plain sight, unseen. One of the most insidious ways that whiteness tricks us into believing its ploys is by dangling some version of our acceptance before us, a sign of validation that makes us think that things have changed for the better. Let us again move through the rhetoric of *National Geographic* to understand this dynamic in depth.

Goldberg writes: “How we present race matters. I hear from readers that *National Geographic* provided their first look at the world. Our explorers, scientists, photographers, and writers have taken people to places they’d never even imagined; it’s a tradition that still drives our coverage and of which we are rightly proud. And it means we have a duty, in every story, to present accurate and authentic depictions—a duty heightened when we cover fraught issues such as race.” Ultimately, Goldberg grounds the magazine’s “duty” in the terms of “accuracy” and “authenticity”—functions of truth which any humanities undergraduate will tell you are more fiction than fact. The “tradition” of global coverage, of which Goldberg claims she is “rightly proud,” is extolled in the so-called truth that the magazine upholds in their reportage. Yet, if we sit with Goldberg’s statement for a moment, it begins to unravel. The “tradition” she is upholding is not the accuracy of the story told, but the material inequities that exist between the magazine, the explorer, scientist, photographer, writer, and the subaltern subjects who are being *exposéd*.

Goldberg goes onto write: “So let’s talk about what’s working when it comes to race and what isn’t. Let’s examine why we continue to segregate along racial lines and how we can build inclusive communities. Let’s confront today’s shameful use of racism as a political strategy and prove we are better than this.” No doubt the rhetoric of her plea emerges in the era of Trump, when a renewed vigor and legitimacy to racist ideology has found full force. But it also speaks to the ultimate problem of liberalism—the invocation of a “we” which does not, in fact, include us. Goldberg’s blind belief in “inclusive communities” helps us to understand this inclusion is the horizon of her desire, an inclusion for which she is a kind of steward. But in truth, her stewardship functions more like a colonial administrator, making sure the images stay in their place.

IV.

It is one thing to critique Goldberg’s statements, it is another thing to try and understand how we have internalized the self-same liberalism in the strategies we take to respond to our peculiar status in the field of vision—both invisible and hypervisible. “There were no images of myself. I had to make them.” I hear this time and time again from cultural producers of color of all ages. I understand where this statement this comes from. The erasure is real. Growing up in Los Angeles, there were no images of my all-too-human and all-too-flawed immigrant Filipino family struggling tooth and nail to survive.

Where was my grandmother, so alienated by her migration that she saw snakes growing from her neck and nursed one cup of coffee from sunrise to sundown? My father who moved trash at the rich Jewish hospital for Hollywood elite, and ducked out to the basement for half his shift with all the other Blacks, Mexicans, and Filipinos to drink whiskey and play cards? Or my mother who got arrested, time and time again, for shoplifting the things we wanted so badly but could not afford? Such stories of our wayward diaspora would never grace the pages of *National Geographic*.

Yet, the white gaze continues to live in me as the voices swim in my head: *I shouldn't say these things. I should celebrate my family lest I perpetuate stereotypes of the lazy, lying immigrants. Should I qualify our poverty by speaking of all the love and care I received? Stay objective, your story is irrelevant!* The voices continue and the whiteness within keeps me questioning the wisdom of my own desire to be true to the life that I have lived. Paradoxically, the problem of “no images of myself” lives alongside an opposite phenomenon that stems from the same dynamic: too many images. This glut of images is the ongoing archive of subjection, dehumanization, servitude, objectification, primitivization—the kind of images that reek from this volume of *White Gaze* and whose continuity, I would argue, exists in most images of people of color today.

We navigate a world where inclusion is normalized as the goal toward which we must aspire. We believe this and work hard to make it into the film festival, the exhibition, the law firm, the tech company, the academe, and while we might not turn a blind eye to the racism we encounter along the way, we *do* turn a blind eye to the aim itself. If the endpoint of our desires is our inclusion in the systems that oppress us, we will always be led to reproduce the systems and structures that exist, despite our best intentions, systems and structures which are, at their core, racist.

The legacy of the images contained in this volume lives on in the elision of the structural inequalities that determine an image's production and distribution, as well as in this drive toward visibility, systemized and excused through a recourse to “truth.” When I ask us to look at these images and what have we internalized, I mean this: we are taught to set our desires toward our visibility. But when those images enter into streams that have not been determined by us, they become another feather in the cap of multicultural inclusion; they become something that can be appropriated toward ends that normalize the inequity of the material conditions that exist; they become fodder that paradoxically renders vulnerable communities even more vulnerable.

V.

The world as-it-is depends on our deaths, fast or slow. This small truth is one that could never be admitted by power, and yet its structural properties are laid bare each time truth is a duty and inclusion is a horizon of politics. After all of Goldberg's rhetoric concerning the “fraught issue of race” had settled, her function as a colonial administrator was made clear to me when *National Geographic's* sales department contacted me in January 2019, almost one year after *White Gaze's* original date of publication. They asked if I had licensed the images for *White Gaze*. When I replied that I had not because the project is protected under Fair Use, they replied that because the images are in a printed book that is sold for money, it is not protected under Fair Use. The sales department forwarded the matter to the magazine's legal department who are now sitting on the situation.

While the magazine has not (yet) acted upon their demand for licensing fees, the situation lays bare the reality of *National Geographic's* claim to deal with their racist past. The editorial department uses words that still long for some kind of better world, even if they are confused on how to get there. The sales department has no need for such rhetoric. The matter is as clear as day: they believe they own these images. They see these images as their property, and effectively dispossess all those photographed of a claim to themselves, as images. Furthermore, they guard the terms of use of these images and continue to profit off the images' afterlives. This sheds new light on the example of the "young Haitians" for we understand that the material inequity of the relation is not only one that takes place when the magazine puts the cameras in their hands, and not only one that takes place with the publication of the story, but actually, an ongoing property relation that will live on long past the lifespan of any of the "young Haitians" or those they photographed. It will live on in who claims to own the image just as who claims to preserve and archive the image. If, as Goldberg claims, *National Geographic* provides a "first look at the world" then we understand this "first look" actually instantiates a modern subject who can possess and appropriate the world.

It is a double articulation—on the one hand *National Geographic's* desire to analyze history and work toward inclusion, and on the other hand, their demand for licensing fees for the images used in *White Gaze*. In this double articulation, the contradiction of neoliberal racial capitalism is revealed. It is necessary for an institution like *National Geographic* to desire to be just in their work and to imagine themselves advancing a progressive politics, while at the same time, maintaining the material conditions for wealth and accumulation that have kept them in operation for over a century.

If *White Gaze* is a work in the sediment of race and property ownership, then perhaps, our excavation has managed to arrive at a bedrock: we cannot fall into the liberal ruse to imagine that newer, better, more accurate images will fix the devastation of our communities. They will not. Rather than seek visibility, we must strategize our approach along multiple registers. We must seek redistribution and reparations and think creatively about ways to unsettle, even topple, the very institutions that profit off the economy of images—those that take our images, those that house our images, those that presume they own our images. We must create alternatives to the legal parameters of intellectual property whose assumptions concerning the ownership of images are identical to the colonial project. We must build community-based grassroots structures to hold our memories sacred. And finally, we must continue to make images, but address these images to ourselves and let those we hold close, those we love, those we wish we could have known, those who have been disappeared, those who bring us joy, those whose life force, known or unknown, dead or alive or yet to come, guide the terms of our work. Only these images will refuse capture. Only these images will lay the foundation for our collective healing.

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- 2 Susan Goldberg, "To Rise Above the Racism of the Past, We Must Acknowledge It," *National Geographic*, The Race Issue, April 2018, 6.