

**Fetishising the Future:
Deconstructing the United States' Obsession with the Mixed-Race American Ideal**

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Writing and developing upon my conference paper has been a process of growth and self-discovery. By participating in the conference, I developed a sense of self-confidence as well as a feeling of value in my work, as a postgraduate student. The overwhelming support of my professor, classmates and other guests instilled in me an amazing feeling of both intellectual and emotional security. The process was unique in my LSE experience because it provided me with an opportunity to really engage in the theories and topics from my course, GI422, by applying them to personal topics of interest, and presenting them to an audience. In addition, I was able to learn more about my classmates and their research interests, which was more than an opportunity to get to know everyone better; it established a supportive community of trust and understanding. The conference paper was also a great learning experience in terms of my writing abilities. I learned to diversify my writing style by developing my, orated, conference paper into a longer summative with more traditionally 'academic' language. As a postgraduate student interested in pursuing a future PhD, the conference paper also provided a glimpse into some of the aspects of academia, that were previously intimidating for me (like public speaking). Overall the conference was a huge learning opportunity for me in terms of writing, research, public speaking, critical text engagement and self-confidence.

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Introduction

In celebration of its 125th anniversary, National Geographic published its October 2013 issue on the power of photography and its transformative nature. One feature article was catapulted to the centre of a nationwide debate on 'race' and national identity in the United States. Entitled 'The Changing Face of America', the article was accompanied by a photographic spread featuring dozens of portrait-style photos of 'mixed-race' persons in the U.S (Funderburg 2013). The article became 'viral' across social media outlets, as seemingly countless posts appeared to endorse the content and praised the 'beauty' of its 'mixed-race' photographic subjects. This infatuation with the photographs in National Geographic's fall issue was magnified by the constant dissemination of its 'multiracial' imagery and the sexually charged rhetoric that accompanied it.

In this essay I will analyse the photographic spread in 'The Changing Face of America'. I will focus on the particularly gendered dimension of exoticism by examining female-subject photos. I have chosen this focus in order to deconstruct the "national, racial, and historical hallucinations" (Williams 2002: 182) ingrained within the historical legacy of attempting to both define and 'other' the racialised and feminised body. I acknowledge that photography is a complex tool capable of being empowering or disempowering. In this essay I seek to examine one of these effects without rendering it a totalising account. By resituating its multiracial 'person of the future' images within a historical context, I argue that 'The Changing Face of America' upholds, rather than disrupts, the problematic status quo of fetishising the racialised body through the medium of photography in the United States.

Polygenesis and Photography: Capturing and Essentialising 'Difference' Through the Camera

Lens

In March 1850, celebrated Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned local South Carolinian daguerreotypist J.T. Zealy to take a series of photographs of African and American-born enslaved people on nearby plantations. Agassiz wanted to have first-hand evidence of the ‘anatomical uniqueness’ of black bodies to substantiate his theory of polygenesis, which held that there was not a common human origin (Smith 2004). He believed that different ‘races’ constituted distinct species that were created separately and unequally, with black peoples being both inherently inferior as well as repulsive. Seven black captives were photographed for Agassiz; their names were Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem and Renty. The surviving daguerreotypes of these seven people expose a photography informed by a deeply racialised and sexualised surveillance of the black body, heightened not by the absence of clothing but by the rolled clothing at the waistline, *exposing* the degrading *process* of being stripped down. Presented as racialised bodies rather than persons, Zealy’s daguerreotypes constrained his seven subjects to perform the role of ‘scientific specimen’ before the camera (Smith 2004). The juxtaposition of their intimate nakedness with the laboratorial, anthropological atmosphere is particularly disruptive as well as jarring. As Smith (2004: 47) states:

One cannot separate the photographic act...from the physical torture and sexual exposure of enslaved men and women... the power of the scientific gaze here is aligned... with the explicitly violent facts of objectification and the literal ownership of the body photographed.

These photos display an exoticised production of otherness brought about by its intention to capture an innate inferiority and pronounced sexuality. The notion of photography as capturing the truth of nature is especially apparent in Agassiz’ choice to study his commissioned daguerreotypes as opposed to the seven subjects themselves. Over 150 years later, the presumed ‘truthfulness’ of photography as an objective, essentialising mechanism remains ever present. To

say that Agassiz' daguerreotypes, and countless others preserved in the historical legacy of racial-type photography and 'white' science, are identical to the modern proliferation of racial-type imagery is to do a large disservice to the violent history of chattel slavery in the United States. I must therefore emphasise that this essay seeks only to explore historical parallels, as opposed to declaring a fixed linear trajectory.

The presumed 'truthfulness' of photography as an objective, essentialising mechanism remains present in contemporary analyses. In line with the historical legacy of codifying the racialised body as 'inherently' representational, the modern proliferation of racial-type imagery has rendered its subjects into essentialised specimens of the fetishised gaze. Transitioning from a historical analysis, I will now explore the contemporary implications of the 'fetishised gaze'. By examining the potential of photography to function as a problematic lens that renders its subjects into spectacles of exoticism, I argue that a fetishised gaze, which subsequently facilitates a voyeuristic sexual experience, informs the photographic spread of 'The Changing Face of America'. I will analyse the 'spectacularisation' (Stratton 1996) of exoticism by investigating the fetishised rhetoric fantasising one of the spread's photographic subjects, Jordan Spencer, as the mixed-race American ideal. My examination of the infatuation with Jordan's photograph is in no way meant to disempower Jordan nor usurp or challenge her agency. I instead hope to problematise the nature of National Geographic's project by deconstructing the relationship between the fetishised gaze and racial-type photography in the digital era.

In April 2014, Zak Cheney-Rice published his article on *Mic* entitled, 'National Geographic Determined What Americans Will Look Like in 2050, and It's Beautiful'. At the centre of his article was the photograph of 18-year-old Jordan Spencer, a self-identified, 'biracial' female from 'The Changing Face of America' whose portrait has been singled out in its widespread dissemination and subsequent sexualisation. The last sentences of Cheney-Rice's (2014) article read: "But in the meantime, let us applaud these growing rates of intermixing for

what they are: An encouraging symbol of a rapidly changing America. 2050 remains decades away, but if these images are any preview, it's definitely a year worth waiting for.”

Cheney-Rice’s article practically salivates at the mouth in its anthem-like writing style that encourages us to keep tending our way to an amalgamated mega-race of hot, young exotics. Mapped onto Jordan’s portrait is the projection of infinite racialised fetishes and desires, as displayed by Cheney-Rice’s discussion of the beauty of ‘intermixing’. All that is known about Jordan Spencer from her photographic caption in National Geographic’s feature article is that she is an 18-year-old Texan who self-identifies as Black/‘biracial’ and lastly, that she identified as black on the U.S. Census form. What is particularly troubling about the information provided is the way in which it both upholds and perpetuates the normative and problematic practice of displacing the body through hyper-racialisation. As explained by Young (2005: 34), “ultimately the portrait session, directed by the photographer, subject, or both creates a product that bears resemblance to the subject but fails to be the subject.” I suggest that this is the case with Jordan. She is a fantasy of the future and, at the same time, a phantom of the present. Of the dozens of portraits in National Geographic’s spread, we, as viewers, must investigate the selection of Jordan’s photo as the fantasised embodiment of the future American phenotype. Further, we must explore the excitement surrounding these images that, as Cheney-Rice (2014) frames it, “makes the future so worth waiting for.”

I argue that there is something innately contentious about the digital lens that renders this very project on behalf of National Geographic extremely problematic; this being the assumption that a camera can transcend the constructed ‘-isms’ that navigate our reality and somehow manage to capture an unbiased ‘essence’. Regardless of how many consent forms signed and conversations had between these subjects and the photographer, we, as viewers, are nonetheless left with a series of fragmented images that operate within a racialised dichotomy of hyper-visibility and invisibility. The very nature of Jordan’s representation invokes the question ‘*what is she?*’ As opposed to ‘*who is she?*’ What are we supposed to see when we look into her green

eyes other than Jordan? Where, hidden beneath her freckles, is this supposed remedy to the hostile racial climate of the U.S? I argue that the discourse surrounding Jordan's photograph has placed her within the immobile digitised sphere of being an object of desire, while at the same time highlighting her 'mixed racial' make-up as a propagandised symbol of future peace in the racist abyss of the United States.

Cheney-Rice's social engineering endorsement is problematic as well as dangerous. Graham Huggan (2001: 13) asserts that

the exoticist production of otherness is dialectical and contingent. While at various times and places it may serve diverging ideological interests providing the rationale for projects of reconciliation, it nonetheless legitimizes, just as easily, the need for plunder and violent conquest.

I suggest that this is the lens we must adopt to deconstruct fetishised readings of Jordan's photograph, such as that of Cheney-Rice. The imposed exoticism onto her physical body must be problematised, as well as the fantasy of Jordan as representing the anticipated American future. Jia Tolentino's (2014) rebuttal to Cheney-Rice's article sums up these enthused responses to Jordan's photograph perfectly: "Look at this freckled, green-eyed future. Look at how beautiful it is to see everything diluted that we used to hate."

Fetishism, Voyeurism and The 'Exotic'

I argue that the mapping of exoticism onto Jordan's body is facilitated through the lens of the camera and the performativity of stillness. Through the innate power relationship of object and subject in National Geographic's spread, the camera functions as a medium, facilitating a sexual voyeurism informed by a historical, racialised fetishism. Sexual or erotic fetishism, in this essay, refers to the sexual arousal stimulated in a person from a physical object, or from a specific

situation. Henry Krips (1999: 21) states that “the *objet a* bears a structural similarity to the ‘commodity’: it is not only a concrete object but also a ghostly value, a false essence carried by the concrete object and constituted through the processes of exchange.”. The “*objet a*”, which refers to the unattainable object of desire, is a fetish structure propounded by Lacan (1986, 1988) that is contingent upon a dichotomy in which the object is reduced to a state of subordination. I suggest that voyeurism is then created because of the inability of the rendered ‘object’ to interact with the desire. In the case of ‘The Changing Face of America’, I argue that these photographs act like a hole in a wall where the voyeur is a ‘peeping tom’. There is a tangible distance between the real-life subjects, what is captured in their photos, and the voyeur. However, through this distancing, there is a glimpse into something fantasised to be intimate and erotic, which is facilitated by the portrait-style intimacy of the photograph. I suggest that the “ghostly value” and “false essence” (Krips 1999) trapped within these exoticised portraits of mixed-race Americans represent the ‘ghostly’ presence of a perceived and fantasised whiteness. As Paul Frosh (2001: 49) asserts: “The concept of voyeurism undoes the reification of public and private as two static domains and re-establishes them as the terms of a dynamic separation... and of the epistemological categories of fantasy and reality.”

In the case of Jordan Spencer, I suggest that her portrait is confined within a digitised stillness. The stagnancy of the photograph renders her the object of a sexualised gaze informed by a racialised fetish. Through this process she becomes the embodiment of an idealised phenotype of the ‘other’. On one hand, this ‘othering’ of Jordan provides an opportunity for American mainstream media to experience sexual gratification brought about by a fantasy to interact with its own pretentious whiteness. On the other hand, her perceived ‘ethnic ambiguity’ acts as a site of racialised and sexualised exoticism that has been present in the U.S. since slavery and the ‘fancy maid’ trade (Baptist, 2001). Walter Johnson (2000) describes ‘fancy maids’ as young mulatto women sold into sex slavery. He further notes that ‘fancy maids’ were styled to appear primed and poised in auctions and thus made to embody an almost doll-like, inanimate,

submissive eroticism. Johnson's account of the 'fancy' trade reveals that "by buying ever-whiter slaves, the prosperous slaveholders of the Antebellum South bought themselves access to ever more luminous fantasies of their own distinction' (Johnston 2000: 18). I suggest that this is a parallel that has been recreated through the stillness and the inertness of photography. Through the lens of the camera, Jordan's photograph is rendered the submissive recipient of the voyeur's racialised fantasy.

Conclusion

The obsession with 'person of the future' imagery in mainstream American media is not a positive sign of an approaching utopic future. It is the photographic extension of the historically racialised and sexualised lens that has sought to disenfranchise and disempower communities throughout the U.S. for hundreds of years. Although it can be noted that perhaps these images were well intentioned, that does not detract from the real effects that have been produced and it certainly does not justify the transformation of Jordan Spencer's photograph into an exotic spectacle, nor the sinister social engineering imperatives mapped onto her 18-year-old face.

I suggest that this proliferation of multi-racial 'person of the future' photography is analogous to the function of mug shots. Mug shots operate with the intention to 'track' and 'record' offenders of the law for utilitarian purposes. However, there is nonetheless an equal act of humiliation encapsulated by the stillness of photography and the unfounded belief that the camera can capture an 'essence', such as 'criminality'. Decontextualised and framed to be representative, mug shots are meant to convey 'evidentiary facts': that a crime occurred, that the person photographed is a suspect, and that the intimacy and agency of their face is now the permanent object of a criminalising portrait. Bourdieu (1990), cited in Frosh (2001: 51), suggests that, "[t]he very stillness of photography appears eminently suited to this representation, detaching social relations from their temporal and spatial contingency and presenting them as the objective reflection of immutable social facts".

National Geographic's photographic spread and the sea of similar 'multi-racial' imagery with the purpose of depicting the future American phenotype exposes a historicised reproduction of fetishising the racialised body through the medium of photography. I conclude this essay by negating the assumption that these images have challenged the status quo or that these hyper-racialised bodies are a remedy for the deeply entrenched institutionalised racism that permeates the United States. I fervently negate this because of the way in which National Geographic's 'The Changing Face of America', and the fetishised rhetoric surrounding it, both uphold and perpetuate the problematic assumption of the racialised body as being inherently representational. These 'person of the future' images distract us from addressing the structural inequalities that have disempowered and disenfranchised racialised bodies in the United States for centuries. As implicated voyeurs, we have to see beyond the propaganda and hold the American mainstream accountable for its racially and sexually charged history of disempowerment. We must challenge the power of the gaze when we look at these 'person of the future' portraits by asking ourselves not what we think we see, but rather what it is that we are looking for, and, most importantly, what it is that informs this.

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