

1-1-2010

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## Recommended Citation

Anne Marie Todd. "Anthropocentric distance in National Geographic's environmental aesthetic" *Environmental Communication* (2010): 206-224. doi:10.1080/17524030903522371

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## **Anthropocentric Distance in *National Geographic's* Environmental Aesthetic**

**Anne Marie Todd**

*Tourism is the way we understand the world: Tourists travel in an increasingly mediated environment in which ubiquitous promotional material and other popular artifacts employ stunning images and romantic travel narratives to describe local environments. Tourist texts 'sell' local landscapes to entice visitors, employing an environmental aesthetic that urges travel. With its mission to "explore the planet," the National Geographic Society contributes to this tourist aesthetic. This essay examines three special issues on Africa simultaneously published by the National Geographic Society: its official journal, National Geographic, and its sister magazines, National Geographic Traveler, and National Geographic Adventure. The photographic images and travel narratives in these tourist texts produce an environmental aesthetic that positions the traveler at the center of these environments. This essay first analyzes how National Geographic constructs Africa's environmental landscapes. These magazines depict Africa as a vast desert plain, a wilderness theme park, and a part of the global scenery. The second part of the analysis examines how National Geographic locates the tourist in these environments. I discuss how National Geographic positions the tourist as protagonist, expert, and hero of Africa's environment. In the conclusions, I argue this environmental aesthetic renders Africa invisible through anthropocentric distance, and I discuss the need for more critical readings of tourist discourse.*

*Key words: tourism, anthropocentrism, National Geographic, aesthetic, environment, Africa*

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Before today's global travelers ever step foot on a plane, they already have seen their destination through representations offered by a variety of tourist discourses. They have likely read reviews on Hotels.com, seen video of countrysides they will visit on the Food Network, or Yelped®<sup>1</sup> for local authentic cuisine. Today's tourists have a highly mediated travel experience (Goodman, 2007). Devotees of Rick Steves enjoy the best

views and the best meals of Europe; Lonely Planet guidebooks are ubiquitous in the hands of backpackers in Costa Rica;<sup>2</sup> and The Travel Channel brings “Man vs. Food” and “Ghost Adventures” to television. Whether seeing the world from a couch, magazine or computer screen, today’s tourists understand the world through these representations. And that’s before they even get to where they’re going.

Tourist texts articulate cultural meaning through representation of specific places (see MacCannell, 1976, p. 45). Tourist discourse inscribes dreams and myths onto places, spatializing social meaning through global images (Hughes, 1998). Tourist media construct places before we see them first-hand: vivid graphics frame landscapes, while action-packed travel narratives explain why such places are meaningful (see Pratt, 1992; Hudson, 2003). Even readers who will make journeys suggested by the magazines may travel to actual destinations, but they experience virtual places (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). This essay arises from a desire to deconstruct these tourist environments. Tourist discourse brings us the world: television shows, magazines, and travel websites all *promote* places, they present us with images to give us a ‘feel for a place.’ Tourist discourse is visual and textual representations of place produced for our consumption.

With its mission to “explore the planet,” the National Geographic Society brings us the world with its familiar yellow-bordered magazine, and relatively recent niche magazines, television programs, and websites.<sup>3</sup> Through stories and photos, *National Geographic* magazine is “America’s lens on the world” and “has come to be one of the primary means by which people in the United States receive information and images of the world outside their own borders” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, pp. 15, 1).<sup>4</sup> This essay examines three magazines: special issues on Africa simultaneously published by the

National Geographic Society: its official journal, *National Geographic*, and its sister magazines, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *National Geographic Adventure*. Critical analysis of these magazines reveals a nuanced tourist discourse of Africa that goes beyond the simultaneous arrival of these issues in my mailbox one late summer afternoon.<sup>5</sup>

I examine how the visual rhetoric of these magazines frames African environments as places for tourist consumption. I first offer some theoretical background, discussing tourism as a discursive practice that produces an environmental aesthetic. Next, I introduce the artifacts examined here and explain the methodology of analysis. I then move to the analysis, where I first take up how National Geographic constructs Africa's environmental landscapes. These magazines depict Africa as a vast desert plain, a wilderness theme park, and as part of the global scenery. The second analysis section examines how these magazines locate the tourist in these environments. I discuss how their visual rhetoric portrays tourists as protagonists, experts, and heroes of Africa's environment. In the conclusions, I explain how this environmental aesthetic renders Africa invisible through anthropocentric distance, and discuss the need for more critical readings of tourist discourse.

### **Tourist Discourse's Environmental Aesthetic**

Tourism is discursive. The practice of traveling inscribes meaning on to places. John Urry describes tourism as the consumption of place (Urry, 1990, 1995, 2002, 2005). Through the tourist experience, places take on definition and acquire identity. Mass-

tourism is a cultural phenomenon that feeds into the practices and networks of peoples' everyday lives (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009). Tourist destinations have "already come to signify significant spaces in [our] personal and national imaginaries through secondary sources" (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 171). As a mediated practice, tourism relies on textual and visual discourse to impart significance to places and activities. Visual images give meaning to the tourist experience as we envision the places we'll go, understand how we are supposed to enjoy them, and know what to tell our friends when we return (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997). Pervasive tourist media guide "our decisions of where to go (and not to go), how to get there, what to value once we are there, and which places, people, or ideas we should remember once we have left" (Pezzullo, 2007, p.143). In this sense, tourist discourse constructs the reality of tourist practices.

Tourist discourse is aesthetic. In *Poetics*, Aristotle posited art as a means of representation and communication (Aristotle, 1941). Like ethical language, aesthetic terms are invoked with the purpose of eliciting certain responses (Ayer, 1952, p. 114). Aesthetic expressions evoke emotional reactions—we feel pleasure, optimism, or other sentimentality toward a concept represented in words or images. Visual sense is central to the production of the tourist experience, and the performance of tourist identity (Crouch & Lubben, 2003). The tourist gaze is the stance of the tourist engaged in visual consumption (Urry 2002). We look at ancient ruins: not allowed to touch, only to soak in their beauty and historical significance. Visual consumption occurs through observation, often unadorned by other, more engaging experiences.

Tourism discourse creates an environmental aesthetic. Environmental aesthetics considers the role of place in how we interpret experience and rests on the assumption

that the world's environments offer much to appreciate (Carlson, 1992, 2001, 2002, 2009). Tourism is an environmental practice whose discourse ascribes meaning to natural places. Central to the tourist experience is location: the surrounding environs play a predominant role in contextualizing the tourist experience. Tourist discourses feature environmental descriptions and images to introduce previously wild places into the human consciousness.<sup>6</sup> They “create sights to be seen, they etch significance onto the landscape and direct our attention” (Crang, 2004, p. 77; see also Rojek & Urry, 1997). Through visual representation “areas of wild, barren nature, once sources of sublime terror and fear, [are] transformed into places waiting at a distance for visual consumption by those visiting.” In this way, nature becomes “abstracted” and “disembodied” (John Urry, 2005, pp. 20, 25; see also Williams, 1972). This raises the question: how does tourist discourse, in its attempts to reveal places to us through visual representation, effectively obscure them from view? To answer this question, I turn to examine National Geographic's environmental aesthetic.

### **Interpreting National Geographic: Artifact and Methodology**

*National Geographic* magazine is an important text in the study of tourist discourse. Lutz and Collins (1993) demonstrate this in their seminal analysis of *National Geographic* magazine. Lutz and Collins interviewed editors, readers, and closely examine hundreds of images to explain how *National Geographic* creates “imaginative spaces that non-Western peoples occupy and the tropes and stories that organize their existence in Western minds” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, 2). This essay does not conduct the multi-method

analysis of Lutz and Collins' book, but draws on their findings about the importance of National Geographic's visual rhetoric to examine three special issues on Africa simultaneously published by the National Geographic Society in September 2005: its official journal, *National Geographic*, and its sister magazines, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *National Geographic Adventure*. The simultaneous reading of these three issues reveals National Geographic's overlying environmental aesthetic. My analysis of National Geographic's visual rhetoric extends Lutz and Collins' research in two ways.

First, I read National Geographic as an environmental text. The National Geographic Society's motto, "inspiring people to care about the planet," suggests that its discourse fosters a caring ethic of the environment. Visual rhetoric renders the natural world invisible (DeLuca, 2005). Representation obscures environmental processes and complexities below the two-dimensional surface of a photograph. "Our worldview means that we never do see the wilderness or nature or the earth, that which is. This basic disjunct would go a long way toward explaining our irreconcilable wilderness vision and material practices" (DeLuca, 2005, p. 84). Visual rhetoric distances us from nature by capturing isolated moments, essentializes nature into a likeness of itself that is more palatable to humans. Pictures of wilderness promote a vision that prevents true human-wilderness engagement because of what we don't see: the processes that allow nature to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

Consider what it is about any object that is at once constitutive of its being and quite hidden from view... what we see when we contemplate something is merely a kind of snapshot or frozen moment of the temporal process which goes to make up its true nature. Our dealings with things

slice cross-sections into time, tearing objects away from the temporality which is of their essence and carving them into manageable synchronic chunks. (Eagleton, 1990, p. 288)

This essay examines the magazine's photographic images of Africa's landscapes in hopes of understanding how these "frozen moments" produce an environmental aesthetic.

Second, I examine a National Geographic Society adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the years since Lutz and Collins' research, National Geographic has expanded its offerings to reach media savvy consumer markets; the media empire now includes additional magazines, television channels, and an extensive, interactive website that supplements the content of its publications. National Geographic is no longer just a magazine, but a multi-mediated experience. This discourse affords a "physical, touristic mobility" (Lutz & Collins, 1993) as readers/viewers 'see' much more of the world through National Geographic's multi-media offerings. Increasingly mediated images serve to distance us from the very places the images are designed to help us connect with by seeing. The ubiquity of such virtual information may blur the distinction between images and lived experience (Urry, 2002, 268-269). As a leisure activity, tourism illustrates the way we wish we could see the world. The modern tourist industry does not sell tickets, its sells dreams.

### *Artifact*

Taken together, *National Geographic*, *Adventure*, and *Traveler* magazines present a panoramic view of the African continent. These magazines follow the model of travel



writing that features photographic images and exciting travel narratives (Hudson, 2003; Pratt, 1992). Each magazine employs distinct types of visual rhetoric to reach its target audience. *National Geographic*, the Society's flagship magazine has achieved iconic status in American culture and expanded internationally. Forty million people worldwide read the original *National Geographic* magazine, and as Lutz and Collins (1993) explain, *National Geographic's* influence extends beyond its subscribers: it is used in high schools, is rarely thrown away, and can be found in thousands of used book stores. While the original magazine is an enduring text of American society, the National Geographic Society diversified its audiences with the publication of sister magazines, and reaches twelve million unique visitors each month on its website (National Geographic Society, 2007). These websites extend the experience of *National Geographic's* "intensely loyal readership.... some of the most influential consumers in the world. As opinion leaders, they are affluent, well educated, and professional" (National Geographic Society, 2009). Tourist promotions dominate the advertising copy, evidence of *National Geographic's* status as tourist discourse. In the special issue on Africa discussed here, many ads promote tourism in Africa. In this magazine, I examine more than 100 photographs of Africa, which accompany seven main articles, and numerous shorter pieces. *National Geographic's* visual rhetoric presents Africa as a vast resource-depleted and dangerous wilderness.

*National Geographic Adventure* appeals to adventure tourists, who seek adventurous travel: "serious leisure" tourists (Hamilton-Smith, 1993, p. 10). With twelve million readers, "*Adventure* is a magazine for active, imaginative people who like to try new outdoor pursuits and want to travel to wild corners of the planet" (National

Geographic Adventure, 2009). *Adventure*'s motto is "Dream it. Plan it. Do it," and the magazine seeks to inspire with "profiles of remarkable explorers... travel narratives to amazing destinations; stories of exhilarating excursions closer to home; and accounts of ambitious expeditions.... We send top writers ... into the field to bring back stories from all over the globe (National Geographic Adventure, 2009). The editors explain the purpose of this issue is to get their readers to go to Africa "in droves" (Rasmus, 2005, p. 12). I analyze more than 100 photographs in this issue, including those that accompany three feature-length articles that offer a whimsical, intimate view of the continent, emphasizing an exhilarating African experience.

With twelve million readers, *National Geographic Traveler* claims to be the world's most widely read travel magazine (National Geographic Society, 2007). *Traveler* aspires to live up to its tagline: "All travel, All the time" as

the source for the active, curious traveler. One who is more inquisitive than acquisitive. *Traveler* is a traveler's magazine. It's the travel magazine readers keep. The magazine that propels you from the armchair and into the field... Every department and article is designed to inspire readers to pick up and go—and to provide them with the tools and orientation to do so. (National Geographic Traveler, 2009)

*Traveler* employs "storytelling" to inspire travel; and to provide the deepest, most reader-friendly service information to enable you to go places wisely and well" (National Geographic Traveler, 2009). *Traveler* appeals to tourists who can afford (to dream about) \$1000-a-night safaris and are attracted to Africa as a tourist retreat: to relax and be awed by the continent's splendor. *Traveler* inspires dreams and provides readers with the

know-how to live these dreams. I analyze approximately ten photographs of Africa that accompany a feature-length article on Africa that includes a descriptive guide to twelve “classic” safaris. This issue of *Traveler* features far fewer images and less text than the other two magazines, but its succinct visual rhetoric is a rich tourist text because it crystallizes many of the elements of National Geographic’s tourist discourse.

### *Methodology*

In these three magazines, National Geographic uses photographs and texts to represent Africa in a powerful way. “Words and images, announcements and advertisements, news and entertainment can structure consciousness in ways that are not reducible to determinations of influence on specific policy decisions” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002, p. 364). Images and stories intend to provoke tourism: whether simply transporting us to distant lands with these photographs, or suggesting itineraries that influence our travel plans. It is useful to consider that readers of National Geographic magazines fall into two categories: those who will see Africa for themselves, and those who will not. For those readers who visit Africa, National Geographic’s rhetoric will influence their experience as they continuously compare their perceptions to the expectations set in the magazine. This analysis is focused not on these tourist practices, but on National Geographic’s tourist discourse (although I do consider how this analysis might influence our tourist practices). I examine these texts from the perspective of the armchair tourist: for whom tourist texts may be the only way they “see” Africa.

I examine the words and images in these magazines to interpret how National Geographic discursively constructs a shared experience of tourism that mobilizes readers' powerful social dreams and desires (Krippendorff, 1987). Readers/viewers "see themselves" in the "collective representations that are the materials of public culture. Visual practices in the public media play an important role at precisely this point. The widely disseminated visual image provides the public audience with a sense of shared experience" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002, p. 365). National Geographic's tourist discourse relies on a collective desire to travel.

Drawing on Robert Hariman and John Lucaites' explanation of the power of photography (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002, 2003, 2007), and Kevin DeLuca's explanation of how environmental representations occlude nature (DeLuca, 2005), I examine how words and images in these magazines establish the primacy of the visual in armchair tourist practices. The magazines use visceral, "you-are-there" photography: the "extraordinary photography the National Geographic Society is known for" (National Geographic Adventure, 2009; National Geographic Traveler, 2009). These photos frame Africa for us: the photographer invites us to look through the viewfinder, and directs how we see the picture with techniques such as focus and light. A photograph's rectangular boundaries mark a special selection of reality (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 31). Indeed these pictures are viewed through multiple lenses: an article's author or section editor chooses from the photographer's images. An executive editor then approves these choices with an eye for the layout of the entire magazine. The articles and captions interpret the photographs for us, adding further lenses to the viewfinder, until the actual object in the image is rendered invisible by the layers of representation. The interplay of text and

images in these pages constructs a nuanced discourse: the text aids in interpretation of the visual, while the image often enhances the meaning of the rhetorical.

From more than 200 photographs, 11 feature-length articles, as well as 15 smaller articles. I selected images and texts that were most evocative of Africa's landscape, and identify themes and tropes in these photographs and their captions<sup>8</sup> to explicate of National Geographic's environmental aesthetic. I explain what it's like to turn the page, to read images with texts, to demonstrate how editing choices such as positioning of images and selection of phrases to highlight influence our interpretation of magazine discourse. I discuss the interplay of photos and texts within articles, explicate connections between pieces within each magazine, and explore themes among the three magazines. In this way, I hope to infuse this criticism with a sense of reader experience, to examine specific images in the context of their accompanying text and surrounding images. Through this approach I hope to uncover multiple layers of meaning in the National Geographic Society's tourist discourse. Let's now turn construction of African landscapes in the three magazines.

### **Africa's Environmental Landscapes**

The expansive global landscape depicted in travel literature constructs a wild and gigantic nature, particularly for places exotic and unknown (Pratt, 1992). These are primarily visual landscapes. Photographs of natural environments create landscapes that emphasize "leisure, relaxation and visual consumption by visitors" (Urry, 2005, p. 20). The three magazines present photographs of Africa that are stunning in their depiction of natural

features unlike those of any other place on earth. The photographs transform Africa's living environment into a still landscape: even the Great Migration is frozen in time. By capturing moments, photographs tame the wild areas, acquiring them for human consumption. Readers soak in images of Africa, but remain distant from the dramatic movement of animals running across this land. *National Geographic, Traveler and Adventure* work together to present three African landscapes: a vast desert plain, a wilderness theme park, and a part of global scenery.

### *Vast desert plain*

All three National Geographic special issues portray Africa as an awe-inspiring vast continent. Images and photos span the landscape, dwarfing humans and animals in natural features of a grand scale. *National Geographic* defines Africa as the "last place on earth," and a "storied landscape" (Rasmus, 2005, p. 12). *National Geographic* serves the function of a cartographer: providing visual representations of Africa through sweeping aerial photos and expansive maps. Aerial shots make "the details of everyday life shrink" (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 149) as the ability to see the expanse of the continent obscures the events on the ground. This mapping is an exercise in scope, an exploration of the African continent as a series of horizons.

For example, a main article, "Views of the Continent," features aerial photographs taken by noted photographer J. Michael Fay. Two-page aerial photographs of the desert in Chad, and of the terraced crops climbing endless mountain slopes in Rwanda demonstrate that above all, Africa is more massive than words can describe.<sup>9</sup> The editors

note that “Africa isn’t a place: it’s a million places. Its landscapes are more diverse than those of any other continent” (National Geographic, 2005, pp. 20-21), but the thousands of feet separating the photographer’s helicopter from the ground erase Africa’s diversity. Without familiar details, readers have no sense of scope: For example, in a photograph of elephants wading through swamp grass in Amboseli National Park, the enormous animals look like mice against the lush backdrop. They could be toy plastic animals set up next to the garden hedge in a child’s make-believe jungle. The aerial views work to instill a sense of visual omniscience in readers seeking a comprehensive view of the continent, but instead of seeing more of Africa, we see less of it.

The possibility of life in this landscape is obscured as readers learn this is a harsh land, unwelcoming to (Western) humans. One exemplary photograph depicts a dramatic landscape in Chad, while the caption speaks to the dangers of the place: “Sandstone pinnacles rise about the desolate Karnasai Valley near the Libyan border. Few outsiders venture into this Saharan no-man’s-land, pocked with land mines left over from the clashes between government troops and rebels” (National Geographic, 2005, p. 31). This is an empty, desolate wilderness; while land mines and harsh terrain prevent tourists from seeing it in person, readers are the lucky “few” outsiders who venture into see it from the pages in the magazine. The peaks and the shadows evoke a lunar landscape, a barren, exaggerated hinterland one might see in *Lord of the Rings*. Just as the mythical lands of Mordor, Africa remains an imaginary landscape. The photographer’s lens works to expose us to an Africa that is most tourists will never see. National Geographic’s photos make Africa accessible.

*National Geographic's* isolated photographs of wildlife preserve the serenity of the aerial perspective. In one image, a leopard is snapped with its paw lifted, conveying a stillness that belies the conditions of the jungle. The photograph frames the leopard in mid-stride *before* it attacks its prey. We don't see the bloody next step—the natural processes of life in the jungle are hidden. *Traveler's* suggested itineraries do no more to reveal Africa's wilderness. Safaris are “immersions in an elegant and serene world far off the beaten path, where the distant nighttime rumblings of hippos and lions lull you to sleep each night” (Stone, 2005, p. 97). Tourists remain distant from the dangers of hippos and lions, which in different circumstances may not provide the lullaby. The magazines transport readers to an abstract land bereft of dangerous details. And so the African wilderness remains unseen: we don't see nature, the environment—*phusis*, the lifecycles of nature is rendered invisible.<sup>10</sup>

### *Wilderness theme park*

Despite this invisibility, Africa's wilderness excites the magazine's readers. “The wild life: it's the image of Africa that enthralls the world—a wilderness untamed—captured in the eyes of lions crossing a stream in Botswana” (National Geographic, 2005, p. 4). But the wilderness in these three magazines is very tame: Aerial photos present the wilderness from a safe distance, and safaris like the balloon ride present a human-friendly wilderness: Africa is an attraction: the leopards' spots, the zebras' stripes could be various skin colors on animatrons in Disney's “It's a Small World” ride. Through the lens of tourism, Africa loses its wildness and becomes a theme park.



This is most obvious in *Adventure*, which promotes “scores of can’t-miss African adventures, ready when you are” (Case, 2005, p. 61). The magazine describes numerous guided adventures designed to make Africa accessible. These adventures help tourists find an authentic wilderness that promises to entertain. One safari boasts a front-row seat to “The Greatest Show on Earth,” but warns, “watching wildlife from an outdoor shower does not qualify as a safari. For the real deal, you’ll have to join the guides at the lodge for an open-air jeep tour through the delta” (Case, 2005, p. 61). Another safari is described in this way: “It was like touring a game park, except that we were not confined to a car” (Cahill, 2005, p. 100). Africa’s landscape is organized for the express purpose of visitation.

Indeed, *Traveler* suggests tourists can gently float through Africa like a ride at Disneyland: “You just sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride while your guide propels a mokoro (a dugout canoe) with a long pole through narrow reed channels and placid pools of the densely vegetated floodplain.” Africa remains a romantic escape; Namibia is a “welcoming place for travelers.” The guide advises tourists “looking for a harsh, desolate, and deserted place, [to] go elsewhere... The Namib is an intriguing wonder-world, one which baffles your senses and fools your intellect. Get down on your knees and dig a little in the sand: You will be fascinated (Stone, 2005, p. 96). Describing Africa as a ‘wonder-world’ where tourists play in the sand, *Traveler* conjures childhood fantasies of swinging from trees like Mogley in the *Jungle Book*.

*National Geographic* contributes to the theme park trope by anthropomorphizing wildlife. One memorable photograph shows an elephant walking through the lobby of Luangwa Valley Lodge, Zambia. The photo is captioned “checking in with a trunk,” and

could be a scene in any *Babar* children's book. It does not take much to imagine the hotel employees watching in the background are actually waiting to escort the elephant to its room. The caption goes on to explain that the elephant is trying to access a mango grove blocked by hotel construction, concluding "it's up to us humans to figure out how to coexist in these shared spaces" (Lanting, 2005, p. 16). This seemingly altruistic encouragement does not question the necessity for tourism development. Indeed, the tourist industry has worked hard to make hotels seem part of the natural surroundings, and this photo reinforces the idea that the animals exist for the entertainment of tourists.

In this way, Africa is a romantic destination where elephants wander through hotels rather than fight extinction. Africa's wilderness theme park has some distinctly Western amenities. The accommodations of the journeys described in *Traveler* and *Adventure* maintain the urban standard of living. For example, *Traveler* describes the Thanda Private Game Reserve: as a "deluxe safari resort—a far cry from simple camps—that serves as an upscale romantic retreat and gateway to three distinct experiences: the Elephant Coast, the safari savanna, and the Zulu tribal heritage" (Stone, 2005, p. 97). The safari resort appeals to luxury travelers who will enjoy the "spa services and meals served al fresco in the bush" (Stone, 2005, p. 98). Another safari is an expedition that "combines immersion in a remote ecosystem with comfortable accommodations" (Stone, 2005, p. 96). We are left wondering what is immersive about this experience: as tourists experience a "wild" Africa from their satin sheets.

*Global scenery*

*National Geographic* complicates this theme park by offering an international geopolitical perspective of Africa. Articles on overcrowded slums, under funded schools, and AIDS victims with no medicine, bring a sense of global consciousness to National Geographic's overall tourist discourse. These stories, along with the stark accompanying photos, provide a pass to tourists concerned at all about global (environmental) justice. Tourists are absolved of any guilt that may come from the repressed knowledge that one's tourists practice may be at odds with one's environmental, economic, and cultural sensitivities. Indeed, the portrayal of Africa as a troubled continent adds to the authenticity of tourist discourse: as I discuss later, the knowledge of the continent's problems somehow make tourism virtuous.

*National Geographic* presents several stories on the fate of Africa. A section devoted to the continent's vital statistics declares, "Africa's numbers tell her story" (National Geographic, 2005, p. 4). The article offers a "blizzard of computerized data:" overwhelming numbers that provide a way for readers to grasp Africa in a global context. A two-page picture of Nairobi is captioned: "Rusty roofs hide the despair of Nairobi's Kibera slum, a maze of shacks and open sewers where some 800,000 people live. Driven by drought, war, or dreams of a better life, Africa's rural poor are flocking to such slums" (National Geographic, 2005, p. 6). Environmental or political forces mean that for many Africans, "survival is a daily challenge" (National Geographic, 2005, p. 100). For the magazine's readership, whose mean household income is nearly \$125,000, the pictures of this desolation sharply contrast their affluent surroundings.<sup>11</sup> The plight of Africans is a reminder of different experiences of globalization.

In *National Geographic*, a picture of villagers farming crops that are terraced to account for the steep terrain is accompanied by a caption explaining that they “move uneasily into the next century” (National Geographic, 2005, p. 8). From the perspective of readers whose cell phone and computers place them firmly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africans’ predicaments remain distant. This image demonstrates globalization as a tenuous proposition for farmers whose practices seem anachronistic compared to Western industrial agriculture.

In a short article in *National Geographic*, we learn that Africans are increasingly using cell phones, although the article’s photo of a Ugandan man climbing a tree to get reception reminds us that their technological capabilities remain outdated.<sup>12</sup> Another photo depicts a cellular phone salesman in white robe and turban, sitting on a folding chair out, next to a huge cardboard cell phone, its display reading: “WORLD.” While the over-sized phone promises to link Africa to the world, it would not provide Africans with access to the global public sphere. In fact, the oversized phone is a clunky symbol of the burdens of infrastructure and poverty that inhibit Africa’s technological growth.

We turn the page of *National Geographic*, and read another short article headlined “Golden Jobs: Mine Work Lures Migrants.” A picture of a man in a dark cave, his ebony skin blending with the cave walls, and the shine of his headlamp providing stark contrast to the grime that coats his skin, helmet and clothes, is captioned, simply: “Joe Moeketsi digs for gold” (National Geographic, 2005, p. 46). The sweat covering Joe’s face is a sign of a long day’s work in the claustrophobic conditions of the goldmine. The tiredness of his eyes looking down in despair conveys a lifetime of hard labor, and in a broader sense, the inequities of globalization.

On the opposing page, an advertisement for Liberty Mutual Insurance depicts a woman, a perky brunette, leaning on the hood of a car that has smashed into a telephone pole. Her red dress, neck scarf and purple-lined straw handbag are stark contrasts to Joe's sweat and dirt-soaked clothes. Her smirking, "oops" expression laughs in Joe's dejected face. The caption reads: "if you're ever in an accident and your car needs repair, don't fret." While neither photo reveals much in the way of surroundings, we infer the stark difference between the daily lives of Joe Moeketsi and the Liberty Mutual lady, the difference of magnitude between his suffering and her fretting. The juxtaposition of these two ads in *National Geographic* is a stark reminder of the distance between the readers and the Africa they witness in this tourist text.

### **Tourists in African Environments**

An important part of the environmental aesthetic presented in the magazines is the location of tourists in African environments. Romantic notions of "exploration, journey, and searching" become "attractive in our modern social world where fragmentation and complexity are the norm" (Beedie, 2003, p. 211). These magazines provide a way to see the world through tourism, and they impart this knowledge with expert performance. Writers take tours with travel guides, or employ noted photographers and explorers to bring stories of the world to tourists. I examine how the three magazines work together to position tourists as protagonists, experts, and heroes of Africa's environment.

### *Tourists as protagonists*

National Geographic's magazines place tourists in African landscapes so that readers "see themselves" in these images. This is most obvious in *Traveler* and *Adventure*, where tourists feature prominently in numerous photographs. In one image in *Traveler*, we see tourists in a jeep, watching an elephant from afar. The caption reads; "the grasslands of Kenya's Masai Mara teem with zebra, elephants, wildebeests, giraffes, and lions" (Stone, 2005, p. 95). Yet, there are more humans than animals in the picture, the takeaway message is that Africa is teeming with tourists. The focus of the images is the tourists, not the environments.

The same article in *Traveler* recommends a balloon safari, as the "most elegant way" to see the Great Migration. The text implores us to "rise above" to "witness" the migration "as far as the eye can see" (Stone, 2005, p. 96). Yet the accompanying photo focuses on the tourist: the grassland extends out of view; our eyes are drawn to the red balloon, aloft in the sky, small against the background, yet commanding our attention. Instead of appreciating the African landscape, we see ourselves there, and how we would look as we took in the view.

Similarly, humans dominate the landscape in a photograph accompanying *Adventure's* article about a "Proper Walk in the Kenyan Bush." The photograph is taken from behind, so the line of camels and trekkers spreads across the page in front of us. On one level, this picture exemplifies how tourists are the focus of *Adventure's* images: the picture is cropped so that the rest of the landscape is beyond our view. Our eyes focus on

the protagonists in this African adventure. On another level, the adventure tourists in the photo are literally “covering ground.” the desert is ultimately conquerable. From this photo, we know that Africa is above all accessible: it is ours.

In another photograph accompanying this same article, we see the reaction of Africans to tourists’ incursion on the landscape. Again the photographer stands behind a trekker in a modern sun hat, a backpack and a walking stick. He gazes downward, presumably at the trail in front of him. He seems not to notice the African woman walking by him, but she stares at him, her ankle-length red dress billowing behind her as she passes. Slightly blurred, she appears to be rushing to deliver the object in her hand. The object is slightly out-of-focus: both its physicality and function rendered unidentifiable. This object could be a symbol for Africa itself: no matter how clear the pictures are, our knowledge of Africa is blurred. With the spotlight on the tourist, Africa is literally out of focus. The caption reads: “a Rendille woman eyes a stranger” (Cahill, 2005, p. 54), reminding us that tourists are always strangers, and reifying how differently global tourists experience globalization from the locals they encounter.

On the same page, a mid-article blurb reads: “no one had spit on me, which, I thought, was probably a good thing. There might have been some cultural misunderstanding” (Cahill, 2005, p. 54). This passage refers to camels, not the woman in the photo. However, the blurb’s enlarged orange letters pop out from the text on the page, making it the default caption for this photo. These subtle visual choices emphasize the cultural differences; tourists remain strangers, and as we watch Africans watching the tourists in the photo (representations of ourselves), we wonder what must Africans think of us?

This is reinforced in another photo accompanying the same article: we see an audience of children in a makeshift auditorium tent at the Makindu children's center in Kenya. The picture is gritty, the dim hues of red and yellow evoking African tribal colors. The caption reads "all eyes front" but many of the hundred or so children are looking at the camera operator with wonder. The children's eyes confront those of us hoping to remain unseen, voyeurs into African landscapes. Their gaze makes us aware of the intrusion of the photographer and the lens: tourism does not go unnoticed. This photo reflects our tourist gaze back to us, and how are we to respond? A few pages later, renowned naturalist David Quammen asks: "are they looking back at us or is it just our consciousness?" (Quammen, 2005, p. 70). Yet, with the tourist as protagonist, *Adventure's* narrative does not raise our consciousness. We only see the continent through a tourist lens constructed to provide expert knowledge.

### *Tourists as experts*

All three magazines explicitly state their mission to provide readers with knowledge about the world's most interesting places. *Traveler* states its mission to provide readers with "information that empowers." Maps and guides are readers' "ticket to the open road, telling you what you need to know before you go." *Traveler* touts its "storied expertise" and "insider point of view." "Ask us "Who knows the world better? " And with clear-eyed honesty we can say: "We do" (National Geographic Traveler, 2009). But *Traveler's* visual rhetoric does not provide a clear view of Africa. The expertise promised here



further distances readers from the continent because it privileges the visual tourist experience.

Many of the safaris *Traveler* describes offer an embedded experience. A gorilla tracking adventure in Uganda is described as a testament to the human spirit: “it takes strength and patience to track gorillas in the forest, but the payoff is inspiring and unforgettable: To observe a family of mountain gorillas grooming and eating is to connect with a more primal aspect of yourself” (Stone, 2005, p. 96). In this way, safaris enable human tourists to practice discipline and fortitude to connect with their “primal” selves. *Traveler’s* tourist discourse emphasizes the power of observation in the tourist experience: to observe the gorillas enables a deeper reflection on human evolution. Tourists travel to remote ecosystems to observe gorillas in their natural habitat, but maintain a safe distance from the animals, and ultimately remain disconnected from jungle life. The accompanying photograph demonstrates the distance of the tourist gaze. We see a pale-skinned tourist in a hat with chinstrap, holding binoculars, but not looking through them as he watches a gorilla. The caption describes this as a “staring contest... getting personal with the mountain gorillas of Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda” (Stone, 2005, p. 67). The gorilla is in the foreground; we can distinguish hairs of its fur. The tourist is meters away, out of focus, his blurriness symbolic of the obscurity of the tourist gaze.

Just as this tourist does not look through the binoculars at nature, elsewhere, *Traveler* advises tourists to leave their camera at home in order to truly enjoy the experience: “leave your camera in your tent, at least for one day, to just enjoy the experience” (Stone, 2005, p. 98). While this exhortation seems to eschew the visual, it

acknowledges the inevitability of the camera, urging one day off, as if experiencing Africa unfettered by a camera allows for a more authentic experience. Yet, even without the camera, Africa remains a visual experience. This environmental aesthetic relies on images that have their own authenticity as tourist experience.

### *Tourists as heroes*

National Geographic's magazines posit tourism as a vehicle for change. The magazines' visual rhetoric suggests tourism has emancipatory power. The leisure qualities of the National Geographic's tourist aesthetic rely on assurances that tourists do not confront problems faced by Africans. Even *National Geographic's* coverage of a continent in peril emphasizes Africa's resilience: "With competition for resources on the rise, convergence has become collision, fueling war, disease, and extinction. Yet despite such calamities, Africa is alive with stories of renewal. In this issue we explore how the continent embodies the challenge facing humankind: how to survive, and make a better life for ourselves, while sustaining a balance with nature" (National Geographic, 2005). A few pages later we discover how tourism is a path to survival, to a better life, and to sustainability.

In a section headed "Get Involved," *National Geographic* explains "how tourism can help" with a list of "ecofriendly" adventures. The introduction reads, "If Africa's cultures are to be preserved for future generations, sustainable tourism is the only way to travel. Visitors can help support local economies and conservation efforts with these ecofriendly African adventures." In this way, even in *National Geographic*, the least

explicitly touristy of the three magazines, tourism is virtuous. Yet, of the six ecofriendly suggestions, only one asks tourists to participate in conservation.<sup>13</sup> Instead, this list emphasizes tours that “specialize in showing Africa to Americans” (National Geographic, 2005, p. 146). In this way, the environmental implications of tourism are not fully articulated here, rather, the possibility of sustainable tourism assuages our conscious to allow us to travel without regard for our environmental impact. And this is the tension in National Geographic’s tourist aesthetic: while tourism is described as a salve for Africa’s problems, it is fundamentally about a quest for retreat. The smattering of green credentials throughout the magazines does not belie the implication that Africa should ultimately be saved to preserve its accessibility to tourists. Rather, the tourist is the savior, virtuous in their worldly knowledge: National Geographic’s magazines depend on the tourist gaze to interpret and save the world.

## **Conclusions**

National Geographic’s rendering of Africa presents a complicated environmental aesthetic, echoing tensions between increasing tourism and consumption and wilderness preservation (see Marafiote, 2008). The high-resolution photographs and poetic text of these glossy magazines portray an Africa that is simultaneously a vast, dangerous continent struggling for survival, a luxury destination of beautiful nature, and place of whimsical wildlife to be trekked and explored. These magazines, the National Geographic Society offers contradictory portrayals of Africa’s environment. *National Geographic* offers a view of Africa ravaged by resource scarcity and ongoing war, an

environment that we must observe from afar because the landscapes are unfit for human inhabitation. *Traveler* presents a very different African environment, one that is luxurious, bountiful, and even elegant. *Adventure* presents Africa as a wild theme park, portraying thrilling landscapes that pose no real danger. Yet the tensions between these visions of Africa reveal a sophisticated environmental aesthetic of 21<sup>st</sup> century tourism. This aesthetic renders Africa invisible through anthropocentric distance, and establishes the need for more critical readings of tourist discourse.

First, this aesthetic is anthropocentric. National Geographic presents the African landscape through the cultural lens of the tourist. Africa's environment is only meaningful as it relates to the tourist experience. Tourism is decidedly anthropocentric. Tourist discourse emphasizes comfort and relaxation, qualities that privilege a human experience quite distinct from the jungle life. Environmental images obscure wilderness. When we go to nature, we aren't in nature; our literal and figurative tourist baggage prevents us from experiencing *phusis*.

Second, despite claims to intimately reveal Africa, the National Geographic Society's tourist discourse demonstrates the limits of visual rhetoric as the basis for environmentally aware tourism. Phaedra Pezzullo (2007) critiques the visual primacy of tourism because "in our looking we come no closer to whom or what we are looking at, and, in fact, that we may move further away affectively as a result of our look" (p. 27). Images of nature do not provide us with a vision of nature itself, but a version of nature rendered aesthetically pleasing, for human consumption. Photographs manipulate nature in ways that justify visually consumptive tourist practices and exacerbate the hegemonic relationship between tourist and places (see Pezzullo, 2007, p. 29). Visual rhetoric creates

distance that allows us to pretend we are not seen and to ignore the implications of tourist practices: that in our pursuit of the visual, we change the world.

National Geographic's ocularcentric discourse constructs an anthropocentric aesthetic. Indeed, tourists are to take pleasure in the act of observation. *National Geographic's* aerial photos and numerical representations portray Africa as a data set, simplifying the complexities of ecological processes into (in)comprehensible numbers and figures. The same distancing occurs in *Traveler* and *Adventure*, where tourists, and readers are "immersed" in the most remote locations, but are far from embedded, surrounded by the protective fences and satin sheets of luxury resorts. The detachment of National Geographic's environmental aesthetic allows readers to ignore tourism's environmental impact.<sup>14</sup> "Tourism is an active agent in the creative destruction of places" (Cragg, 2004, p. 74). *Adventure's* call for its readers to go "do" Africa brings to mind hordes of well-heeled trekkers, paddlers, climbers and photographers invading a land that can barely sustain its own populace. Ultimately this aesthetic obscures Africa as a place. Despite the fact that Africa comprises fifty-three countries (the greatest number of all the continents), the complexity of Africa's environments is obscured in the magazines' breathless rhetoric, and our perspective remains global and monolithic.<sup>15</sup> The implication is that we don't see Africa's challenges as a harbinger of what happens with ecosystems are stretched to carrying capacity.

Anthropocentric distance in National Geographic's environmental aesthetic renders Africa invisible. National Geographic's environmental aesthetic is predicated on consumption of place, and thus tourist texts impede engagement through environmental representation. As we devour images of nature, our human framework closes off

possibilities for critique. Anthropocentric distance is an important concept in the study of environmental communication in two ways: First: it requires us to confront the limitations of environmental rhetoric, specifically environmental images. Discourse provides a uniquely human perspective: the only tools we have to represent nature (images, text) are constructed from an anthropocentric framework. If we cannot throw off the mantle of anthropocentrism, how can we reflexively analyze communication about the environment?

Second, anthropocentric distancing points to the need for more critical questioning of tourist discourse. To what extent does the pursuit of worldly experience compromise our critical stance? How can we broaden the frame of tourist discourse to reveal what is not shown in the photos? So we should strive for context and perspective as we read tourist texts. In these magazines, National Geographic posits tourism as a way to *see* the world, critical tourism positions traveling as alternative way to *be* in the world. To be critical readers and creators of tourist discourse, we must acknowledge how we participate in the tourism's culture industry. We might seek alternative sources of information, such as word of mouth, local newspapers. We could seek to travel to places without the layer of representation erected by tourist discourse. While traveling without a guidebook is not practical, perhaps we discover a part of a city on our own, putting away the map, and allowing the sounds and smells to guide our vision. Perhaps we acknowledge tourism's environmental impact and plan trips because of their low ecological footprint rather than promises of exotic sights. Perhaps we seek tourism that can make a difference. Numerous scholars discuss the critical possibilities of advocacy tourism (see Milstein, 2008; Pezzullo, 2007). Place-based, embodied experiences of

witnessing may hold significant potential for challenging unsustainable discourses (Spurlock, 2009). We should discover ways tourism can be critically reflexive. A more critical tourist stance might not expose *phusis*, but might reveal a sustainable tourist aesthetic. Instead of seeking out the most beautiful sunset, the most reclusive wildlife, or the most delicious local meal, we should get lost.

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<sup>1</sup>There is debate in the blogosphere regarding the use of Yelp (the user recommendation website [www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)) as a verb. See also the *Washington Post*'s coverage of the launch: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/14/AR2007081401782.html>.

<sup>2</sup>See Tracy Stephenson Shaffer's intriguing 2004 essay on backpacker culture and the quest for meaning (in references).

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, National Geographic has magazine, website and television media devoted to kids. Children's tourist discourse presents an interesting problem for another essay.

<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I refer to the different magazines as: *National Geographic*, *Adventure*, and *Traveler*. I occasionally use “National Geographic” (unitalicized) to refer to the National Geographic Society.

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<sup>5</sup> In truth, only *National Geographic*, and *Adventure* arrived in my mailbox. I spotted *Traveler* in my library's current periodicals section a few weeks later. I wish to illustrate how these magazines simultaneously entered public discourse.

<sup>6</sup> See Nash's (1967) description of wilderness as a state of mind (in references).

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger refers to this as *phusis*. See Heidegger (1971, esp. pp. 57-110). A full Heideggerian analysis of *National Geographic* is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> If this analysis focuses on images, then articles become extended captions.

<sup>9</sup> Photos described throughout the essay are published in the magazines, but some are also available: [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com).

<sup>10</sup> The full explanation of Heidegger's *phusis* is for another article.

<sup>11</sup> See [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com) for full audience demographics.

<sup>12</sup> While television commercials portray America's phone networks to be supported by an army, readers of this article can surely recall a time when they would have climbed a tree for better reception.

<sup>13</sup> *Save the Elephants* allows tourists to shoot a tranquilizer dart, help scientists attach collars on elephants, or follow the movements of elephants online.

<sup>14</sup> UNEP offers a basic, but extensive discussion on the environmental effects of tourism on its website: <http://www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/sust-tourism/environment.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> At a European news conference, in 2001, President George W. Bush said, "Africa is a nation that suffers from incredible disease." The *New York Times* covered this verbal slip without comment: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/15/world/deep-us-europe-split-casts-long-shadow-on-bush-tour.html>