

# Entering the Contact Zone: Reflections on A Conceptual Framework Used to Study Brazilian Fashion

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## Abstract

This article reflects upon the critical framework – ‘the contact zone’ – used by the author in her recent book *Fashioning Brazil: Globalization and the Representation of Brazilian Dress in National Geographic* (2018) to examine Brazilian fashion as a transnational form of modernity. This AHRC-funded project examined the visual and textual strategies by which the popular ‘scientific’ and educational journal *National Geographic* has *fashioned* an idea of Brazil in the popular imagination of its readership, but also, the extent to which Brazilian subjects represented in its pages can be seen to have *self-fashioned*, through the strategic appropriation and reinterpretation of clothing and ideas derived through transnational encounter and exchange. Mary Louise Pratt (2008) defined ‘the contact zone’ as real or imagined ‘spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’. Inherent within this space of contact are notions of friction or conflict played out in a militant area, or amorphous zone, in which the spatial and temporal presence of previously separate groups can be seen to interact. The contact zone provided a critical tool for the author to decentre her ‘foreign’ gaze – that of a light-skinned, European woman – onto Brazilian fashion. In conducting this research project, the author necessarily entered the contact zone, positioning herself in self-reflexive dialogue and debate with the range of different subjects that she came into contact with. The objective of this article is to ask, how might the use of the contact zone as a critical framework to examine Brazilian fashion be of value to other Fashion Studies scholars?

**Keywords:** the contact zone; auto-ethnography; brazilian fashion; my positionality; global fashion studies; transnational fashion histories.

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## Introducing the Contact Zone

This article reflects upon the critical framework used by the author in her recent book *Fashioning Brazil: Globalization and the Representation of Brazilian Dress in National Geographic* (2018) to examine Brazilian fashion as a transnational form of modernity. Whilst a sizeable amount has been written on Brazilian fashion in the Portuguese language by academics based in Brazil, far less research has been conducted by scholars outside of Latin America.<sup>1</sup> It is crucial that scholars based in the ‘Global North’ continue to cast their gaze upon fashion cultures and histories that are distinct from their own, since doing so expands our understanding of what ‘fashion’ is and constitutes a critical perspective from which to decentre the discipline of Fashion Studies. However, scholars inevitably require revised theories and methods to problematise the hegemonic influence of Western Europe and North America, and to ensure that cross-cultural engagement, discussion and reflection are placed at the forefront of such research projects. At the time of writing, accusations of exoticism, racism and cultural appropriation are rife, generating polarised debates in public and academic discourse that intersect with lived experience. It is crucial that scholarship can challenge, rather than reinforce or evade, long established hierarchies of power, by engaging with the nuances and complexities of fashion as a mediating thread of our interconnected world.

*Fashioning Brazil* was an AHRC-funded project that examined the visual and textual strategies by which the popular ‘scientific’ and educational journal *National Geographic* has *fashioned* an idea of Brazil in the popular imagination of its readership, but also, the extent to which Brazilian subjects represented in its pages can be seen to have *self-fashioned*, through the strategic appropriation and reinterpretation of clothing and ideas derived through transnational encounter and exchange. *National Geographic*, since it was established in Washington DC in 1888, has self-consciously positioned itself as a voice of authority within mainstream U.S. print media, offering what purports to be an unprejudiced ‘window onto the world.’ In recent years, academic scholarship has criticised the magazine’s quasi-anthropological outlook for organising hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality and identity and, under the guise of objective science, pursuing a form of U.S.-driven cultural imperialism.<sup>2</sup> *Fashioning Brazil* highlighted the potential reductiveness of such critiques, which straightforwardly assert that *National Geographic* has fixed *subjects* as dehumanised and essentialised *objects* within an imposed ethnographic present, a spectacle of the unknown and exotic Other.<sup>3</sup> This tantalising commentary has disregarded the possibility that fashion, with all of its allied ambiguities, might operate in unexpected or strategic ways, sometimes even against the very representational contexts that have framed it. The representation of Brazilian fashion in *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Brasil* (the Portuguese language version of the maga-

1. Maria do Carmo Teixeira Rainho and Maria Cristina Volpi expand upon the work of these scholars within their article “Looking at Brazilian Fashion studies: Fifty Years of Research and Teaching,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018): 211–26.
2. The four key critical monographs on *National Geographic* to date are: Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic’s Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Tamar Rothenberg, *Presenting America’s World: Strategies of Innocence in National Geographic Magazine, 1888–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Stephanie Hawkins, *American Iconographic: National Geographic, Global Culture, and the Visual Imagination* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010). Other critical studies of *National Geographic* have included: Philip Pauly, “The World and All That is In It: The National Geographic Society, 1888–1918,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1979): 523; Howard Abramson, *National Geographic: Behind America’s Lens on the World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987); Joan Gero and Dolores Root, “Public Presentations and Private Concerns: Archaeology in the Pages of National Geographic,” in *The Politics of the Past*, eds. Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 19–37; Lisa Bloom, “Constructing Whiteness: Popular Science and *National Geographic* in the Age of Multiculturalism,” *Configurations*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994): 15–32; Alison Devine Nordstrom, “Wood Nymphs and Patriots: Depictions of Samoans,” in *The National Geographic Magazine, Visual Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1992): 49–59; Julie Tuason, “The Ideology of Empire in *National Geographic Magazine*’s Coverage of the Philippines, 1898–1908,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 89, no. 1 (1999): 34–53; Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Radhika Parameswaran, “Local Culture in Global Media: Excavating Colonial and Material Discourses in *National Geographic*,” *Communication Theory*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2002): 287–315; David Jansen, “American National Identity and the Progress of the New South in ‘National Geographic Magazine,’” *Geographical Review*, vol. 93, no. 3 (2003): 350–69; Robert Poole, *Explorer’s House. ‘National Geographic’ and the World it Made* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
3. I draw here on Edward Said’s widely acknowledged discussion of the Western European ideological creation of an inferior Other. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

zine, established in São Paulo in May 2000) provides a compelling case study to expand the global field of Fashion Studies by illuminating the transnational nature of fashion, which crosses geographic borders, passes through different pairs of hands, acquires new values and intersects with the slippery processes of identity formation.

The author expanded upon Mary Louise Pratt's concept of 'the contact zone' to make a far more complex reading of how fashion in Brazil has been created, worn, displayed, viewed and represented over the past one hundred years. Pratt, an American Scholar of Portuguese and Spanish Languages and Literature, coined the term in her text *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992, updated 2008) to describe a space in which different cultures encounter one another and establish ongoing relations.<sup>4</sup> She defined 'the contact zone' as real or imagined 'spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.'<sup>5</sup> Inherent within this space of contact are notions of friction or conflict played out in a militant area, or amorphous zone, in which the spatial and temporal presence of previously separate groups can be seen to interact. The author developed Pratt's concept by applying it to fashion and using it to unpack a more nuanced understanding of the local and global agents and agencies that have shaped the representation of Brazilian fashion throughout the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as the power relations underpinning them.

*Fashioning Brazil* went beyond previous scholarship on *National Geographic* by approaching fashion not simply as clothing but as a system of communication, whose many meanings are not fixed but continually *informed* and, to an extent, even *performed*, by its visual, textual and material representation. The author employed a working definition of 'fashion' as simply evidence of change in ways of dressing, which fostered an individual's sense of identity but also of social belonging. Anthropologist Joanne Eicher asserted that 'fashion is, after all, about change, and change happens in all cultures because human beings are creative and flexible.'<sup>6</sup> This approach remained sensitive to different paces, forms and spaces of fashion innovation whilst unpacking the complexity of intersecting local, regional, national and international identities, as well as the dynamics of power and influence that necessarily inform the transnational fashion landscape. The contact zone was employed as a critical framework to examine Brazilian fashion as a visual image, a material object, a text to be read, a lived experience and, crucially, as a concept that *travels*. The author was concerned not just with the representation of Brazilian fashion, but also with the materiality of the magazine itself and the reader/viewer's interaction with it, specifically its tangible qualities. By focusing on particular 'snapshots' or case studies of Brazilian fashion, my analysis opened up far more complex readings of *National Geographic's* imperial gaze by drawing attention to the ambiguity of fashion's meanings as well as its strategic use by individuals. *Fashioning Brazil* ultimately balanced an examination of how Brazil has been fashioned by an *outsider's* gaze—based primarily upon essentialising external characteristics of its population deemed to be representative of the nation—with recognition of what self-fashioning Brazilians can tell us about fashion from an *insider's* perspective, by revealing an intricate interplay of commodities, ideas and images operating transnationally.

The contact zone provided a critical tool for the author to decentre her 'foreign' gaze—that of a light-skinned, European woman—onto Brazilian fashion. In conducting this research project, the author necessarily entered the contact zone, positioning herself in self-reflexive dialogue and debate with the range of different subjects that she came into contact with. Her positionality became an integral part of the research process. The objective of this article is to ask, how can the author's use of the contact zone as a critical framework to examine Brazilian fashion be of value to other scholars, particularly those of Western European or North American heritage, whose research may lie beyond their own cultural, ethnic or national backgrounds? How might the contact zone be used to embrace a more holistic field

4. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

5. Pratt, 7.

6. Joanne Eicher, "Introduction: The Fashion of Dress," in *Fashion*, ed. Newman (Washington: National Geographic, 2001), 31.

of Fashion Studies, by nuancing accusations of cultural appropriation, on the one hand, with academic ghettoisation, on the other?

## Entering the Contact Zone: My Positionality

My analysis in *Fashioning Brazil* was concerned with identifying instances of ‘auto-ethnography,’ which Pratt emphasised is a phenomenon of the contact zone. Auto-ethnographic expression is an autobiographical mode of writing, performing and reflecting upon the subjectivity of one’s own culture; it is engaging and emotional, as opposed to putatively ‘objective,’ and thereby differs from ethnographic accounts of a particular culture made by an ostensibly neutral and distanced observer, such as *National Geographic*. The process encompasses an appropriation of the idioms of the dominant culture, but also an infiltration by indigenous modes, which enable the auto-ethnographic subject to creatively and actively self-fashion and self-present. Pratt’s formulation of auto-ethnographic expression is clearly informed by and expands upon the poststructuralist thinking of Brazilian scholar Silviano Santiago. Santiago coined the term ‘writing back’ in 1978 to refer to the palimpsestic process whereby Western literary practices are modified, re-presented or even resisted in part by Latin American writers, in order to provide space within Latin American literature for the reinscription of different and alternative modes of non-Western creative expression.<sup>7</sup> Brazilian fashion is a form of auto-ethnographic expression, a sartorial manifestation of ‘writing back,’ which has enabled Brazilian subjects to re-present themselves as they wished and highlighted some of the tensions, contradictions and nuances of their ethnographic representation by *National Geographic*. Pratt acknowledged that ‘whilst subjugated people cannot control what the dominant culture visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean.’<sup>8</sup> Although auto-ethnographic expressions are predetermined to be understood differently by diverse readerships, this is not of primary concern, since they nevertheless ‘constitute a group’s point of entry into the dominant culture.’<sup>9</sup> The process entails a self-reflexive and critical awareness of how one is viewed by an outsider gaze, as well as a conscious re-fashioning of identity in response to that representation.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to comment upon my own auto-ethnography from the outset and explain where I positioned myself as researcher in relation to the critical framework of the contact zone. In conducting my examination of the representation of Brazilian fashion in *National Geographic*, I necessarily entered the contact zone, and placed myself in dialogue, discussion and debate with a range of different subjects that I have come into contact with: predominantly those represented in the pages of *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Brasil*, but also those inferred from the principally (but by no means exclusively) white or European-descended male readership, in addition to *National Geographic* staff in Washington DC and their Brazilian counterparts in São Paulo, as well as the numerous Brazilian, North American, and European artists, photographers, fashion designers, writers and researchers that I met

7. Silviano Santiago, *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture*, ed. Anna Lucia Gazzola, trans. Tom Burns, Ana Lucia Gazzola and Gareth Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 31. More recently, Pratt has referred directly to Santiago’s work and drawn upon his conceptualisation of the “space in-between,” defined by Pratt as “a site from which she or he [the Latin American subject] can reflect back to the center images of itself that the center could never generate but from which it stands to learn.” See “Modernity and Periphery: Towards a Global and Relational Analysis,” in *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (New York: SUNI Press, 2012), 32.

8. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

9. Pratt, 9. In her investigation of the European reception of Japanese fashion designers in the 1980s, Dorinne Kondo has used the term “auto-exotic gaze” to describe the Western gaze that non-Western cultures place upon their own cultures, which they translate into an exotic product that they then offer back to the West. Kondo’s expression draws a parallel with Pratt’s understanding of auto-ethnographic expression, since the process of auto-exoticism is, as Kondo pointed out, “never merely a reinscription of the dominant” but rather contains “a dis-ease that always contains an implicit threat to the colonizer’s hegemony.” Dorinne Kondo, *About Face* (London: Routledge, 1997), 10.

10. Mary Louise Pratt used the term to distinguish between ethnographic texts, which are “those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others” as opposed to auto-ethnographic texts, defined as “representations that so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts.” Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

throughout the process. My gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, cultural background and religion have all affected the subjective position that I adopted, however subconsciously, in relation to the primary material consulted within this project—which included a broad range of visual media encompassing photographs, travel albums, postcards, engravings, illustrations, paintings, film, even social media, supported with interviews—and had a direct bearing on both my readings of race and Brazilian fashion. It is useful to introduce myself from the outset, since the gaze that I placed upon my material was an inescapably European one. I am a thirty-year old white British woman of Polish descent who was born in Sheffield, grew up in Norfolk and has lived in London for the past 10 years. As a fashion historian trained in an art history tradition—with knowledge of the practical techniques of dressmaking—I have an image-centred *and* material notion of what fashion constitutes as well as the additional layers of meaning that representation affords. I recognise that not only is there a consciousness in the way that active subjects choose to dress and present themselves to the outside world, but that the images surrounding us in print and digital media also influence my awareness, as a viewer *and* a wearer, of how identities are fashioned. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty clearly indicated the entwining of the fashioned body with visual perception when he wrote: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my comprehension.”<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty rejected a detached and objective mode of viewing the world, but instead foregrounded the role of the fashioned body in making sense of our surroundings.

Whilst I have a close affiliation to Brazil, having lived in Olinda, a city in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco, I am not Brazilian. My mother tongue is English, although I continue to study the intricacies of Brazilian Portuguese. I strongly contest the notion, however, that one needs to be ‘Brazilian’ in order to study ‘Brazilian fashion,’ given that it is akin, surely, to saying that Brazilian scholars can *only* study Brazilian subjects, British scholars must study British subjects, and so on. Such perspectives amount to a form of academic ghettoisation that British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie vehemently warned against in his anti-essentialist essay, “Imaginary Homelands” (1982). Rushdie reasoned that “the largest and most dangerous pitfall” is the adoption of “a ghetto mentality”: “To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to define ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers.”<sup>12</sup> While there is an inescapable ethnocentrism in my gaze onto Brazilian fashion, which afflicts, as Emanuela Mora, Agnès Rocamora and Paulo Volonté observe, “all scholars who have been trained or have worked in a cultural world with roots in the West,” the contact zone as both a critical framework and an academic approach provided a means to meet and engage with Brazilian fashion.<sup>13</sup> I was careful to be sensitive to the primary material consulted, to listen to the various individuals encountered during the research process and, where possible, to bring Brazilian voices—particularly indigenous identities and those of colour—into the frame to discuss the subject with them. I used art-historical methods as a critical strategy to analyse images of Brazilian fashion heuristically, allowing close examination of the visual representation to open out into a broader discussion that draws on theory and historical context.

In order to decentre my European gaze onto Brazilian fashion and reinforce that concept of a meeting point that is capable of moving beyond binaries of centre/periphery, coloniser/colonised, Western/non-Western, local/global, *Fashioning Brazil* also mediated threads of thought by five Brazilian cultural theorists. Poet Oswald de Andrade (1980–1954), film theorist Robert Stam (1947–), poststructuralist Santiago (1937–), sociologist Roberto Schwarz (1938–) and anthropologist Renato Ortiz (1947–), have each grappled with the auto-ethnographic construction of Brazilian identity in diverse and singular ways.<sup>14</sup> It is

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), 273.

12. Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” *London Review of Books* (October 7, 1982), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/vo4/nr8/salman-rushdie/imaginary-homelands>

13. Emanuela Mora, Agnès Rocamora and Paulo Volonté, “The Internationalization of Fashion Studies: Rethinking the peer-reviewing process,” in *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2014): 7.

14. Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropófago,” *Revista de Antropofagia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1928): 6–7. Robert Stam, “Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Garbage,” *Cultural Visual en América Latina*, vol. 9, no. 11 (1998). Silvano Santiago, *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture* (London: Duke University Press, 2001). Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso 1992). Renato Ortiz, “Popular Culture, Modernity and Nation,” in *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, ed. Vivian Schelling (London: Duke University Press

not surprising that these scholars have all engaged with, and theorised, forms of auto-ethnography given their own mixed cultural identities and experiences of living and writing within different contact zones.<sup>15</sup> Not only have these scholars been concerned with the liminal position that Brazil occupies being placed culturally in-between Latin America, as well as other regions of the world, but they have woven fashion metaphors into their interdisciplinary writing, which has encompassed poetry, film studies, post-structuralist theory, literary criticism and anthropology. Despite the different periods and disciplines in which the scholars are writing, they are connected by a twentieth- and twenty-first-century preoccupation with the formation of Brazilian identity, as well as a sensitivity to how Brazilian subjects have negotiated global influences to address local concerns. Whilst each recognizes that Brazilian culture has been constructed through sustained engagement with the world at large—especially Western Europe and North America—there is a refusal to view this as a passive imitation or straightforward subordination to ‘Western’ culture.<sup>16</sup> *Fashioning Brazil* grappled with the tensions of these scholars’ competing arguments by contextualizing their ideas in the socio-political contexts in which they lived and worked.<sup>17</sup> Using the contact zone as a critical framework thus enabled my close observation of Brazilian fashion to be nuanced by the perspectives of contemporary Brazilian anthropologists, cultural theorists and historians, who I drew into my field of enquiry in order to decentre my analysis from a predominantly English-language perspective. That these scholars are all male is a bias that the author is committed to addressing in future research, by inviting a more diverse range of Brazilian perspectives and lived experiences – particularly those of women and minority groups – into the contact zone.

## Snapshots of the Contact Zone

Pratt acknowledged that “the complexities of life in the contact zone ... show up only in glimpses.”<sup>18</sup> *Fashioning Brazil* employed a snapshot approach in its examination of *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Brasil*, in order to historicise and ground my analysis of Brazilian fashion in solid case studies. I did not intend to provide an encyclopaedic account of the representation of Brazilian fashion in the magazine but rather to unpack, in the words of Alexander Nemerov, “a patchwork of glimpses” that provided a means of coming into contact with the past through the “photojournalistic precision of an instant in time.”<sup>19</sup> The real challenge was to pinpoint the charged instances in which local, regional and national identities are given form and *experienced* through fashion, but also intersect with global flows of images, objects, people and ideas in the world at large, whilst problematising the power relations that underpin them. My analysis illuminated how national and cultural identity, far from being fixed, is fashioned by the gaze of both insiders and outsiders to the group at certain points in time and space. Visual images were understood in this method anthropologically too, not as neutral documents

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2000), 199–218.

15. Andrade, for instance, was born in São Paulo in 1890 and lived there for the duration of his life, but was of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. Stam, also of mixed parentage, was born in the United States in 1941 and completed his PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Berkeley in 1977. He has described his three-decade ‘intense, palimpsestic cohabitation with all things Brazilian’ as ‘the fruit of a long personal connection to Latin America due to an important part of [his] family living there.’ Santiago, on the other hand, was born in Brazil in 1936, received his PhD in comparative literature at the Sorbonne in 1961, and has taught in the United States and Brazil. His personal experience of living between different cultures has surely sparked his concern with Latin American hybridity. Roberto Schwarz was born in Vienna in 1938 but grew up in São Paulo, received his PhD at the Sorbonne in Latin American Studies in 1976, and currently lives and teaches in Brazil. His formulation of ‘misplaced ideas’ can be understood as a reflection of his personal experiences of feeling ‘out of place’ between these different cultures. Finally, Ortiz’s conception of the neologism ‘mundialization’ is a reflection of his hybrid identity, as a Brazilian (b. 1947) who was educated in France and received his PhD at l’Université de Paris VIII in 1975, but now lives and works in Brazil. Robert Stam, “Acknowledgements,” in *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 11.
16. This does exclude Roberto Schwarz somewhat more pessimistic view of Brazilian dependence on foreign influences in *Misplaced Ideas* (1992).
17. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
18. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 52.
19. Alexander Nemerov, *Wartime Kiss: Visions of the Moment in the 1940s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

but as objects whose identities are unequivocally conditioned and reconditioned by the social, cultural, political, economic and technological context in which they are produced and circulated. Hans Belting critically recognised this when he insisted that photography does not simply mirror the world but, rather, synchronises our shifting gaze with that world; it is “our changing gaze upon the world—and sometimes a gaze upon our own gaze.”<sup>20</sup> Not solely a record of something that existed in the world, a snapshot opens up interpretative possibilities for the viewer, who invests his or her own memories, imaginings, epistemological knowledge, experiences, emotions and preconceptions onto the image, thereby forming interconnections with broader verbal, visual, textual and tangible systems of communication.

This included my own gaze as researcher, which I understood to be integral to the research process. My gaze inevitably placed an additional layer of meaning onto the primary material examined. I therefore positioned myself self-reflexively as the auto-ethnographic writer, who undertook the process of ‘writing back’ by modifying, re-evaluating and re-presenting the historiography of *National Geographic*. A self-reflexive re-engagement with these snapshots held the potential for a contested history of *National Geographic* to be revealed whereby, as Elizabeth Edwards has articulated, the snapshot acts “both as a confrontation with the past and as an active and constituent part of the present.”<sup>21</sup> The snapshots discussed in *Fashioning Brazil* provided a site of potentiality, demonstrating points of fracture with the overdetermined arguments of previous scholarship. Whilst it cannot be denied that an asymmetrical dynamic of power has often been in operation between *National Geographic* and self-fashioning Brazilian subjects, by allowing the images to perform on a broader stage across time and space, my method of analysis provided the opportunity for the nuances and complexities of interactions within the contact zone to be illuminated. My analysis sculpted out a space *within* existing academic discourse for alternative histories of the magazine to be revealed, thereby enabling the creative sartorial expressions of Brazilian subjects to be foregrounded, as opposed to silenced.

Having taken into account my auto-ethnography, it is important to outline what was at stake in my selection of individual snapshots. Rather than impose any assumptions onto the primary material, I allowed the starting point to be the images themselves. In order to remain sensitive to the materiality of the magazine, as well as to the reader/viewer’s specific experience of interacting with it, this careful and close-up analysis could only have been conducted by me, since the experience was necessarily one of unequivocal subjectivity. During the numerous hours spent in London, Washington DC and São Paulo examining every single copy of *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Brasil* to date, but also during the time spent thinking about and discussing the images with archivists, editors and contributors, I was concerned first and foremost with those particular images that revealed the nuances and complexities of Brazilian fashion. Whilst the complete archive of each issue of *National Geographic* produced to date is published and available to purchase inexpensively as a digital collection on DVD, the National Geographic Society Archive in Washington DC is far less willing to allow scholars and journalists access to its rich archival material, which includes correspondence sent between editors, contributors and readers, working drafts of articles, and unpublished photographs.<sup>22</sup> That my request for access was received favourably is likely due to the nature of my topic, which staff generally seemed more intrigued by than anxious of its potential to damage the reputation of the magazine. Nevertheless, once granted access to the archive, I was not allowed free rein, but could only access information within the Records Library by requesting microfiche and digital files related to particular articles. I was frequently informed that files were unavailable to view, and it was only through determination and insistence that I was able to examine all of the material related to the particular snapshots that I had selected previously, through close visual analysis of every edition of the magazine published to date in the British Library, London. The nature of my experience at *National Geographic Brasil* in São Paulo was markedly different to that in Washington DC, since access to archival material, although by no means as extensive, was fluid and open, and staff went out of their way to locate relevant files, which included unpublished photographs,

20. Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 146.

21. Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 7.

22. This reluctance is unsurprising due to the highly critical nature of previous scholarship.

readership statistics, and every edition of the magazine published to date. It was very easy to find out information verbally on the editorial processes of *National Geographic Brasil*, which had not previously been possible at *National Geographic*, but I was unable to view correspondence exchanged between contributors, editors and readers since this was largely conducted in conversation or via email. I was informed by staff at *National Geographic Brasil* that it was very interesting to respond to the questions that I asked as an outsider, since it prompted them to reflect upon their own identity and culture in a way that they had not previously considered. This was a good example of how entering the contact zone as a researcher can be a positive experience, since it enabled me to ask questions that might not have seemed important or interesting to a Brazilian researcher, and therefore highlights the necessity of having an awareness of one's positionality as a researcher.

## Brazilian Fashion in the Contact Zone

The contact zone provided a critical framework to explore the nuances and complexities of fashion in Brazil, which reveals a long history of transnational exchange and influence through cross-cultural contact, slavery and immigration. It is a complex and fluid process by which Brazil, since it was first colonised by the Portuguese in 1500, has absorbed but also reinterpreted influences that stem from its indigenous populations, as well as from Europe, Africa, Asia and the United States. Brazilian dress innovations explored in *Fashioning Brazil* illuminated Brazil's role as an active participant in global fashion culture, unsurprising given that it is the fifth largest and fifth most populous country in the world. The success of Brazilian fashion designers such as Alexandre Herchcovitch enables us to see the country as something far greater than simply a source of exotic inspiration to the West. His darker designs challenge recurring stereotypes in North American and Western European magazines, which still resort to oversimplification in their representation of Brazil as an exotic spectacle, failing to appreciate the internal subtleties of the country's racial, religious, social, cultural, geographic and sartorial diversity. From North to South, huge variables in culture and climate necessarily impact upon the everyday clothing choices made available to Brazilians. It leads one to question whether there is a form of fashion characteristic of Brazilian culture or conspicuously national in character. Simplistic outsider reactions might suggest the bikini or *Havaiana* flipflops, possibly even carnival costume, but this tells us more about foreign perceptions of Brazil—which have tended to treat Rio de Janeiro as a synecdoche for the entire country—than of the lived experience of fashion for most Brazilians. There is an incredible variation of fashion choices and styles in Brazil, which tell multiple stories about their wearers, revealing transnational networks of objects and ideas that are in dialogue with local identities. The forms of Brazilian fashion analysed in *Fashioning Brazil* included, but were not limited to, the complex and shifting sartorial system of the Guarani-Kaiowá indigenous group, who live in the central Western state of Mato Grosso do Sul (Fig. 1 and 2) and combine jewellery and body paint with Western-style shorts and T-shirts, in addition to ceremonial fashions, such as the white outfits worn by *baianas* in Salvador da Bahia, who adhere to the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé and wear a hybrid fusion of sartorial elements that have emerged through cross-cultural contact between Brazil, West Africa and Europe as a result of the Portuguese slave trade. I analysed low fashion, such as the localised use of Lycra among anonymous Brazilian designers (Fig. 3) working in Madureira, a poor suburb in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro, who re-fashioned the body-conscious designs of international brands such as Azzedine Alaïa and Giorgio Armani for a local audience, but also high fashion, such as the Ipanema boutiques of designers Bianca Marques and Victor Dzenk in the affluent South Zone, who catered to a wealthy local elite.

*Fashioning Brazil* was preoccupied, first and foremost, with the use of the term “fashion” as a verb—“to fashion”—that illuminated how fashion can be a means of fashioning one's own body, but also of being fashioned into something by an external gaze.<sup>23</sup> I was particularly concerned with the instances in which

23. From the earliest days of European contact in Brazil, represented by the artist Theodor de Bry's popular engravings in *America* (1590), which fashioned the monstrous, flesh-eating indigenous Brazilian cannibal—frequently also female—the European imagination has run wild. Such representations have often been centred on the fashioned human body which, in the context of tropical Latin America, historian Nancy Stepan argues has frequently been used to serve ‘as a kind of litmus test of a culture's preoccupations, responding to all sorts of contradictory projections and anxieties.’ Nancy Leys





Figure 1: Paulo Siqueira, Ava Tape Rendy'I of the Guarani-Kaiowá indigenous group, published in *National Geographic Brasil*, August 2013



Figure 2: Paulo Siqueira, anonymous woman of the Guarani-Kaiowá indigenous group, published in *National Geographic Brasil*, August 2013



Figure 3: Mari Stockler, image from *Meninas do Brasil* (Girls of Brasil), 2001

Brazilians could be seen to have participated in competing sartorial systems, and consciously chosen how to present themselves to the outside world. They may have done this through *self-fashioning*, which I define as personal style and clothing choices, and/or *self-presentation*, a term I use to describe the expressions, gestures, poses and gazes that subjects frequently enact before an outsider's gaze. Adopting Brazil as a geographical boundary to analyse and classify 'Brazilian fashion' was a deliberately contentious notion. Nations and cultures cannot be divided neatly into discrete units that never overlap and exist in isolation. All the examples of Brazilian fashion that I examined within the critical framework of the contact zone revealed the transnational flows of exchange and influence that intersected with local, regional, national and international identity formation.

## Applying the Contact Zone to Global Fashion

This article concludes by questioning the applicability of the contact zone to explore fashion cultures beyond Brazil. My research ultimately repositioned 'Western' fashion as simply *one* system, which operates amongst numerous others. This corresponded with a wider shift in academia, including contributions from scholars such as Eugenia Paulicelli and Hazel Clark, Karen Tranberg Hansen, Susan Kaiser, Margaret Maynard, Sarah Cheang and Victoria Rovine, which has called for the need to decentre our definition of fashion from a predominantly Euro-American perspective. The forms that fashion takes inevitably vary from culture to culture and from period to period, something which came to light through my examination of *National Geographic's* representation of Brazilian dress innovations over a period of almost 100 years. Sociologist Shmuel N. Eisenstadt recognised—especially within the context of the different societies that make up Latin America—that the experience of 'modernity' and its relationship to globalisation is a complicated one; modernity is a discourse that can be redefined in numerous ways, with multiple routes for modernisation.<sup>24</sup> Brazilian fashion clearly operates in different systems too, since dress innovations have taken different forms and paces in expressing an individual or social group's experience of the *now*. My research grappled with the nuances and complexities of identity formation at its intersection with dress innovations in Brazil, challenging the pervasive misunderstanding that fashion is, as Giles Lipovetsky articulated, "a sociohistorical reality characteristic of the West and

Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 88.

24. Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Latin America and the Problem of Multiple Modernities," in *Shifting Centres of Citizenship: The Latin American Experience*, eds. Mario Sznajder, Luis Roniger and Carlos Forment (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

of modernity itself.”<sup>25</sup> Lipovetsky ignored the existence of multiple modernities and multiple fashion systems, which operate independently from, in parallel to, and frequently in collaboration with, those in Western Europe and North America. As design historian Sarah Cheang has acknowledged, the fashion system that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, centred on Parisian couturiers, seasonal collections, fashion plates and the emergence of department stores, is only one, very specific ‘Western’ system of fashion. It was intricately tied up with imperialism and developing regimes of image-making, playing an instrumental role in the formation of a specific European urban identity.<sup>26</sup> The notion that ‘fashion’ emerged and flourished in the West, only emanating to the rest of the world with the arrival of Europeans, is a deeply rooted eurocentricity, equivalent to declaring that Brazil’s history only began in 1500 with the arrival of the Portuguese. The field of Fashion Studies requires a more holistic approach that ensures that global fashion histories are not continuing eurocentric histories of fashion.

The strength of using Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the contact zone to analyse Brazilian fashion is that it provides a means to understand contact between the United States and Brazil not solely from the perspective of *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Brasil*, but also to consider the practices and lived experiences of fashion for Brazilian subjects. This critical framework highlighted the ambiguities and fluidities of Brazilian fashion, which have enabled it to operate in unexpected and frequently strategic ways, crossing borders, passing through different hands, acquiring new values. While Brazilians have played with notions of national identity to construct personal and public subjectivities, my analysis revealed that it is impossible to reduce Brazilian dress to a single culture, nationality or geographical region. It is the complexities of fashion that the contact zone brings to light, which have provided the analytical tools for a deeper understanding of cultural identity, global networks of exchange, and transnational flows of images, ideas and objects. This has particular relevance within Brazil, a heterogeneous country that encompasses so many different identities, whether indigenous, European, African or hybrid, as well as clothing cultures. But it is far from exclusive to Brazil. Many cultures share similarly hybrid histories, and fashion is, after all, a primary expression of cultural identity/identities. The conceptual approach used in *Fashioning Brazil* embraced the fact that the meanings of fashion, as well as its representation, never speak to a single audience, but are decoded and recoded as clothing travels through diverse sites and locations. This includes the crucial role that the researcher’s positionality inevitably plays within that. My own positionality was an important concept that I worked into my analysis, forcing me to question my own unconscious biases and assumptions. I hope that my enquiry into Brazilian fashion can provide a compelling case study for Global Fashion Studies. If given the opportunity to develop my research, I would seek to invite a more diverse range of scholars into the contact zone to include, for example, more indigenous and female voices, such as the work of Lilia Moritz Scwharcz and Manuela da Carneiro Cunha.

The conceptual framework of the contact zone nevertheless revealed how global fashion is often reconstructed through local dress forms, how social and cultural realities are experienced on an everyday level through fashion choices, and how the nation is an important concept even within the context of the transnational. It can be applied not just to different geographical areas, but to almost anything, since knowledge production is always about expanding critical thinking into different arenas, and questioning the power relations and biases embedded within that process, whilst encountering new perspectives and ideas.

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