

National Geographic acknowledges its racist past, then steps on its message with a cover photo

By Victor Ray

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National Geographic has long offered a kind of pop-cultural imperialist anthropology that centers the white gaze and exoticizes people of color. The current issue of the magazine makes a brave attempt to deal with that [messy history around race and racism](#).

To get an outsider's view of its coverage of race, National Geographic hired the University of Virginia history professor [John Edwin Mason](#), who studies the history of photography and African history. Mason found that the magazine was often on the wrong side of racial history. For instance, it glossed over the historical significance of the brutal 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, in which white South African police killed 69 unarmed peaceful protesters.

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National Geographic's editors rarely questioned the colonial legacy and power relations that allowed its photographers and writers to shape a global conversation on race and difference that was too accommodating to white supremacy. I was happy to see the magazine take up the laudable goal of addressing its racial history. Many mainstream publications, were they to examine their own history surrounding coverage of race and the protection of white supremacy, would probably not fare much better than National Geographic.

Unfortunately, the cover story for this issue traffics in the very racial clichés the magazine's editor says National Geographic was guilty of in the past. The cover photo depicts 11-year-old mixed-race twin girls, with the tabloid-esque framing that one is black, the other white. And the headline makes the grand claim that the girls' story will [“make us rethink everything we know about race.”](#)

The “we” here is implicitly white people, and the story of these children doesn't break new ground so much as reinforces dangerous racial views. The girls in the photo, with their differing skin tones, are depicted as rare specimens and objects of fascination.

Admittedly, my problems with this article are both personal and professional. I'm a light-skinned black man who grew up with my darker-skinned younger brother. We were likely candidates for this type of story.

When we were children, white people often questioned whether we were related, insisted we must have had different fathers, or simply regarded me as a kind of unfortunate eugenic quirk. As an adult, white folks typically think I'm white, and when I tell them otherwise, they often respond with shock. Having my racial identity constantly questioned was tiring enough without an international magazine putting us on its cover and claiming our experience would help rewrite racial history. And my personal experience leads me to suspect that much of the “curiosity and surprise” that greet these young women come from white people. Black people are aware that we come in all shades.

Professionally, the article gets the social science wrong, in that it frames racism as a matter of individual attitudes and behavior and overstates the racial progress we've made.

I'm a sociologist who studies race and ethnicity, and there is a consensus among social scientists that racism is bigger than individual actions. Racism is likely to influence the lives of these girls in ways that can't be reduced to individual, mean-spirited prejudice. For instance, whites in the United States have, on average, [10 times as much wealth as black people](#). This wealth gap has multiple causes, including institutional racism in [lending and housing discrimination](#). Similarly, because of current and historical patterns of segregation, black Americans are more likely to live in polluted neighborhoods with adverse implications for their long-term health.

Although I can pass as white, and this has undoubtedly made my life easier in many spaces, my life has still been shaped by a lack of intergenerational wealth and by asthma, both of which were shaped by being born in a segregated black neighborhood. When journalists reduce racism to the actions of nasty individuals, they miss how racism shapes life chances beyond interpersonal meanness. My experience as a mixed-race person who could pass for white has always been marked by white supremacy.

The cover story also overstates the amount of racial progress we have made when it claims that “50 years after the assassination of Dr. King, racial identity has reemerged as a fundamental dividing line in our world.” While this narrative of progress and reemergence may be comforting to some, the scholarly record is clear — race and racism never went anywhere.

We are also 50 years from the landmark Kerner Commission report on Civil Disorders published in 1968, following the civil rights-era riots. A number of scholars have [revisited the report's findings](#), and their results are grim. Hiring discrimination against black men has remained [constant since the late 1980s](#), schools [are more segregated](#) than they have been at any point since *Brown v. Board of Education*, and data on differential rates of incarceration, health and many other measures are similarly stark. Claims that we've made considerable racial progress may be politically compelling, but the data provide a more complicated and pessimistic picture.

The stakes for getting race right in reporting are high and well beyond the personal. Although media coverage has faded, black people are still being disproportionately [killed by police](#).

Our president equivocates when faced with [white supremacist violence](#), regularly traffics in racial slurs and supports retrograde racial policies like a [reignited drug war](#) that will disproportionately hurt people of color. And white supremacist movements are ascendant in Europe, as far-right parties have been increasingly winning electoral representation.

If National Geographic really wants to atone for its racist past, it should drop narratives that overstate the racial progress we have made and stop misrepresenting racism as a personal sin.

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