

## ***Worlds Apart: nation-branding on the National Geographic Channel***

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Simon Anholt, a British branding expert, who made a career out of developing image campaigns for brands like Coca-Cola and Nestle, now helps countries develop themselves as global brands, 'with a carefully managed international identity, as recognizable as any consumer product'. Anholt observes, 'When it comes to economic development, everyone talks about transportation, technology, and civil service. No one talks about marketing, which is bizarre. Marketing is at the heart of what makes rich countries rich' (quoted in Rendon, 2003: 5).

Building national identity, according to Anholt, means ensuring that its brand-image is:

... supported, reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between the country and the rest of the world: the brands which the country exports; the way it promotes itself for trade, tourism, inward investment and inward recruitment; the way it behaves in acts of domestic and foreign policy; the way it promotes and represents and shares its culture; the way its citizens behave when abroad and how they treat strangers at home; the bodies and organisations it belongs to; the countries it associates with; the way it competes with other countries in sport and entertainment; what it gives to the world and what it takes back. (Anholt, 2003a)

Consequently, a country's nation-branding strategies are informed by intercultural exchanges. A brand is useful shorthand for what the product or company stands for (Anholt, 2002b: 29), and within the cultural imaginary, nation-branding utilizes fetishized visual codes to 'fix' a country's image. Nations looking to market themselves favorably seek a unique identity 'that can be articulated as a clear point of difference' from other countries (Morgan

and Pritchard, 2002: 61). Within globalization, this compare-and-contrast strategy often produces a discursive Othering that symbolically reduces difference to the Colonizing binaries of First/Third World, self/other, white/black, culture/nature and so on. In short, the case for nation-branding is built on the premise that 'development is as much a matter of positioning as anything else' (Anholt, 2003b: 28-9).

Since the events of 11 September 2001, it has become more vital to research the material and cultural processes involved in 'manufacturing' the power of nations. The most critical function of any national branding strategy, Anholt argues, is uniting a *heterogeneous* population with *one* common vision (2003b: 28). Investigating this representational process involves, as cultural studies scholar Henry Giroux suggests, 'an ongoing critical analysis of how symbolic and institutional forms of culture and power are mutually entangled in constructing diverse identities, modes of political agency, and the social world itself' (2004: 59). The theoretical study of *offetishism* within identity construction permits an examination of the link between the psychic and cultural structures involved in nation-building, since the nation-brand is constituted as a symbolic substitute for a 'real' community that is, in turn, an ideological construct. This semiotic construction has material effects in how a nation is perceived within the global order, and how that image influences 'its economic, cultural and political destiny' (Anholt, 2002b: 28).

Mega-brand nations, like the US, have the resources to support their hegemonic positioning. This calls for a political economy investigation of the institutional weight behind national representations. National *cultures* defined in opposition to the brand-leader are presented as spaces of 'lack' or underdevelopment, thus creating a hierarchy of nations arranged according to their economic and political clout. Thus, postcolonial countries are positioned as *cultures* and their nationalism placed under erasure. Countries that have the power to define and consume these 'cultures' can establish themselves as the 'masters' of globalization, and therefore, as modern *nations*. A study of nation-branding therefore, inevitably entails an analysis of how such discourse facilitates the enterprise of neocolonialism.

With the demise of formal empires at the end of the Second World War, transnational corporatism, arguably, has produced a neocolonial hierarchy of nations. Neocolonialism, or political sovereignty through economic and cultural hegemony, reiterates the inequities of old-world colonialism by positioning modern industrialized nations as owners and consumers, and developing nations as their factories and dumping grounds (Miyoshi, 1993). The US has been accused of being an imperial power because, apart from its strong global military presence, American cultural/media products and corporate conglomerates dominate the world marketplace. The debate about cultural imperialism centers on the fear that American popular culture has become a vehicle for transforming cultures everywhere. American consumer culture, in its pervasiveness, is proof of the strength of US nationalism, and

the US as a mega-brand is the inspirational model for many developing postcolonial nations (Anholt, 2002b: 29). What this charge also brings to the forefront is the continuing tension between the local 'imagined community' of the geo-political nation (Anderson, 1991: 6-7) and the multiplicity of 'imagined worlds' (Appadurai, 1996: 33) created by globalization, as well as by competing nationalisms within the framework of internationalization.

In the contested and shifting terrain of global political relations, nation-branding, or the fetishistic construction of national identity through specific image-signs, is a significant discursive venture in securing power. The US Information Agency (USIA) distinguishes between '*public diplomacy*' endeavors to 'promote the national interest of the United States through understanding, informing and influencing *foreign audiences*', and '*public affairs*' campaigns that communicate 'the goals, policies and activities of the U.S. Government' to a '*domestic audience*' ('What is Public Diplomacy?', 2002).

In the case of the US, as journalist Michael Holtzman asserts, American public diplomacy is 'neither public nor diplomatic'. Since the US government is the 'messenger', and the State Department the executor of such messages, post-9/11 nation-branding efforts by the US have been perceived internationally, 'not as a dialogue', but as a 'one-sided exercise' with America speaking at the world' (2003: 13). In an August 2004 subcommittee hearing addressing 'The 9/11 Commission Recommendations on Public Diplomacy: Defending Ideals and Defining the Message' (National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations Sub-Committee, 2004), both Keith Reinhard (president of the non-profit private sector consortium Business for Diplomatic Action and chair of the advertising conglomerate DDE Worldwide) and Gary Knell (president and CEO of the Sesame Workshop), emphasized the need to involve the *private sector* in creating this missing dialogue through *intercultural programming* in the *entertainment media*. Such media narratives, they suggested, would showcase the cultural diplomacy of the US, while simultaneously redefining for the *international* community what America stands for. While their recommendations remain on paper, this article seeks to examine how American reality television dealing with intercultural themes has contributed to nation-branding at home, redefining what it means to be American for *domestic* viewers.

Since the 2001 terrorist attacks, the US travel industry has urged residents to travel, while noting that consumer priorities have shifted, according to market research surveys, to a focus on family, community, integrity, balance between work and life authenticity, and security (Smith, quoted in Morgan et al., 2002: 152). A spate of destination reality television programs from *Survivor* (CBS, 2000) to *The Amazing Race* (CBS, 2001), and more recently, the National Geographic Channel (NGC) series *Worlds Apart* (2003), showcase some of these new American values, while presenting a vision of America(ns) moving outwards from an insular nationalism and triumphing in the global arena. In a *Washington Post* interview, Steve Schiffman, executive VP of marketing for NGC, revealed that his target audience needed to feel 'connected with the world'

and to be 'in the know' (in Friedman, 2003). These 'New Enthusiasts' 'wanted opportunities for "familial bonding" and to experience a sense of "being there" with explorers without leaving their couch' (Shin, 2004). Referring to the need to address this audience, Schiffman stressed, ' "Relevance", is a good word. We need to be more relevant' (in Friedman, 2003).

*Worlds Apart* (NGC, 2003) follows American families, on a 10-day survival camp, among indigenous groups in remote Third World villages. The three episodes informing the main analysis in this article are 'Katonah, NY meets India', 'East Brunswick, NJ meets Kenya' and 'Travers City, MI meets Guyana'. The show follows a structural formula: disjuncture, culture shock, assimilation and introspection, during which the participants reveal what's been learned from the experience. Subsequently, the return home is accompanied by self-discovery and a renewed appreciation for family and nation.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to argue that nation-branding is a strategic act to secure ideological terrain in the global/national cultural imaginary, and symbolically reinforce the notion of a 'natural' hierarchy of nations within the world order. I suggest that the fetishistic construction of brand-America within *Worlds Apart* emphasizes the idea of a progressive and modern nationalism that can survive the challenge of redefining itself. Nation-branding also depends upon the comparative positioning of other nationalisms vis-a-vis one's own. While the underdevelopment of the host countries provides an invaluable 'education' about global inequities for American participants and viewers alike, it simultaneously reaffirms the difference and superiority of brand-America. As Allie Palmer who visits Kenya notes, her journey helped her realize how fortunate she is, 'I prefer it here [in the US]', she says. 'You need certain amenities they [the Rendille tribe] don't have, like water and a telephone' (in Todaro, 2003).

Within cultural and media studies, such tourist ethnographies are important to investigate as *edu-tainment*, or education through entertainment. In presenting America to the world and vice versa, the inevitable semiotic contraction of national identities generates what I term 'specular geographies', or a neocolonial visual mapping of nations, enabled by technologies of the gaze, into spaces of development and lack.

I propose that the NGC reality television series *Worlds Apart*, made primarily for an American audience, functions as a neocolonial text since it visually frames the primacy of American nationalism through a conquest of space that is both territorial (in terms of 'invading' other cultures) and imaginary (conquering ideological ground in the minds of viewers). Glenda Hersh, executive producer of the series, emphasizes that the point was to make the American families experience 'culture exchange' and not 'culture shock' (Vernon, 2003). However, it is the latter that provides the dramatic component of the show. The poverty, hard manual labor and lifestyle change that the middle-class American families encounter results in meltdowns and revelations. Walter Lockett, who traveled to Peru, says that after sleeping on the ground and

eating guinea pigs, his family had to put a positive spin on things or 'it would have been a horrendous experience'; simultaneously, it made them 'appreciate the things that we take for granted here in America' (CNN, 2003).

NGC's cross-cultural programming also utilizes fetishized codes of primitiveness to situate developing postcolonial nations in the chrono-political space of a pre-industrial past, which American participants/viewers can safely visit and consume, like the artificially resurrected anthropological space of the World Fairs and museums. American viewers of/participants in *Worlds Apart* are encouraged to feel part of a global human 'race', even as the storyline promotes the superiority of the American 'race' within an epidermal ranking of nations. Within this schema, race and socio-economic class become conflated, so that people of color are equated with 'culture', and whiteness becomes synonymous with modern 'civilization'. There is, consequently, no perceived need on the part of the program's producers to throw the participants into the urban spaces of the Third World. Instead, the rural backdrop of the Other's space confirms that modernity and urbanity only belong to developed nations. An online posting by Diane Schutz, an NGC researcher looking for families in Vietnam, reveals that, for some of the episodes, the producers had to find English-speaking families in larger towns within the host country, willing to return to the villages they grew up in, to create the 'authentic' setting for *Worlds Apart* (Weitzel, 2003).

Within the capital-based racism of neocolonial globalization, countries described as First World or Third World, are also predominantly either white or colored, respectively. As labor flows make nations more complex sites of mixed racial articulation, there is an ongoing straggle to define a nation's racial identity. Arguably, one of the strategies by which this racial tension is negotiated is by utilizing consumerist values associated with an idealized lifestyle to unite disparate groups into one national culture, especially if this national lifestyle also corresponds to a superior national brand. This is established in the opening scenes of each episode of *Worlds Apart*, where the American families, regardless of their race, are established as equal by virtue of their shared middle-class backgrounds.

While the show does include American families from minority groups, the latter are whitewashed by the affluence of their national origin when contrasted against the 'real' people of color - their host families. It is also interesting that the American families of color are never placed in a foreign culture that would appear too close to their racial origin. Thus, the African-American families in the series are *not* placed in Africa, since this might cause the discomforting resurfacing of the repressed history of slavery that originally brought African people into America. Instead, the strategy of constituting racial primacy through lifestyle helps maintain the visual superiority of American nationalism, by which modernity can still be harnessed to the hegemonic reign of whiteness.<sup>2</sup> As postcolonial theorist Anne McClintock warns, 'Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance' (1992: 86).

It is equally important to acknowledge how the *deliberate* selection of 'traditional' cultures for the show situates developing postcolonial nations as worlds apart. I suggest that, through a politics of exclusion, specific types of families get selected to represent both sides of the world. The contrast between the families simultaneously suggests difference (through competing nationalisms) and homogeneity (through shared family values), so that, consequently, the material effects of global capitalism dividing nations (and groups within a nation) become secondary to the ideological celebration of a family-of-nations based on mutual tolerance. This recurring theme of families coming together, in turn positions America(ns) as cultural ambassador(s) in creating the global village.

In the show's analysis, I discuss how fetish signs are used to 'fix' nation-brands. The brand impoverishment of the host cultures, suggested by their representation through fetishized sites/sights of underdevelopment, implies that the worth of Third World nations lies in their 'service', this time in the 'production' of brand-America. By further utilizing the fetish to critically deconstruct the colonizing impetus in nation-branding, this study also suggests that the symbolic reassertion of brand-America signals an underlying anxiety about the devaluation of its brand image abroad.

According to a Pew Research Center survey (2004), two-thirds (67%) of Americans believe the US is less respected worldwide, versus 20 percent who maintain that the US is still held in high regard. Moreover, more than 4 out of 10 Americans (43%) regard the loss of respect for the US around the world as a significant problem, which is twice the number of those who believe it is not worth worrying about (23%). Within such a cultural climate, it is important to analyze media commodities such as *Worlds Apart*, as topical programming based on audience research that addresses social fears and desires, and where the re-branding of the 'imagined community' validates the political relevance of popular culture.

### **Fetishism and comparative nationalisms**

Nation-building on *Worlds Apart* creates, to borrow Lawrence Buell's words, a 'toxic discourse' of otherness. Buell uses 'toxic discourse' to refer to the rhetoric of an 'anxiously industrializing culture' addressing the fear of 'a poisoned world' (1998: 639). I am reworking his phrase to refer to the anxiety within American popular media to present cultures not yet 'poisoned' by anti-Americanism, and through which the US can combat the negativity of its perceived imperial global presence. Simultaneously, these media representations of primitive Otherness reassure American viewers that all is well in their part of the world, in contrast with the Third World, which is constituted as its lack.

The etymological roots of the term 'fetish' point to the substitution of 'cultural signs replacing natural substance' within representation (Bernheimer, 1993: 63). The fetish-as-substitute conceals the anxiety of a missing origin. Within nationalism, fetish signs such as the Statue of Liberty, flag, Constitution,

etc., unite Americans as one 'imagined community', and become material evidence of a *real* nationalism, even though American-ness is a discursive product.

In anthropology, the fetish marked a difference in value systems that was ideologically employed to justify colonization: white European culture was therefore perceived as hierarchically superior to non-white cultures,<sup>3</sup> a discursive strategy that continues in neocolonial global discourses.

The Freudian fetish is a substitute-object, luring the male gaze away from the source of anxiety (threat of castration), and onto itself (for a detailed explanation see Freud, 1927). In the case of competing nationalisms, the American media/viewers' masculinist gaze is displaced onto the fetishized site of the feminized Third World. The threat of emasculation thus allayed is the realization that the so-called underdeveloped Third World is largely responsible, as the case of outsourcing of technological jobs to the periphery has shown, for American progress and modernity (see for example Bally and Farrell, 2004).

In Marxist terms, the commodity fetish heralds the triumph of appearance over the material conditions of production.<sup>4</sup> Within global capitalism, the fact that the commodity culture that defines brand-America is supported by Third World labor is invisible to the American gaze, except as a 'made in' source-label on the product that positions developing nations as manufacturing sites.

In *Worlds Apart*, the fetish signs of the host cultures - food, race, woman and family - are positioned as antithetical to the project of the modern American nation, even as they are used to restore the strength of brand-America. At the same time, a critical re-examination of the fetish, as a tool of both nation-branding and cultural imperialism, entails exploring the ideological space behind its object-surface to reveal the repressed fears/anxieties that the fetish seeks to conceal.

### **Marketing the US - nation-building and public diplomacy**

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, Charlotte Beers (a former Madison Avenue branding expert) took on the task of selling America to Muslim countries in her new position as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Secretary of State Colin Powell informed the House Budget Committee that this nation-branding campaign would be a change from 'just selling us in the old USIA way to really branding foreign policy ... [and] marketing American values to the world ... ' (Carlson, 2001: C01). In addressing the National Press Club in Washington DC on 18 December 2002, Beers stressed the need to communicate to the world that the US, despite its Western values, shares similarities with other cultures, particularly those in the Arab world (De (Srazia, 2002: 4).

For many onlookers at home and abroad, this attempt to sell the US reeked of propaganda and cultural imperialism. Victoria De Grazia of the *New York Times* points out that such efforts to market the nation in the eyes of savvy global consumers is taken 'as another example of America's overwhelming

media presence abroad, for which the nation is already criticized', while failing the test of credibility, for in the end 'advertising is only as good as the product being sold'(2002: 4). The real lesson, according to Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek International*, is that:

America isn't powerful because people like us: our power is a product of dollars and guns. But when people think that America's unique role in the world is basically legitimate, that power becomes less costly to exert and to sustain, (quoted in Micah Marshall, 2004: 87)

While the NGC series *Worlds Apart* was *not* engineered as a public diplomacy effort, it did evolve from market research conducted to develop 'relevant' programming that, at the time the series aired in 2003, was centered on American viewers' concerns about 'wanting to feel connected with the world' and being 'in the know' (Shin, 2004). It returns us to Anholt's pertinent observation that nation-branding is evaluated in part by the manner in which a country presents its culture, how its citizens interact with people from other places and the perceived fairness of its global exchanges (2003a). Executive producer Glenda Hersh outlined the show's mission: 'for Americans to get a sense of what the rest of the world is like and for the American families who go, to be really the eyes and ears of America' (Catlin, 2003: D1). And while there is no public data on viewer ratings or feedback for the show, target audience interest in such reality television explorations contributed to a 75 percent increase in NGC's viewer ratings (as per Nielsen) since 2003, when it launched its new cross-cultural programming (Shin, 2004).

### **The National Geographic Channel as window to the world**

The task of legitimizing national identity begins at home, where voting publics must be convinced that their world is better and safer than those outside the nation's borders. It thus becomes necessary to evoke comparative nationalisms or create 'worlds apart' that *show* us that we occupy a superior space. Television scholar Michael Curtin points out that the emergence of new world markets due to capital flows makes the 'differentiation between places' all the more important for transnational enterprise. Television, then, becomes an instrument for 'localizing and naturalizing a hierarchy of values and attitudes about places' (2001: 337-9).

It seems apt that the National Geographic Society, which began with the aim of conquering unknown worlds and bringing other cultures to the American-at-home, should, in the 21st century, seek to expand its spectral empire with the help of Rupert Murdoch, a media baron whose name has become synonymous with the project of cultural imperialism. The National Geographic Channel is a joint venture between National Geographic

Television & Film and FOX Cable Networks (*National Geographic Magazine Online Sales Kit*, 2002). Within America, the NGC has become the fastest-growing cable network since its inception in January 2001.<sup>5</sup> The channel combines the efforts of acclaimed scientists and explorers, journalists and film-makers, exhorting the armchair viewer to take on the challenge of the brand's new identity tag-line: 'Dare to Explore'.

Losses of approximately \$70 million in 2004 prompted NGC to combine aspects of the 'shock' programming that FOX has a reputation for with the ethnographic documentary approach of the NGC. A July 2004 news report indicated that the Nielsen ratings during the previous quarter for NGC's average prime-time audience were about 154,000, which was close to the more widely disseminated *CAW Headline News*, which attracted 198,000 viewers for the same time-slot (Shin, 2004). Appealing to a middle- and upper middle-class demographic, similar to its audience for the *National Geographic* magazine, typical NGC viewers in 2003 were categorized as having an average household income of \$54,000 and above (Larson, 2003). Described as 'New Enthusiasts', these affluent and highly literate viewers make up approximately 17 percent of the viewing households (Shin, 2004). This makes NGC immensely attractive to advertisers and is a reminder of the economic considerations that influence programming so that NGC can maintain high ratings and remain a lucrative advertising venue. Subsequently, as media reviewer Jim Forkan observed in 2003, 'Like the wildlife featured in so much of its programming', NGC was hunting for more advertising revenue. 'As bait', NGC planned to use six new series, 'one of which - *Worlds Apart* - aired that October, during primetime, as part of "Culture Shock Week"'.

#### Behind the scenes of *Worlds Apart*

Glenda Hersh describes how in creating 'culturally challenging' programming, True Entertainment, the company that produced *Worlds Apart*, decided to select an American 'family that has no idea what life is like in another place ... and plunk them right in there' (Shattuck, 2003). According to Shari Solomon, a producer on the show, the team *deliberately* selected traditional cultures that were not overly westernized, although the host families *had to speak English*. Participants were remunerated for their expenses only. The crew accompanied the families on their odyssey, but Solomon emphasizes that, 'Everything is *real*. We make sure they [Americans] *have lots of bottled drinking water, and sunscreen*, but the [American] families *really live daily life*' (Gillies, 2003: Y06, emphases mine). Her statement indicates how 'reality' is framed within the discursive space of the NGC. Reality television, in this case, is produced by the *real* hardships of people in underdeveloped nations. In comparison, the American middle-class lifestyle becomes the *ideal* and the defining strength of brand-America.

Hersh explains that the show enables American families 'to be able to step out of their own shoes, and walk a mile in another family's flip-flops, so to speak' (Vernon, 2003). The framing device of footwear to suggest cultural/economic difference translates into similar visual metaphors that ideologically inform the show. Hersh acknowledges that there is no plan to 'reverse the process' and bring families from other cultures to America (Catlin, 2003: D1).

When asked how the production crew prepares families for the 'reality of being filmed', Hersh responds with a lack of self-reflexivity:

People are more comfortable with cameras than you think they would be.... Television is such a regular presence in almost everybody's lives that we forget sometimes that people actually are far more comfortable living on camera than we as producers feel filming them... (Catlin, 2003: D1)

Who these people are is immediately apparent when we contrast her words against a news excerpt that discusses an episode from the series, where the Thurman family travels to the Trobriand islands to live among 'the villagers *without electricity* or running water' (Gillies, 2003: Y06, emphasis mine). Obviously then, Hersh is referring to American families who have access to both electricity and television as part of their daily lives. The indigenous families are positioned outside the space of urban modernity and technological development, so their experience too is secondary in this repositioning of brand-America. It becomes clear, then, that the American cultural perspective is the privileged lens through which we will be introduced to other cultures and the ideological spaces they occupy, which are definitely 'worlds apart' from the US.

Hersh also points out how rare it is for American families to bond due to the cultural emphasis on individualism and independence. In fact, this expedition forces the family to 'spend two weeks *together* because there are no distractions and no activities of the *traditional* kind' associated with American commodity culture (Vernon, 2003, emphasis mine). The tourist setting is where the American family (as a microcosm of the nation) can be reconstituted in the hospitable space of the other cultures.

Tradition has kept these cultures fixed within the rubric of backwardness and underdevelopment. Yet, as 'native authenticity', this primitiveness is cultural capital in the Western media market, where survival and hardship are not part of daily life but consumed as the dramatic components of reality television shows. For Hersh, travel to these cultures is *reality* 'in the more *traditional* sense of the word' (emphasis mine). She offers the example of the Palmer kids who went to Africa:

This gave them a cultural perspective that they could never have gotten in the classroom. It really was as though they had stepped into the pages of the *National Geographic*. And that's an educational opportunity that I think is unparalleled, (in Vernon, 2003)

Her words attest to the significance of the NGC and the *National Geographic* magazine in the American middle-class imaginary as legitimate sources of popular knowledge, that sometimes, as in this case, are evaluated as superior to more formal types of institutional knowledge. In the case of the NGC, this perception may be due to the fact that the programming content is easily accessible, based on first-hand experiential knowledge and backed by visible proof. Moreover, viewers can vicariously participate in the knowledge-making process, while the ideological basis of such 'edu-tainment' supports nation-building, making the American viewer feel 'at home' in the world (see Lutz and Collins, 1993).

### **Exclusionary politics on *Worlds Apart***

One family. No house. No car. No TV. No microwave. No phone. Definitely no speedboat. Sent to the other side of the world and given the chance to experience daily life with another culture. Here's their story – *Worlds Apart*.

The opening lines of the show establish the nature of this global challenge – one American family (nation) against the rest of the world. In establishing nations metaphorically as families, the NGC excludes certain populations (homosexuals, single people, childless families) from being constituted as 'proper' citizens through this definition. The application for families who wish to participate on the show requires that they must have children between the ages of 6 and 18, be able to travel for two weeks, be healthy and possess health insurance (National Geographic Channel Online, n.d.). This again narrows the description to those families who can 'afford' such an adventure, since the ability to take time off from work or purchase the required insurance reflects a certain socio-economic advantage.

Limiting the participation to middle-class Americans also enables the dramatic contrast in lifestyles between the participant and host countries on the show. The most marked aspect of culture shock will be, as the opening lines suggest, that of material poverty and a lack of the amenities that define the bourgeois American lifestyle and 'national culture'. This disparity emerges in an online discussion in which the Thurman family, who visited the Trobriand islands, notes that the host culture was 'not a whole lot different from what our culture was *two or three hundred years ago*' (*Washingtonpost.com*, 2003, emphasis mine).

Also lurking below the surface narrative is the colonial history of these host countries. The Thurmans disclose that they found traces of American occupation on the island (an unused airstrip from the Second World War), and that one of the native ballads is 'about a Japanese soldier, shot down over their island, who they protected from the Americans and British, even though they favored the Americans'. The interview subsequently reveals that, although the

islands are visited by anthropologists and agronomists, '[the islanders] were surprised to see a complete family of "dimdins," which is their word for white people' ('National Geographic', *Washingtonpost.com*, 2003). Through such questioning *outside* the context of the show, we become aware of the fixing of these other cultures as sites of colonial occupation, international tourism, research and exploration. Within the colonizing rubric of the show, the islands are 'invaded' once again, this time by American media and families, and used to recreate the tension of 'culture' vs. 'civilization' through which brand-America can be resurrected.

### Constructing the Third World

In the first few minutes of each episode of the show, viewers get a taste of the good American life. The Palmers, for instance, live in East Brunswick with a population of approximately 50,000 people. Here alone there are 42 fast-food joints and 121 dentists. The Palmer residence has five bathrooms. Susan is a soccer mom and Sunday school teacher. Chris, the father, is manager for a flavor and fragrance company. They have three kids: Jamie, Michael and Allie. On the other side of the world, we get a glimpse of the host family. The Orgubas live in Korr, Kenya, where there are no flushing toilets, no electricity and the nearest phone is hours away. Teresa and Lawrence Orguba have 10 children. Lawrence is a farmer and community leader. His wife performs domestic chores, walking miles to procure firewood and water, and preparing meals for the family. Already we see the divide between the two worlds along the lines of labor and its valuation. The Palmers' white-collar income guarantees them the affluent lifestyle they take for granted. The Orgubas, despite their backbreaking labor in raising goats and cultivating their fields, eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. As Chris Palmer discovers, his daughter 'can make as much money one night babysitting as the Orgubas make by selling one of their best goats'.

The various depictions of Otherness create a disquieting set of contradictions. First, there is the 'fact' that these cultures are *not* like American culture, and the images and narrative establish this difference. Concurrently, however, there is also the realization that these people *are* like Americans because they too share the same family values. R.J. Russell who spent time in Ghana, recounts:

They [the Frafras] don't know what a microwave is, they've never seen a refrigerator, and they don't have "any idea about ice. But we have so many more things in common than uncommon. They laugh and cry just like we [Americans] do, and they love their children and want to give them what's best in this life. And that crosses cultural divides. (Shattuck, 2003)

There is an interesting juxtaposition here between the values affirmed as important to Americans (emotional warmth, family), and the definition of Americanness through the material aspects of commodity culture (refrigerator,

microwave). It suggests why, despite the appreciation for the simple life in their host cultures, the American families are glad to return home. Referring fondly to her Orguba hosts, 15-year-old Allie Palmer says, 'I want to bring them to live *here*' [in America] (Shattuck, 2003, emphasis mine). The ideological space of brand-America is rendered powerful because, while the participant families appreciate the human experience in these other cultures, what is *of value* ultimately is the privileged economic lifestyle that allows such cultural consumption.

This ambivalence within the Othering of the host cultures is resolved through visual fetishism that emphasizes cultural difference. Such fetish images - whether they are of tribal rituals, taboo food, or the extreme poverty and filth of underdevelopment - only serve to accentuate the safety and civilization of the absent American homeland. All contradictions are ironed out by the simple logic that this is the 'natural' way of life for Third World cultures. Glenda Hersh, for example, contends that it was 'intentional' that the American women found themselves doing more work than the men on these visits. 'We like to make sure that the family is going to experience some of the *highlights* of the culture,' she says, 'and, unfortunately for the women, *that's what life is like in a lot of the cultures*' (Shattuck, 2003, emphasis mine). This view, supported by the participants' remarks on the show, suggests that such inequities do not exist within America, so that the latter, by contrast, emerges as the democratic ideal.

### Food as fetish and taboo

As one of the fetish signs used to establish difference on the show, food becomes a symbolic reminder of the taboos that safeguard against cultural pollution (see Douglas, 1966: 33-7). Animal killing is linked to the other culture's idea of food in a manner that elicits revulsion within the First World gaze. In 'Travers City, MI Meets Guyana', visiting mom Maureen Berger joins her South American counterpart in cleaning tripe and emptying offal from a steer carcass. We are made acutely aware that even the animal's insides will be served at the table. This theme is repeated across shows, emphasizing that what the visitors would consider filth is food in these cultures, and overlooking the paucity that renders every part of the animal invaluable. In Kenya, for example, the Palmers are offered goat intestines and meals made out of the animal's milk and blood, and Allie Palmer is reduced to tears after three days of eating food made gritty by the sand that's everywhere.

Food also becomes a cultural conduit. The Berger kids visiting Guyana decide to kill their host's rooster so they can share an American tradition, barbecuing, with the Charlie family. What haunts the edges of this scene is the inequality of the cultural exchange. It is the host's daughter, Amanda Charlie, who catches the rooster for the Palmer boys and makes their barbecue fire, and it is the host family's bird that is transformed into the fetish sign of an American tradition. In this case, the Berger boys and American viewers share

a moment of home-away-from-home at the expense of the Charlie family and their labor. What is privileged is the cultural insertion of the lifestyle associated with brand-America, achieved by consuming the host culture. Moreover, this exchange reflects the economic imbalance within neocolonial globalization, where Third World countries are placed in the production and service of Euro-American countries.

When the Bergers return home, they celebrate with a meal at Burger King. Jay Berger remarks, 'I really prefer American beef. Plus I didn't have to kill it!' The burger as commodity fetish is the symbolic substitute for American 'civilization'. In Marx's formulation of the commodity fetish, the object gains surplus or symbolic value that erases the conditions of labor behind its production. The consumer's desiring gaze, distracted by the erotic lure of the commodity's packaged surface, fails to examine the material conditions of the product's origin. Jay's comment though, forces an investigation of this fetish-space, made conspicuously visible by the earlier scenes of the butchering of a steer in Guyana. The safe burger in its Burger King wrapper conceals the violence of the slaughterhouse. The hamburger is 'civilized' food because it has erased the signs of animal killing to produce the ultimate fetish sign of the American lifestyle - fast food. Furthermore, the fetish-front of brand-America's desirable consumer lifestyle in *Worlds Apart* directs attention away from the exploitative representational process by which this American Dream is sustained through the Othering of the host cultures.

Food also establishes 'territory' or a sense of home in the midst of foreignness. In the African bush, Susan Palmer uses her husband's ceremonial African sword to flip pancakes so the family can enjoy an American meal. When Susan decides to cook something for her host family, she decides on the American staple: chicken soup. We learn from Teresa Orguba that the Rendille people don't eat birds and prefer camel meat. However, Teresa pretends to taste the stew that Susan has prepared, discreetly emptying the spoon on the ground. Teresa's gesture becomes visual proof, for viewers, of a polite rejection of the American way of life.

We see such separatist politics of representation articulated as oppositional identities in Benjamin Barber's post-9/11 introduction to his book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*. In it, he describes those who subscribe to the call of 'Jihad' or militant fundamentalism, as 'people who detest modernity - the secular, scientific, rational, and commercial civilization created by the Enlightenment' (2001: xiv). 'McWorld', on the other hand, refers to the 'forces of integrative modernization and aggressive economic and cultural globalization' that have homogenized world culture (2001: xii). Both forces, according to Barber, are attacks on democratic institutions and the nation-state (2001: xviii). But while 'Jihad' and 'McWorld' may represent two polar extremes within globalization, in the post-9/11 world, even as it is offered as a critique, Barber's 'McWorld' (America) becomes the desirable space to occupy.

### Historicizing race and place

The postcolonial nations are often contextualized within violent pasts. Viewers' introduction to Guyana, for example, is through the reference to the Jim Jones cult-suicide in Jonestown. And in 'Katonah, NJ Meets India', the Jewish Rappys encounter the swastika sign in a Hindu temple. Their host Mahendra explains that the symbol indicates health, wealth and happiness. When Floyd Rappy mentions that the Nazis used the swastika, Mahendra proudly informs them that Germans are 'our brothers' because they're Aryans and 'we are Aryans also'. A fact-blurb on the screen informs viewers that Aryans migrated from Central Asia to India about 3500 years ago.

Of course, the Rappys (and viewers) are disoriented by this historical and racial reconfiguration. Mahendra's pride at a shared inheritance with the German people displays his naivete about Nazi history and its racist politics that would have excluded him from that brand of Aryan nationalism. He seems oblivious to the racialized hierarchy of nations within globalization that places India in the non-white space of underdevelopment. Instead, the swastika becomes a fetish sign of racial purity by which Mahendra defines himself, while simultaneously masking the anxiety of racial pollution attributed to skin color. Concurrently, the fact-blurb about Aryan migration alerts viewers to *their* ignorance of the 'history' of race and to its stigmatization as skin color.

Therefore, as anthropologist James Clifford insists, in any ethnography there must be a critical historicizing of 'location' that reveals the multiplicities and contradictions inherent in the construction of place. Location is not 'a matter of finding a stable "home" or of discovering a common experience'. Rather, it is the task of becoming aware of how difference is being constituted through the 'various inscriptions, "places" and "histories" that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories ... ' (1989: 182). Accordingly, the 'location' of *Worlds Apart*, reveals the racial anxieties behind nation-branding. The 'white' lifestyle of brand-America on the show subsumes Jewish ethnicity, which is then pitted against the people of color 'claiming' to be white. And while the homogeneity of brand-America, represented by its middle-class participants, renders internal racial differences as inconsequential, race is summoned to economically demarcate the host countries.

### Frontier feminism

Ella Shohat's re-reading of the Freudian metaphor of the 'dark continent' reveals how, within the imperial context, 'woman' and 'native' are 'figures of darkness and threat that must be controlled' (1991: 41-70). Within the show, the native women, similarly, are perceived as fetishized sites of regressive femininity that threaten American feminism. In most host cultures the division of labor along gender lines is visibly pronounced. The native women's

roles are defined in terms of serving family first, much to the consternation of their Western counterparts. Initially, the hard domestic chores and lack of modern amenities strain relations between the American women and their native counterparts. Floyd Rappy explains the challenge for his wife Michelle: 'A knock comes on the door and she has to be ready to serve the queen [their hostess Prem]. So to expect that she [Michelle] will be friends with Prem is a lot to expect.'

Not only do the American women find themselves taking orders from the native women, they also have to serve their families without assistance from the men. In Kenya, Susan Palmer tearfully confesses, 'I definitely feel unappreciated.' Her son Michael wants to help but says his dad has forbidden him to because it would 'change the culture'. Ultimately, though, the American women manage to triumph in their attempts at assimilation, even outdoing the American men in some cases.

It is interesting to observe how stereotypical femininity in the neocolonial discourse of *Worlds Apart* is transformed into a sign of strength and frontier spirit when adopted by the American women in 'native disguise'. The colonial impetus behind such mimicking of nativeness in imperial texts is to outdo the natives at their nativeness. In Guyana, Ben Berger marvels at his mother's resilience. 'My mom's the strong one in the family', he states, after observing his father fail at many of the chores, adding, 'My dad's a wimp.' That the American women are stronger than their men in many cases may also mirror the domestic anxiety about the growing power of professional women in America (see for example Employment Policy Foundation Online, 2003), but in this foreign space it becomes a way of shoring up the power of the American nation whose female ambassadors are up to the task of making a home away from the homeland.

### **Developing brand-America through the Other**

Edward Bruner discusses how tourist 'borderzones' produce a 'recurring wave of temporary travelers' for whom the 'natives have to break out of their normal routines to meet the tourists: to dance for them, to sell them souvenirs, or to display themselves and their cultures for the tourist's gaze and for sale' (1996: 158). The inequalities between those who cross the border on either side mark the disparateness of experience, as Bruner points out, 'because what for the tourists [and ethnographers] is a zone of leisure and exoticization, is for the natives a site of work and cash income' (1996: 158). Bruner argues that, while the Western elite try and avoid the Other in First World cities, they look obsessively for the 'authentic' native in the tourist borderzones of the Third World (1996: 160). In *Worlds Apart*, this 'authentic' Other is objectified as a site/sight of fetishized desire that enhances America's brand equity.

Michelle Rappy explains how Americans, like her, are searching for connectivity. She adds, 'The people here [in India] are lucky to have the love and support of community. I envy them that.' In Guyana, Jay Berger comments without irony that, 'It's wonderful that the world has places like this and people who appreciate it, and its freedom. It's probably the most free you could be anywhere in the world.' Susan Palmer confides that she is glad that her family had the opportunity 'to bond with people who, on the surface, we have nothing in common with, and that *we* were able to do it, really do it!' (emphasis mine). As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski writes in his study of the Trobriand natives, the end goal of the ethnographer is to 'briefly grasp the native's point of view', in order to 'realize *his* vision of *his* world' (1961: 25). In the same spirit, this televised drama is less about the people who are being 'invaded' or their views on the shock of this tele-assault; rather it is about the 'invaders' re-discovering their identity by assimilating Otherness.

Within the imaginary tourist space of *Worlds Apart*, the daily hardships, integrated communities and close parenting, are fetishized as the 'lack' that the American families perceive in their own lives. Ironically then, Third World poverty is translated into a sign of *real* freedom and spirituality that transcends the material crassness of the developed world, even as the US becomes the *ideal* space that can import the spirituality without the poverty and be renewed by this experience. Michelle Rappy, for instance, describes how she set up a knitting circle at home to re-create the spiritual community of women that was so affirming in India (Nagorski, n.d.).

In Kenya, Susan Palmer, finds it hard to contemplate how the Rendille can make do with so little, especially since America is such a 'throw-away society'. For Susan, 'The question ... is what do you do with the knowledge [of the Third World experience]? Do you just take it home and say, I was lucky enough to be born where I am, or do you think about how you can effect change?' Her words recall what theorist Mary Louise Pratt calls 'imperial meaning-making', in which the site of the Other becomes the space of colonial expansionist fantasies (Pratt, 1992: 4). The traveler distances herself from the tediously familiar (home) by seeking novelty, or, as in this case, identity, in the location of the Other, while concurrently transforming the foreign space into the familiar territory of 'home'. The Palmers bring a kite, board games such as 'Twister' and American music to share with the Rendille. They also plan to send them pictures since no one in the tribe has seen their own image because there are no mirrors or cameras (Todaro, 2003). Back in America, daughter Allie contemplates her mirror reflection, wearing a tribal necklace that took her hostess 48 hours to weave. Such fetish mementos erect the facade of a 'screen memory',<sup>6</sup> whose 'imperial meaning-making' masks how nation-branding is achieved through the asymmetry of this commodity exchange.

In India, Michelle Rappy confesses that she feels so much 'at home' that she has trouble remembering her American life, after just a week. Similarly,

in Guyana, Jay Berger is sufficiently moved by the cultural encounter to tell his host Christopher, 'You have family in the United States now.' In these narratives about extended families, viewers see the fantasy of an 'image community', manufactured by the NGC, in which nations too can establish familial relations with each other. These 'image communities' are informed by what Arjun Appadurai terms 'mediascapes'. Appadurai argues that mediascapes as 'image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality', script 'imagined lives' for both those who experience their transforming effects, as well as those 'of others living in other places' (1996: 35). Subsequently, nation-branding within the show's scripting upholds America's role in taking 'worlds apart' and forging one 'image community'.

### Healing the family and nation

The family as the microcosm of the nation embodies the tropes of heterosexuality, capitalist production/reproduction and patriarchy. The foreign territory provides the testing ground for the relationship between the American parents and their children, which is a theme in most episodes. This is most apparent in the case of the Palmers who travel to Kenya. The children view their father as overtly macho and insensitive. Chris Palmer admits: 'We love our children very much, and we think that by bribing them and giving them more than they'll ever want that they'll love us back, but that's not the case.' The only person who can communicate with the Palmer boys is the host-father, Lawrence Orguba, who takes the boys on long walks, listening to them and affirming them. In the end, Chris Palmer learns important lessons about parenting from Lawrence. Chris decides that when they return home, he is 'going to take the time ... [and] give them [the boys] plenty of time to say what they have to say, and if they don't talk, that's okay. Silence is okay too.' By learning how to be a family through the Orgubas, Chris admits, 'we've really become a family with *them* [the Orgubas]' (emphasis mine). The reconstitution of the family/nation also enables America to form a family-of-nations with the host cultures.

Political scientist Jacques Donzelot warns that 'the death of the family' signals an 'impending return to barbarism' (1977: 8). Within the family unit, children as future citizens are fetishized as symbols of heterosexual reproduction and capitalist production. In sharp contrast to the spoilt American children, viewers see images of the hard-working Third World children, who begin to participate in wage earning or in domestic labor from an early age. The latter invites the American viewers' appreciation of this hard-work ethic, though the fetishization of these productive children prevents a critical examination of the conditions that prohibit them from attending school or enjoying some of the amenities that their American counterparts have. Ironically, it is within the allegedly backward countries that we find the idea of a close-knit family intact, and it is through the example of their parenting that the American family/nation is

redefined. Jay Berger remarks of his host family in Guyana, 'They're the kind of family I hope our family is even though we're from different worlds.' Viewers too vicariously participate in the rebuilding of the 'imagined community' that accompanies the renewal of the American family/nation.

### **The return to home/homeland**

For all their 'education' at the cost of the Third World, the American families are unanimously relieved to return to their home/homeland. The Rappys, returning from India, rhapsodize about seeing a real bed and flush toilet once more. Jay Berger posts photographs from the trip on his Microsoft MSN website (the show's sponsor), and then proceeds to take his family for an American meal at Burger King. Back in New Jersey, the Palmers discover that their neighbors have put up 'God Bless America' signs on their front lawn, along with the phone numbers of the local pizza outlets. As the American families re-enter familiar territory, they are able to leave behind the other world, which is reduced to a souvenir snapshot on their website or in the family album.

Renato Rosaldo describes how 'imperialist nostalgia' occurs when 'somebody deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention'. Imperialist nostalgia utilizes powerful discursive means to erase all *personal* and social responsibility. The conquered subjects under erasure are mourned (and therefore represented) by the conquerors. When the loss prefigures a nation or culture, the representation focuses on reliving the nostalgia of the past. Within this framework, Rosaldo concludes, the Euro-American past is narrated as another country or culture (1989: 69-71). In this case, when the neocolonial text of *Worlds Apart* displays nostalgia for the life left behind in the host countries, it is bereft of any awareness of its complicity in fetishizing the 'liberating effects' of the poverty and hardship that are outcomes of (neo)colonial exploitation. Instead, the pre-industrial sites within the Third World are fetishized as welcoming spaces that Americans can visit and occupy to situate *their* national-brand.

### **The fetish as critique of cultural imperialism**

The project of contrasting nationalisms is problematic, however, when the colonized Other refuses to remain within the assigned space of the stereotype and instead disrupts the binary order within which it is the subjugated term. Thus we find that, even in the rural remoteness of these cultures, the host families speak English and wear Western items of clothing with American corporate logos. This attests to both the colonial past, where English was a cultural tool of influence wielded by the colonizers, and to the neocolonial present, where the influence of Euro-American corporations has reached these sites that are distant even from the cosmopolitan centers of their own nations. It becomes difficult to insist on nativeness when the 'natives' use the

lingua franca of Western corporate culture, even if they cannot afford those brands (e.g. Prem, the Indian hostess, uses Pepsi in the English sentence she is constructing with the help of Michelle Rappy). What this forces us to confront is the poverty-as-difference that the neocolonial discourse of nation-branding hides behind the fetishized surface of culture-as-difference.

In a curious reversal of othering, some scenes where American culture is being 'taught' to the natives draw laughter and ridicule, even from the Americans themselves. In Kenya, Allie Palmer tries to teach the Rendille tribe the 'time-warp' dance from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, so they can perform it at an inter-tribal dance competition.<sup>7</sup> As Allie, her blonde hair in cornrows, dances at the competition with her host tribe, the other tribes watch, giggling behind cupped hands. Her younger brother Jamie sighs, 'I think they thought the "time-warp" dance was really weird. I know that I did.' His words allow viewers to revisit the scene through the eyes of the onlookers, to whom this strange choreography and music places the Americans in the place of the Other. If the dance from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* were to be presented as a fetishized sight of American-ness, how would US culture be regarded? Such a question reveals the hollowness of reducing an entire culture to limited fetish signs. It equally demonstrates the power of fixed representations within nation-branding, especially when the means of producing such 'image-communities' belongs primarily to the First World.

In *Worlds Apart*, brand-America is fetishistically represented by the family-as-nation. The marketing of America abroad depends on establishing the superiority and strength of the American family/nation in the space of the host culture, as well as by incorporating the latter in the imaginary space of the American family/nation. When the Bergers are leaving Guyana, host Christopher Charlie pragmatically faces the fact that, while the two families have grown close, 'the time has come to an end', and he does not know 'when again we will see each other'. On the other hand, Jay Berger, who sees distance as less of an obstacle due to the economic luxury of being able to travel, reassures Christopher, saying, 'You have family in the United States now.' What this dialogue implies is that a family-of-nations is possible if America goes to other places and makes 'personal' contact (albeit through its cultural products and mass media, or even military occupation). It suggests that, if other nations see and 'know' the American people through such an exchange, unequal as it may be, they will realize that Americans are really well meaning. It is also an extended invitation to the other countries to feel that they have 'family' in the United States. Accepting this argument means buying into the underlying assumption that American cultural imperialism is a necessary diplomatic exercise to correct misunderstandings about America and Americans.

Charles M. Sennott, writing in the *Boston Globe*, observes that:

... culturally it **seems** Americans reject an image of themselves as an empire. They cling to the nation's birth narrative - that it was founded in a revolution against an empire. That founding spirit is still how America chooses to see itself. To call itself

an empire would contravene its own myth of creation. In his first visit to Iraq as secretary of state, Colin Powell said, 'We are not an empire.... We come here as liberators'. (2004)

Likewise, in the project of mapping 'other worlds', the NGC would never describe its enterprise as one of extending the ideological borders of the American empire. But, in making the world a smaller place, the NGC does so by keeping 'worlds apart', thereby legitimizing the First World/Third World division. This also makes American nationalism a desirable commodity fetish, concealing its growing crisis at a time when America's image is suffering in the international community and national morale is low at home. Through the entertainment platform, the NGC can reassure audiences at home that things are good in the US, that the American Dream is intact and that, like the nation itself, the American people are willing to venture out of their comfort zone and establish an extended family-community or 'global village' with the rest of the world.

## Notes

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1. The Odyssey market research firm defines NGC viewers as New Enthusiasts who are highly educated and affluent. They want more choice, and are discerning about their viewing choices (see Shin, 2004).

2. Consequently, Deborah Noble recounts, seeing herself through the eyes of her Mongolian hosts, 'I don't think they looked at us as being African-Americans. I just think they looked at us as being Americans' (*Desert Sun*, 2003, emphasis mine).

3. Abdul JanMohamed notes:

All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural difference but as characteristics inherent in the race.... In its extreme form, this kind of fetishization transmutes all the specificity and difference into a magical essence. (1986: 86)

4. For a concise summary of the Marxist notion of the fetish, see Marx (1992) and Mulvey (1996: fn31).

5. Currently, it is available to more than 50 million homes in the US via satellite and cable providers. FOX holds majority shares in NGC and has invested \$270 million into NGC's American channel alone (Shin, 2004).

6. Freud argues that the seemingly banal content of the screen memory often deflects from the more important content of the traumatic memory concealed by the fetish object. For a detailed summary, see Schor (1987).

7. Jamie explains that the choice of the song is appropriate to how the Palmers feel in Africa.

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