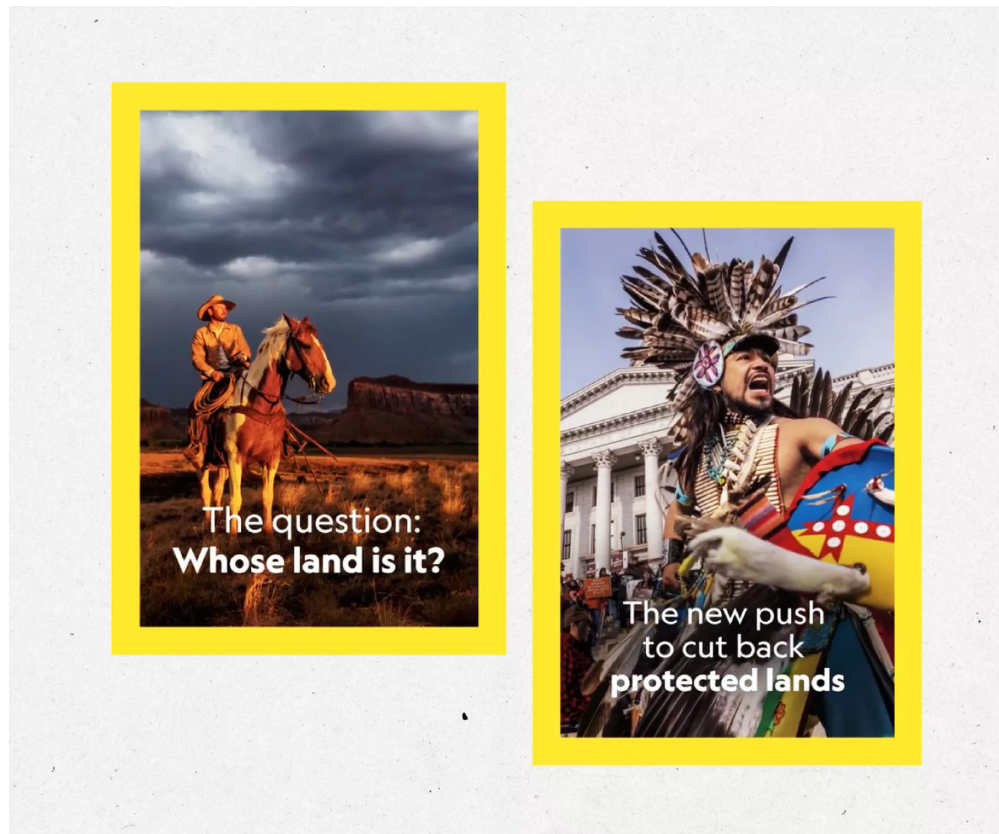


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National Geographic's November cover falls back on a racist cliché

The white cowboy versus the “savage native”: 8 months after its “racial reckoning,” the magazine takes two steps backward.

By Kainaz Amaria | @kainazamaria | Nov 1, 2018, 7:30am EDT

This month's cover of National Geographic depicts a lone white cowboy looking out over the American West, with the question: Whose land is it anyway?

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MARS SEASON TWO PREMIERES NOVEMBER 12 AT 9/8C ON NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

The Battle for the
American
West



IN THE
WIDE OPEN
PROTECTED
SPACES
OF THE
WEST, THE
QUESTION
ENDURES:
WHOSE
LAND IS IT
ANYWAY?

*"It is a diverse,
iconic, some say
spiritual landscape."*

MATT REDD
RANCHER



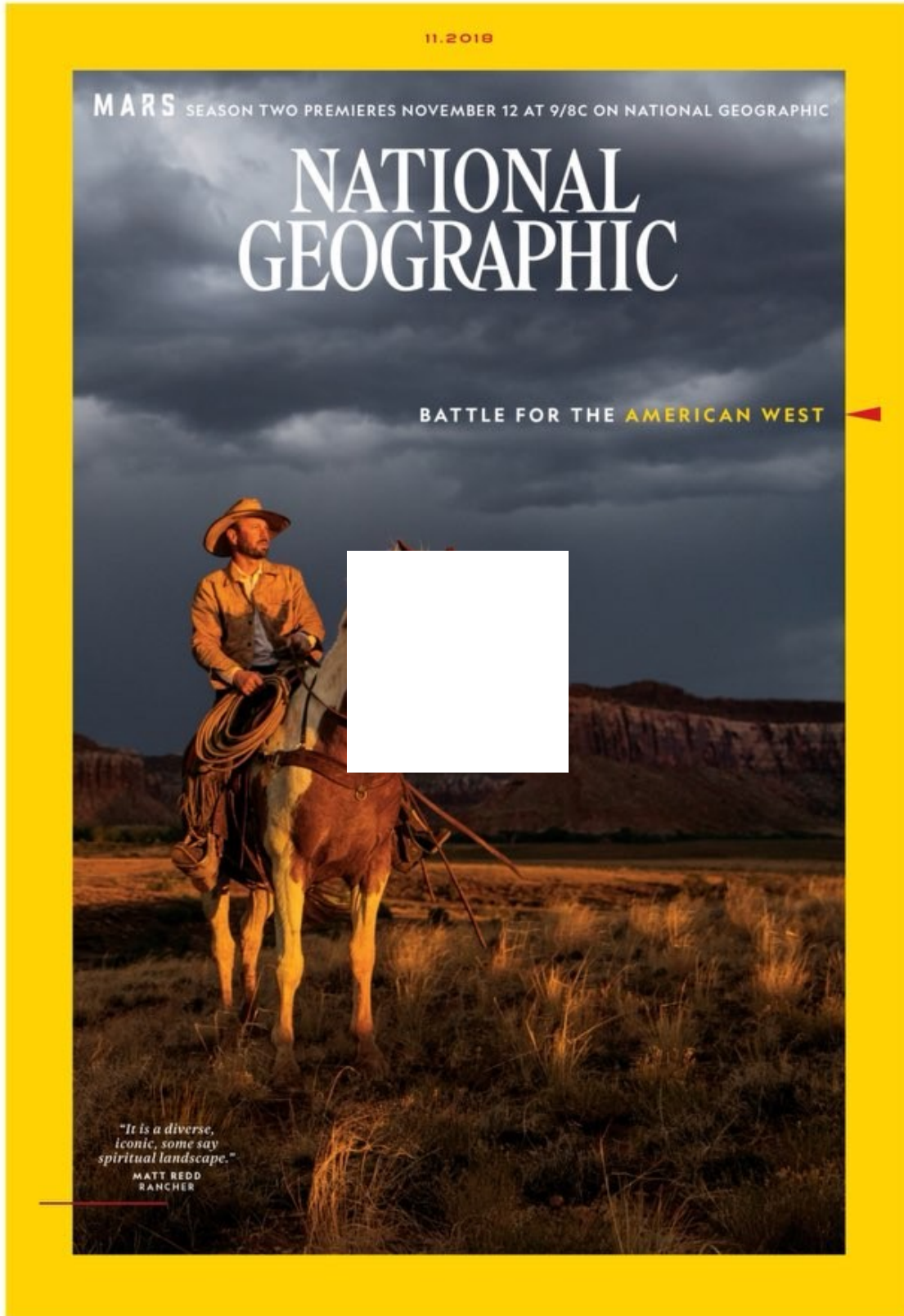
National Geographic's November issue. | National Geographic

The Instagram promotion of the cover juxtaposes the American cowboy and the words “Battle for the American West” with a Native American, dressed in full regalia in front of a Utah state building.



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In our November 2018 issue - the new push to cut back protected lands is fueling a dispute rooted in our history and culture. The question: Whose land is it?

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This visual framing — the heroic white savior versus the savage native — is not new to the American imagination or to the magazine. For decades, National Geographic has been criticized for its colonialist approach to nonwhite cultures, specifically indigenous communities. Critics argue that it has been peddling visual tropes of “savage” or “uncivilized” brown and black people for more than a century.

As part of the magazine's April 2018 **“The Race Issue,”** Susan Goldberg — the publication's first woman and first Jewish editor-in-chief, since its founding in 1888 — flatly **denounced National Geographic's troubled history.** Her mea culpa was headlined, “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It.”

As part of the story, Goldberg hired John Edwin Mason, a University of Virginia professor specializing in the history of photography and the history of Africa, to examine how the magazine pushed readers toward racist stereotypes and tropes.

Mason was almost speechless with some of the depictions he came across in the archive, like **a 1916 story about Australia** where aboriginal Australians were called “savages” who “rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings.”

“What Mason found in short was that until the 1970s National Geographic all but ignored people of color who lived in the United States, rarely acknowledging them beyond laborers or domestic workers. Meanwhile it pictured ‘natives’ elsewhere as exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages — every type of cliché,” wrote Goldberg.

Which brings me back to November's cover — a blatant disregard for what seemed like a sincere reckoning. I corresponded with Mason to inquire about his work with the famed publication, whether he sees progress, and how he felt when he first saw the magazine's November cover.

The Q&A, lightly edited for clarity, appears below.

Kainaz Amaria

Tell me a little bit about your work with Goldberg on the magazine's "racial reckoning."

John Edwin Mason

My instructions were to dig deeply into the magazine's archives to evaluate the ways it had depicted black and brown people — overseas and in the US. I found that its photographs and illustrations tended to position black and brown people as racial inferiors, as people inherently backward and incapable of progress. These depictions were sometimes overtly racist at least until the 1970s. The sometimes explicit corollary was that white people were the natural rulers of the globe.

The magazine has changed significantly for the better over the last few decades, but the habit of seeing black and brown people as the other — that is, of viewing them from the standpoint of whiteness — has never completely gone away.

Kainaz Amaria

Let's back up a bit. Can you describe the era in which National Geographic was founded and how it came to prominence?

John Edwin Mason

The magazine was born at the height of so-called "scientific" racism and imperialism — including American imperialism. This culture of white supremacy shaped the outlook of the magazine's editors, writers, and photographers, who were always white and almost always men.

They saw the world through the same elite perspective as American policymakers and politicians based in Washington DC. They were tied to that elite white male perspective. The magazine almost thought of itself as a branch of government. It believed very much in the colonial enterprise.

I didn't detect any defensiveness in the editors when I spoke with them about this. Instead, I sensed a genuine willingness to address the magazine's past and to improve the ways it depicts people of color. And, as it turned out, **the race issue** was superb.

Kainaz Amaria

For folks that are new to understanding issues around representation in photography, can you tease out why the imagery of a cowboy on a horse and a Native American person in

regalia combined with the text “Whose Land Is It?” feels like it’s from another time? What were your initial thoughts when you saw November’s National Geographic cover?

John Edwin Mason

Surprise, disappointment, and a touch of sadness. The cover of the November issue is a step backward. The Instagram presentation is two steps backward.

The image of the white cowboy reproduces and romanticizes the mythic iconography of settler colonialism and white supremacy. After all, we know that most cowboys weren’t heroic and that **a very large number of them were Latino or black**. We know that the land that the cowboy worked had been stolen from Native Americans. The myth was created to obscure all of that.

The cover of the November issue tells us that it’s about “The Battle for the American West” and asks “Whose Land Is It Anyway?” The photo of the cowboy, bathed in golden sunlight, while sitting on his horse and surveying the landscape, answers the question — implicitly but clearly. The American West is his. It’s a white man’s country.

On Instagram, a photo of a Native American — dressed in tribal garb, mouth wide open — immediately follows the image of the handsome, stoic cowboy. The implied racial hierarchy is clear. One is exotic and primitive; the other is, like the magazine’s presumed readers, white and civilized.

“THE MAGAZINE MISSED AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISRUPT ENTRENCHED WAYS OF SEEING THE WEST”

This way of seeing the West reproduces the iconography of settler colonialism. You could put it on the cover of a book extolling the righteousness of Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century notion that white settlement was divinely destined to spread across North America.

The cover photo also reminds me of the iconography of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa. The man on a horse, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and commanding the landscape, was a recurring motif in Afrikaner nationalist imagery. As in the US, it grew out of a desire to naturalize and justify settler colonialism and the theft of lands owned by indigenous

people. White Americans don't like to think of their country as a settler state, but, like apartheid South Africa, that's exactly what it is.

Kainaz Amaria

This seems to directly contradict their mea culpa. How could it have been done better?

John Edwin Mason

I was as disappointed by what the cover didn't do as by what it does. The magazine missed an opportunity to disrupt entrenched ways of seeing the West. Why didn't it use a portrait of a Native American? Or if you wanted to stay with the theme of conquest, why not an image of a white pioneer woman? At least it would be a reminder that the West wasn't simply a white man's world. Or if the theme of the cowboy was important, why not a dark-skinned cowboy?

Kainaz Amaria

Anything else you'd like to add?

John Edwin Mason

There were many options that the magazine could have chosen to encourage its readers to see and think anew. But it ignored them all.

The photographs in **the online version of the cover story** also create a racial hierarchy. Native people are seen only in traditional clothing. A photo of an ancient Pueblo dwelling and photos of petroglyphs and pictographs that are many centuries old represent their culture. Visually, they're associated only with the past. The article shows whites, on the other hand, dressed in modern clothing and engaged in recognizably modern activities such as farming, mining, and outdoor recreation. They're surrounded by associated modern technologies of jeeps and trucks and mountain bikes. Whites, then, are depicted as progressive and dynamic, the opposite of Native Americans, who seem to be mired in the past.

Kainaz Amaria

Let's go beyond the cover. What are your thoughts specifically on how the **other stories inside the magazine** are framed?

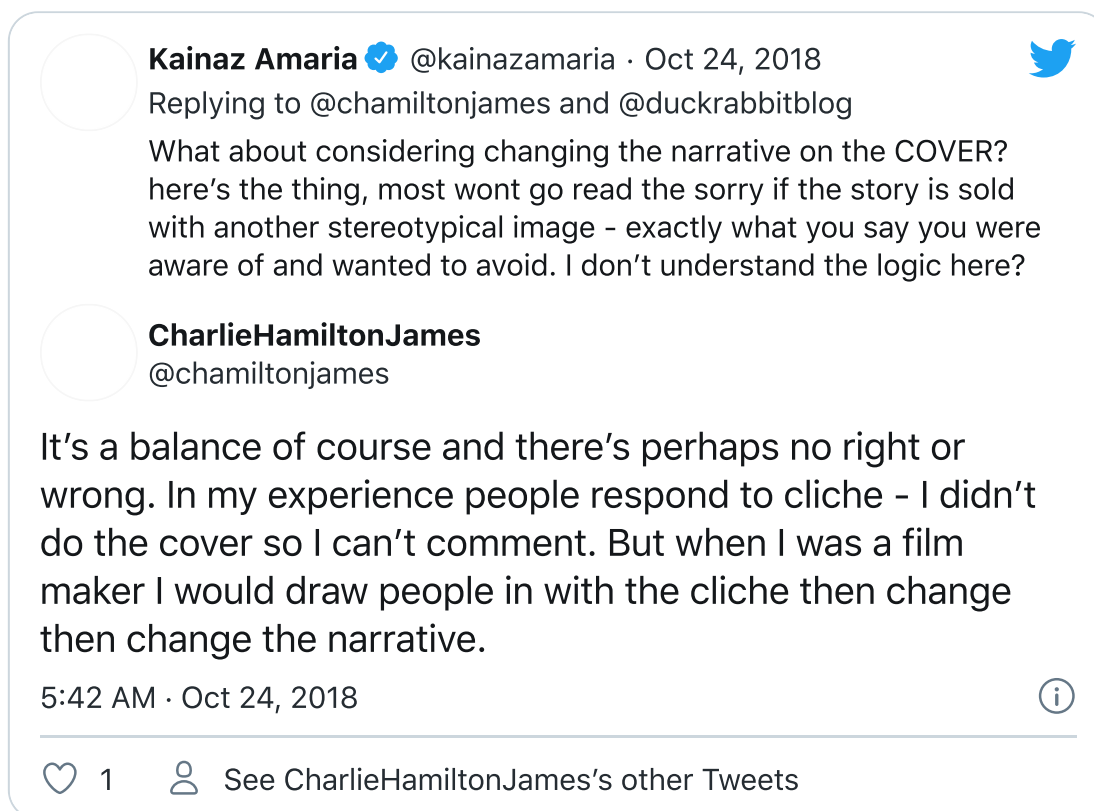
John Edwin Mason

It contains some truly excellent reporting and photography, including **the cover story** about the rancher who sold his land to the Nature Conservancy.

It's clear to me that the cover and the Instagram promotion don't do the magazine justice. The content is more complex and nuanced than they would lead one to believe. This is especially a problem since it's very likely that most people who see the cover and the Instagram post will never read **this issue of the magazine**. They'll see only the message that the cover and post send, a message that reproduces and reinforces an enduring myth of settler colonialism.

Kainaz Amaria

This a really good point. If the cover reinforces visual cliches that could offend audiences, is it fair to ask people to engage with the stories inside? Charlie Hamilton James, who photographed the cover story for their **October issue**, noted that in his experience, clichés are often used to draw an audience into the story.



I'm interested in your thoughts around this argument. Do you think using clichés works to draw in audiences?

John Edwin Mason

It seems to me that National Geographic has itself demonstrated that cover photos can draw readers in while simultaneously challenging their preconceptions. I'll point to the cover of the January 2017 issue on the gender revolution. It featured Robin Hammond's

powerful portrait of a transgender girl, dressed in pink with hair to match, whose pose and direct, utterly self-possessed gaze riffed on Édouard Manet's "Olympia."



Many readers probably found the portrait to be unsettling. Yet it's also undeniably compelling and an almost irresistible invitation to open the issue and read more.

Clichés are crutches; National Geographic doesn't need them. Its mission isn't to tell people what they think they already know about the world. It's to show them something new. ■