

# Primitive style

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## Fashion photography and constructions of indigeneity in Argentina

*This paper examines representations of race in Huellas (2000), a calendar by Argentinian fashion photographer Gaby Herbstein in which fashion models represent different indigenous cultures of Argentina. Although Huellas allegedly attempts to celebrate Amerindian communities and criticise Argentina's racial politics, the photographs reinforce stereotypical constructions of indigeneity through the reproduction of white fantasies of possession and mastery. However, I argue that the images allow an additional reading as a site of ambivalence in which the possibility of a critique of Argentina's racism can emerge. This is because the camp performance of indigeneity by the fashion models and the absence of the real Amerindian body expose the models' whiteness, thus de-naturalising the racist politics that positions white as a neutral and as norm.*

Gaby Herbstein is one of Argentina's most renowned fashion photographers and her work has achieved recognition in the art circuit both in Argentina and abroad, including exhibitions at Art Basel and Art Miami. Each year the Herbstein studio prepares a calendar with a specific theme. The 2000 edition, entitled *Huellas* (Traces), was dedicated to the indigenous groups that inhabited and inhabit what is present-day Argentina: Toba, Wichí, Chané, Guaraní, Tehuelche, Mapuche, Yámana, Kolla, Diaguita, Huarpe, Abipón and Selk'nam. It was shot in studio using props that supposedly recreated the landscapes and world-view associated to each community. Each month corresponds to a specific group represented by a famous female model in traditional attire.

In *Appropriation as Practice*, Arnd Schneider devotes a chapter to *Huellas* and points towards the obviously problematic aspect of making a calendar to celebrate indigenous cultures but yet choosing to shoot white models instead of indigenous women. [1] However, he fails to elaborate this any further, sidelining the connections between *Huellas* and post-modern discourses of multiculturalism that, while advocate racial diversity, at the same time reinforce racial exclusion. But what is more, I argue that the calendar allows a more complex reading. In this article I will show that, although the calendar reproduces historical racial stereotypes, it also allows a possible interstice in which forms of questioning Argentina's racial politics and indigenous people's subaltern status could emerge. The following photographs are illustrative of the calendar's style.



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Before engaging in the analysis of the calendar, it is important to refer to Argentina's politics of race, which have been historically articulated around a dominant representation of the country as the whitest, most European nation in Latin America.

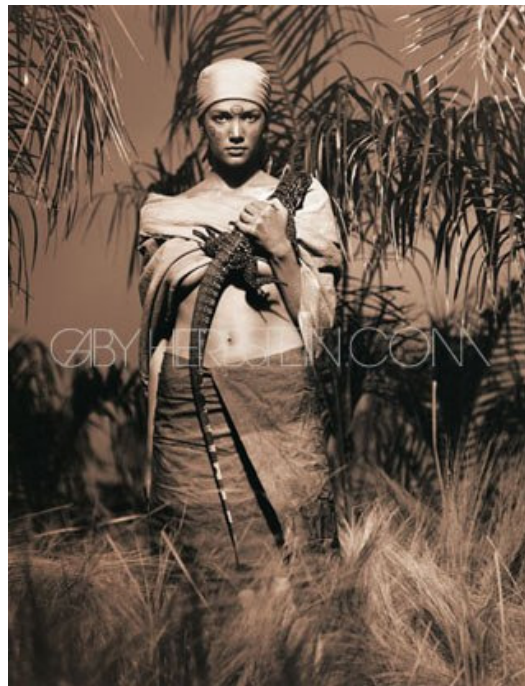


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The origin of these founding narratives can be traced back to the late 19th Century, a period in which a series of processes consolidated the emergence of the modern Argentinian state and its construction as a racially homogeneous nation. Between 1879 and the first decade of the 20th Century large military campaigns to the indigenous territories of Patagonia and Chaco, the annexation of these lands in order to allow the emergence of an agrarian capitalism, and massive European immigration already disciplined in capitalist labour conditions transformed dramatically Argentina's society and its racial composition. However, despite the significant impact of European immigration and the genocide of indigenous population carried out during the military campaigns of annexation, contemporary studies agree on the fact that white population could not have reached more than 60 per cent of the total inhabitants at its height in the 1920s. [2]

As a matter of fact, certain regions, such as the north-west, did not experience immigration to the same degree as Buenos Aires and the centre and littoral regions. This points towards the cultural apparatus of the state as an agent that made racial diversity invisible through the production of narratives of racial homogeneity articulated around the reproduction of the tropes of extinction of indigenous people and blacks or the use of census categories. For example, as early as 1895, the director of the Second National Census argued that measuring race was unnecessary because the population was almost completely white. [3]

The fact that it was not until 2001 that a question of race was re-introduced in a census provides an idea of how dominant narratives of whiteness have been in the definition of discourses of national identity in Argentina throughout the 20th Century. [4]

Since the 1980s indigenous organisations in Argentina have been struggling in order to achieve recognition and rights, as part of the rise of identity politics and indigenous activism on a transnational level. In 1985 the National Institute for Indigenous Affairs, INAI, was created. Additionally, in 1992 Argentina adopted the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation that requires that indigenous and tribal peoples are consulted and give their consent on issues that affect them (this was ratified in 2000 and came into force in 2001). The reform of the National Constitution in 1994 recognized the ethnic and cultural pre-existence of the indigenous peoples in Argentina and guaranteed the right to legal personality for their communities and the community possession and property of the lands they traditionally occupy. Argentina also voted in support of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when it was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007.

However, despite all these progressive measures, in practice the majority of indigenous communities have not received legal recognition of their lands and live in conditions of extreme poverty. Due to the advance of mining and farming industries, a high number of indigenous communities have been evicted from places they traditionally inhabited. A large number of these evictions have resulted from orders issued by provincial and national courts that accuse members of indigenous groups of seizing private property, which shows the complicity of the state in transnational capital's advance over indigenous land.

In this context, in which the visibility of indigenous communities is experiencing significant transformations, traditional representations of these groups are also being subject to contestation and resignification. The analysis of Gaby Herbstein's portrayal of Amerindian groups in *Huellas* allows reflecting critically on the relationships between racism and representational politics in contemporary Argentina vis-à-vis the increasing presence of indigenous people and the challenges this posits to the narratives of Argentina's racial homogeneity postulated by the white dominant culture. Since the calendar was produced by a successful fashion photographer for upper-middle and upper class audiences of white/European background, it can be examined as an exercise of self-reflexivity from that very dominant culture.

More specifically, as an example of how sectors of the dominant white culture respond to the increasing emergence of discourses that engage critically with images of race in Argentina, and the primacy of post-modern discourses of multiculturalism that characterise late capitalism.

As shown by the photographs, *Huellas* depicts an indigenous cosmology in which Amerindians and nature are intrinsically linked through the force of desire. In the images, the women dominate the composition, thus transmitting a certain mastery of the environment, not only by holding the animals but also in the poses, which imply action and agency, for example in the figure of the hunter [fig. 1] and the fisherman [fig. 2] – considered to be masculine activities – or in the way in which the gaze interpellates the spectator [fig. 3].

However, these strong feminine figures can also be interpreted in the opposite direction as a personification of a heterosexist male fantasy. In his study of beauty queens dressed as Amerindians in Bolivia, Andrew Canessa explains that indigenous women have traditionally been constructed as undesirable but yet sexually available. [5] This is especially the case of the *chola*, the urban *mestizo* domestic who represents, for some middle- and upper-class men, their first sexual experience. White women, in turn, stand for the opposite: desirable but not as easily accessible for mere sexual intercourse. This can be extended to the case of Argentina, in which many *mestizo* women work as live-in maids, to which it is possible to add immigrant women who came from Peru and Bolivia in the 1990s, for whom domestic service constituted their main occupation. But what is more, because of the predominant codes of beauty and handsomeness, many non-white women tend to be attracted to white men.

Therefore, in Argentina there is also a widespread construction of the urban *mestizo* woman as sexually unattractive but nevertheless available for white men. The photographs in *Huellas*, which at first seem powerful portrayals of femininity, can therefore be read as a white heterosexual male fantasy: the body of a white woman, and moreover, a fashion model, with the ease of access of a non-white woman. Thus, the models and the poses allow for the spectator the projection of sexual and racial fantasies about the Amerindians contained within the safeness that provide the location of <acceptable> white bodies. The calendar provides the pleasures of sexualising and exoticising non-whiteness without the consequences or conflicts attached to being attracted to the subaltern racial other, since the women portrayed respond phenotypically to what is <allowed> to be desired.

With regards to the previous reading, it is important to note that, even if the spectator is not male, white and heterosexual, the subject-position to which he or she is invited to identify is. However, there is another dimension that emerges from the calendar that addresses precisely the possibility of a critique of this racialised economy of desire.

Appropriating and playing Amerindian-ness in portraits is, of course, a long-standing practice of white people, with many manifestations, contexts and historical and cultural meanings. Margarita Alvarado shows that it was common for upper-class women in late 19th-Century Chile to be photographed <playing Mapuche>, a practice also spread to Argentinian high society. [6] In many works, such as David Roediger's study of blackface minstrelsy, racial cross-dressing by whites has been interpreted as a form of reinforcing domination and boundaries. [7]

However, for others, such as Marjorie Garber, the practice of cross-dressing in general (be it in terms of race, gender or class) has also the power to call into question established binary oppositions. Judith Butler offers a different perspective both critical of purely disavowing or celebratory conceptions of crossing. She challenges the idea that crossing is either subversive or regressive, arguing instead that it is very often the case that it works as a form of both questioning and reinforcing stereotypes. This is because cross-dressing «reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes». [8] In other words, it reiterates dominant constructions of race and gender on the bodies of the performers themselves, but because there is a clear discontinuity between racial or gender appearance and reality, it also de-naturalises them, showing their constructedness.

Based on this, the calendar can be read as a complex site of ambivalence. Of course the problematic element in this case is that the crossing is not from a subaltern position to a dominant one, like the archetype of cross-dressing, the drag, but the other way around. As Gail Ching-Liang Low states, in racial passing by whites the cross-dresser can always reveal or revert to the whiteness underneath the native clothes, that is, go back to the privileged position without any penalties.

[9] However, the calendar still has the potential to de-naturalise race since, in the photos, the incongruity between the representation of indigeneity and the white beautiful bodies of the models expose the performative dimension of racial identities. Richard Dyer argues that «whites do not represent themselves as raced, or even as white, but always as variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled». [10]

Therefore, by performing Amerindian-ness, the models <become> white for the spectator.

If in any other shooting the models would stand for de-raced subjects, merely attractive women, the performances in *Huellas* paradoxically put forward the bodies' whiteness. The obvious distance between the represented racial identity and that of the model makes her whiteness visible, implying for the spectator the acknowledgment of the racialised nature of the economy of desire that necessarily excludes the Amerindians even when they are being personified. Therefore, if the calendar reinforces the dominant racialised codes of beauty and femininity, at the same time it contains an excess of meaning that interpellates the spectator. In other words, the viewer is confronted with an absence, the indigenous body, which cannot be ignored, and this suggests a possible site for questioning whiteness, even if it is at the same time white as norm is reiterated.

For Sarah Ahmed, fantasies of becoming the racial other such as those inscribed in cross-dressing can also be linked to a desire for mastery through knowledge: «the other is not simply the object of scrutiny, but the site of ambivalence, of a desire which repels, of a desire which moves beyond the opposition positive/negative. That desire is closely linked to knowledge; the desire to know the other [...] to take the place of the other». [11]

This aspiration of knowledge is made explicit by the Herstein studio in its strategy to present the calendar not only as an art object but also as an anthropological document. In a text that accompanies the photographs, along with brief descriptions of every ethnic group there are some pages on the calendar's making-of that emphasise the rigorous research involved in its preparation.

«In order to faithfully recreate aboriginal clothes, Gaby carried out an anthropological research that took a year and included contributions from aboriginal people, anthropologists and historians. As part of this research, she went to indigenous reservations and ethnographic and archaeological museums, and she collected 19th-Century photographs. The calendar's photographs, and the reconstruction of indigenous clothes done especially for it, do not have any precedents and has become reference material in educational contexts». [12]

The inclusion of a text by well-known ethno-historian Carlos Martínez Sarasola also provides legitimacy to the calendar's alleged objectivity. Thus, *Huellas* assumes a multiple status: art object, fashion product and anthropological document. «Gaby Herstein decides [...] to follow the Traces of the Argentinian past». [13] In the making-of video Herstein states: «To go towards the future you need to know your past, don't you? I think it's... very difficult to move forwards without knowing who you're». [14] Furthermore, Julieta Garavaglia, the calendar's art director, adds: «One has to become aware... of where we're from». [15]

Although white middle- and upper-class Argentinians have traditionally traced their lineage back to Europe, *Huellas* proposes instead to go back to the native cultures that originally inhabited the territory as a possible foundation of Argentinian-ness that is supposedly more <authentic>. Discourses of the Patagonian Amerindian as an ancestor of the white lettered man were common tropes in the discourse of 19th-Century naturalists. For example, Eva-Lynn Alicia Jagoe points that «[Charles] Darwin perceives Patagonia and its inhabitants as somehow occupying a different geographical and temporal sphere from his own». [16]

Argentinian naturalists and explorers Francisco Moreno, Estanislao Zeballos or Ramón Lista appropriated this notion as they established the foundations of natural science and ethnology in Argentina, in synchronicity with the emergence of the modern nation-state in the last decades of the 19th Century. They proposed a connection between Amerindians and Argentinians based on the fact that they both inhabited the same land. This was instrumental in justifying the state's advance over Patagonia, under the effective control of indigenous groups until the military expedition known as the <Conquest of the Desert>, led by Julio A. Roca in 1879. As Jens Andermann correctly points out, because the active presence of indigenous groups implied that the so-called desert was not exactly empty, it was necessary to produce a representation of Amerindians as living fossils, relics of the past soon to disappear under the inexorable force of modernity. [17] Since the disappearance of Amerindians was <inevitable>, it was necessary to use the capabilities of the photographic camera to register these cultures before their imminent extinction.

Thus, collections of indigenous people were created in order to produce a scientific visual record of these subjects, such as is the case of the photographs held at the archive of National Museum of La Plata. [18] *Huellas* does not only appropriate this discourse that claims a lineage of continuity between Argentinians and Amerindians (as human fossils from a different historical time); what is more, it reproduces the visuality associated to it through the use of sepia tones that recreate the tonality of the anthropometric-portrait collections. But at the same time, in their artistry, they resemble even more the studio portrait of Pincén, taken by Antonio Pozzo in 1878.

The recently captured *cacique* also performed a masquerade of Amerindian-ness, since he was forced to handle a spear, strip from the waist up and dress with specific attire designed by Pozzo, in order to personify for the camera the image of the barbaric Amerindian that was popular at the time [fig. 4]. The fact that Pincén's Amerindian-ness was not <Indian> enough in the perception of the white culture can be connected with *Huellas* in the fact that, through the reproduction of colonial stereotypes of racial otherness, unintentionally ends up showing the performative dimension and artificiality of racial identities.





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However, if the 19th-Century discourse and images of Amerindians as disappearing predecessors were instrumental in the constitution of the founding narrative of Argentina as a white country without Amerindians, its meaning in the months before the country's financial collapse in 2001 (the worst economic crisis in its history), is actually related more to the limitations of those very narratives to deal with the demands for identitarian markers in a context of national emergency that also affected historical notions of nationhood (especially the idea of Argentina as the most developed country in Latin America).

Of course there is also the influence of a particular end-of-the-millennium sensitivity that puts Amerindians as signifiers of authenticity and origin. But despite the influence of these global trends, *Huellas's* discourse is quite local in its attempt, whereas naïve or cynical, to positivise the instability of ideas of nation-ness during the economic crisis by means of these fantasies of racial crossing. Amerindian-ness, in the post-modern primitivist version of *Huellas*, is invested with the attributes of the essential, the time-less and the unchanging, which contrasts to the dominant forms of Argentinian identity made fragile, contingent and unstable by the crisis. In the calendar's text, for example, it reads «We have to find them to find ourselves / And start all over again». [19]

However, if the Amerindians are positioned as a signifier through which history and nation-ness can be ideally reconstructed on the basis of originality and reality, at the same time, because this indigeneity is so skilfully contrived in the photographs, there is distance between the latter and the indigenous people who are precisely excluded from the representation. This is why the declared aim of the Herstein studio is to recreate these cultures in a primitive stage: there is a clear tension between representation and social encounter inscribed in these images, that is, between the idealised Amerindian and the real Amerindian.

Thus, *Huellas* shows that the only way in which the indigenous cultures made invisible by the dominant culture can be signified by the latter is through the re-enactment of images and a visual format that refer to a specific moment in the past before Argentina became white and racial homogeneous. Nonetheless, the hyperbolised use of masquerade, performance and staging end up producing a camp effect that destabilises that very aura of authenticity with which the Amerindians are invested with by the authors. By means of sartorial signifiers and artifice, the camp photographs in *Huellas* point out that race is constructed, a fantasy that can be dress in and staged. But at the same time, it also reinforces the disparities between racial identities since in this case it is the white who is entitled to cross-dressing without consequences. This goes back to the previous statement about the calendar as a site of contradictions that both de-naturalises and reinforces indigenous stereotypes and the position of whiteness in Argentinian politics of race.

## Fussnoten

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Arnd Schneider, *Appropriation as Practice. Art and Identity in Argentina*, New York 2006, pp. 77-98.

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Oscar Chamosa, *Indigenous or Criollo: The Myth of White Argentina in Tucumán's Calchaquí Valley*, in: *Hispanic American Historical Review* 88/1, 2008, pp. 71-106, esp. p. 77.

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Hernán Otero, *Estadística y Nación. Una historia conceptual del pensamiento censal de la Argentina moderna (1869-1914)*, Buenos Aires 2007, p. 352.

Seite 128 / [4]

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This representation politics of race has also been successful abroad. Illustrative of this is the fact that despite having a larger indigenous population than Brazil's in proportional and absolute terms, Argentina nevertheless captures an opposite image: Argentina is portrayed as a semi-European territory with hardly any indigenous presence while Brazil is a land full of Indians. See Gastón Gordillo and Silvia Hirsch, *Indigenous Struggles and Contested Identities in Argentina: Histories of Invisibilization and Reemergence*, in: *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8/3, 2003, pp. 4-30, esp. p. 6.

Seite 129 / [5]

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Andrew Canessa, *Sex and the Citizen: Barbies and Beauty Queens in the Age of Evo Morales*, in: *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 17/1, 2008, pp. 41-64, esp. 43-4.

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Margarita Alvarado, *Los secretos del cuarto oscuro y otras perturbaciones fotográficas. Recursos y procedimientos en la construcción y el montaje de un imaginario*, in: *Revista Chilena de Antropología Visual* 1, 2001, pp. 15-27, esp. pp. 23-4.

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David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, London 2007, pp. 115-32

Seite 130 / [8]

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Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York Routledge, 1993, p. 86.

Gail Ching-Liang Low, *White Skins/Black Masks. The Pleasures and Politics of Imperialism*, in: *New Formations* 9, 1989, pp. 83-103, esp. p. 93.

Richard Dyer, *White*, London 1997, p. 3.

Sarah Ahmed, *Phantasies of Becoming, the Other*, in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2/1, 1999, pp. 47-63, esp. p. 57.

«Para poder recrear fielmente la vestimenta aborigen Gaby realiza un trabajo de investigación antropológica que llevó 1 año y que contó con la colaboración de aborígenes, antropólogos e historiadores. Investigación que la lleva a recorrer reservas indígenas, museos etnográficos y arqueológicos, y recolección de fotografías originales de época. Este grupo de fotografías junto a la reconstrucción del vestuario realizada especialmente para este trabajo, no tiene precedentes y se ha convertido en material de consulta educacional». This and all following quotes in Spanish are my own original translations. Quoted in Laura Mombello, *Arqueología de la imagen de «los aborígenes de la Argentina»*. Una aproximación, go to <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa2009/files/MombelloLaura.pdf> [5/30/2012].

«Gaby Herbstein decide [...] seguir las Huellas del pasado Argentino». Gaby Herbstein, *Huellas*, Buenos Aires 2000, p. 4.

«Para ir hacia el futuro tenés que conocer tu pasado, ¿no? Creo que es un... creo que es difícil avanzar sin saber quién sos». *Making-off Calendario 2000 – Huellas*, go to: <http://vimeo.com/14425863> [5/30/2012].

«Que uno empiece a tomar conciencia un poco de... de dónde venimos». *Making-off Calendario 2000 – Huellas* (as note 13).

Eva-Lynn Alicia Jagoe, *Patagonian Peripheries*, in: *Studies in Travel Writing* 7/1, 2003, pp. 29-45, esp. p. 31.

Jens Andermann, Mapas de poder. Una arqueología literaria del espacio argentino, Rosario 2000, p. 125.

Martha Garrido, Tatiana Kelly and Alejandro Martínez, Las colecciones fotográficas del Acervo Histórico de la Facultad de Ciencias Naturales y Museo de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, in: Entrepasados 16/31, 2007, pp. 163-76.

«Tenemos que encontrarlos a ellos para encontrarnos a nosotros / y comenzar de nuevo». Herbstein, Huellas (as note 9), p. 4.

## **Abbildungen**

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Gaby Herbststein, Noviembre (abipón), 2000.

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Gaby Herbststein, Julio (yámana), 2000.

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Gaby Herbststein, Enero (toba), 2000.

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Antonio Pozzo, Cacique Pincén, 1878.