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The Art of the Anthropological Diorama: Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity

by Noémie Étienne

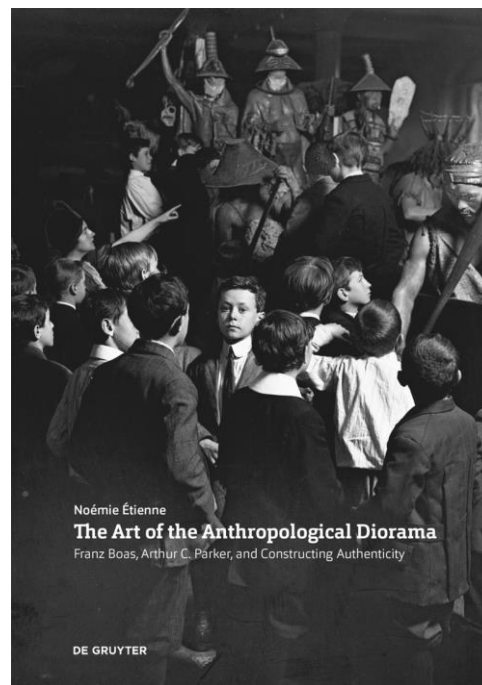
Translated by Chris Miller

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Reviewed by: Dore Bowen

Prior to this publication, art historian Noémie Étienne worked primarily on European culture of the long eighteenth century, using close analyses of materials (such as varnish) to analyze political structures on a molecular level. In this, her second book, recently translated into English, she masterfully extends this approach to early twentieth-century anthropological dioramas in the United States, focusing on those depicting Native American cultures.¹ In these displays, mannequins are staged within artificial habitats that appear untouched by modern life. While such scenes are outdated at best and colonial propaganda at worst, in Étienne's view they are tremendously informative, and over the course of five long chapters, she presents close studies that result in fresh research on the topic.

Étienne addresses the charge of racism head-on by bookending her discussion with the observation that anthropological dioramas, most one hundred or so years old now, are facing calls for their removal due to their offensive imagery (11, 197). While she agrees with this charge, Étienne also mounts a vigorous case for saving dioramas on the basis of their historical value. We learn, for example, that while dioramas place cultures in a fictional past and reduce individuals to clichés, the material practices that constitute these scenarios inform us about scientific ideas on race and cultural development at the turn of the twentieth century. Étienne also demonstrates that these displays contain information about the unique collaborations involving artists, models, anthropologists, and museum officials who created them. Finally, and most importantly, Étienne claims that dioramas serve as counter-colonial instruments for contemporary activists seeking to right the



wrongs of the past by exposing the denigration of Native cultures and, in fact, have been employed thus “since their earliest use in the United States” (66).

The book is structured around two institutions in New York State—the fabled American Museum of Natural History in New York City (AMNH) and the lesser-known New York State Museum (NYSM) in Albany. Étienne notes that although the two institutions are geographically close and both feature Native American dioramas, they approach the topic in wildly divergent ways. Anthropologists Franz Boas, director of the AMNH from 1896 to 1905, and Arthur C. Parker, director of the NYSM from 1906 to 1925, serve as representatives of this contrast. German-born Boas departed from nineteenth-century evolutionist approaches by promoting “cultural relativism,” holding that “each culture had to be understood separately” and in its own context (20). Accordingly, his dioramas depicted “coherent cells” intended to recreate the authenticity of Indigenous cultures before they became “contaminated” by Western society (28). By contrast, Parker, of Seneca (Onondowahgah) and European descent, combined evolutionism and cultural relativism. Étienne explains that “Parker brought these two currents of thought together in his displays, showing that the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy enjoyed an autonomous existence but also that it underwent a process of continuous transformation” (20). She finds that Parker’s engagement with Native culture—such as his Seneca Arts Project, wherein he hired Native artists to create historical artifacts (discussed in chapter 5)—informed the six dioramas he created for the NYSM, making them portraits of *living* rather than dead cultures.²

While Étienne contrasts the two anthropologists, she complicates reductive comparisons by exploring how the dioramas were fabricated, “so that the illusion of their transparency can be exposed and their true complexity revealed” (18). The introduction prepares readers for this complexity by presenting a multitude of practices that, Étienne claims, inform anthropological dioramas. Étienne also notes that dioramas continue to inspire contemporary artists, particularly those who seek to grapple with history by appropriating a “diorama aesthetic” (18). Ultimately, however, the investigation deemphasizes the sense of sight—thereby contesting theoretical approaches put forth by Jonathan Crary and Alison Griffiths, among others—in favor of touch and physical contact. In sum, Étienne argues that dioramas create a “contact zone”—a concept Étienne borrows from scholar Mary Louise Pratt—where viewers and cultures meet and collide (16), and she rightfully notes that photographic depictions flatten these interactive sites by transforming dioramas into static, two-dimensional images.

In chapter 1, “The Multiple Origins of the Diorama,” Étienne argues that dioramas coalesced into staged scenarios in natural history museums as part of a turn-of-the-century pedagogical movement that favored viewer engagement. Photographs reproduced in the book usefully illustrate this point. In a 1939 photograph taken at the AMNH, for example, a group of young children adorned in paper headdresses weave in and out of a teepee while “playing Indian” (59–60). Dioramas, Étienne writes, served as “a sort of backdrop to the children’s play” (58), and through such activities, “identification with Native Americans as both ancestors and Others was enacted” (63). The diorama’s affective force derives from the embodied encounters it both creates and infers. At the same time, this innovation rests on a rich confluence of precursors, and Étienne discusses seventeenth-century religious displays (such as *Sacri Monti*), reliquaries, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century period rooms, *tableaux vivants*, wax museums, anthropological

villages, decor dictionaries, and, in the twentieth century, colonial exhibitions, tourism, and “human zoos.” Details give texture to these practices, such as the alarming story of “Ishi,” a Yahi man who was taken in 1911 by Berkeley professor Alfred Kroeber and kept at the university’s anthropology museum “for most of the rest of his life” (44).

Chapter 2, “The Strategy of the Relic,” interrogates the idea of the “vanishing race”—the romanticized notion that Native Americans exist on the verge of extinction—and finds that the diorama plays a role in perpetuating this myth. Étienne argues that anthropological dioramas supported this idea by presenting artifacts as relics but also by extending the idea of relics to the Native people themselves, who were viewed as if “relics of a dying population” (78). Parker, she contends, subverted this discourse to promote living Native cultures; his “strategy of the relic” involved “a rhetoric of loss while asserting the imperative need for conservation and insisting on the value of Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) societies” (80). Toward the latter part of the chapter, she discusses small-scale dioramas illustrating African American history. The comparison to Native American dioramas suggests that anthropological dioramas do something similar, regardless of the culture or ethnic group represented (96). Nevertheless, Étienne also notes that artistic choices impacted the dioramas—a topic she develops further in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 3, “Boundary Practitioners,” concerns the intermediary site where artists, models, anthropologists, and museum officials collaborated to create anthropological dioramas. Étienne calls these individuals “boundary practitioners” and shows that their aesthetic choices impacted the political inferences embedded in the dioramas. Mahonri Mackintosh Young and Howard McCormick, for example, used the village of Walpi, Arizona, as a source for their backdrop in the Hopi diorama, and while “inexact from a scientific point of view,” Étienne claims that the display was “perhaps inspired by other, earlier images—notably the photograph taken by Edward S. Curtis” (who was known for promoting the myth of the “noble savage”) (104). Étienne also discusses Boas’s practice of staging photographs in preparation for his dioramas. In these, a blanket was hung behind Native American models to blot out the environment, thereby effacing “the presence of the settler colonialists” and furthering “the fiction that Boas wished to present, that of a ‘precontact’ world in which there was no trace of white people” (110). Such examples reveal how aesthetic choices were guided by institutional and at times outright racist agendas.

The material practices discussed in chapter 3 culminate, brilliantly, in chapter 4’s topic of “Fabricating Race,” which explains the material processes by which anthropological dioramas reduce Native Americans to a racial type. The “desired skin” color for mannequins, for example, was invented by artist Rudolf Cronau. The book reproduces a letter sent from Cronau to Boas illustrating how a hole card can be placed on Native American models to configure an overall skin color from natural tonal variations (135). These homogeneous colors were then ascribed to particular tribes. In another striking example, Étienne explains how a 1904 face cast of a young Filipino man by Caspar Mayer, fabricated under Boas’s direction and labeled “Negrito,” resulted in variations that ultimately replicated racist stereotypes. For example, Étienne observes that a 1909 photograph shows a bust derived from the original cast, but “the lips and nose of the young man protrude, and his features are exaggerated” (147). Étienne is in full control of her method here, and the results are positively breathtaking as the political implications of material practices unravel organically from her descriptions of the archival evidence.

Finally, chapter 5, “Authenticity by Contact,” examines how the authenticity of the artifacts placed in dioramas is determined. Étienne writes that, for Boas, the object’s “use, wear, and age” (166) must accord with its traditional function. Parker’s preference, by contrast, was for artifacts made by Native American artists (even if they were newly fabricated and made to look like an older object). Étienne discusses how both Parker and Boas compromised their ideals and that the results were, at times, quite interesting. A fascinating example is that of Alice and Maude Shongo (later Hurd), a mother-daughter duo hired by Parker to make garments for display and who, in the process, gained expertise in waning Indigenous traditions, such as moose-hair embroidery (172). Étienne also explains how much models were paid and other details of production; through such examples, dioramas are presented as productive, as well as reflective, of culture.

Throughout the book, Étienne lends a “European eye” to her American topic by highlighting pivotal European figures. These include thinkers Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin; art historians Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, and Heinrich Wölfflin (whose “ideal view,” she argues, informs the diorama); artists Auguste Rodin, Rudolf Cronau, Henri Marchand, and Caspar Mayer; and scientists Georges Cuvier, George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Francis Galton. Parisian art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler makes a cameo, as does Vienna-born René d’Harnoncourt—longtime director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and, we learn, organizer of the 1939 Indian exhibition in San Francisco. These included figures implicitly prove that a European discourse informs representations of Native Americans in US museums. Although this fact is lamented by scholars—such as Amy Lonetree in her 2012 *Decolonizing Museums*—it is rarely addressed by revealing the complex network of individuals that contributed to fabricating and conceptualizing these representations.³ Étienne blends her discussion of these Europeans with references to American scholars on the cutting edge of cultural studies and art history—such as Donna Haraway, Jonathan Crary, Benedict Anderson, Mary Louise Pratt, and Alexander Nagel—and, as a result, the book forges its own “contact zone.”

At times, however, the numerous figures, archival sources, scientific concepts, and details of production brought to bear on the topic of anthropological dioramas makes Étienne’s account difficult to follow. And, while the reader is encouraged to look to the dioramas themselves for clarity, Étienne’s fluid definition expands, rather than refines, her object of study. She writes, for example, that dioramas appear and reappear in different contexts, “losing their original sense but none of their impact” (31). Does, then, the seventeenth-century *Sacri Monti* reappear in the anthropological diorama? Indeed, Étienne suggests it does, though how is left unexplored (31–32). This jostling of ideas is a feature that often attends groundbreaking research, and this book establishes a foundation while exposing new and uncharted territories for studies to follow.

Concluding with the present moment, Étienne quotes Donald Trump—in a statement predating his tenure as president of the United States—asserting that the Pequot people must be fake (“They don’t look like Indians to me”) (199–200). Trump, the example suggests, can make this absurd claim because, unlike the uniform skin tone that results from Cronau’s hole-card method for diorama mannequins, the skin tones of the Pequot exist on a continuum of light to dark. Such pointed examples demonstrate how historical biases embedded in the practices that constitute anthropological dioramas became embroiled in policies that affect the lives of real people. Clearly, there is much to learn

from these forms of visual culture, and if we look to the colonial histories that undergird anthropological dioramas, we begin to understand the disfiguring consequences of racism. To counter this, Étienne gives Indigenous communities the honor of self-designation, and her scrupulous research gives names to the artists, models, and scientists involved in their production. By delving into the many practices by which anthropological dioramas were constructed, this book offers an unprecedented glimpse of the smoke and mirrors that allow these ventriloquists to function as the “go to solution” for “making objects speak” (26).

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Notes

¹ The book was originally published as *Les autres et les ancêtres: Les dioramas de Franz Boas et d'Arthur C. Parker à New York, 1900* (Dijon: Presses de réel, 2020).

² Begun in 1907, the six dioramas Parker directed at the NYSM “represent the nations that occupied New York State and part of contemporary Canada; the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy consisted of the Mohawk (Kanien'kehaka), Oneida (Onayotekaono), Onondaga (Onundagaono), Cayuga (Guyohkohnyoh), Seneca (Onondowahgah), and Tuscarora (Skaruhreh) Nations” (81).

³ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).