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Anthropology of Science

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Response Paper: Carnegie Museum of Natural History

People within many professions often fall back on the argument that if something is claimed to be “natural”, it is indisputable and good. However, perceptions of nature and particularly the relationship between humans and nature varies greatly between populations and over time. Star and Griesemer wrote in 1989, “Common myths characterize scientific cooperation as deriving from a consensus imposed by nature. But if we examine the actual work organization of scientific enterprises, we find no such consensus.” A shifting view of nature can even be seen in the current exhibits at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Each display has been thoughtfully organized and executed by a broad network of people to subtly or explicitly convey particular messages about the world.

Situated awkwardly by itself in the lobby of the ground floor is an interesting piece called *Lion Attacking a Dromedary*. This title is a literal description of the scene depicted, although it fails to mention that there is also a dark-skinned man in a turban riding the dromedary. Recently, this exhibition has spurred several interesting debates and investigations. First of all, a CT scan revealed that the head of the man is composed of an actual unidentified human skull. This discovery raised questions about the origin of the human remains and what types of artifacts belong on display. Second, and more pertinent to this paper, was the decision to move the piece from the natural history wing of the museum toward the art portion. This change is symbolic of a deliberate shift in the purpose and message of the work. The scene, which cannot be proven to be historically accurate, shows discord and violence between humans and nature. By reframing the piece as an expression of the artistic style Orientalism, the museum is stating that it should not be interpreted literally, but rather that it reflects the biased perceptions of both nature and foreign people held by colonial powers in the mid-1800’s.

The second floor of the museum contains many exhibitions, including the *Hall of North American Wildlife* and the *Hall of African Wildlife*. These displays promote an idyllic image of nature as pristine, peaceful, and untouched by humans. In the North American section, there is a family of grizzly bears, a mother polar bear caring for her offspring, a majestic bald eagle, a pair of elk engaging in a competitive struggle, and many more. In the African section, there is a community of diverse animals coexisting around a life-giving waterhole. The beautiful scenery draws the viewer into this far off “natural” world without questioning where each of these animal skins came from or where humans fit into this conception of nature. If you asked someone to describe nature, most people in today’s world would probably draw on the type of imagery shown in these exhibits to describe a remote, diverse landscape, rather than the world right outside their door.

On the third floor, there is a temporary exhibition called *We Are Nature: Living in the Anthropocene* which presents a distinctly opposite state of nature. Rather than portraying a world at peace, each item in the exhibit is evidence of a world in crisis. Human interactions with nature are central to the conversation and are largely blamed for the drastic degradation of resources and wildlife. The exhibit prompts a clear call to action by appealing to the emotions of the viewers. For example, one part is set up like a memorial service for the Great Barrier Reef with big black curtains, a projected death date in 2050, and a funeral book which viewers are asked to sign. By describing the environmental state in this way, the designers of the exhibit are assigning human-like qualities to other aspects of nature and showing that this loss is something to be mourned. This example may make it seem like the exhibit promoted a defeatist mentality in its viewers; however, this is not the case. They showed the difficult reality of how humans have negatively affected nature in the hopes that people would be shocked, disappointed, and ultimately inspired to make a change now.

The current mission statement of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History is, “To use our collections and scientific expertise to create knowledge that inspires an understanding of natural heritage, communicate the unity and interdependence of humanity and nature, and advocate for the protection of the earth and its inhabitants, while encouraging participation in the natural sciences.” The *We Are Nature* exhibit most explicitly accomplishes this goal by focusing on the role humans can have in damaging or protecting nature. While this exhibit is the most obviously political with a clear call to action, every part of the museum has its own agenda and message attached to it. Donna Haraway says in her article *Teddy Bear Patriarchy*, “Behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals.” These social interactions produce underlying messages which do not always perfectly align even within the same museum at the same time. The variety of exhibits at the Carnegie Natural History Museum illustrates that our relationship with nature is dynamic; and therefore, our perception of what is “natural” is also subject to change and not valid as a conclusive argument in and of itself.

Relationship between humans and nature:

* Lion attacking dromedary
  + Nature is something to be dominated, or at least attempted to be dominated
  + No communion between nature and people, but tension
* Hall of North American Wildlife
  + Nature is untouched by humans
  + Peaceful and removed
* We are nature
  + Humans have a profound impact on nature
  + Communal relationship has been abused
  + Call to action

HARAWAY

Behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals

Osborn summarized the fond hopes of educators like himself in his claim that children who pass through the museum's halls "become more reverent, more truth ful, and more interested in the simple and natural laws of their being and better citizens of the future through each visit.

STAR

Common myths characterize scientific cooperation as deriving from a consensus imposed by nature. But if we examine the actual work organization of scientific enterprises, we find no such consensus.

Interessement, to indicate the translation of the concerns of the non-scientist into those of the scientist.

“Behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals.” This statement from Donna Haraway’s article \_\_\_\_\_ describes the ways in which the deliberate planning of exhibits in museums and galleries presents knowledge to convey particular messages about the world. The Carnegie Museum of Natural History has a vast and diverse collection of artifacts which are displayed to the public through interactive and informative exhibits.