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# Dinosaurs, Racial Anxiety, and Curatorial Intervention

## Whiteness and Performative Historiography in the Museum

The performative representation in museological display of dinosaurs, those extinct denizens of the Mesozoic era, has been informed since their articulated remains first shared exhibition spaces with human spectators in the nineteenth century by theatrical and aesthetic choices situated in discourses of Darwinism and eugenics, settler colonialism, and frontier mythology concomitantly emerging with the science of dinosaur fossils. In so many words, dinosaurs are *racist* . . . Or, is it that the staged encounters between museum visitors and dioramic display of dinosaur fossils, animatronic reproductions, and films and exhibits in

institutional natural history and science museum spaces have been designed to capitalize on and performatively reify white anxiety about the exotic other using the same practices reserved for representing primitive “savages” indigenous to the American West, sub-Saharan Africa, the Amazon, and other untamed wildernesses. In short, dinosaur others in popular culture have served as surrogates for white fears and anxieties about the racial other.

In this essay I argue that the historiographic manipulation of time, space, and matter, enabled and legitimized by a centering of the white subject as protagonist, has defined how we understand dinosaurs and has structured our relationship with them as (pre)historical objects. Whether dinosauric display has been featured in museums (The American Museum of Natural History, The Field Museum, etc.) or world’s fairs (Sinclair’s Dinoland, New York 1964) or touring shows and popular media (*Jurassic Park*, *Walking with Dinosaurs*), producers of these encounters have continuously reinscribed the scenario of “threat to the white subject,” with its attendant seductive affects of awe and dread, as a sensational draw for audiences, despite the temporal separation of dinosaurs and humans by dozens of millions of years. I interrogate some of the earliest staged encounters between human visitors and dinosaur remains at natural history museums to show how curators and visual artists drew upon tropes of the American West, the very spaces from which the remains were often found, to foment the thrill of exotic non-white locales and performatively link dinosaurs to a repertoire of other threats to white purity and safety. Dinosaurs, I argue, are not mere innocent prehistoric objects of inquiry, but contemporary products and perpetuators of the white racial frame, the hegemonic worldview that holds up the white subject as the protagonist of history, associated with “white virtue, superiority, moral goodness, action,” and perennially under threat from the forces of nature, including non-whites among other untamed animal aggressors.<sup>1</sup> In making this argument, I offer a way to think through one of the primary inquiries taken up by the essays in this special issue: how are the ways of housing the past (in this case, the dioramic displays of dinosaurs in natural history museums) intricately bound up with the ways we experience the past (i.e., how are visitors’ experiences of time, space, and matter manipulated through the practices of performative historiography to reify cultural perceptions and beliefs)? Further, exposing the ways in which racist tropes like white precarity have informed historiographical practices in dinosaur exhibits offers a tool for interrogating how racist ideologies have permeated the formations of modernity that inform our modes of inquiry.

That dinosauric display in museums has never been merely an objective showcase of fossil remains is hardly new idea. As Brian Noble puts it in *Articulating Dinosaurs*, these creatures are “political forms of life emerging within and across” what he terms “the *specimen-spectacle complex*—most recognizable in, though not

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<sup>1</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 19, 22.

exclusive to, the action of museums.”<sup>2</sup> Museum display, he argues, has sedimented the ways in which we perceive dinosaurs far more than have their physical remains. “[D]inosaurs and their worlds,” he writes, “are materialized performatively, articulating much that has been separated otherwise.”<sup>3</sup> The networked images and ideas of dinosaurs that have been grouped into the discursive category of the Mesozoic (and its popular culture fantasy space, the “Lost World,” where dinosaurs exist in the present) are examples, argues Noble, of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “chronotopes,” or intrinsically connected temporal and spatial relationships.<sup>4</sup> For W. J. T. Mitchell, too, the meaning of dinosaurs is hardly intrinsic to their remains, but rather to that which has been semiotically assigned to those remains in discourse. “The dinosaur is,” Mitchell writes, “a composite ‘imagetext,’ a combination of verbal and visual signs—what a semiologist would call ‘symbols’ and ‘icons,’ a distinction related to what Jacques Lacan called the ‘Symbolic’ and ‘Imaginary.’”<sup>5</sup> The images resulting from scientific and artistic speculation do not merely exist as products, but feed back into the process of speculation and scientific thinking as constitutive elements.<sup>6</sup>

The relative paucity of material evidence upon which we base our conceptions of what dinosaurs looked and sounded like millions and millions of years ago is a testament to the curatorial labor that has been expended in this regard. As Lukas Rieppel writes in *Assembling the Dinosaur*, the very lack of a complete picture of life in the Mesozoic, and “[t]he mystery of what life may have been like during the depths of time allowed people to project their fears and anxieties, as well as their hopes and fantasies, onto these alien creatures.”<sup>7</sup> Infusing animals with human concerns and anxieties is an act of anthropomorphism that amounts to what Theresa J. May calls “eco-minstrelsy,” a projection of human power, privilege, and ideology upon the animal other that assures us that we are “tame, civilized, and worthy of the

<sup>2</sup> Brian Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs: A Political Anthropology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Noble, 33, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51–52.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *Last Dinosaur Book*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Lukas Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur: Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 3. Popular culture representations of dinosaurs as manifestations of white anxiety have been an ongoing subject of scholarly inquiry. Brian Noble reflects on how a rampaging *T. rex* in one of the *Jurassic Park* sequels evokes other threats to the “domestic middling Americans who are Spielberg’s primary target market”: drive-by shootings, car-jackings, home invasions and terror attacks, Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 30. Ron Tanner argues that dinosaur depictions in books and toys, increasingly popular in the second half of the twentieth century, were grouped by their designers and consumers into categories much as were American minorities, Ron Tanner, “Terrible Lizard! The Dinosaur as Plaything,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 2 (2000): 58. And David H. Stymeist, drawing on Clifford Geertz, has inventoried the manner in which monster movies of the twentieth century (*King Kong*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, etc.) have represented an “envisioned cosmic order” that pits white civilization against spaces of primitivity shared by dinosaurs and dark-skinned, half-naked examples of “retrograde human population,” David H. Stymeist, “Myth and the Monster Cinema,” *Anthropologica* 51, no. 2 (2009): 398, quoting Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1973), 4.

biblical role of master.”<sup>8</sup> To infuse prehistoric animals like dinosaurs with contemporary human concerns involves not only the affective projection of ideologically charged feelings and emotions upon the non-human other, but a projection across multiple temporalities. Such practices of meaning making allow for museum visitors to cognitively apprehend the specimens on display across what would otherwise be an immense gulf separating spectator and object. The gulf in this case comprises not only the lapsed time between the Mesozoic and the present, but also the discursive procedures that have intervened between the fossilized fragments and what they have come to signify in the emergent episteme since they were first categorized as *dinosauria*. Before the end of the nineteenth century, the discursive formation delineating the range of structures and representations producing the limits of what could be thought or enunciated—what Michal Kobialka calls the language of intelligibility<sup>9</sup>—allowed for audiences only to access dinosaur remains in previously available venues and modalities: the static taxidermic vitrine, the *Wunderkammer*, the prelapsarian biblical narrative. In other words, narratization, conjecture, speculation, imagination and other curatorial interventions assisted the spectator in wrapping their heads around “deep time,” the inconceivably distant temporality that thwarts understanding.<sup>10</sup> The shifts in museological practices marked a representational threshold, both allowing the emergence of a blockbuster museum spectacle and serving to, in Foucault’s words, “suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development and force it to enter a new time.”<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the anxieties tapped by the display of fully articulated fossilized dinosaur skeletons at the American Museum of Natural History in New York at the turn of the twentieth century under the direction of Henry Fairfield Osborn. Osborn’s exhibits included the first fully articulated and free-standing *Brontosaurus* skeleton (composed of two partial skeletons), a major coup for dinosauric display when it opened in 1905: this was the first time the public had seen a dinosaur mounted and exhibited in this way, and it doubled the museum’s attendance that year and launched a new era of natural history museum exhibition practices.<sup>12</sup> Discovered in Wyoming in 1879, *Brontosaurus excelsus* was named by paleontologist Othniel Charles Marsh, purportedly inspired by

<sup>8</sup> Theresa J. May, “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies,” *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 2 (2007): 96. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2008.0001>.

<sup>9</sup> Michal Kobialka, *Further on, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 474, quoting Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 3–4; see also Michal Kobialka, *This Is My Body: Representational Practice of the Early Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Curatorial intervention is Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s term for procedures used by the museum to intervene between the past object and its representation in the present to impose meaning and improve upon the former for touristic purposes, per the institution’s ideologies, agendas, and interpretive goals, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, 70.



**FIG. 1** *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton model, exhibit under construction, 1913

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, NEW YORK

Sioux stories of the “thunder beings” that populated the land during the “first sunrise of time” (paleontologists in the American West often relied on native guides to help them find fossils).<sup>13</sup> The opening reception for the *Brontosaurus* exhibit attracted five hundred of New York City’s notables, including J. P. Morgan, who were served tea under the seventy-foot long, fifteen-foot-high skeleton by the wife of Mayor George B. McClellan. Another major exhibit under Osborn’s direction was *Tyrannosaurus rex*, named by Osborn in 1905 “to indicate this creature’s identity as a ferocious predator from the deep past.”<sup>14</sup> A “proclivity for extreme violence” prompted the American Museum of Natural History to plan for a spectacular exhibit featuring two *T. rex* skeletons posed as if battling over the carcass of a duck-billed dinosaur<sup>15</sup> (FIG. 1). A model was commissioned, but the exhibit proved too large and ambitious for the dinosaur hall exhibition space and was never completed. “Still,” writes Rieppel,

<sup>13</sup> Rieppel, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Rieppel, 140.

<sup>15</sup> Rieppel, 140.

the planned *Tyrannosaurus* display reveals much about the museum's overall exhibition strategy. First, curators were keen to create a paleontological analogue to the habitat diorama by mounting multiple skeletons interacting with one another and their surroundings. And, second, these paleontological groups always depicted the Age of Reptiles as an especially brutish period of life on earth.<sup>16</sup>

Osborn ended up displaying a single freestanding *Tyrannosaurus* skeleton, discovered by Barnum Brown in Montana in 1908, intimidating enough with its six-inch teeth even without the addition of a rival (and even in a tail-dragging, kangaroo-like posture now considered inaccurate), but would go on to display skeletons in dynamic group scenes like an *Allosaurus* tearing into the tail of a *Brontosaurus* with its knifelike teeth, and a pair of grazing duck-billed dinosaurs startled by the approach of a *T. rex*.

Though conjectural representations of full-sized dinosaurs had been displayed before this point, most famously Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins's concrete *Iguanodon* sculptures unveiled in 1854 in Bromley's Crystal Palace Park, the American Museum of Natural History's offering of free-standing fossilized dinosaur skeletons went the farthest at that time in allowing a spatio-temporal breach between the Mesozoic and the present, staging an encounter for spectators in which they could come face to face with untamed others of deep time. The curatorial intervention, in other words, took two separate and cognitively discordant temporalities, the prehistoric and the contemporary, and brought them together into a single environment. There are different ways to visualize this. On the one hand, we can think of the experience of time as line: a Cartesian  $x$  axis depicting a continuum of progress extending backward into the past and forward into the future. In this conception, the Mesozoic occupies a swath of the timeline millions of years from the spot on the timeline occupied by the present. The spots on the timeline are irreconcilable because two times cannot occupy the same point. A curatorial intervention, however, that brings these two times on the line together in the same space amounts to, in a manner of speaking, a short circuit, bypassing the millions of years of intervening time. Would such a historiographic procedure actually be possible, we could endeavor to know all the intimate details of a past moment. Indeed, much of the enterprise of modern historians has been motivated by the fantasy that we can do exactly this short-circuit maneuver through careful empiricism and research, working backward through the past to encounter the object of inquiry in its original context. Alas, both these positivistic conceptions of historiographic inquiry and the Hegelian model of time upon which they are based

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<sup>16</sup> Rieppel, 141.

are grounded in a nineteenth-century ideological and discursive milieu (shared by Osborn and his contemporaries), and have been exposed and critiqued as such.<sup>17</sup>

Further, were it merely the case that the American Museum of Natural History was short-circuiting time with its dinosauric display, the simple binary opposition of deep past and immediate present would likely have been infelicitous when it came to spectators cognitively assimilating the irredeemably distant reality of dinosaurs and their milieu. And in any case, the amount of material reality actually original to the past moment would not have amounted to a preponderance of anything recognizable to the average spectator. The fossilized bones themselves, falling short even of full skeletons, would be meaningless without the semiotic assignments that would make them, in Mitchell's words, composite imagetexts. More precisely, then, we might think of the intervention as a Deleuzian folding over of the plane of immanence to bring together the possibilities, actualities, and states of affairs concretized in the Mesozoic and turn-of-the-twentieth century into the shared space of the museum gallery.<sup>18</sup> In this conception, the past temporality and spatiality imagined into being through a kind of Deleuzian "creative fabulation"<sup>19</sup> occupies the same plane as the experienced present, and the visitors' encounter with the dinosaurs is one that unsettles the creatures from time only to ideologically restabilize them, so that they may surrogate for that which elicits fear and anxiety in the present and activate those fears and anxieties accordingly. In other words, the visitor is brought into contact with the distant dinosaur other, but rather than this being an alienating experience with an unrecognizable object, the dinosaurs—here more cobbled together bits of present sensibilities than either how they appeared in the past or how their remains were found interred in rock—elicit affective responses familiarly accompanying other present-day villains.<sup>20</sup>

Here is how this worked. The thrill of the encounter banked on temporal otherness: if the object was the prehistoric specimen on display, the subject was the visitor, who became the protagonist in the scenario of encounter. The skeletons themselves, as I say above, were far from complete: the missing bones and bone fragments were filled in conjecturally, in a process described by paleontologist

<sup>17</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 91.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 153.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 171–172.

<sup>20</sup> The staged confrontations between spectator and dinosaur, to paraphrase Michel de Certeau describing Theodore Galle's engraving, after a drawing by Jan van der Straet, of Amerigo Vespucci "discovering" primitive exotic America, were inaugural moments of encounter between civilization and untamed nature (Certeau, *Writing of History*, xxv–xxvi). Time and space had been breached, and previously inviolable worlds had been brought together. The thrilling possibilities of such an encounter, as in the past, proved consistently exploitable, and are, for instance, of a kind with the conceit of *Jurassic Park* movie franchise. In the latter case, bringing dinosaurs and humans, up to now separated by eons, together in the shared space of the eponymous tourist attraction through science and entrepreneurship, makes for a nightmarish yet thrilling juxtaposition.

Erwin Hinckley Barbour as a painstaking labor to match the real thing, with “rusty, frost-cracked, weather-beaten, moss and lichen effects, craftily wrought in plaster, and the conditions wrought by time on the specimens themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Where the imagination needed assistance in fleshing out the skeletons’ bodies and their natural surroundings, the museum offered what Rieppel terms other authoritative “indexical” markers, like leaflets, descriptions, and artist’s paintings executed under the strict supervision of paleontological advisors.<sup>22</sup> Rieppel offers Charles R. Knight’s painting of *Allosaurus* tearing the meat from a fallen *Brontosaurus*’s tail, which accompanied the posed fossilized skeletons depicting the same scene at the American Museum of Natural History when the exhibit opened in 1908.

This dramatic rendering by Charles Knight depicted an identical scene to the skeletons on display, except that the fearsome predator was now covered in skin, sinew, and flesh. Artworks like these brought an additional element of excitement into the exhibition space, virtually transporting visitors backwards in time to witness a world that was otherwise inaccessible to direct observation. As a whole, then, the museum’s dinosaur hall constituted a densely choreographed mixed media installation that was carefully calibrated to provide a vivid imaginative experience whose credibility was grounded on the solid bedrock of material fossils that survived from prehistory into the present day.<sup>23</sup>

For Rieppel, Osborn’s dinosaur exhibits were symbols of American exceptionalism and of the resource-rich American West in which the biggest and most exciting dinosaur fossils were being found. They were also manifestations the political and economic forces that gave rise to them, namely the maneuvers of wealthy philanthropists in the long Gilded Age who acquired prestige, social legitimacy, and cultural status through funding dinosaur bone digs and building museums to house the finds, and who helped usher in the structures of modern capitalism.<sup>24</sup> The extinction of the dinosaurs was understood by these philanthropists as a cautionary tale against laissez-faire capitalism that had defined the American nineteenth century up to that point. Rieppel writes:

The mass extinction event that killed them off at the end of the Cretaceous period mirrored the era’s widespread anxieties about degeneration and decline, and dinosaurs were often inserted into a cyclical narrative that characterized evolutionary

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<sup>21</sup> Erwin Barbour, “Notes on the Paleontological Laboratory of the United States Geological Survey under Professor Marsh,” *American Naturalist* 24, no. 280 (1890), quoted in Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, 208.

<sup>22</sup> Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, 202–203.

<sup>23</sup> Rieppel, “How Dinosaurs Became Tyrants of the Prehistoric,” *Environmental History* 25, no. 4 (2020): 778.

<sup>24</sup> Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, 4.



development as a predictable series of fits and starts. The same evolutionary process was understood, in turn, to result in a familiar pattern of boom and bust that mirrored the emerging conception of what came to be called the business cycle.<sup>25</sup>

Where Rieppel sees dinosauric displays at the turn of the twentieth century manifesting wealthy industrialists' anxieties about the decline of capitalism, Noble sees them as standing in for Osborn's anxieties about racial miscegenation and the decline of the superior white Nordic stock, anxieties he finds paralleled in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Lost World*, in which an expedition of white adventurers discovers ferocious dinosaurs that have survived extinction in an isolated region the Amazon basin. Osborn was a "notable advocate of a variety of Lamarckian principles," points out Noble, "which, as it turns out, helped to brace up his white, Anglo-Saxon supremacist eugenics philosophy, a philosophy which resonates with the ideas present in Doyle's novel."<sup>26</sup> Osborn would preside over the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1921, hosted at his own museum while he oversaw the collection of murals in the Hall of the Age of Man "depicting the stages of racial advancement,"<sup>27</sup> a situation unpacked by Donna J. Haraway in *Primate Visions*.<sup>28</sup> And he had laid out his own fears that his Nordic stock would gradually die out in his preface to Madison Grant's eugenics book *The Passing of the Great Race or the Racial Basis of European History* in 1916. Dinosaurs, Noble argues, helped Osborn exemplify the extinction of an otherwise "great 'race' of powerful creatures."<sup>29</sup> The Mesozoic could stand in as a mimetic "timespace milieu for performing a comparison of his own sense of ancient 'reptilian' nature against that of contemporary 'mammalian' nature."<sup>30</sup> *T. rex*, then, for Osborn, served as a Mesozoic counterpart to the contemporary Nordic human specimen, a "climax creature" that could "stand as evolutionary counterpoint in support of imagined mental and racial superiority and perfectibility—indeed, it could be a support to the prized, white, Nordic genealogical stock from which he and many of his wealthy New England compatriots saw themselves as derived."<sup>31</sup>

While Mitchell also holds that dinosaurs are impossible to apprehend outside of contemporary meanings and discourses imposed upon them, in his conception the narratives offered by both Rieppel and Noble can both be obliged, as dinosaurs remain flexible enough to accommodate any meaning convenient or habituated

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<sup>25</sup> Rieppel, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Noble, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> Noble, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Noble, 94.

to the beholder. “As you’ve probably noticed” about the dinosaur, he writes, after surveying dozens of examples in which it has symbolically functioned as a cultural symbol in visual culture, “is that it has too many meanings, and too many of them are contradictory.”<sup>32</sup> There’s always already an answer for any category of meaning they fill, or for why they’ve retained the status of cultural symbol in the past century and a half. “It’s because we can admire them as a world-dominant species, or feel superior to them because they died out. It’s because they are a riddle and an enigma, or because they are a universally intelligible symbol.”<sup>33</sup>

While dinosaurs have been and continue to be blank canvases upon which meanings are projected, it is possible to suggest for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum practitioners and their spectators that the stunning paleo-performative exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History cemented a dominant (if not explicitly stated) meaning that capitalized on already circulating spectatorial tropes of white precarity. As I said at the outset, we can find in Osborn’s dinosaur hall practices that reify nineteenth-century notions and practices of historiography that center whiteness as the default experience of the subject and that performatively tie anxieties of exotic other that attend to other threats to racial purity and safety of the nineteenth century. By offering three-dimensional spaces of encounter, and tapping an existing repertoire of tropes and performances, museum curators took on the role of their cultural purveyor counterparts in dime novel publishing and frontier play and wild west show producing in inviting their patrons to imagine themselves into a zone of rupture, where the spatio-temporal boundary between contemporary civilization and the threatening realm of untamed nature is breached. And of course, natural history museums used the scenario of the breach as a counterpart for the breach between the present and deep time, which was so much more difficult to comprehend because it was inaccessible except through imagination: a heterotopia as Foucault would have it, or a material performative *chronotopos* in Noble’s terms, after Bakhtin, an “otherworld” infused with “physical technical, political, social, masculinist, and racializing concerns.”<sup>34</sup> Let me explore this idea further.

First, it need not be argued that whites have been the de facto protagonist in cultural productions throughout modernity, and certainly this outgrowth and reinforcement of systemic racism and white supremacy had reached a particular crescendo during the decades Osborn oversaw the dinosaur exhibits at the Museum of Natural History. As Joe R. Feagin writes, the dominant white racial frame, which for centuries had “protected and shaped . . . society’s racially inegalitarian

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<sup>32</sup> Mitchell, *Last Dinosaur Book*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 20.

structure of resources and its racialized hierarchy of status and power,”<sup>35</sup> had by the end of the nineteenth century justified westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, genocide, enslavement, Jim Crow, and “a scientific-racist view of people of color across the globe as innately and permanently inferior to the white race.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, insidiously, the white racial frame had become an entrenched internalized worldview that contemporary social scientists like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have called the “white habitus.”<sup>37</sup> This worldview justified the global social order, where white protagonists were on top and the earth’s wildernesses were there to be either exploited or benevolently preserved. In either case the threatening human and animal denizens that stood in the way needed to either be tamed or eliminated. In this formula, if dinosaurs are brought into the present through the kind of performative historiography practiced by world’s fairs and museums, then they must be grouped with the other threats to the white subject into the domains of the jungle, the savannah, the wild west frontier. In other words, when the subject encounters the dinosaur through museological display, the narrative is already bound to be one of antagonism. In the natural order of things, as ordained by the white racial frame, the dinosaurs are the exotic others along with the lions and elephants and bushmen of the safari, the snakes and headhunters of the jungle expedition, and the savage Indians of the frontier wars. The museum visitor protagonist, by contrast, is a denizen of civilization: the city, the academy, the nation-state, the cultural institution. Their analogues are the big game hunter, the missionary, the cowboy paleontologist.

In this manner, I agree with Brian Noble that Henry Fairfield Osborn’s advocacy of eugenics and white supremacy informed his dinosaur exhibits at the American Museum of Natural History, but whereas Noble offers that this plays out in *T. rex* serving as an analogy for the white Nordic stock as the most advanced race of its time, I argue that *T. rex* more likely served as a Mesozoic counterpart to the thrilling and dangerous denizens of the present that threatened to topple the white subject from his spot of supremacy: for instance, what Osborn described as “the massive influx of Asian and southern and eastern European immigrants [that] threatened the existence of the Nordic race that founded this country”<sup>38</sup> or the threats to racial purity as articulated by Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s, whose “racial hygiene” programs Osborn supported.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, the American Museum of Natural History’s

<sup>35</sup> Feagin, *White Racial Frame*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Feagin, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Feagin, 15, quoting Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 104.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Rainger, *An Agenda for Antiquity: Henry Fairfield Osborn and Vertebrate Paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History, 1890–1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 118, quoting Henry Fairfield Osborn, “The American Museum and Citizenship,” 53rd Annual Report of the American Museum of Natural History, 1922.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *Last Dinosaur Book*, 149.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

**FIG. 2** Charles R. Knight, *Leaping Laelaps* now known as *Dryptosaurus*, 1897

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, NEW YORK

exhibition spaces were intended for white audiences. Noble, drawing on Donna J. Haraway, discusses how the procedures of collection and display of fossils in Osborn's galleries mirrored the masculinist practices of elite big-game hunting clubs like the Boone and Crockett Club founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887.<sup>40</sup> And Haraway famously imagines the ideal spectator to the exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History entering through the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Atrium as "necessarily a white boy in moral state" vicariously passing through the successive rites of passage leading to manhood, per Roosevelt's instructions, of "courage, hard work, self-mastery and intelligent effort."<sup>41</sup> Mieke Bal, in taking up as a case study the American Museum of Natural History's "constative speech acts of display,"<sup>42</sup> describes the guilefulness in hiding from the spectator the intentionality of the institution (what she terms the "slippery I" in the subject/object dichotomy) as a means of reinforcing its myths of civilization and primitivity.<sup>43</sup> "Showing' natural history,"

<sup>40</sup> Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Noble, 104, quoting Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Bal, *Double Exposures*, 37.



COURTESY OF THE FIELD MUSEUM

**FIG. 3** Charles R. Knight, *Triceratops and Tyrannosaurus Rex*, 1928

FIELD MUSEUM, CHICAGO

she writes, versus showing their own hand or voice, “uses a rhetoric of persuasion that almost inevitably convinces the viewer of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, largely Christian culture.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, when dinosaur skeletons were first mounted in museums like the American Museum of Natural History, and complemented with informational panels and artists’ paintings filling out the scenes, the curators invited audiences into performative stagings that appeared to capture the animals in exciting moments of dynamism, rather than displaying the fossilized bones in, say, the death poses in which they’d been found and disinterred from the surrounding rock. In so doing, the curators confronted audiences with scenes of thrilling danger: the towering *Tyrannosaurus* rampant displaying teeth and claws, the *Allosaurus* tearing into the *Brontosaurus*’ tail, and so forth. Artists’ imaginative renderings fleshed out the scenes on canvas to conjure up epic battles between carnivores and herbivores, or between two meat-eaters battling over quarry or territory. Charles R. Knight’s groundbreaking painting for the American Museum of Natural History, *Leaping Laelaps*, captures a battle between two theropods (FIG. 2). The attacker pounces with teeth bared and the feet and claws of both hind legs prepared to rip into its opponent, itself bristling with teeth and claws, back against the ground with its own hind legs raised in defense. Perhaps most famous is Knight’s 1927 mural for Chicago’s Field Museum, depicting a *T. rex* fighting a *Triceratops* (FIG. 3). Knight’s “scene of *T. rex* and *Triceratops* poised for single combat,” observes Mitchell, drawing on Haraway, “was a perfect visual conclusion to the nineteenth-century cult of the big game hunt. It appeared at the moment when the big game was

<sup>44</sup> Bal, 53.

beginning to vanish, and the hunt itself was in danger of becoming a vanishing ritual of Anglo-Saxon manhood.”<sup>45</sup>

Unlike group scenes of prehistoric mammals such as giant ground sloths or woolly mammoths elsewhere in the galleries, who were often depicted as working together peacefully, points out Rieppel, the interactions of the articulated skeletons of dinosaur fossils, in the cases of two or more specimens grouped together, “almost exclusively revolved around acts of predation.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly, for the curators, while the world of later mammals may have involved a bit more cooperation, the reptilian world of the Mesozoic was inhospitable, competitive, and dangerous:

Whether it was an *Allosaurus* feasting upon a section of *Brontosaurus* tail, a *T. rex* facing off against a *Triceratops*, or a duckbill startled by the sound of its enemy of in the distance, it was violence that bound these creatures together. Theirs was an ecology of intense struggle and ruthless competition most often resulting in death.<sup>47</sup>

Here again, then, as the visitor-protagonist encountered these scenes of predation, they were at once an affectively engaged subject of the scenario, a vulnerable agent immersed in a cruel and thrilling *mise-en-scène* and a protected voyeur into the dangerous time-space of the dinosaurs within the safety of the institutional setting in the urban center of civilization. Furthermore, within the museum’s larger natural history narrative, they could be emboldened by the assuredness the white subject’s place in the grand order of things.

Third, the space from which these dinosaurs hailed was not that of the hushed vaulted temple-like galleries of the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, where their remains were now displayed, but of some alien wilderness, as difficult to imagine as the dinosaurs themselves, with only bits of fossilized plant remains to give indication of the flora. But these worlds were creatively brought into being by artists who, working closely with scientists, created whole primeval landscapes depicting a younger, rawer earth. In the worlds painted by Knight, dinosaurs scrape out their brutish lives against backdrops of conifers, cycads, and ferns clinging to the craggy rocks of new mountains and hills, interspersed with patches of bare, scrabbly earth. In *Leaping Laelaps*, the conflict between two ferocious reptiles plays out against dynamically pitched, weather blasted hillside (FIG. 2). The bounding attacker’s shadow stands out against the sun-bleached sandy earth and tufts of prairie grasses and scrubby ground covering. In the distance, a jagged hill rises up to the clouds from the

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<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, *Last Dinosaur Book*, 142, quoting Haraway, *Primate Visions*.

<sup>46</sup> Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> Rieppel, 174.



**FIG. 4** Charles R. Knight, *Allosaurus*, 1904  
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, NEW YORK

surrounding wasteland.<sup>48</sup> In Knight's painting of *Allosaurus* feasting upon *Brontosaurus*'s tail, the land is similarly composed of weather-beaten hardscrabble. Shallow puddles of stagnant water appear at the edges of the painting. Knight practically invites the viewer to imagine the air is thick with the stench of the deteriorating carcass of the dead beast, half exposed as if dragged out by the carnivore from the few concealing bushes into the hot sun (**FIG. 4**).

The landscapes, not insignificantly, are evocative of the scrubby, semi-arid Black Hills, bluffs, and badlands of the American West (**FIG. 5**)—the same rugged spaces from which the world's most superlative dinosaur species at-the-time were being discovered and unearthed in the "Bone Rush" at the end of the nineteenth century: the *Brontosaurus*, *Stegosaurus*, *Tyrannosaurus*, *Triceratops*, *Allosaurus*, and so forth—bigger, fiercer, and more spectacular than the fossilized *Iguanodons* and *Ichthyosaurs* found to that point in Europe. Even though there are a handful of palm trees in Knight's *Triceratops and Tyrannosaurus*, the moment before the clash between the two opponents is set in the dawning light on the battleground of a western-looking prairie, ringed by distant trees under big-sky. And the scene is definitely western, or at least westward-oriented: the head of a second *T. rex* in the middle distance, standing bit taller, is illuminated by a dawning sun behind the viewer to the east, as if beginning to peak out from out over a hill overlooking

<sup>48</sup> Mitchell offers that "Dinosaur painting often imitates the style of nineteenth-century realist and romantic landscape painting by depicting a savage world of animal violence with a dashing, expressionistic handling of paint." The style of Knight's *Dryptosaurus Fighting* (another name for *Leaping Laelaps*), he writes, is a "throw-back" to James Ward's 1803 *Bulls Fighting*. Mitchell, *Last Dinosaur Book*, 60.



COURTESY SID RICHARDSON MUSEUM

**FIG. 5** Charles M. Russell, *Buffalo Bill's Duel with Yellowhand*, 1917

SID RICHARDSON MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

the brutal showdown about to unfold in its receding shadow. Here, the western landscape dominated by *T. rex* is conflated with the American West already familiar to Osborn's audiences: the American West as allegorical space in which the national character was forged—as produced by Turner's Frontier thesis, dime novels, and frontier melodramas and wild west shows that had been synchronously capturing the popular white imagination. An untamed expanse filled with savages threatening to attack and murder, or make captive, the brave white American settlers who dared to carve out of it their piece of Manifest Destiny.<sup>49</sup>

Due in no small part to the fact that dinosaur fossil discovery and public presentation emerged so dramatically in the nineteenth century, the discourses with which they are associated have been informed by Darwinism, survival of the fittest, and concomitant white ideologies of racism, imperialism, and colonialism. Yet, the curatorial practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were also part and parcel of the larger, systemic hegemony of the white racial frame, in place since the seventeenth century and before, which relegated non-white people to the realm of the untamed, the primitive, the culturally inferior, the dangerous, the behaviorally

<sup>49</sup> See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. C, 1865–1914, eds. Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Arnold Krupat (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 1146–1150; Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); and Dan Moos, *Outside America: Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005).



incontinent. In this paradigm, dinosaurs were grouped with these others into their spatial categories of precarious, untamed wilderness. The display of dinosaurs at museums and in popular media, then, capitalized on the kind of imaginative re-encounter between white protagonist subjects and exotic others that had already been popularized in wild west shows, world's fairs, and fantasy novels. As curators reached for the available tropes of white precarity, they reproduced them in museum spaces as scenarios of violence and predation, and the jungles, savannahs and wild west frontiers became imaginative stand ins for the disappeared wildernesses the living dinosaurs once commanded.

These curatorial interventions involved historiographic manipulations of time, space, and matter on a spectacular scale, serving as a threshold that would change museological practices thereafter. The museum professionals utilized not only the available protagonist-antagonist narratives of theater and entertainment, but also their technologies, to create dioramic displays—chronotopic “otherworlds” in which past and present were folded into the same space. These historiographic spaces of encounter were further shaped by conjecture, imagination, and artists’ paintings that rounded out the dynamic scenes. Such “indexical markers” shored up the authority and credibility of the museums’ version of historiographic truth and structured visitors’ relationship with dinosaurs as simultaneously objects of the past and surrogates for contemporary threats to racial purity and safety. The museological practices of early twentieth-century institutions poignantly draw our attention to how the ways in which we experience the past are inextricably bound up in the ways the past is housed. They serve to remind us of the desire to situate the past object of inquiry into a feedback loop in which audiences project that which most closely haunts them onto the object, only for it to reify in return their most familiar fears and anxieties.

Dinosaur display in museums has changed dramatically since the first exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History at the turn of the twentieth century. Notable examples include the recent “Dinosaurs Among Us” exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History that featured colorful, feathered dinosaurs, not so much as extinct as still with us in their modern bird descendants, or the *Maiasaura peeblesorum* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum (the subject of an extensive ethnography in the second half of Noble’s *Articulating the Dinosaur*), which moved away from the entrenched themes of dinosaurs as predators and victims in an inhospitable, brutal world to showcase a day in the life of a “good mother lizard,” a hadrosaur (duck-billed dinosaur) that nurtured its young. Nevertheless, the dinosaur as centerpiece in narratives of white precarity persists in both museums and popular culture. It is a testimony to the degree to which the performative situating of the white subject as protagonist in the encounter with the dinosaur other is entrenched in the ideologies and anxieties of the white racial frame that justified and perpetuated a global social order since the seventeenth century and earlier. Unmasking the racist practices in museums with such an unlikely subject as dinosaurs helps us reveal the ways in which the theme of white precarity undergirds historical practices that emerged

within the discursive formations of modernity. Historiography, I contend, exposes how manipulation of time, space, and matter, enabled and legitimized by a centering of the white subject as protagonist, has defined how we understand and structured our relationship with (pre)historical objects.



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## Abstract

### Dinosaurs, Racial Anxiety, and Curatorial Intervention: Whiteness and Performative Historiography in the Museum

This essay argues that the staged encounters between museum visitors and dioramic display of dinosaur fossils in natural history and science museum spaces have been designed to capitalize on and performatively reify white anxiety about the exotic other using the same practices reserved for representing other historic threats to white safety and purity, such as primitive "savages" indigenous to the American West, sub-Saharan Africa, the Amazon, and other untamed wildernesses through survival-of-the-fittest tropes persisting over the last century. Dinosaur others in popular culture have served as surrogates for white fears and anxieties about the racial other. The author examines early dioramic displays of dinosaurs at New York's American Museum of Natural History and conjectural paintings by artists like Charles R. Knight to argue that the historiographic manipulation of time, space, and matter, enabled and legitimized by a centering of the white subject as protagonist, has defined

how we understand dinosaurs and has structured our relationship with them as (pre)historical objects. Exposing the ways in which racist tropes like white precarity have informed historiographical practices in dinosaur exhibits offers a tool for interrogating how racist ideologies have permeated the formations of modernity that inform our modes of inquiry.

### Keywords

dinosaurs, museums, historiography, white precarity, white racial frame, Henry Fairfield Osborn, Charles R. Knight

### Abstrakt

#### **Dinozaury, rasowy niepokój i kuratorskie interwencje: Białość i performatywna historiografia w muzeum**

Esej dowodzi, że inscenizowane spotkania zwiedzających wystawy z dioramicznymi ekspozycjami skamieniałości dinozaurów w muzeach nauki i historii naturalnej zostały zaprojektowane tak, by wyzyskać i performatywnie urzeczywistnić lęk białych przed egzotycznym Innym. Wykorzystywano w tym celu te same koncepcje – zwłaszcza podtrzymywaną przez ostatnie stulecia ideę przetrwania najsilniejszych – za pomocą których reprezentuje się inne historyczne zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa i czystości białych, symbolizowane przez prymitywnych „dzikich” z amerykańskiego zachodu, Afryki Subsaharyjskiej, Amazonii i innych dziewiczych pustkowi. Dinozaury jako inni stały się w kulturze popularnej substytutem białych lęków i niepokojów związanych z urasowionym Innym. Autor bada wczesne dioramiczne ekspozycje dinozaurów w nowojorskim American Museum of Natural History oraz obrazy przypisywane artystom takim jak Charles R. Knight, by dowiedzieć, że historiograficzna manipulacja czasem, przestrzenią i materią, umożliwiona i uprawomocniona przez umieszczenie w centrum białego podmiotu jako protagonisty, zdefiniowała sposób, w jaki rozumiemy dinozaury i ustrukturyzowała naszą relację z nimi jako obiektami (pre)historycznymi. Odsłonięcie dróg, jakimi rasistowskie motywy, na przykład poczucie kruchości białych, wpłynęły na praktyki historiograficzne w ekspozycjach dinozaurów, otwiera możliwość analizy roli rasistowskich ideologii w formowaniu się nowoczesności, która określa nasze metody badań naukowych.

### Słowa kluczowe

dinozaury, muzea, historiografia, niepewność białych, biała rasa jako rama widzenia, Henry Fairfield Osborn, Charles R. Knight

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