

H-France Forum

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Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 392 pp. Notes and bibliography. 79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-3755-7; 26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7878-9 (pb).

Review essay by Alice Conklin, Ohio State University

I would like to thank the editors of the H-France forum for choosing three distinguished scholars of modern France and its empire to review *In the Museum of Man*. All three readers are generous in their praise while thoughtfully engaging with different parts of the book. J. P. Daughton brings his pioneering work on the history of missionaries in the French colonies to bear on the complex and often neglected question of the religious workers' contribution to modern popular and scientific understandings of the other. Mary Lewis, a superb social, legal and political historian, has deployed her deep knowledge of the construction of categories in modern states to analyze my arguments about racist and anti-racist scientific understandings of difference in France between 1850 and 1950. And Robert Aldrich, a leading authority on the history of sexuality, the French and British empires, and colonial vestiges in France, meditates on the fraught post-colonial lives of ethnographic and anthropological museums opened during the colonial era whose collections remain so problematic.

The best history is always a collaborative venture, and it is therefore a pleasure to see the ideas advanced in my book ricochet in ways I had hoped—and sometimes failed to anticipate. In what follows, I both address questions raised by my readers, either explicitly and implicitly, and also explore some of the lessons learned from writing a book that became an “ethnography,” in its own right, of a particular community of scholars who trained in the orbit of France's interwar Museum of Man and the University of Paris' Institute of Ethnology. In writing their story, and especially in revisiting the awful choices that confronted them in Occupied France, I was surely also spinning a cautionary tale about the larger *habitus* that most university-trained historians know only too well. In this sense, as Marcel Mauss might have put it, history writing is not only a history of the present *but also and always* a history of the self.

As with many other H-France forums, I am struck by how differently my three readers have handled their assignment. To some extent, I am not surprised. The seven chapters of *In the Museum of Man* weave together subjects that are often treated separately: the history of ethnography, the history of museums, the history of racial science, the history of empire, the history of anti-Semitism, and the history of the late Third Republic through Vichy. I was thus immensely gratified by Daughton's declaration that even with its complex cast of characters, ideas, and institutions, the book was “a great read”—high praise indeed from a riveting storyteller himself! Truth be told, I did not set out to write an intimate story of three *maîtres* and six disciples.

In the Museum of Man's organization and themes emerged slowly from my sources, as I realized that only a particular combination of individuals, institutions of higher learning, and politics—extreme politics, in the case of the fin de siècle and the 1930s—helped to account for the shifts in scientific ideas about culture and race that I was tracking. I was fortunate as well in discovering larger-than-life personalities in the archives, parts of whose careers have up until now remained in the shadows: on the one hand, Marcel Mauss, the renowned author of *The Gift*, whose “writer's block” hid a great teacher who molded a considerable cadre of disciples; Paul Rivet, an obscure medical anthropologist whose commitment to American ethnography helped put in

place the structures that enabled the brilliance of scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss to shine; and George Montandon, whose very “evilness” has led previous scholars to neglect how subtly he constructed a scientific persona that fooled all of his contemporaries; on the other hand, a second generation of apprentice anthropologists so closely knit together that writing a “family” biography was possible.

Daughton raises a number of probing questions about how best to consider the broader history of ethnography/ethnology not just in France but in the West. He rightly points to a much longer and messier tradition of writing about the mores and customs of other peoples than one I document, a tradition that arguably began with Herodotus. He then stresses the role played by missionary encounters in forging the scientific tradition of ethnology that coalesced in the university and museum in France in the 1920s and 1930s and wonders about the reception, impact, and novelty of the science itself. These are wonderful avenues for further research, which Daughton’s own work has already done so much to elucidate.

The central concern of my book, by contrast (as Daughton graciously acknowledges), was understanding why notions of race and culture remained entangled for so long among those who were considered scientists between 1850 and 1950, at a time when science carried an authority that few questioned, and how this same science became politicized in ways that have not always been recognized. This said, Daughton is right that there were many ethnographic accounts (missionary, popular) during this same century that did not cast non-Western peoples in immutable essences. To cite just one example, Père Aupiais, a Catholic missionary based in colonial Dahomey (Benin) in the interwar years, developed a holistic approach to culture that engaged some of Mauss’s own ideas. Nevertheless, Mauss deliberately kept Aupiais and his findings at arms’ length: in the anti-clerical world of republican politics, he preferred to cite ethnographies written by British missionaries than one proposed by a Catholic priest. The Aupiais-Mauss connection is just one of many of those “hidden in plain sight” points that are so easy to miss and, when investigated in more depth, could well nuance claims about a “new way of ethnographic seeing” emerging in France after the Great War. This same failed encounter also serves as a reminder that if the professionalization of French ethnology teaches us anything, it is that social scientific disciplines do sometimes craft their new credentials by ignoring other approaches to similar questions, for no loftier reason than to secure the kind of public funding that allows a discipline to grow.

Lewis pays me the ultimate compliment of beginning her review with a hook that I had once considered using myself in the book: Henry Louis Gates’ PBS program “Finding Your Roots.” About a year before this program first aired in 2012, the American Association of Anthropologists (largely made up of cultural anthropologists) launched a traveling museum exhibit dedicated to educating a broader public on the race question and science, entitled “Race: Are We So Different.”^[1] It set out to explain that race today was a meaningless category from a biological point of view, but “real” from a social point of view. The experts involved were concerned that there were still too many misperceptions among the broader public regarding what the scientific truth about race was. Both “Finding Your Roots” and “Race: Are We So Different” illustrate Lewis’ particular “take away” from *In the Museum of Man*: that it is a book committed to explaining why, in the early twenty-first century, we are witnessing a new round of public anthropology on the race question, a tradition consolidated in 1950s Paris with the UNESCO statement of race and the event with which my book ends.

In 1950, of course, both anthropologists and biologists hoped that the newest science (social and biological) could undo once and for all the terrible errors made by an earlier science. Clearly they were unsuccessful because, as we now understand better, race is both real and not real,

depending on the meaning that society attaches to it at a given moment; the history of race as both an idea and an affect can thus be tracked, much like the history of science itself.

My point here, and the larger point my book seeks to make, is that in the modern world, “new” ways of seeing that effectively undercut the nineteenth-century scientific construction of race were always relative, partial and incomplete. My hope was to avoid a triumphalist and teleological narrative in which a certain French community of scientists moved definitively from an assumption that race was a meaningful biological marker of human identity to a view that all identity is socially constructed. At the same time, I took seriously the notion that only an alternative cultural understanding of human difference, along with the economic and political enfranchisement of minorities everywhere, could hope to dislodge deeply seated popular notions of racial inferiority that science once endorsed. From 1850 to 1950, a paradigm shift occurred among scientists in the understanding of human diversity, due to reasons both internal and external to science. But the new scientific concepts of race and culture that replaced earlier ones by 1950 remained subject, like all scientific truths, to further revision and politicization. I am particularly grateful that Lewis in her detailed and nuanced analysis of my main themes recognized the contingent nature of my conclusions, and that she highlighted my insistence that neither French scientific racism nor its opposite began or ended with the shock of the Holocaust.

With Robert Aldrich, we turn from the making of scientific ideas about race and culture to a wide-ranging and stimulating set of insights on the continuing impact of colonial collecting practices long after the disappearance of empires. His account of traveling through Vietnam’s present-day museums reminded me of my own recent sojourn in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, a copy of Norman Lewis in hand. The post-colonial irony here is how difficult it was in the 1930s for Rivet to establish the very kind of ethnographic museum that finally opened (with the help of French ethnologists) in Hanoi in 1997. A sinecure for orientalists rather than professionalizing ethnographers, interwar Vietnam was especially rich in those missionary-, doctor-, and administrator-authored ethnographies to which Daughton also alluded. Professional ethnologists subsidized by the empire did not choose Vietnam as a field site until the late 1940s, when George Condominas (himself born in the colony and trained by Mauss’s students Denise Paulme and Marcel Griaule) resided among the Mnong ethnic group and then published his landmark 1957 work, *Nous avons mangé la forêt*. Aldrich interprets the fact that so many museums and cultural centers in both former colonies and former imperial centers have been experimenting since the 1990s with new museum practices as another sign of a revival of the kind of public anthropology that I chronicled before and after World War II in Paris.[2] However, the paucity of examples of ethnographers or travelers like Lewis and Condominas, who wrote in the period from the late 1940s to the 1990s, known to either Aldrich or me, also seems telling: if too little has been written in general about amateur European ethnographers on the colonial ground, we know even less about anthropological ways of seeing during the years we commonly associate with the long struggles for decolonization. Like Aldrich, I find myself jumping from the founding years of the Musée de l’Homme in the 1930s to the museum politics of the present—and yet understanding what happened in the intervening years must surely form an essential part of any explanation for the twenty-first century predicaments and choices of curators, activists, and ethnologists.[3]

Overall, Aldrich’s rich vein of questions in response to his reading of *In the Museum of Man* while traveling in South East Asia provides an exciting blueprint for continuing research in the history of cultural encounters and the public intellectuals who often participated in them. The stuff of such histories, as all three readers suggest, are in theory as unlimited and as diverse as those encounters themselves—whether they occurred in the halls of a museum or an international organization, through reading a missionary gazette, or in the study and exchange

of sexual forms of intimacy; whether they took place in conditions of relative equality or inequality; and whether they were framed by European understandings of difference, or by other traditions, or by exchanges among multiple cultures within and outside France's borders. In practice, of course, the existence of and access to archives, and the imagination with which historians approach those archives, limit the kind of stories about cultural encounters that historians can write. The queries posed in this forum, like writing the book itself, have already expanded my own historical imagination; for this I cannot thank my readers enough.

Notes

[1] <http://www.understandingrace.org/home.html>

[2] In addition to the articles cited by Aldrich, see Caroline Ford's illuminating essay "Museums After Empire in Metropolitan and Overseas France," *Journal of Modern History* 83:3 (2010): 625-61.

[3] This neglect is beginning to change. See, for example, Daniel J. Sherman's *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*, New African Histories' Series (Columbus: Ohio University Press, forthcoming).

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