

Book Review

Brian Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs: A Political Anthropology*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, paperback £26.95, pp. xiii+491

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The study of dinosaurs and their place in the world is an exciting and interdisciplinary field, although the idea of a political and anthropological approach will require further elaboration to most. Noble's goal is to 'consider how dinosaurs act as cultured and political beings of multiple natural possibilities in contemporary social history' (5). The manner in which dinosaurs act is, of course, the way we tell them to act (on foundations of varying respectability) and so the articulation of dinosaurs here means the investigation of humans. There is a rich history of similar approaches to the construction of knowledge in the earth sciences, including those by Rudwick (1985) and Knell (2000). Noble's focus is the museum, with his book predominantly being divided into two case studies, both focussing on the resurrection of dinosaurs into gendered and characterised entities. The first section is situated at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in the initial decades of the twentieth century, where naturalist Henry Fairfield Osborn crafted *Tyrannosaurus rex* into the furiously masculine symbol it largely remains today. The second section turns to the century's end and provides a detailed ethnographic study of the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) more dialogic approach to an exhibition of *Maiasaura peeblesorum*, the so-called 'Good Mother Lizard'.

Dissatisfied with the scientific grounding of W. J. T. Mitchell's oft-cited cultural diagnostic, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (1998), Noble proposes a variety of theoretical tools to examine the formation and reformation of inseparable '*dinosaur politics/natures*' (9). The symbiotic relations between fossil and exhibition that embed contemporary politics into fossil matter are dubbed, in the manner of a Foucauldian dispositif, the '*specimen-spectacle complex*' (13). This apparatus generates meanings through two broad and overlapping time-spaces in which dinosaurs are conceived: the scrupulously scientific Mesozoic era and the romantic zone of the lost world (16). Dinosaurs as we know them are enacted into being at this junction, Noble suggests, through a collective '*Mesozoic Performativity*' that is not an unsightly ideological or imaginative intrusion into science but part of the process of science itself (7). The book's assembled cast thus includes novelists, palaeontologists, artists, curators, and the reliably unpredictable museum visitor.

The first section highlights a political symmetry between Osborn's physical and literary articulation of *Tyrannosaurus* and the connotations of dinosaurs in contemporary culture, most notably Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912). These 'remarkable correspondences', suggests Noble, point to a 'performative nexus' of aggressive masculinity, racial supremacy, and imperialistic domination that were and are embodied by the dinosaur (100). Furthermore, he contends that the often fantastically speculative and lurid dinosaur media consumed by many in the substantially male world of palaeontology, although it may appear antithetical to the museum world and its soberly scientific bases, is unavoidably 'drawn more or less from *inside* but also *back into*' its halls and its palaeobiology (119).

Although Noble addresses various audiences with his interesting argument and thus strives for accessible language, many readers will find the proliferation of coinages and theoretical terms difficult to grapple with. These structures can sometimes overshadow representation of the particular cultural context in which Osborn and Doyle—both of whom

have been written about extensively—were working; a variety of recent texts which also explore the subject of ideology and palaeontology at the AMNH, including Sommer (2016), Rieppel (2012), and Cain (2010), present more thickly historicist alternatives. Moreover, while Noble is wise to focus on the twentieth century rather than elaborate on the densely-researched nineteenth, the methodologies of Secord (2004) and O'Connor (2008)—both briefly cited—provide precedents for the collapsing of how we can study literature and science that could have been usefully integrated. The most intriguing and suggestive areas in this first section are the briefer considerations of palaeontologists' passions for the dinosaur literature and films of the mid-twentieth century, and what scientific implications these interests may have. Further investigation of this area would be a welcome prospect.

Due to Noble's personal ethnographical work with the Maiasaur Project at the ROM, carried out during the late 1990s and 2000s, the book's second section provides an immensity of intimate detail that will be of significant value to scholars of museum studies. This fascinating exhibition featured ground-breaking multimedia facilities and, for its first two years, a working laboratory in which the dinosaur *Maiasaura* was being processed. Noble sees this case study as capturing changing late-century attitudes to gender and public engagement that, in contrast with Osborn's 'masculinist circuits of production', demonstrate self-conscious 'notions and practices of feminized animals and outcomes' (164). The motherly gendering of the *Maiasaura* specimen (in fact of unknown sex) became, through a variety of contingent factors, a prominent challenge to conceptions of the masculinity of dinosaurs. The detailed analysis that follows traces how factors including the then-recent *Jurassic Park* (1993) film and an increasing sectoral requirement for entertainment value additionally 'mutated in unexpected ways' the curator's initial optimistic hopes to display through the lab the 'dynamic process' of palaeontology (319), forming an irresolvable '*specimen-spectacle tension*' (357). In such an environment, meaning became extremely difficult to channel. Carefully roving through his interviews of the ROM staff and museum visitors, Noble is able to plot this complicated story in a satisfying and non-reductive manner. His study provides a map of the competing forces at work in the creation of a dinosaur exhibition at what was arguably the height of 'dinomania', and the fate of the Maiasaur Project is surely an instructive one for palaeontologists and museum professionals considering the multiplicity of meanings that can be conveyed and created in their own exhibits.

Articulating Dinosaurs relays a wealth of scholarship, albeit in a manner that is not always lucid. If its first section somewhat lacks the three-dimensionality of its second, the narrative of gender that connects the two is an often illuminating one. Most importantly, Noble's work with the Maiasaur Project presents an ambitious engagement with the immensely problematic realities of scientific exhibition. His call for museum workers to pursue 'generative directions' in the way that dinosaurs are articulated today—an attention to performativity that goes beyond what he scorns as the shallow naming of dinosaurs after Harry Potter characters—is a just one (405). Rather than the AMNH's orthogenetic *Tyrannosaurus* or the ROM's benignly maternal *Maiasaura*, he proposes an attention to species and ecosystems of the Mesozoic which reflect contemporary concerns such as biodiversity and climate change. With the London Natural History Museum's famous Edwardian cast of *Diplodocus carnegii* disassembled and ready to go on tour, and its pride of place to be taken by the skeleton of a blue whale, further challenging articulations of Noble's '*politics/nature*' appear to be already underway.

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