

Introduction

When I was little, my parents took me to the California Academy of Sciences to learn about the world. My favorite exhibit was a series of elaborate dioramas, each featuring life-sized mannequins of people from other places. One in particular grabbed and held my attention: an African woman crouched in a scrubby landscape, partly nude and holding a grub to her open mouth.

In my memory the grub is enormous, pink and fat and glistening. The woman's exposed breasts and the barrenness of her surroundings heighten my sense of the difference between us: a young white California girl and this brown woman half a world away. I sense my father behind me; he is looking down at my shocked face and laughing. Then for a moment distance and difference collapse. I imagine eating grubs myself, I imagine living naked in this landscape, and I am troubled.

This encounter marked a significant development in my commitment to environmental justice, and it was effective precisely because I saw an "other," a person framed (in this case by the museum) as very different from myself. The surprise of this encounter produced a different kind of vision. I could suddenly see that my life, like the one depicted before me, was built on resources I had taken for granted. The food I ate and the clothes I wore, even my presence in the museum, depended on

a particular consuming of the rest of the world. If other people ate insects, should I too? If other people could live exposed to the elements, did I really need all my possessions? The shock I experienced told me a lot about who I thought I was, even about what I thought it meant to live as a human being.

Later I would learn that the catalyst for this encounter was *ethnographic presentism*, the tendency of earlier anthropology and some current museum displays to “arrest” the ethnographic subject (the foreign human being) in a timeless now that often corresponds to the “primitive” past of the observer.¹ The woman I saw was supposed to stand in for an African way of life that transcended time and space. For a white viewer, this simplified vision was very helpful; in one glance I was able (or thought I was able) to take in the whole of her “Africanness.”

Recognizing the racism of this way of describing and displaying others, anthropologists now emphasize how individual practices vary within communities and how communities change over time. Many museums are overhauling their displays of peoples to reflect *cocuration*, the collaboration among anthropologists, museum curators, and their ethnographic subjects.² In the Field Museum, for example, *The Ancient Americas* (2007) uses multimedia to tell a story of living Indigenous communities and their frequent cultural change, in contrast to the Native North American Hall, which is full of artifacts collected by white Americans in the nineteenth century and arranged in the 1950s.³ Museums have also made explicit how colonialism gave them other people’s artifacts, how those artifacts have been displayed, and the racist ideologies they helped motivate.⁴ The dioramas I saw at the California Academy of Sciences are long gone.⁵

Years after this encounter but still entranced by it, I would also learn that Greek and Roman authors described peoples in a similar mode, in “ethnographies,” the texts they wrote about distant places and their inhabitants.⁶ Herodotus’s fifth-century BCE *Histories*, for example, states that the Babylonians “bury their dead in honey, and mourn like those in Egypt” (1.198), while Diodorus Siculus’s first-century BCE

Library claims that the “majority of Hyperboreans play the cithara” to honor Apollo (2.473). This use of the present tense is not mandatory to the genre, but it is the default in Herodotus, Diodorus, and other ethnographers, who describe many non-Greek customs as eternal, fixed at the time when the ethnographer (or an informant) observed them.⁷ In many ways, these ancient descriptions are the textual equivalent of the diorama I remember seeing as a child.⁸

Ancient Greeks and Romans were not the only peoples to develop a system for describing and cataloging others, but there is an especially close relationship between their ethnographies and modern anthropological displays.⁹ Natural history museums in Europe and its colonial holdings, including the United States, grew out of Renaissance “curiosity cabinets,” themselves the legacy of ancient natural history collections held by emperors and other elites, and of textual archives, such as Herodotus’s *Histories* and Diodorus Siculus’s *Library*.¹⁰ Professional and royal collectors vied with Greek and Roman authors to amass unusual objects and explain their origins, while Jesuit missionaries described the peoples they encountered in the “New World” by comparing them to ancient “barbarians.”¹¹

Despite their formative influence on later colonialists, Greek and Roman ethnographies had a more complicated relationship to ancient colonialism. As Ian Moyer has argued, there is little evidence to suggest that Greek and Roman imperialists, unlike their later counterparts, used ethnographies as handbooks for conquest.¹² Nevertheless, Greek and Roman ethnographic writing often depended on imperialist projects. Inasmuch as ethnographies derive from on-the-ground encounters between different peoples (rather than authors’ imaginations), conquest—like trade—caused contact and encouraged the exchange of information; conquerors in particular needed to gather information about the people they wished to rule.¹³

Herodotus’s main subject, the fifth-century BCE wars between Greek city-states and the Persian Empire, describes other peoples in the order the Persians conquered (or tried to conquer) them and in the

context of his account of Persian expansion, so that Persian imperialism gives rise to and structures the ethnographies of the *Histories*.¹⁴ Given the wealth of Persian sources Herodotus mentions, we can assume that Persian expansion provided the Persian court, and subsequently Herodotus, with some of the ethnographic information he reports.¹⁵ In other words, the Persian conquests that preceded the Greco-Persian wars “opened” the world for Greek scholars as much as for Persian kings.¹⁶ As an author who seems to have relied largely on textual sources, Diodorus is further removed from the conquests that generated his information.¹⁷ On the other hand, several of his sources, including Megasthenes and Agatharchides, seem to have seen conquest or its aftermath up close.¹⁸

Like early modern anthropologists, Greek and Roman ethnographers also deployed the ethnographic present to enhance their own authority. The ethnographic present constructs a moment of direct contact between ethnographer and ethnographic subject and places the reader there; this allows the reader the pleasurable illusion of travel and increases the credibility of the ethnographer, whose account, because timeless, never loses its authority. The ethnographic present also constructs the other person as other by forcing them to stand still and be compared to the observer. To return to the preceding examples, the present tense used to describe Babylonian funeral customs allows Herodotus’s readers to compare these customs to those they themselves practice and assume that they understand the difference between themselves and the other.

The cultural customs (*nomoi*) Greek ethnographies describe range from mourning and religion to dress and education. In line with my encounter with the nameless woman in the California Academy of Sciences, *Other Natures* focuses on what I call environmental cultures, human practices in which we can see the interactions among humans, other species, and larger ecosystems. This book is my inquiry into the environmental cultures of Greek ethnography and a chronicle of my own encounter with this ancient mode of writing. It tells the story of

how two Greek authors, Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Diodorus Siculus, reflected on the environmental questions of their own time by analyzing how non-Greeks interacted with other beings and explores how we can read Herodotus's and Diodorus's texts to understand Greek environmental discourse. It further argues that people in the present day can use Greek ethnographies to confront environmental degradation and transform their own relationships to other species.

In this book, the term *discourse* denotes a system of meaning that structures the way people talk, write, and otherwise communicate with one another. By looking at written documents, such as ethnographies, as well as dioramas, photographs, and other objects one might find in a museum of natural history, we can begin to understand the concepts, assumptions, beliefs, fears, hopes, and other thoughts of the people who created them. Discourse is the pattern that underlies or governs these thoughts, even if people are not aware of the pattern's existence. Discourse is a set of rules to a game you may not even know you are playing.¹⁹

Greek ethnography embodies many discourses. There is its discourse of power, both the imperial power that often generates information about other peoples and the hierarchies that Greek authors assume govern other societies. There is its discourse of sex, gender, and sexuality, which structures the customs Greek authors track and the way they represent (or fail to represent) women and nonbinary people. These discourses and others appear in the following chapters, while many others do not, but my main focus is the environmental discourse in Greek ethnographies and, later on, in museums of natural history. Environmental discourse governs how Greek authors describe human beings in relation to other species and larger ecosystems. It determines the way Greek authors divide the world into natural categories, including species and sex, and how they evaluate the relationships between creatures in different categories—who should eat whom, for example.

I begin with a passage that exemplifies the kind of discourse I am describing. In his fifth-century BCE *Histories*, Herodotus reports that

there are a number of peoples living in what he calls Libya (present-day Libya and Algeria).²⁰ Among them are the Nassamones. Herodotus begins:

οἱ τὸ θέρος καταλιπόντες ἐπὶ τῇ θαλάσῃ τὰ πρόβατα ἀναβαίνουνσι ἐς Αὔγιλα χώρον ὀπωριεῦντες τοὺς φοίνικας οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ καὶ ἀμφιλαφεές πεφύκασι, πάντες ἐόντες καρποφόροι. τοὺς δὲ ἀττελέβους ἐπεὰν θηρεύσωσι, αὐήναντες πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον καταλέουσι καὶ ἔπειτα ἐπὶ γάλα ἐπιπάσσοντες πίνουσι.

In the summer, they leave their herds by the sea and travel up to a place called Augila to gather dates. Plenty of tall, wide-spreading trees grow there, and they all bear fruit. And when they hunt locusts, they dry them in the sun and grind them up, then drink them sprinkled over milk. (Hdt. 4.172)

From this passage, we learn that the Nassamones herd animals, gather dates, and eat locusts. We learn that they depend on these species, and that these species are in turn indigenous to (or at least well-established in) the region. This description of Nassamonian customs is called an “ethnography” by classical scholars, but it is quite different from the social-scientific genre of the same name.²¹ Unlike modern anthropologists, Greek authors mix their descriptions of human beings with information now separated from anthropology, including geography, botany, zoology, and medicine.²² Later in book 4, for example, Herodotus catalogs the animals of Libya (4. 192).

Greek ethnographers are interested not only in *culture*—how different societies practice religion and marriage, what languages they speak, and how they educate their children—but also in what political philosopher Samantha Frost calls “culturing.” In English, *to culture* is “to cultivate, to provide some kind of medium within which a thing or things can grow.” She goes on to explain:

I prefer to think of culture in terms of the verb because it nudges us to take into consideration not just dimensions of our living habitats that shape and give meaning to living bodies and deeply complex forms of

social and political subjectivity, but also those dimensions that materially compose living bodies All of the materials in which creatures are cultured are important to take into account.²³

For ancient Greek (and Roman) ethnographers, human culture cannot be studied apart from the other species and forces with which humans live. They would agree with Frost that “all of the materials in which creatures are cultured are important to take into account.” Yet this does not mean that Herodotus answers all of our questions. He tells us that the dates the Nassamones eat are abundant and how they prepare them, but we do not know how the Nassamones feed their herds, or if they eat meat or anything other than dates and locust smoothies.

Nevertheless, this commitment to describing humans alongside other beings puts Greek ethnographies at odds with the dominant strain of white Western environmental discourse, which has strictly partitioned nonhuman “nature” from human “culture” since at least the nineteenth century.²⁴ This partition has shaped and severely limited environmental practice at both the individual and institutional levels. White Western environmental discourse is not necessarily *environmentalist*, that is, convinced that large-scale human violence against other species is immoral (or at least unsustainable). Both environmentalists and their opponents assume this division between humans and “nature.” But the effects of the human/nature partition have been particularly tragic for environmentalists. As US environmental historian William Cronon once said: “If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. . . . We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.”²⁵ Classical studies, the academic study of ancient Greece and Rome, has been implicated in the human/nature partition through Platonic dualism, which sets human reason above and beyond the material world, and its reception in the European Enlightenment.²⁶ While some

classical scholars have argued that aspects of Platonic thought can be made compatible with environmentalist projects, this book demonstrates that ethnographies embody a different strand of environmental discourse in Greek literature.²⁷

My interest in the environmental discourse of Greek ethnography has two foci. The first focus delimits categorical boundaries, whether between nations and continents (chapter 2) or between bodies: male, female, human, and animal (chapter 3).²⁸ The second focus explores environmental cultures by investigating how particular people feed themselves (chapter 4) and manage wealth (chapter 5). Through their depiction of relationships between humans and other beings, ancient Greek ethnographies suggest that people are coconstituted both culturally and materially with what is around them, that human beings will thrive if they organize society to promote economic self-sufficiency, and that independence from other human communities entails and encourages collaboration with nonhuman communities.

Since Greek ethnography was a genre controlled by elite men, its environmental discourse cannot be called “Greek” in a universal sense.²⁹ At the same time, the principles and possibilities that emerge from Greek ethnography are also a product of non-Greeks; the people Herodotus and Diodorus call Egyptians, Indians, Babylonians, and Scythians have left their imprint.³⁰ To whatever degree readers of this book find Greek ethnographies helpful to think with, they must credit the non-Greeks without whom these texts would not exist.

And why is Greek ethnography helpful to think with? The ancient world seems rather remote from the long environmental crisis in which we find ourselves, essentially unrelated to the rising and accelerating toll of extinctions and the environmental oppression of people without political power. What I offer here is primarily a cultural history of ancient Greece, a conservation of ancient Greek meanings, but this conservation is also, in Joy Connolly’s word, “purposive,” since it is animated by the needs of the present.³¹ In particular, I am driven by an urgent dread of the environmental destruction in which I participate as a consumer in one of

the world's richest countries. As I struggle with how to live in the Anthropocene, this new age of unprecedented human shaping of the world, I am hoping to receive an epiphany from my encounter with ancient cultures.³² I know from studying my sources that this encounter is itself implicated in both the history of empires that brought information to Greek ethnographers and the canonization of Greek and Roman "classics" by European powers that has made these texts especially precious to me.³³ Nevertheless, I have found a great deal of worth in ancient Greek ethnographies, not because the environmental cultures they describe are easily applicable to the present day, but because the human and non-human entanglements they explore challenge my most deeply held assumptions about who I am and how I should live.³⁴

Readers of this book may now follow (at least) two paths, reading through parts I and II continuously or skipping to part II for a return to present concerns, including museum displays like those I have described. After spending the majority of the book on ancient Greek ethnography, this return to natural history museums allows me to explore the resonance of Greek and Roman ethnography in living institutions and suggest places this resonance can be leveraged for environmental pedagogy. In these concluding chapters, natural history museums become the ground on which I stake my hope for the transformation of environmental culture.

Chapter 1, "Sources and Methods," introduces Herodotus's *Histories* and Diodorus's *Library*, including their relationship to Hellenistic historiography; significant concepts that recur in the chapters, including *physis* (nature) and *bios* (way of life); and the discourse of ancient cultural history and its relationship to ethnography. The chapter also outlines the history of ecocriticism both in and outside of classical studies and describes theoretical methods that animate the book, especially Indigenous cosmovisions and new materialisms, including the philosophy of Karen Barad.

Chapter 2, "Rulers and Rivers," argues that the boundaries between peoples and continents in Herodotus and Diodorus are not immutable,

but emerge from the interactions of rulers, rivers, historians, and their surroundings. It begins with a reexamination of the Persian king Xerxes's "transgressing" the border between Europe and Asia, when he whips, brands, and bridges the Hellespont. Rather than setting up Xerxes's actions as unnatural or his bridge as artificial, Herodotus's text indicates that the great works (*erga*) of rulers should be judged by their effects. Yet this does not free humans to act as they will in the world. The stories in Herodotus's *Histories* and Diodorus's *Library* suggest that humans and other forces (especially rivers like the Nile) should intervene in land- and waterscapes to help the human community.

Chapter 3, "Female Feck," argues that women in Greek ethnography possess *feck*, the ability to make a difference in the world, and use their outsider status and "situated knowledge" to rewrite bloodlines, expand empires, and destabilize sex/gender and species categories. One prominent example is Semiramis in Diodorus's *Library*, who invents a gender-concealing garment to scale the walls of Bactra and giant elephant devices to fool her enemies in India. But women's bodies also surpass their and others' control. In the *Histories*, for example, the Persian queen Atossa has a breast tumor that puts her in the power of her doctor. Under his influence, she convinces her husband Darius to invade Greece, kickstarting the Greco-Persian wars.

Chapter 4, "Dietary Entanglements," turns from borders and bodies to bodily practices, particularly diet and its effects on health. Herodotus and Diodorus understand food not as an inert substance but an active force that, to use Sam Frost's term, "cultures" human beings. For example, although long-lived Ethiopians in the *Histories* benefit from a diet of animal meat and milk, the Persians who pursue them end up eating one another. While Herodotus assumes that humans cannot escape the effects of these dietary entanglements, Diodorus shows that people can mitigate the negative consequences of certain diets by seeking even more interdependence with other species. His Egyptians are prime examples: although they have access to a variety of unhealthy refined foods, they protect themselves by feeding most of these to sacred animals.

Chapter 5, “Resisting Luxury,” continues the theme of consumption, focusing on wealth. It argues that Solon and Croesus’s dialogue on wealth and happiness in the first book of Herodotus lays out principles that govern not only individual lives but also countries and their populations. Through the *Histories* we learn that human communities are easily destroyed by wealth: the envy of others often leads to being conquered, and the desire for more impels wealthy nations to conquer their neighbors. On the contrary, the happiest peoples are those who cultivate self-sufficiency, contentment with what they have in their native land. The chapter then analyzes two peoples in Diodorus’s *Library* who escape the problems of wealth by creating alliances with other species: Impassive Fisheaters who pair with trees, fish, and seals to improve their impoverished surroundings; and Indians, who protect their borders with war elephants. Human life flourishes in these interspecies collaborations.

Chapter 6, “After the Encounter,” tries to move beyond the paradox of cultural comparison introduced in chapter 5, that is, that learning about other ways of life may reinforce attachment to one’s own customs rather than provoking change. Using Diodorus’s didactic proem to motivate a reading of the *Library* for the twenty-first century, I encourage readers to “become Amazons” by taking responsibility for how they make the world, extend society to include other beings, and engage with leaders to centralize environmental change. This approach is contrasted with Diodorus’s portrait of Alexander the Great, who applied his values inconsistently, with disastrous results for human life.

In chapter 7, “Transformation in the Natural History Museum,” I express my hope that museums of natural history can bridge the written page and the world of lived experience. By analyzing exhibits in the Chicago Field Museum, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and the Whale Museum, the chapter explores how museums educate visitors about their relationship with other species. A number of these exhibits unintentionally exclude visitors from “nature” and encourage them to respond to environmental crises in very limited ways. Yet visitors to

these museums also encounter ways of life that challenge their own, often in exhibits that do not emphasize environmental conservation. By drawing on the principles of Greek environmental discourse described earlier in this book, curators can leverage their collections for transformative environmental pedagogy.