



Ann Elias. *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4780-0318-2.

Reviewed by Samantha Muka (Stevens Institute of Technology)

Published on H-Environment (April, 2020)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (University of Idaho)

In 1937, surrealist theorist Andre Breton published a submarine image of the Great Barrier Reef in his book *Mad Love*. Breton got the image, originally taken by J. E. Williamson on an expedition in the Bahamas, from the *New York Times*. The original photograph was framed by a circle, indicating that Williamson shot it from a “photosphere”—a small air-filled chamber on the bottom of a submersible that facilitated photography. Breton cropped the photo, giving the viewer the perception that the photograph was shot by a submerged diver. And then he relocated it, from the Bahamas to the Great Barrier Reef, possibly because of the exoticism and delight that audiences took in visuals of the Pacific during this era. Breton’s new image of the Great Barrier Reef, based on Williamson’s Bahamian image, “was among the most widely distributed underwater photographs between 1929 and 1937” (p. 42). Ann Elias describes the finding of this photograph in *Mad Love* as the genesis of her research into her book *Coral Empire*. This photograph sparked her interest in understanding why Breton made these changes and enticed her “to explore why and how the underwater photography and filmmaking of coral reefs in the early twentieth century helped define the experience of being modern” (p. 230). According to Elias, understanding this small photographic saga can

tell us about the development of the coral reef as a “modern spectacle.”

At its heart, *Coral Empire* is a book that seeks to tell the history of coral reefs. This is not a natural history but is instead a book about the way that visual artists shaped public perceptions of these spaces. According to Elias, reefs did not really exist until the era in which they were made visible to the public through photography and moving pictures. The coral reef is an object that only exists after it is seen in these mediums. But this new visibility was not value free and has had implications for the way that these spaces are conceived and used. Elias explores the cinematic coral reef through the work of two artists, Williamson, a photographer in the Bahamas, and Frank Hurley, a film creator on the Great Barrier Reef. Both Williamson and Hurley were some of the first in their fields to produce submarine images and both used their medium to advance images of coral reefs as exotic, dangerous, and linked with colonial fears and desires.

The book is divided into small, episodic chapters. Two-thirds of the book follows the work of Williamson and Hurley and the final sections pull out and discuss larger themes in coral cultural representation. The third half of the book is dedicated primarily to Williamson’s work. The most compelling chapter follows the development of coral reef dioramas for the Field Museum in Chicago

and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Williamson headed an expedition to the Bahamas to collect corals for the dioramas; his videos and photographs would serve as “reference material when constructing the diorama” (p. 69). This chapter is so compelling because Elias makes it clear that the diorama was planned long before collecting began, meaning that collecting and even the field photography followed a preconceived notion of what the expedition *should* find. This included emphasizing the colonial aspects of the reef and especially the link between reefs and danger through the inclusion of a shark feeding frenzy. This chapter shows how the visual culture of reefs was not contained to single photographs but through the embodiment of that vision in Williamson, traveled into scientific visualization seen by millions of visitors.

The next section of the book is dedicated to Hurley’s cinematic visions. Hurley’s film *Pearls and Savages* (1924) introduced moviegoers to both the natural wonders of Pacific reefs but placed those reefs into a colonial context that emphasized the “equally romantic idea of a light-filled coast where pearls are found, and the equally romantic idea of the dark jungles where savages are found” (p. 149). The majority of the chapter and much of Elias’s work on Hurley details his methodology and “nature faking.” Elias shows how Hurley convinced audiences that he filmed underwater while his work was primarily accomplished using aquariums on the beach. Images of reefs were constructed in aquariums and then spread as “nature.” This “nature faking” is indicative of other social constructions of the reef life by Hurley, including his obsession with showing native pearl divers fighting sharks. Elias reminds the reader that this construction, of the native as barbarian, is the outcome of Hurley’s aquarium vision. “He conceptualized the ocean not only as a giant aquarium but also as a giant cinema for projecting dreams and fictions as well as a space to colonize and play in” (p. 168).

The final third of the book pulls out these themes of race and colonization, the nature of truth in these media representations, and the outcome of this vision of coral. Throughout the book, but especially in this final section, Elias clearly links this perception of the reef as object with anthropogenic impacts on imperiled reefs today. My only quibble with Elias in this section, and throughout the book, is that she largely absolves “science” from this vision and instead suggests that these images are unscientific because they are sensational. When discussing Hurley and a scientific advisor’s work in getting images of corals for *Pearls and Savages*, she states “Although Allan McCulloch was a scientist, his concern with the slime emitted by the dying corals was the same as Hurley’s: it interfered with the production of sensational images” (p. 141). This phrase, and many others like it in the book, put subtle distance between the process of making scientific images and sensational images. However, Elias’s larger work, including the Williamson diorama and research during *Pearls and Savages*, shows that it is very difficult to cleave the Gordian knot of sensation and science in underwater visualization during this era.

This book is well written and the short chapters make it extremely readable. In addition, the book is beautifully printed, with black-and-white images embedded in chapters and their color counterparts inserted in the middle of the book. It is refreshing to see a book that relies on the reading of images paying such close attention to their reproduction in the text. I am already using this book in my class on science and visualization, but it would work well for classes on public science, museum studies, or environmental history, or as a gift for someone interested in marine themes.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Samantha Muka. Review of Elias, Ann. *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54484>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.