Empire’s Garden: Anthropology and the Racialization of Vision in fin-de-siècle Paris

During the 1860s a new type of urban space was developed in Paris called the Jardin d’Acclimatation (Acclimatization Garden) which was at once a landscape garden, public attraction, a zoo, and a center for scientific research. Starting in 1877, the Jardin began a regular series of human exhibitions featuring indigenous people from around the world. Though largely forgotten today, these ethnographic expositions ran for thirty years and proved immensely popular with public and the international scientific community. Leading anthropologists of the day such as Paul Broca, Adolphe Bloch played a crucial role in providing the scientific justification for these dehumanizing exhibits, which also introducing a curious public to the nascent discipline of anthropology. In this talk I examine the rise and fall of the exhibitions in Paris, the reactions of the public, and share the stories of several people who were featured in them. I also build on recent visual approaches to the history of science to demonstrate that the exhibitions were a site where racial categories – and the discipline of anthropology itself – were created in tandem through practices related to display, curation, mediation, and the education of the public in racial ways of seeing. Though the era of scientific racism is over in anthropology, I explore the ways in which the visual culture of the discipline continues this legacy in the present.