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book review of

*Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*  
by Renée Ater

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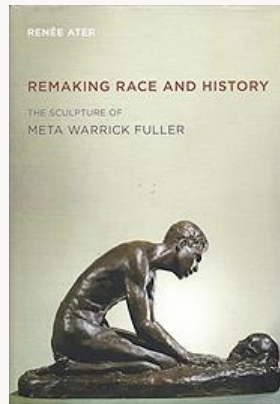
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Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 214pp., 63 b/w illustrations, 8 color illustrations; bibliography; index. \$49.95 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-520-26212-6

If recent publications are to be taken as a measure of current trends in art history, then the time to admire, study, and take seriously women sculptors of the long nineteenth-century has arrived. In 2008 the work of Marie d'Orléans was featured at the Musée du Louvre and the Musée Condé, for which a catalogue was published (Musée du Louvre Editions), and in 2010 *Child of The Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Duke University Press), *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography* (University of Massachusetts Press), and even my own book on Marcello found their way into libraries and onto important bookshelves (and hopefully into the hands of interested scholars as well). Adding to this list, last year the University of California Press at Berkeley published Renée Ater's *Remaking Race and History: the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*, the subject of this review. Ater's book, which derives from her dissertation (*Race, Gender and Nation: Rethinking the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*, PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2000), takes a closer look at Fuller's life, and three of this artist's most important artworks in particular: the *Warrick Tableaux*, a set of fourteen dioramas created for the Jamestown Tercentennial Exhibition of 1907; *Emancipation*, a multi-figure group created for the National Emancipation Exposition of 1913; and Fuller's most famous sculpture, *Ethiopia*, made for the America's Making Exposition of 1921.

The aim of the book, according to Ater, is to "make Fuller's art visible and to define its importance in the history of American art"(2). In her introduction, Ater correctly remarks that Fuller is "marginalized, invisible, and isolated from serious scholarship" and that she hopes to rectify that situation with her book (2). Apart from Fuller, Ater's study is also very largely about the representation of race and the history of the African American experience as presented at the three exhibitions she discusses. Throughout the text, Ater analyses the contradictions of the Progressive Era in terms of race (which sought social transformation through educational, governmental, and industrial reforms, but usually with white middle-class people as the beneficiaries of these developments); the mixed feelings about the segregation of actual

African Americans and their history at the exhibitions she discusses; and, in a very prominent way, the roles of the organizers of African American history and materials at the exhibitions, especially of Thomas J. Calloway and W. E. B. Du Bois. These core issues are central to the book and are revisited throughout in each of the four chapters.

In chapter one, entitled “Foremost Sculptor of the Negro Race,” Ater presents the reader with Fuller’s biography, and she concentrates on the years 1900 to 1940, when the sculptor was most productive. She starts with two photographs of Fuller, one a studio portrait of the artist as an upstanding, prosperous, middle-class wife and mother (what Ater calls “the ideal black woman”); the other an informal photograph of the artist in a flowery dress called a wrapper and loose cummerbund (signifying that Fuller was a free-thinking bohemian artist). These photographs represent a familiar balancing act in the history of artists who were women—how does one successfully balance two or three serious life roles (wife, mother, artist) without allowing something to slip out of the hands and come crashing down into shatters? (Forget the long nineteenth century; how does one do it now?) It was even more profoundly difficult for black female artists, who had to deal with the art world’s opposition to both their gender and their race.

For scholars interested in Fuller’s life, education, challenges and overall career, chapter one will be found most useful. The reader learns of Fuller’s education at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts (now the University of the Arts, Philadelphia) and years in Paris (1899–1903), where she studied at the Académie Colarossi, met Auguste Rodin, and seems to have enjoyed the best reception and commercial successes of her career. She saw the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle and visited the American Negro Exhibit, in the United States Pavilion, where she met the organizers Thomas J. Calloway, W. E. B. Du Bois and Daniel P. Murray (all of whom play a larger role later in the book). There, she repaired, at Calloway’s request, the dioramas by Thomas W. Hunster and his students from the Armstrong Manual Training High School in Washington, DC; this work (called the Hunster Tableaux) would greatly inform her own dioramas discussed in chapter two. Fuller also exhibited her early, Symbolist-inspired works (most of which were later lost in a studio fire, ca. 1910), at the American Women’s Art Association exhibition and the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, and in a solo exhibition of twenty-two works at Siegfried Bing’s L’Art Nouveau Bing Gallery in 1902. However, once Fuller returned to the United States, she faced American-style racism and the numerous challenges presented when doing business with art dealers who would not even seriously consider her work. Her marriage to Dr. Solomon Carter Fuller in 1909, and the subsequent birth of three children, slowed her career to a crawl. Fuller regularly bemoaned the politics of housework, and while she remained artistically and politically active through the 1920s and 30s, her production in sculpture was minimal; Fuller died in 1968, having written more poetry than carving sculptures at the end of her life.

“Segregation and Inclusion” is the title of chapter two, which covers the fourteen dioramas that made up what is now known as the *Warrick Tableaux*, commissioned by Calloway for the Jamestown Tercentennial Exhibition of 1907, held in Jamestown, Virginia. For these dioramas, placed in the Negro Building of the exhibition, Fuller painted canvas backdrops, sculpted 130 two-foot tall plaster figures, and made the clothing for all of the sculptures for the dioramas. The work depicted the advancement of African Americans from the settlement of Jamestown in 1619 to the modern era. The dioramas were an achievement not only for their historical

contribution to the exhibition, but because they focused on the legacy of slavery, emancipation and segregation at a place where this very history was ignored by the white organizers of the rest of the show. Ater presents the dioramas through the lens of four themes that emerge through them: the positive effects of improved environment; the emphasis of clothing on class status; the ideology of racial uplift; and the interpretation of black history as “ethical awakening,” that is, that “African Americans had awakened to their ethical and moral potential” through their linear historical narrative (39). Fuller highlighted church, education, and home life as elements of progress. All fourteen of the dioramas, now lost, are illustrated in the chapter through period photographs, originally published in 1908 in Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis’s *The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States*. The *Warrick Tableaux* won a gold medal at the exhibition in the historical art category, and the pieces were generally well received. There was ambivalence, however, about African American participation at the exhibition, especially in the face of southern Jim Crow laws and rising segregation. Dioramas were also an art form used in ethnological and anthropological collections and displays, and in this way, the works may have been seen as compromising the retelling of the black experience. Additionally, their small size may have made the sculptures seem less “serious” in the eyes of some visitors, particularly white viewers. Ater explores in depth the problems inherent in exhibiting in a segregated exhibition hall: while most African American artists would have preferred to have their work included in the “regular” exhibition halls, their personal history would have been lost to the general public; on the other hand, their inclusion in a segregated building made their works “invisible” (70).

*Emancipation*, commissioned from Fuller by Du Bois for the National Emancipation Exposition of 1913, is the subject of chapter three, “Memory and Commemoration.” The original plaster, life-sized group marked Fuller’s return to sculpture after a six-year hiatus to care for her children, home life, and husband. While she states in an endnote that no photographs of *Emancipation* exist from the exhibition and the period photographs are poor, Ater does not attempt to include contemporary images of the original plaster version of *Emancipation*. (Only images of a posthumous bronze cast of the work, made in 1999, are reproduced. One assumes the original is lost, but then how was the bronze cast produced?) In any case, early in the chapter Ater includes some quotes by Fuller about the commission, which adds her voice to the early pages of this chapter. Du Bois did not seem to like *Emancipation* and Fuller believed that it was because he was offended by the nudity of the figures. The theme of *Emancipation* is discussed herein, and works on the same theme by artists (John Quincy Adams Ward; Edmonia Lewis; and Thomas Ball) from a generation before Fuller’s own are presented as comparisons.

Chapter four, called “Race and Americanization,” focuses on Fuller’s most well-known sculpture, *Ethiopia*, commissioned by Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP for the America’s Making Exhibition of 1921. The exhibition, which honored the contributions of immigrants to American society, named African Americans “honorary immigrants,” even though they weren’t immigrants and did not even have full U.S. citizenship at the time of the show. However, the African American organizers felt that it was better to be an “honorary immigrant” than the alternative, which was to be left out of the history of the nation’s diversity (123). At the exhibition, the lineage of American blacks in Africa was highlighted, and the “Americans of Negro Lineage” booth was modeled after an Egyptian temple. Much of this chapter is concerned with the history of the exhibition and Du Bois’s pageant for it, in which the main character was a mystical figure of Ethiopia similar to Fuller’s sculpture, placed at the

entrance to the booth. Ater does note that *Ethiopia* was displayed in later exhibitions, but she does not provide a clear list of where and when those later showings occurred. At the very end of the chapter, in the last paragraph, Ater suggests *Ethiopia* is a literal and psychological self-portrait of Fuller, but she unfortunately does not fully develop this very interesting line of thought.

Taken as a whole, Ater's text is a significant contribution to many histories in addition to Fuller's own, including African American history, American art history, the history of exhibitions and fairs during the Progressive Era, women's history, and the history of sculpture. While I am reluctant to disparage this book, or any book in which the author's aim is to advance the work of a female sculptor, there were some problems with the text that cannot be completely overlooked. Firstly, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. One expects more discussion of Fuller's many sculptures, but the book is only focused on the three mentioned herein (I would have just changed the subtitle to "The Public Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller"). For example, the wonderful bronze sculpture *Talking Skull* (1937, Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket), which graces the cover of the book jacket, is only mentioned briefly on three pages. Additionally, Fuller was a prize-winning potter, but no examples of her pottery are included in the book. Secondly, Ater does not really discuss Fuller's artistic process. Although there is a photograph of Fuller working in her studio, the image is used to discuss the cramped working conditions with which she had to contend. Ater relegates important information about the sculptures and their materials to the endnotes, and we never really learn about her work with foundries (for example, who cast *Ethiopia* in 1921? Who cast *Talking Skull* in 1937?) and how specific sculptures arrived in the collections where they now reside. I am still unclear as to whether a plaster of *Emancipation* still exists somewhere, and how *Ethiopia* ended up at the New York Public Library (was it in Arthur Schomberg's original collection or was it purchased later?). Ater's strengths lay in her knowledge of the history of early American exhibitions and fairs and the role of African American artists at such venues. Finally, while there is much information within the text about how the sculptures functioned at the public exhibitions for which they were made, readers will find themselves wanting more information about, and analysis of, the sculptures specifically. At times Fuller and her works recede into the background, and the chapters often seem to be more focused on the exhibitions, the reception of the exhibitions, and the exhibitions' organizers (especially Calloway and Du Bois) than on Fuller or her works. In chapter four, one reads pages 116 through 126 with hardly a mention of Fuller or *Ethiopia* at all. The artist does not come completely to the foreground in the later chapters, and, apart from the first chapter that deals with Fuller's biography, the history and reception of the three exhibitions at which her works were exhibited tend to overshadow her own voice about the works and her artistic contributions to these exhibitions. It is also never really clear what Fuller thought of the exhibitions herself.

With that said, Ater's book is the first lengthy publication to offer some serious analysis and consideration of Fuller's life and career, and the function of her public sculpture. Ater's bibliography of Fuller is comprehensive and will be useful to scholars for many years to come. Many of the color plates and black and white images are rare, were taken by Ater herself, or have never before been published. The information about the exhibitions is rich in detail and she presents a full picture of the reception of the exhibitions by everyone from the most well-known black leaders of the day, to the press, to the general public. Ater has a wonderful, jargon-free writing style and an excellent grasp of American racial history during the

Progressive Era. Most importantly, Ater's book whets the appetite for more information on Fuller; her book will certainly inspire other scholars to work on the sculptures by Fuller that she chose not to focus on, gems such as her portraits and head studies, and small works such as *Silence* and *Repose* (c. 1934), *Sorrow* (1934), *The Water Boy* (1914) and others. Ater positions Fuller as an important American Symbolist sculptor of the Progressive Era, and future sculpture scholars of American Symbolism will now be required to take her work (both existing and lost) into consideration when discussing this period. *Remaking Race and History: the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* is an essential text that will be utilized by scholars in various fields for many years to come, and is a welcome addition to the newfound wealth of books on women sculptors.

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