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Interspecies Blendings and Resurrections: Material Histories of Disability and Race in Taxidermy Art

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the contemporary art practice of rogue taxidermy. Specifically, I look at the rogue taxidermy of Sarina Brewer, an artist who utilizes sensationalist aesthetics and representations found in historical sideshows alongside unconventional forms of taxidermy to critique historical and contemporary forms of body display. I discuss the material histories that informed and shaped the practice of taxidermy and how taxidermy was (and continues to be) bound up with a complex history of human and nonhuman animal exploitation. I analyze the interconnections between nonhuman animal taxidermy display and the historical preservation, study, and exhibition of postmortem human bodies in museums. The ethical implications of using nonhuman animal bodies as objects for political art entangle rogue taxidermy artists within the domination of nonhuman animals (alive and dead). The act of using postmortem nonhuman animal materials in artistic sculpture makes rogue taxidermy artists complicit in the history of modernity that used various bodies to outline "undesirable" racial and physiological variances. Furthermore, I analyze the subversive potential of Brewer's sculptures to differently reconstruct sculptures of *lusus naturae* – from past representations – but, also, address the risky complexity of staging "monstrosity" in contemporary rogue taxidermy art. I conclude that the access and permission to place nonhuman animal bodies on display – from the outset – shows a normalization of human domination over nonhuman animal bodies, but argue that Sarina Brewer's art, in various instances, critiques exploitation through multiple forms of body display.

Keywords

Critical disability studies, human-animal studies, taxidermy art, monstrous aesthetics, freak shows

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Introduction

Through the tactile manipulation of corporeal bodies, taxidermy sculptures often inscribe normative values about the existence of nonhuman animal and human animal life. Taxidermy is a practice that involves hunting, killing, and collecting nonhuman animal bodies to produce skinned, stuffed, and displayed trophies, which are meant to replicate the natural pose of the nonhuman animal prior to death. In addition to the large collection of nonhuman animal remains in natural history museums, the historical production of taxidermy has involved a number of postmortem bodily rights violations of both human and nonhuman animal remains. Nonhuman animal bodies and skins were historically used to inform harmful narratives against human bodies that fall outside of normative white, masculine, national, and able-bodied ideals. Many mythologies, narratives, and cultural stereotypes fuel how nonhuman animal bodies are constructed in museums and, when assembled in exhibits alongside humans, taxidermy helped validate discriminatory forms of human oppression (Haraway, 1989; Tobing-Rony, 1996; Wakeham, 2008). While eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taxidermy was used to inform white European superiority over nature, nonhuman animal skins were used to further pathologize humans who were perceived as "abnormal" by their physiological and racial differences. Taxidermists and museum curators have historically used taxidermied nonhuman animals in the displays of disabled, racialized, and gendered bodies in anthropology museums or travelling

displays in order to emphasize certain groups of humans as closer to nonhuman animality (Taylor, 2017; Bogdan, 2012; Bogdan, 1988).

Taxidermy is reliant on ableist norms[1] and the ideologies of eugenic fitness that produces an ideal (nonhuman) animal specimen, but also through the visual manipulation of the bodies of large game to make these specimens appear more dangerous and uplift the narrative of empire's control over the natural world. The manipulation of nonhuman animal appearances began in the Victorian period where the statures and expressions of large (predominately male) nonhuman animals were constructed by taxidermists to appear more menacing and intimidating to inform the struggles and successes of man to dominate dangerous nonhuman animals. Nonhuman animals were staged to express "eugenic fitness" and the "virility" of the human species, while such taxidermied manufacturings sought to further intensify the superiority of white masculinity over exotic nonhuman animals and the lands from which these nonhuman animals came (Wakeham, 2008, p. 12). Taxidermists saw their displays in museums as purified forms of nonhuman animals and nature, whereas such interpretations were western European interpretations of sanitized nonhuman animal life. Historically, taxidermy sought to conquer and conceptualize an authentic and stable nonhuman animal "other" through realist aesthetics. These displays were informed by zoological, anatomical, and indexical knowledge constructs that have continued to inform ideological forms of taxonomic classification of nonhuman animal inferiority and diversity in the present.

Rogue taxidermy is unlike previous traditions that had European hunters electively kill nonhuman animals to symbolize human domination and is different from present day trophy hunters of North America that travel near and far to collect wild game to be mounted onto walls.

[1] Ableism is defined as a set of "assumptions, institutions, and structures that disadvantage persons with disabilities" (Delvin and Pothier, 2006, p. 13).

Rogue taxidermists follow an ethical mandate to never kill nonhuman animals for the purposes of art. Instead, rogue taxidermists acquire nonhuman animal bodily materials through what they have described as "ethical" means, such as roadkill, discarded livestock materials, disowned museum taxidermy, and other donated deceased (nonhuman) animal bodies that have been discussed within the artists circles as dying of "natural" causes. Despite the rogue taxidermy ethics charter to not harm nonhuman animals, there are many ethical stakes in the art collective's problematic choices of acquiring nonhuman animal materials. Motor vehicular accidents, casualties from the trading and transportation of pets, and the discarded materials from slaughterhouses, butchers or garment industries are a few systems among the many that make humans directly responsible for the deaths of various nonhuman animals. Though not directly guilty of these actions, rogue taxidermy artists, like most humans (even those with the best of intentions), are complicit in the systems that exploit and destroy nonhuman animal life through human-made technologies, the occupation of land, and mass consumption. For instance, Koelle (2012) states that roadkill is "evidence of one of the deadlier forms of the complex relationalities between humans and wild creatures that are brought to the fore by our intersecting mobilities" (p. 653). Likewise, many humans are complicit in the daily use and purchase of animal by-products that propagate an economic system founded on postmortem nonhuman animals' bodily materials.

Contemporary "rogue" taxidermy artists diverge from *realist* taxidermy by creating unconventional or anti-realist sculptures that make visible the constructed nature of taxidermy representation itself. The rogue taxidermy art movement is defined by its artists as a form of contemporary pop-surrealist sculpture that uses conventional taxidermy materials in unconventional forms (Brewer, 2019c); however, the art movement does much more than simply appropriate and transform traditional taxidermy design. Rogue taxidermy artists produce

alternative creatures from multiple nonhuman animal bodies in order to make sculptures that are, I argue, antagonistic to realism, colonialism, and restrictive taxonomy. This complex art movement brings forth material histories that have involved the violation of postmortem bodily rights as a result of imperial projects that have extracted nonhuman animal and human (animal) bodies for entertainment and display. Contemporary taxidermy art is primarily championed by North American women artists who have taken up the practice to create anti-conventional (nonhuman) animal art sculptures[2]. Oftentimes these sculptures are used to critique and, arguably, *undo* the violence of hunting, stuffing, and mounting nonhuman animal bodies (see, for example, Niittynen, 2018; Desmond, 2016; Niittynen, 2015; Aloi 2012).

The resurgence of taxidermy is historically rooted in anthropocentrism, masculinity, colonialism, and the projects of eugenics—scientific and ideological knowledge systems and programmes born from European thought that sought to identify and eradicate racial, physiological, and cognitive variances deemed undesirable. Such belief systems and programmes were practiced across European and North American society through multiple projects including reproductive and public health policies and enforced sterilization (Turda, 2010; Schoen, 2005; Ordover, 2003; Kline, 2001). In a North American context, Kafer (2013) writes that "[t]ens of thousands of people diagnosed with various 'defects' were targeted by eugenic professionals and policies for the first half of the twentieth century, classified, and managed in order to contain the alleged risks they posed to public health" (p. 30). For Haraway (1989), the natural history

[2] While there is large diversity among taxidermy artists across the globe, the art movement of "rogue" taxidermy is known for its large number of women practitioners. This realization is rather striking because of the historical association with male bodies with this specific craft (although many white European women, such as Delia Akeley, assisted their husbands in hunting and taxidermying wild game). In a contemporary context, the artists who access nonhuman animal materials through alternative means for taxidermy sculptures (outside of elective forms of violence and harm such as hunting) have been, in large numbers, women (Marbury, 2014, p. 25; Turner, 2013, p. 28).

museum was not simply a force to control nonhuman animals, but also a project in fastening colonial control over civilization and the influx of new immigrants. Likewise, when discussing America's most famous taxidermist, Carl Akeley, and his famous African Hall of Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Wakeham (2008) writes that "[b]y freeze-framing the gorillas and lions of Africa in poses of eugenic fitness, white [sic] men such as Akeley marked their communion with and yet mastery over nature as proof of the virility of their own species" (p. 12); in other words: their race and able-bodiedness.

Rogue taxidermy artists are fundamentally implicated in a practice that staged bodily alterity to inform ideals of whiteness, bodily normativity, and evolutionary "fitness". Rogue taxidermists, however, try to critically undo taxidermy's traditions of display and, in doing so, these artists challenge strict scientific classifications that produce a fixed knowledge. Maleuvre (1999) argues that realist taxidermy successfully encapsulates a Kantian aesthetic, which follows that the taxidermy nonhuman animal be "an image whose perfection lies in the successful concealment of human activity" (p. 214). Calling forth the standards of *successful* taxidermy, which decree that each specimen or trophy must never uncover any visual fabrications of the taxidermy process, rogue taxidermists partake in critical unfoldings and undoings of the principles that make this craft. Rogue taxidermists resurrected taxidermy discarded by museum workers and, in doing so, artists expose cuts, wounds, and stitches on the surface of nonhuman animal skins that were produced through violent means of acquiring nonhuman animal bodies; they incorporate dyes on skins to change the colours and styles of nonhuman animals to go against the normalization of realist representations of museum displays that depict nonhuman animals, naturally, in the wild; and they combine multiple nonhuman animal body parts in order to make abstract, chimerical, and unidentifiable nonhuman animal bodies to break apart the fixed

compulsion to generalize nonhuman animal existence.

Rogue taxidermy artist Sarina Brewer is critically aware of how science has been used to pathologize and colonize physiological variances (both human and nonhuman animal) and this is seen through her use of metaphor and satire in her *Carnival Curiosa* and *Fantasy and Fiction* series (Brewer, 2019a). The *Carnival Curiosa* series is described on her website as "[u]sing anomalies of nature and the freak show tents of yesteryear for inspiration"; Brewer's pieces are "laced with environmental, social, political commentary. Some messages are overt, while others are ambiguous" (Brewer, 2019a). In the pages that follow, I analyze historical and contemporary taxidermy art in conversation with critical disability and feminist scholars. Specifically, I contextualize Brewer's *Carnival Curiosa* and *Fantasy and Fiction* series within a larger discussion about how the history of human and nonhuman animal display inform and also weigh heavily on the present through the use of taxidermied nonhuman animal bodies in the art gallery. Brewer's series are collections of taxidermied nonhuman animals reconstructed as *lusus naturae* or "freaks of nature" by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American imaginaries. Her collection of rogue taxidermy sculptures includes two-headed sheep, mermaids, and other "nondescript" creatures that blur established species boundaries and taxonomies (Brewer, 2019a; Brewer, 2019b).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, nonhuman animals were used to further pathologize humans through socially oppressive discourses that deem some bodies as "normal" and others as "abnormal". In concert with this discussion, I analyze Brewer's art in relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taxidermists that staged postmortem nonhuman animals for their apparent bodily "differences" and also analyze how her work diverges from these displays in order to critique contemporary forms of oppression inflicted on nonhuman animals in the

present. In doing so, I also discuss the risky complexity of utilizing sideshow aesthetics—what I see as romanticized depictions of the historical freak show in both representation and content. Nicholas (2018) writes that "[i]n the stratification of human beings the freak show became a popular consumer pastime that allowed participants to enter into great debates on race, gender, nation, and natural difference" (p. 23). Alongside romanticized depictions of the sideshow perpetuated through rogue taxidermy art, the images of taxidermy in Brewer's *Carnival Curiosa* and *Fantasy and Fiction* series are made up of postmortem bodies. The act of displaying bodies (past and present) is deeply bound to histories of human and nonhuman animal exhibition and exploitation and, as the following section will show, present day taxidermy continues to be intertwined with violent forms of body display.

Historical Roots of Exhibition

Taxidermy was exhibited in museums alongside other curious "oddities" found in what were known as *Wunderkammers* (or "cabinets of curiosities"). *Wunderkammers* were early museum collections that staged objects of otherness and preserved nonhuman animal bodies that were previously unencountered by white Europeans. Originating in sixteenth century Italy, cabinets of curiosities were collections popular in Renaissance Europe and were markers of high-class status for worldly and well-traveled men (Aloi, 2012, p. 31). Objects collected in these cabinet displays were meant to store what were considered obscure items at the time and these objects were displayed and preserved for encyclopedic purposes. Parts of preserved nonhuman animal bodies were one component of a larger collection of antiques, rocks, and other historical relics found throughout colonial expeditions—where all sorts of new nonhuman animal species

and objects were encountered, collected, and brought back to Western Europe (Turner, 2013, p. 20).

The sixteenth-century cabinets were known as spaces of wonder to fuel the imaginaries of western Europeans unaware at the time of the diversity of the planet. Through their analysis and reading of historical European sideshow celebrities, Kérchy and Zittlau (2012) situate curiosity cabinets, anatomical museums, and travelling circuses as the various spaces that bridged the display of human bodies that were famous or displayed because of their physiological variances (p. 11). Likewise, Blanchard et al. (2008) situate the exoticism of human zoos (otherwise known as "living" or "ethnographic" exhibits) with earlier phenomena, such as the chambers of marvels in the great courts of Europe at the end of the sixteenth century and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosities (p. 1). Early forms of menageries created a framework of understanding how humans were later placed within zoological gardens. It was not until science began to widely conceptualize, understand, and categorize (nonhuman) animal and vegetal life that interests in "human morphology" became more prominent (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 2). As a result, human zoos became realities with the growing rate of cross-continental imperial and colonial expeditions (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, Blanchard et al. write that "during centuries of discovery and conquest, travellers and explorers brought living or dead human 'specimens' to the courts of the European monarchs. The strange, the different, and the monstrous have thus long been objects of a lively curiosity" (2008, p. 4).

Throughout the Victorian period, taxidermy broke out of the cabinet and was part of everyday life within the British culture. Amato (2015) writes that taxidermied exotic (nonhuman) animals and other nonexotic wildlife "were fashioned into possessions of surprising diversity, such as chairs, lamps, ornaments, monuments, trophies, clothing, scientific specimens, and a

variety of museum installations" (p. 183). Taxidermy held its golden age during the Victorian period (1837-1901) where big game hunting was a defining sport of the British empire. Hunting and collection of large game became the emblem of burgeoning masculinity and character building of young men. The conquest of large game (nonhuman) animals shaped western European ideologies of white civilization and masculinity. Staged nonhuman animal bodies made into objects were used as evidence of the power, fitness, and tenacity of young adult white men who were able to further the ideals of imperial expansion. Amato points out that taxidermy objects "reflected the Victorian and Edwardian belief that animals should be *useful* to humans, even in death" (2015, p. 183, emphasis added).

While human superiority and domination over wildlife produced a model for British masculinity throughout the Victorian period, there were clear changes to the ways in which taxidermy was produced and displayed. Miller (2012) writes that at the turn of the twentieth century, norms of masculinity changed. The conservation and study of wild nonhuman animals by the rational and concise scientist eclipsed the previously celebrated domineering hunter. The changes were related to the transformation of technologies that were used to preserve nonhuman animal existence; for instance, the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century saw hand-held cameras replace taxidermy as a tool to "capture" and represent the natural world. The end of the nineteenth-century "[n]atural history [museum] turned away from cruelty in favour of a more restrained model of masculinity that intends to moderate the aggressive pleasures of hunting" (Miller, 2012, p. 71). Hunting, however, continued to be encouraged in order to meet demands for specimen collection in encyclopedic records and natural history museums. The result of this process of gaining nonhuman animal "objects" to further

Enlightenment knowledge led to killing and decimating nonhuman animal populations on a grand scale (Wirtén, 2008, p. 88). Gregory and Purdy (2015) state that:

> The paradoxical notion that you had to kill animals in order to preserve them derives from the desire to maintain a social or ecological system in a fixed and undefiled state of purity that could be appreciated and studied by future generations (p. 67).

Interspecies Connections

Like taxidermied nonhuman animals, human bodies (alive and dead) were, and continue to be, displayed in a number of different contexts. Carlson (2007) elaborates that the association of nonhuman animals with particular groups of human animals has been part of the dehumanizing process. She argues that groups such as women, racialized, ethnic and national peoples, criminals, and the physically and mentally disabled have been particularly vulnerable to the negative aspects of this association. In the frame specifically of the entertainment industry, Taylor (2017) writes that:

> [I]n the spectacle that is the sideshow, animality was front and center—with the most demeaning of animal comparisons being reserved for people of color and for intellectually disabled persons. In the sideshow animality was used to spark the imagination by transgressing common categories and distinctions with theatrics and spectacles, while also legitimizing scientific racism, imperial expansion, colonization, and fear of disability (p. 104).

Throughout her book *Beasts of Burden,* Taylor (2017) describes how nonhuman animals were staged alongside humans in order to exaggerate "abnormalities" and "exoticisms" that were shaped by an ableist and colonial worldview. As a result of the various social norms that

permitted the display and exploitation of human bodies when these persons were alive, the continual display of their bodies after death was a common occurrence. Many sideshow performers were placed on display and toured across Europe and North America after their deaths, oftentimes against the wishes they had expressed when they were alive. Similarly, taxidermied nonhuman animals were toured after their deaths in circuses and sideshows. For example, controversial American showman P.T. Barnum (1810-1891)[3] toured the taxidermied remains of circus elephant Jumbo (captive from 1882-1885) after Jumbo was hit and killed by a train in St. Thomas, Ontario. Using Jumbo's death as an opportunity to make a profit, Barnum told patrons the story of saving "Tom Thumb", where Jumbo courageously gave up his own life by pushing Tom Thumb (a dwarf elephant) away from the train (Harding, 2000, p. 110). Jumbo was then stuffed (with bones preserved) and displayed with the circus (Nance, 2015, p. 68, 70).

Scholars have argued that human colonization has not been readily extended to nonhuman animal colonization because of the fears of trivializing human oppression (Armstrong, 2002, p. 413). Armstrong (2002) writes that the "absolute difference" between what is deemed the human and what is called the animal are the result of colonial ideologies and legacies of European modernities and "imperialistic humanism" (p. 414). Alongside Armstrong's call for a closer postcolonial-animal studies perspective (2002, p. 416-417), Tuvel (2011) points out that the fear to extend recognition to nonhuman animals from an anti-racist perspective is already shaped by a preestablished anthropocentrism (p. 223). Similar arguments can be made in regard to critical disability work that has noted the longstanding history of exhibitions that used nonhuman animality to construct human bodies as "nonnormative" (Clare, 1999; Taylor 2017);

[3] Phineas Taylor Barnum was a famous showman who toured his circus across North America and Europe and ran a museum, known as Barnum's Grand Scientific and Musical Theatre in New York City (O'Neill, 2017).

many contemporary disability scholars have highlighted the importance between connecting critical disability and animal studies scholarship. For instance, Nocella (2016) has advocated for "eco-ability" scholarship that takes into account the interconnections and intersections between people with disabilities, nonhuman animals, and the environment. He argues that these fields of thought can learn a lot from each other, as he highlights, for example, how linguistic ableism and speciesism continues to oppress groups fighting for social justice for all beings (p. 325).

For Carlson (2007), however, western philosophy and animal rights scholarship spearheaded by Peter Singer have harmfully conflated nonhuman animals with cognitively disabled persons when engaging in philosophical debate and questioning what beings fall under the consideration of moral status. Such conflations, argues Carlson (2010), are at risk of erasing historical and individual complexities when persons with cognitive disabilities are classified or made abstract through the processes of philosophical inquiry. Under similar terms, Haraway (2007) speaks to the erasure of animal existence when nonhuman animals are used as metaphors and analogies by philosophers who ignore *real* nonhuman animals in order to advance their own philosophical claims (p. 20-21, 46). As a rejoinder to Carlson's work and in equal criticism of the problematic and dangerous arguments made by Peter Singer, Taylor (2017) seeks to uplift nonhuman animality through her work on disability, language, and experience. Taylor writes that:

> Animals are a category of beings that in the western tradition we have decided that we rarely, if ever, have duties toward—we can buy them, sell them, and discard them like objects. To call someone an animal is to render them a being to whom one does not have responsibilities, a being that can be shamelessly objectified. (p. 108)

Despite the tensions that arise and subside across the interdisciplinary fields of critical disability

and animal studies, *what draws humans and nonhuman animals together in my arguments are the ontological culmination of becoming a corpse and what ethical and moral questions can arise when postmortem bodies are violated of rights.* There are several human rights violations recorded in response to the preservation of postmortem human bodies that are marked as "monstrous" by their disability, gender, race, sexuality, class, and species classification. For example, there are countless examples of human rights violations that involve the display and preservation of postmortem human bodies; these examples include the ongoing debates on the treatment of Indigenous remains as "artifacts" in archaeological research (Sillar and Fforde, 2005); Peter the Great's collection of children with diverse sexual and physiological variances in his 1718 *Kunstkamera* (Anemone, 2000); the preservation and subsequent display of famous "freak" show entertainer Julia Pastrana [(1834-1860) Garland-Thomson, 1998]; and the display (against his wishes) of Mr. Charles Byrne's (1761-1783, otherwise known as "The Irish Giant") skeletal remains at the Hunterian Museum in London (Asma, 2001).

Other human displays include partial or full preservation, biopsies, autopsies, and displays of marginalized bodies. For instance, the invasive dissections on criminal corpses in anatomy schools (Ward, 2015); the public autopsy of elderly and disabled African American slave woman, Joice Heth [(c. 1756-1836) Reiss, 2009]; the exploitation and display of an Indigenous man known as "Ishi" (c. 1861-1916) who had his brain dissected (against his wishes) and preserved at the Smithsonian Institute (Day, 2016); and, more specifically, the preservation and display of African bodies seen in the cases of Saartjie Baartman [(1789-1815, otherwise known as the "Hottentot Venus") Reiss, 2009] and the man known only as, and given the appalling title of, "El Negro of Banyoles" (Rapoo, 2011).

While the corpses, preserved bodies, and skeletal remains of various marginalized bodies continue to be on display in anatomy museums in the present, so too are nonhuman animals placed on display to fulfill an artistic, educational, or anthropocentric drive to look at and extract the materials of postmortem bodies. Garland-Thomson (1996) writes that just "[a]s scientific explanation eclipsed religious mystery to become the authoritative cultural narrative of modernity, the monstrous body moved from the freak show stage into the medical theater" (p. 2). Historically, taxidermy was considered most successful when the nonhuman animal's eyes were realistic enough to capture an intimate gaze (albeit illusory) with the human onlooker. As Poliquin (2012) writes, "[t]here is no taxidermy without human longing to perpetuate the ability to *look* at animals" (p. 82).

Any representation of an nonhuman animal body through taxidermy is constructed through human centered interpretive frames; however, traces of exploitation towards other human persons for their constructed physiological "differences" haunts these displays. I argue that traces haunt, not simply because the materials were once attached to a living (nonhuman animal) being, but because human socio-cultural frameworks assess value through certain materials, objects, and other constructed forms, such as nonhuman animal skin. The word taxidermy has its roots in the Greek τάξις (*taxis*), arrangement or order, and δέρμα (*dérma*), meaning "skin" (Wakeham, 2008, p. 9). Distinct from nonhuman animal skins, taxidermy sculptures include synthetic and artificial materials that are used to portray the animating features and ideals of the living nonhuman animal, and are used to replace parts of the body that are unable to be preserved upon death. According to Hansen (2010):

> In Latin, there are two main words used for skin: *cutis*, signifying human skin, and *pellis*, which refers to animal skin. The latter term also stands for dead, flayed skin. In other

words, the body contours *as* remains suggest a becoming-animal of the skin itself (p. 12). Traditional taxidermy, Hansen goes on, "pushes forward the belief that animals *are* their skin" (2010, p. 14). When skin is flayed from the dehumanized body, the body becomes exploitable, albeit animal-like. In the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sideshows and human zoos, humans were staged with live nonhuman animals or adorned in nonhuman animal skins in order to exaggerate exoticism and further dehumanization (Taylor, 2017, p. 108-109; Bogdan, 2014, p. 26; Bogdan et al., 2012, p. 18). Deckha (2006) argues that, "social meanings ascribed to abjected animal bodies were and are generated from the same discourses which produce(d) abjected human bodies" (p. 19). Taxidermy in its various forms are reproductions of norms that are human made. Furthermore, I discuss Brewer's sculptures below for evoking traces from the complex history of display that staged and represented bodies (nonhuman animal and human) as "nonnormative" or "unruly" and how such discourses are informed by nineteenth-century anxieties about human and nonhuman animal interspecies blending.

Taxidermy is not separated from famous sideshows or the display of humans in zoos as many living humans who were displayed to the public when alive, subsequently had their bodies preserved, studied, and displayed after their deaths. In *Beastly Possessions*, Amato writes that "Victorians went to great lengths to ensure that most human bodies remained intact at death" (2015, p. 190). By contrast, the displacements of skin were commonplace in taxidermy practices that managed nonhuman animal corpses. Furthermore, she stresses that beliefs about the "sanctity" of the human body—that humans were "higher beings and spiritual entities" – allowed nonhuman animals to be treated as raw material and turned into objects (Amato, 2015, p. 183). Not all humans were treated equal, however, as Amato explains that there were clear exceptions to the rule such as humans with perceived disabilities, racial differences, or criminal

backgrounds. She writes that "humans perceived to have abnormal bodies were sometimes treated like animals and natural history specimens, anatomized after death and preserved for future study and display. This was the final stage in the process of dehumanization" (Amato, 2015, p. 183).

Many feminist disability scholars recall the exploitations of Julia Pastrana, a sideshow performer who was displayed not simply because of her perceived physiological "difference" (a genetic condition, hypertrichosis terminalis), but also because of her racial difference. Pastrana was a Mexican Indian woman born in 1834 in the Sierra Madre Mountain region of Mexico. She was represented as "animalistic" in advertisements that labelled her either "The Ape Woman" or "Bear Woman". She was exhibited in New York in 1854 and became famous in London after touring across Europe in the late 1850s. Taylor (2017) writes that, "[Pastrana] was analyzed by doctors, anthropologists, and scientists who described her body as 'hideous,' 'deficient,' 'extraordinary,' and 'hybrid'" (p. 105). Discussing how her gender and race factored into the descriptors of Pastrana's perceived bodily "difference", Taylor explains that:

> Scientists and showmen alike would speculate over whether she was human or ape or whether she might be of African descent (which is where the racist science of the day imagined that a 'missing link' between the two would be found). Her 'feminine figure,' small waist, delicate feet, 'remarkedly full breasts,' and lovely singing voice were dramatically contrasted to her body hair, beard, and supposedly masculine and apelike facial features. (2017, p. 105)

Pastrana's story is significant because after her death in 1860, caused by complications of childbirth, her husband (also her manager), Theodore Lent, had her and her child (who also died shortly after childbirth) embalmed by Professor Sukolov of Moscow University's Anatomical

Institute. After her and her son's embalming, Lent repurchased their bodies and continued to exhibit their bodies to the public (Garland-Thomson, 2003, p. 130). Garland-Thomson (2003) writes that:

> By February 1862, Pastrana's body, along with her baby's, were being viewed again in London. Now billed as 'the Embalmed Female Nondescript,' her viewers were often those who had seen her live performance only a few years earlier. Pastrana's singular body, not with her son's, continued to circulate on public exhibition in various museums such as the Prater in Vienna, in circuses, before Royal families, and in amusement parks for well over one hundred years. In 1972, Pastrana's body toured the United States with a traveling amusement park called the Million Dollar Midways. Because public and religious objections now make Pastrana's display an embarrassment, her embalmed corpse has been retired to the basement of the Institute of Forensic Museum in Oslo where it is studied by medical experts (p. 130).

After her death, Pastrana's remains were turned into an object and the process of specimen construction allowed for the scientists, anthropologists, and the public to gaze at her postmortem body. In February of 2013, writes Taylor, Pastrana was finally buried after 112 years of display and touring across Europe and America (2017, p. 105).

Pastrana was often described as a "nondescript" as her appearance seemingly fell outside of the constructed categories of species formation. The word "nondescript" was, "a commonly used terminology for animals not yet classified or described by science" (Bogdan, 2014, p. 136). In eighteenth and (early) nineteenth century America, Bogdan (2014) states that, "[m]any of the exhibits had yet to be classified by taxonomists. Such fields as endocrinology, genetics, and anthropology were in their infancy" (p. 26-27). The nondescript, as a species hybrid, further

evoked the discourses about monstrosity; Grasseni (1998) writes that, "[t]he Nondescript questions precisely the relation of 'fidelity' to 'scientific responsibility': monstrosities are living debates about what constitutes 'naturalness', and about who has the authority to describe and appropriate it" (p. 286). Situating dominant discourses at the time, Henning (2007) writes that blending between species (human and nonhuman animals) created a great deal of uneasiness because such discourses were used to exemplify connections between people of colour and apes through evolutionary theory and narratives reinforced by popular culture to encourage imperial expansion (p. 672). In the next section, I discuss Brewer's *Carnival Curiosa* and *Fantasy and Fiction* series and analyze contemporary rogue taxidermy art's complicated political motivations.

Sarina Brewer's Sideshow Aesthetics and Hybrid Bodies

Sarina Brewer is an American artist working in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A self-described sculptor, Brewer did not train as a taxidermist. Her techniques include skinning carcasses with a scalpel, tanning hides, and creating clay molds of the skeletal remains. Final skins are glued to the constructed (nonhuman) animal mannequin. Each mannequin must be built from scratch, as Brewer's taxidermied nonhuman animal creations take on shapes not normally reconstructed or provided in taxidermy supply stores (Desmith, 2009). Brewer's sculptures in her *Carnival Curiosa* and *Fantasy and Fiction* collections expose a history of exhibition shows that displayed nonhuman animals as "monsters" and "freaks" in order to define the (bodily, gendered, sexual, and racialized) normality and normativity of the "ideal" human.

Appropriating and utilizing the monstrous or (re)creating nonhuman animals from classic sideshow displays is risky given that many humans have experienced extreme forms of exploitation and trauma under such designations or systems of entertainment. Equally risky are

the histories of mass destruction of nonhuman animal populations for Enlightenment knowledge that used taxidermy to illuminate static depictions of nature. Discussing her *Carnival Curiosa* collection, Brewer has stated in an interview that she has optimized on a niche market of taxidermy art buyers who continue to run contemporary sideshow businesses. Having come to sideshow aesthetics from her own personal fascination with *lusus naturae* (Hodges, 2004), Brewer's personal politics are complicated not only by present day scholarship critical of the exoticism and exploitation of disabled bodies placed on display in historical "freak" shows, but also by present-day animal rights scholars and activists that find the use of taxidermy in art galleries obscene (discussed in Niittynen, 2015).

Brewer's taxidermied bodies do show subversive potential when brushed up against the tradition of realist taxidermy. Her creations of sideshow nonhuman animals are, however, fraught with a long material history that used animals to determine the "nonhuman". In various ways, Brewer romanticizes sideshow aesthetics in her series of sculptures. For example, she takes on the aesthetics normally displayed, such as the bright and playful colour schemes, the sensationalized content, the recreation of historical bodies (in this case the Feejee Mermaid discussed below), or the language used to exaggerate sideshows. In Brewer's sculpture *A Rude Awakening* (Fig. 1), an amalgamated body of a rooster and skunk sits on top of a display mount that reads "The Greatest Show on Earth". The satirical tone of her art portrays that there is something foul in sideshow display and this representation is an example of the many ways that her sculptures ambiguously critique and, sometimes, politically present messages to her viewers.

Fig. 1: Sarina Brewer, *A Rude Awakening*, 2017. Rooster and skunk taxidermy. Image used with permission from artist, © Sarina Brewer.

In relation to the inter-blending between species in contemporary taxidermy art, Brewer's taxidermied hybrids are perhaps politically resistant because they work against taxidermy's realist principles that construct discourses about fixed bodily normalcy. For instance, Brewer utilizes monstrous aesthetics specific to nonhuman animals through cryptozoology—a parascience of unknown, rumored or hidden creatures that question the normative classification of species based on discovery. In several instances, cryptozoology brushes up against the discourses of monstrosity; specifically, when creatures such as "Big Foot" threaten the boundaries of anthropocentrism's animal-human divide. An example of this type of nondescript or "missing link" monstrosity (creatures that blur the line between human and nonhuman animals) is found in Brewer's sculpture *Viva La Barnum* (Fig. 2), a reproduction of the famous "Feejee Mermaid" gaff that shocked the people of England (and later America).

Fig. 2: Sarina Brewer, *Viva La Barnum*, 2007. Taxidermy. Image used with permission from artist, © Sarina Brewer.

The Feejee Mermaid was advertised as half human and half fish when it was first displayed to the public in 1822 at the Turf Coffeehouse in London. Brewer's taxidermied depiction of the mermaid is influenced by the 1822 advertisement for the London Coffeehouse. Brewer's mermaid stands upwards with two claws, two gills, and a tail, with the face of a monkey that is reminiscent of the description of the mermaid as a "dried, shrunken and blackened corpse"; "manufactured by attaching the upper torso of a monkey to the body of a

fish" (Leja, 2006, p. 54). Like the visual caricatures used to overexaggerate and advertise the circus gaffs, the visual representation of the Feejee Mermaid was interpreted through a cultural lens that perceived bodily difference as "perverse".

Originally created by a Japanese fisherman, the Feejee Mermaid landed in England in 1822 and was circulated among communities until 1825, later to be transferred to the United States by Samuel Barrett Eades in the 1820s and purchased by Captain Eade's son, Moses Kimball, and P.T. Barnum in 1840 (Laurent, 2017). Laurent (2017) writes that eighteenth-century stories of men encountering mermaids on ocean travels for colonial expeditions informed both the fascination and wonder of nineteenth-century English scientific and public discourse. These stories were shared orally and little to no proof confirmed these encounters. Displayed in 1842, the Feejee Mermaid was exhibited by P.T. Barnum and was considered one of Barnum's most sensational exhibits (Levi 1977), given that the fascination towards the mermaid had more to do with locating the (porous) boundary between human and nonhuman animal, as well as the gendered and racial politics that informed identity at the time. Shildrick (2002) writes that, "[monstrosity] destabilises the grand narratives of biology and evolutionary science and signifies other ways of being in the world" (p. 10); however, the nonhuman animal "monster" alone does not unsettle the security of the human in the ways that nonhuman animality—interblended with humanity—threatens the perceived restrictive boundary of human existence. Further, she writes that:

> The animal is the other in the comforting guise of absolute difference, but in its lack of humanity it cannot appeal direct to the heart of our own being. Those monsters that are at least in an ambivalent relationship to humanity, however, are always too close for comfort. They invoke vulnerability. (Shildrick, 2002, p. 20)

Brewer's fascination with the aesthetics of sideshows, nondescripts, and other "missing links" is influenced by Barnum's story. The celebratory "*viva la"* (long live) in Brewer's sculpture highlights the popularity of P.T. Barnum as a celebrity icon in America, adding to the erasure of Barnum's exploitation of many marginalized humans and nonhuman animals. The celebratory tone of Barnum's past is no more evident than through Michael Gracey's 2017 musical, *The Greatest Showman*, which romantically depicts Barnum (Hugh Jackman) as a family man who is also an ally to the many human "attractions" that were displayed in his museum and travelling circus show. Through a white-washed representation of Barnum's rise to fame, Gracey's musical shows Barnum as heavily invested in the lives and employment of the people he, in reality, exploited for economic gain.

Regarding the mermaid, patrons were mired by the narratives and advertisement hype applied to the object and, as many scholars have expressed, the authenticity of these objects was confirmed through Barnum's accomplices who posed as naturalists or witnesses to his stories and displays. In the case of the Feejee Mermaid, Barnum's accomplice, Levi Lyman who posed as Dr. Griffin, was staged as a naturalist from the London Lyceum of Natural History (Leja 55; Reiss 181). Highlighted by her choice to entitle the work *viva la* ("long live"), Brewer's replication of the mermaid in her *Viva La Barnum* sculpture shows how objects and narratives continue to be circulated through visual culture.

Despite the celebratory tone of her sculpture *Viva la Barnum*, Brewer's other taxidermied nonhuman animals are represented in ways that are critical of sensationalist forms of monster-making in the history of taxidermy. Brewer's aesthetic is not only informed by the sideshow aesthetics commonly associated with P.T. Barnum, but also the taxidermy styles of one of Britain's most famous taxidermists, Walter Potter (1835-1918). Potter's taxidermy sculpture of a

lamb with two heads and four eyes is an intertext for Brewer's critical reframing of *lusus naturae*. Potter is most famous for his anthropomorphic approach to taxidermy. His taxidermic aesthetic depicted nonhuman animals in human actions and clothing in tableaux that Henning (2007) likens to dolls and doll houses (p. 670-671). Potter's dioramas or tableaux were displayed at his museum in Bramber, Sussex, England. His tableaux included common (nonhuman) animals and pets, such as birds, cats, cavies, toads, squirrels, rabbits and rats—animals that "resided in close proximity to humans and were easily acquired in the local environs" (Amato, 2015, p. 218). In the tableaux displays, nonhuman animals "play sports, get married, fill schoolrooms and clubs, but they also illustrate well known sayings, rhymes, and rural myths" (Henning, 2007, p. 663). According to Amato (2015), Potter's tableaux symbolized "as vestiges of Victorian sensibilities, consumer practices, and the diverse meanings of Victorians ascribed to taxidermy" (p. 182); "His vignettes show no signs of industrialism, poverty, class struggle, political strife, or imperial expansion; instead his animals all seem to know and enjoy their place in the social order" (Amato, 2015, p. 219).

In opposition to Potter's anthropomorphic tableaux, he also preserved and collected nonhuman animals with perceived nonnormative bodies. Among these nonhuman animal bodies were a three-legged piglet, four-legged chicken, two-headed lamb, two-headed kitten and six-legged cat that were each donated to Potter's collection by local farmers (Morris and Ebenstein, 2014, p. 18; Amato, 2015, p. 217). The collected "aberrations" were particularly popular with museum visitors. The two-headed lamb, for instance, was featured on postcards and sold at the museum as confirmation of the (nonhuman) animal's existence (Morris and Ebenstein, 2014, p. 19). As an intertext for Brewer's taxidermy, Potter's two-headed lamb (Fig. 3) was recreated by

Fig. 3: Walter Potter, *Lamb with Two Heads & Four Eyes.* Photo postcards from Potter's collection at the Bramber Museum (closed in the 1970s).

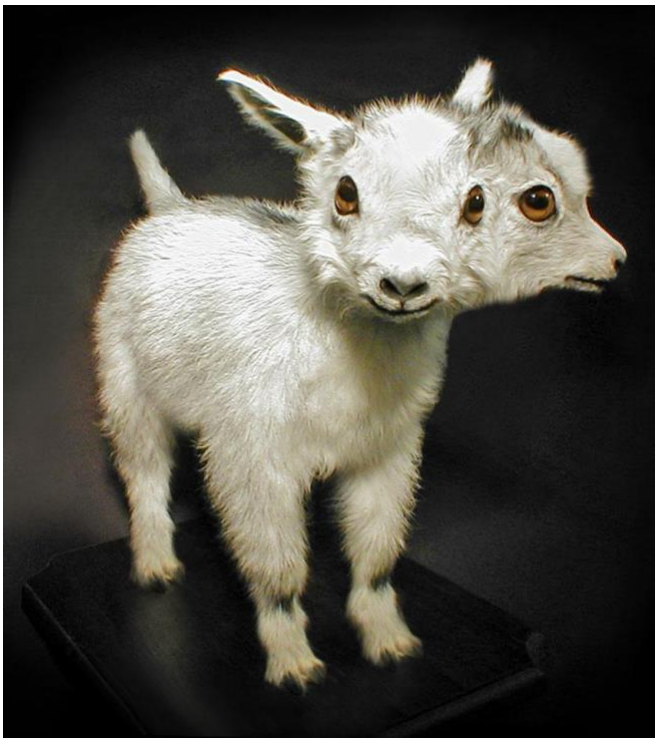

Fig. 4: Sarina Brewer, *Barnyard Bastard*, 2004. Two-headed lamb, taxidermy. Image used with permission from artist, © Sarina Brewer.

Brewer who staged the taxidermied body under the title of *Barnyard Bastard* (Fig. 4). Brewer's two-headed lamb is white in colour and is mounted with a black backdrop. Brewer's decision to stage the two-headed lamb without a nature scene backdrop draws attention to the ways in which nonnormative farm animal bodies are made objects through the ableist gaze. As a stand-alone sculpture, onlookers are invited to recognize the taxidermied nonhuman animal body—as an object—without the framed painted backdrop that so often produces the fantasy of sublime

(nonhuman) animal life in harmony with sublime nature through realist aesthetics. Indeed, Brewer's version of the two-headed lamb follows the aesthetic principles of traditional taxidermy championed by taxidermists such as Potter and other American realist taxidermists like Carl Akeley; however, Brewer's lack of backdrop and critical caption creates a different type of encounter. Brewer's sculpture mocks the anxiety and guilt of progeny placed on women's bodies through the symbolic use of "bastard"—a derogatory word for an illegitimate child born out of wedlock—seen in her art piece's title.

According to Shildrick (2002), monsters are produced by a "general anxiety about origins, and the relationship between maternal and foetal bodies" (p. 29). Likewise, Garland-Thomson (2003) writes that children born (dead or alive) in antiquity with atypical bodies were called "monsters and prodigies" and were "signs from the gods or omens about the future" (p. 129). Beliefs of god's role in creating abnormal bodies in order to provide a message extended beyond the antiquity; however, as Shildrick (2002) writes, beginning in the late modernist period, the narrative about monsters changed to reflect more "naturalistic" and "scientific" hypotheses for "atypical" births (p. 34). Shildrick states that eighteenth-century beliefs were a form of epigenetics where monstrous births were a product of the mother's impression of the external world; she writes that:

> [t]he concept of maternal imagination, or maternal impressions as it was more often known, held that the disordered thoughts and sensations experienced by a prospective mother during pregnancy were somehow transmitted to her foetus such that at birth the child's body, and sometimes its mind, was marked by corresponding signs. (Shildrick, 2002, p. 32-33)

Because of this feared power of the maternal imaginary, Shildrick (1996) writes that "to produce

the monster marks the *potency* and *danger* of unbridled female imagination" (p. 4, emphasis added). The shift from "God's will" to the "maternal imagination" more apparently show women's role in the creation of monstrous births (Shildrick, 2003, p. 34). In the nineteenth century, however, these beliefs began to diminish and were replaced by perspectives that bodily "abnormalities" were "part of God's great order of creatures and subject to scientific study and classification, as were all creatures" (Bogdan, 2014, p. 27)[4].

While nineteenth century displays of taxidermied "atypical" nonhuman animal bodies were displayed as entertainment objects throughout Western Europe and North America, advances and expanses in agriculture meant that perceived "abnormal" nonhuman animal bodies were not anatomically 'fit' to conduct the work expected of their bodies and, as a result, many of these nonhuman animals were killed (Arluke and Bogdan 2010, p. 120). While historically nonhuman animals with disabilities were put to death for the inability to function as beasts of burden, Taylor (2013) writes that in the contemporary context of the factory farm, nonhuman animals are manufactured to be disabled (p. 761). She states that:

> Industrialized farm animals not only live in such cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions that disabilities become common but also are literally bred and violently altered to physically damaging extremes, where udders produce too much milk for a cow's body to hold, where turkeys cannot bear the weight of their own giant breasts, and where chickens are left with amputated beaks that make it difficult for them to eat. (Taylor, 2013, p. 761)

4 These beliefs were not wholeheartedly diminished; however, as Craton (2009) points out, the shows of Juliana Pastrana continued to be disrupted in the nineteenth century in part by the presumed "public health risk" of Pastrana's performance on the "unborn children of pregnant viewers" (p. 2).

Fig. 5: Sarina Brewer, *Turducken à la Monsanto*, 2014. Duck, turkey, chicken, taxidermy. Image used with permission from artist, © Sarina Brewer.

Through the creation of nonnormative bodies in her art, Brewer critically stages taxidermy sculptures that criticize big agribusiness conglomerates for biotechnologies and genetic manipulation and also the consumption of nonhuman animal bodies through meat dishes. For instance, Brewer's 2014 sculpture *Turducken à la Monsanto* (Fig. 5) criticizes "Monsanto" for the effects it has caused on the environment (and its beings) and egregious forms of nonhuman animal testing (Robin, 2011, p. 141-142), while simultaneously criticizing the meat practice of "stuffing" the dead body of a chicken into the body of a duck and then into the body of a turkey. Brewer's sculpture stages a duck body with three heads—the head of a duck (left), turkey (middle), and chicken (right). Her *Turducken* sculpture expands species boundaries through cryptozoology, given that—as of the present time—a duck/chicken/turkey hybrid has yet to exist or be encountered by humans (beyond the meat dish). Brewer's sculpture can be considered subversive for her critique of (nonhuman) animal rights abuses, such as the haunting effects of "stuffing"—read as both taxidermy stuffing and the stuffing of domesticated farm

animals (through the "turducken" meat dish) and also the technologies of genetic manipulation that seek to change nonhuman animals to enhance the production of meat and (nonhuman) animal by-products. Despite the subversive potential of her taxidermy art, there continues to be lingering questions about the human right to display nonhuman animals. The practice of taxidermy continues to be a regular practice in the present and the use of postmortem nonhuman animal materials continues to be a popular medium in contemporary art.

The ethical implications of using nonhuman animal bodies as objects for political art entangle rogue taxidermy artists in the domination of nonhuman animals (alive and dead) and also make artists complicit within the history of body display that was founded on various forms of discrimination. The access and permission to place nonhuman animal bodies on display—from the outset—shows a normalization of human domination over nonhuman animal bodies. Alas, these material histories and present realities highlight the ways in which the practice of taxidermy—which is for the purposes of display—is bound up with a complex and problematic history of human and nonhuman animal exploitation. As I have argued elsewhere, rogue taxidermy artists sit in a contradictory position in relation to animal rights. For instance, rogue taxidermists are, undeniably, implicated in a tradition of violence against nonhuman animals in their use of dead animal materials for contemporary (and arguably political) taxidermy art; however, the automatic dismissal of this art practice fails to acknowledge the numerous ways in which rogue taxidermy artists do, indeed, critique and undo the very systems that perpetuate postmortem nonhuman animal experimentation, preservation, and exhibition (Niittynen, 2015, p. 13).

The debate over the right to use nonhuman animal bodies after death continues to be contentious and, I argue, there are no easy answers offered, especially in relation to practices that

take place across differing relationships to nonhuman animals based on human cultures, epistemologies, and worldviews. What is clear, however, is that rogue taxidermy art demands critical reception and acknowledgement of the historical forms of display that often go undiscussed when bodies are encountered in the museum space. Though situationally different, the historical display of human and nonhuman animals is interrelated and reinforce the complex narratives of inter- and intraspecies difference.

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