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Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality (review)

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modern federal attack on Indian communities. Upon reflection, the reader can see in this story the roots of change in tribal leaders' perceptions of how to work the system, the roots of modern tribal governing systems in relation to federal policy, and the limitations of and opportunities for tribal self-determination in the modern era. This book brings to light the efforts of a broad variety of Native leaders who shaped the future of Indian intellectualism, Indian policy, and tribal development in the latter twentieth century. It will be used best in upper-division or graduate courses and is essential reading for anyone attempting to understand the forces of change and the precursors to AIM in the years between the end of the Second World War and 1970.

REVIEW ESSAY by *Greg Johnson*

Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality

by Pauline Wakeham
University of Minnesota Press, 2008

A central, organizing taxonomic device of numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century North American museums bespeaks the layered and complex cultural politics of late colonialism. Namely, the placement of indigenous cultural exhibits in natural history museums—often alongside a backdrop of wild animals—reveals the ways in which native peoples have been imagined, engaged, and reconstituted throughout various periods of colonial history as specimens of nature. This taxonomy of natives as nature locates indigenous fates in a narrative of historical progress wherein nature simultaneously provides the grounds for and bears the costs of the advance of “civilization.” While other scholars have reflected upon this museological phenomenon, cultural studies scholar Pauline Wakeham reinvigorates analysis of the cultural logic behind such troubling taxonomies, showing the ways they are regnant in various discourses up to the present. Wakeham launches *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* through an interrogation of the fraught juxtaposition of simulated indigenous cultures and people with preserved and stuffed animal skins in various museum settings. Wakeham ferrets out the logic that binds these museological forms in the process of developing a theory of taxidermic signs and the linked processes of destruction, recovery, and nostalgia enabled by this “active colonial logic” (14). Wakeham argues that “‘taxidermy’ may be conceptualized as a sign system inclusive of but not restricted to the literal stuffing of skins that reproduces a continually rearticulating network of signs that manipulate the categories of humans and animals, culture and nature, and life and death in the service of white supremacy” (6). Pursuing her

robust thesis, Wakeham traces taxidermic logic through an interesting and revealing range of manifestations, including tourist sites, cinema, audio recordings, and, more recently, repatriation disputes. Across this range of cases, Wakeham argues for a theory of taxidermic signs in the mode of a “political economy of semiotics” (16), insisting that her chosen analytical trope of taxidermy functions not merely as a metaphor. Taxidermic habits of mind, insists Wakeham, underpin “white” engagements with “aboriginality” in direct if permutable ways. Her attempt to argue this point is at turns illuminating and strained.

The strengths of *Taxidermic Signs* include the incisive manner in which Wakeham brings contemporary cultural studies theory to bear on historical formations and cultural practices that have not always received the analytical attention they merit. Engaging such thinkers as Paul Gilroy, Donna Haraway, Johannes Fabian, and James Clifford, Wakeham’s theoretical musings are cast in conversation with a range of leading lights. Theoretical insights that emerge from these engagements include attention to questions of temporality, affect, and the limitations of liberalism. While thus locating her theoretical investments at the cutting edge of a number of fields, the degree to which Wakeham compellingly illuminates theoretical issues through her case studies is, to my mind, less clear. That said, *Taxidermic Signs* performs a genuine service through bringing a fresh and destabilizing perspective on the technologies and politics of colonial mimesis. By insisting that the salient issues in her case studies are decipherable neither as mere politics nor as innocent representations, Wakeham positions herself in a venerable genealogy of semioticians who regard social life as always and everywhere constituted by the politics of signs and the signs of politics. Indeed, in its best moments *Taxidermic Signs* calls to mind Roland Barthes’s classic *Mythologies*, piercing the screen of everyday projections in order to shed light on hidden logics and the social forms they sustain.

Wakeham’s bursts of insight are most persuasive and least formulaic when she addresses non-literal “taxidermic” discourses. The most focused discussion of concrete taxidermy, which is found in chapter 1, entails a “reading” of the Banff Park Museum and sets the tone for the book but does not offer particularly unexpected interpretations of this “museum within a museum.” Chapters 2 and 3 address ethnographic films—those of Edward Curtis and Marius Barbeau, respectively—and push toward genuinely provocative analysis. Both chapters are especially instructive due to their comparative components wherein Wakeham contrasts the “original” films with their later reconstructions, effectively getting at the semiotics of taxidermy across several decades and their concomitant ideological shifts. Chapter 4 is the most politically sensitive of the case studies, taking on the contested terrain of repatriation. Despite her outspoken politics, Wakeham’s

contribution here is found in the fact that she is not directly implicated in these debates. Most repatriation literature is sharply partisan, emerging from the camps of those directly affected by recent laws and politics shifts, including museum professionals, archaeologists, legal professionals, and, of course, indigenous communities. Each of these groups has provided telling commentary on repatriation, but there is an understandable tendency in these works to address issues in narrowly pragmatic terms. Seldom have scholars stepped back to pose questions about the larger framework of cultural politics beneath the skin of repatriation. Wakeham does so by taking up the infamous Kennewick Man dispute and the less known Canadian counterpart, the fate of Long Ago Person Found (aka "B.C. Iceman"). She poses difficult questions about the enunciation of race and science discourses and the inverse silencing of oral histories at work in these poignant and legally pivotal contexts. This latter point is particularly suggestive in light of Wakeham's earlier discussion in the book about the embalming of oral tradition through emergent audio technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Applying her taxidermic hermeneutic to both instances, Wakeham shows how what was sought in one era—a record of native voices—was nonetheless denied in another by means of a consistent but politically reshaped cultural logic.

If the strength of *Taxidermic Signs* is found in its persistently engaged theorizing, then one of its weaknesses is found here, too. Wakeham has a penchant for jargon as well as for reiteration, the combination of which can be stultifying at times. A related problem is that the author sometimes moves quickly to theoretical rumination without building a sufficient foundation on primary source material. The book is not bereft of research, but more could have been done. In particular, had Wakeham conducted more primary research in the repatriation context, she might then be less ready to lump archaeologists as belonging to a "colonialist discipline" (177). Archaeologists range a wide spectrum in their relationship to and support of repatriation laws, and some have been tireless proponents of various indigenous communities. Beyond her treatment of archaeologists, a tendency to make fairly broad judgments about various disciplines and their representatives bedevils *Taxidermic Signs* and is symptomatic of a general treatment of "whiteness" in occasionally monolithic terms, which fails to detect adequately or analyze sufficiently gradations of non-native intentions and practices, not all of which follow the logic of taxidermy. By contrast, Wakeham is careful not to collapse native voices, but then again very few actually enter her work. While this lacuna does not derail the force of her argument—it is a book about non-native representations—*Taxidermic Signs* would offer more to readers in various branches of indigenous studies if Wakeham had included more indigenous interlocutors.

Taxidermic Signs marks a provocative and at times compelling exploration of colonial logics and practices, and especially of how “taxidermic modes of representation perpetually rearticulate past-ness and perpetuity in dynamic configurations” (17). Readers interested in the application of semiotics to colonial representations of native subjects will find it particularly instructive.

REVIEW ESSAY by *Leanne Simpson*

Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation

by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008

In searching through the database of racist slurs that have been hurled at me over my life as a Nishnaabekwe, I'm not sure I've ever actually been called “neolithic.” And I've never read an entire book (published in 2008, no less) that attempts to convince me that my caveman ways are inferior, outdated, and responsible for my maldevelopment and that of my Indigenous relations. I've never read a book that actually re-casts colonialism and residential schools as saviors for Indigenous peoples, primarily because the authors took it upon themselves to relegate their cartoonish characterization of Indigenous cultures inferior to all things European.

Until now.

I want to be up front with you. I am a Mississauga woman, I am a scholar, and I am a wholehearted advocate for Indigenous peoples. I believe Indigenous peoples have complex, intricate, and relevant intellectual traditions. I love my people, my land, and my culture, and I believe our political systems hold great promise for re-envisioning our relationships with state governments—all beliefs that the authors of this book, Francis Widdowson and her husband, Albert Howard, dismiss as deception, lies, and “traditional quackery” (255).

Throughout my professional life, Widdowson and Howard have misused my work, which is rooted in decolonizing and Indigenist theory and the work of my colleagues to advance their Euro-centric, neo-assimilative political agenda reminiscent of the nineteenth century. And for over ten years now, Indigenous scholars and our allies have critiqued Widdowson and Howard's work, only to be met with strikingly willful and committed ignorance and constant charges of anti-intellectualism, emotionalism, and romanticism, because, as they claim in this work, we have built our careers around obscuring the fact that Indigenous peoples are culturally inferior and neolithic in order to