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# “To Talk of Many Things”: Chaotic Empathy and Anxieties of Victorian Taxidermy in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

LIN YOUNG



THE EPONYMOUS heroine of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) traverses a mad dreamscape, one in which playing cards are employed as gardeners, flamingos serve as croquet mallets, and white rabbits wear waistcoats. For the Victorian Alice, the fantastical absurdity of *Wonderland* lies in the notion that the capacity for consciousness, identity, and employment extends from human to animal to object. At precisely the same time that Carroll was dreaming up these categorically confused characters, the world of Victorian taxidermy was undergoing a series of crucial changes that saw seemingly straightforward animal bodies designed for the natural history display evolve into charming and charismatic anthropomorphic creatures. When placed in the larger context of the Victorian preoccupation with natural history and the rise of anthropomorphic taxidermy as a popular entertainment, Carroll’s representation of a tangled hierarchy of consciousness can be understood as a subversion of the nineteenth century’s appetite for a categorical and governable natural world that must, in some way, address the ever-shifting role of the human within that world.

This paper will argue that the modes of being as understood by the Victorians—namely, those of human, animal, and object—exist in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as products of an imagined process of assembly and disassembly. By exploring three distinct representations of “assembled” identity in the text—the human-object, the animal-object, and the human-animal—I will demonstrate that Carroll extends the capacity to be rendered down into parts (and, by extension, to be reassembled into alternative shapes) to all three imagined categories of being, removing the delineating lines between human, animal, and object in such a way that the individual features of each particular group become interchangeable with those of other groups. The result of this is twofold: first, it enables us to read the epistemic anxieties inherent in the display and organization of the Victorian natural history museum into *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, particularly as they are reflected in the evolution of taxidermy from a purely categorical, instructional tool that insists on the separation of identities, into the realm of anthropomorphism, which imagines a kind of blended identity. Second, by engaging with these anxieties and extending the capacity for objecthood to all categories of being,

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be situated as a key text in the evolution of the Victorian it-narrative and its increasing concern for the faculty of empathy, allowing for a kind of "object identity" to exist without the structures of human ownership.<sup>1</sup> This paper thus identifies *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a vital intersection between two evolving modes of Victorian observation—the human observation of the animal-object and the imagined reversal of that gaze in the animal-object's observation of the human. In understanding *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a product of these two prototypical Victorian approaches to increasingly tenuous hierarchies among human, animal, and object, we must read *Wonderland* as both the result and the embodiment of an extended rearrangement and reconfiguration of the catalogue of life in the nineteenth century.

Critics have long noted that Lewis Carroll had some interest in natural history, and particularly so during *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's* period of production: he was a regular museum-goer, and his diary records his desire to "borrow a Natural History to help in illustrating *Alice's Adventures*" (*Diaries* 193), though the potential influence of taxidermy on his work has thus far been overlooked. Arguably this influence began in 1851, when he was said to have attended the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London. The Great Exhibition is particularly notable for introducing the Victorian public to the anthropomorphic taxidermy of Hermann Ploucquet, whose animal tableaux involving "frogs having a shave, kittens serving tea, and a marten acting as a schoolmaster" (Morris 4–5) were immensely popular with the Victorian public; the *Illustrated London News* published illustrations of them, and Queen Victoria herself wrote of them in her diary (8). It seems only logical to assume that Carroll, who had a documented fascination with both natural history and fantastical curiosities such as puppetry, automata, and magic tricks (Fisher 14–15), would have made a point of visiting the animal tableaux. Pat Morris's work on Walter Potter, another famous taxidermist of the era, details the rising popularity of anthropomorphic taxidermy in the years following the exhibition. Whether or not a young Potter might have taken in the Ploucquet tableaux, he nonetheless further popularized the practice and would go on to produce perhaps the most famous and widely advertised example of Victorian anthropomorphic taxidermy, *The Death & Burial of Cock Robin*, in 1861 (Morris 9). One year later, in the summer of 1862, Carroll would entertain Alice Liddell with the first incarnation of the Alice in *Wonderland* story. Significantly, the Victorian vogue for anthropomorphic taxidermy began in the decade preceding *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and arguably hit its peak popularity with Potter's *The Death & Burial of Cock Robin*, at which time Carroll was developing his novel.

The Great Exhibition encapsulates the process of exchange that occurs much more commonly in the display practices of natural history museums, wherein the human gazes on an objectified animal and recognizes it as two distinctly separate categories of existence: animal and object. The cultural

climate within which Ploucquet and Potter were working was one that the taxidermic animal helped define, but, as Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues in *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture*, it was not intended to overlap with human identity. Before anthropomorphic taxidermy began to “[draw] attention to the links between humans and animals and anxieties related to humans’ place in the natural world” (Talairach-Vielmas 124), the Victorians understood taxidermy particularly as a means through which their place in the natural world could be conveyed and reaffirmed. Considering the appeal of fairy tales, Talairach-Vielmas writes that “controlling nature was at the heart of Victorian preoccupations” (125), and the museum, with its taxidermy displays, aided in the preservation of clearly articulated categories of being. Early-nineteenth-century taxidermy sought both to preserve nature and to bring it *inside*, to confine it either through museum displays designed for public consumption, where “attempts to reproduce the experience of encountering an exemplary member of the species in the wild” (Creaney 12) could be experienced inside a curated space, or through the private collections found in many home studies. Museum displays were arranged so as to suggest the categorization of the taxidermic subjects in a conceptual hierarchy of life. As one contemporary visitor notes when describing the educational value of taxidermy, “It is not the objects themselves that [the average working man] sees there and wonders at, that make this impression, so much as the order and evident science which he cannot but recognize in the manner in which they are grouped and arranged” (Forbes 9). Modern-day natural history curator Geoffrey Swinney elaborates on this claim, asserting that “the ordered arrangement of the museum menagerie (as a whole) has vitality in directing (human) social structures.” The hypothetical visitor can recognize “his proper place in the natural order of the world—a place from which he should not seek to stray” (229–30). This arrangement of human, animal, and object implies a relationship among all three that is at once fundamentally separate but unavoidably interconnected, if only implicitly: the animal, when represented as an object, is key to defining the human. The human, then, by virtue of the comparison, is understood as that which is neither animal nor object.

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* troubles this early categorical gaze in many ways. In *Wonderland*, the three delegations of identity—human, animal, and object—come into happy, tangled conflict with one another. *Wonderland* thus operates contrary to the order that typifies Victorian natural history museums, with white rabbits serving playing cards, duchesses nursing baby pigs, and hatters keeping time with Time. Carroll effectively clips the red velvet rope between them; there are no clear, consistent barriers separating the animals, objects, and humans from one another, nor does the capacity for language, consciousness, or intelligence seem to be particularly notable in one group over the other. The most subversive element of Carroll’s natural world, however, comes in his imagining these subjects not merely

as rearranged but as both psychologically and physically *blended*. Not only do opposing identities keep easy company with one another, but isolated bodies often exist simultaneously as one *and* the other. In other words, Carroll's work lies not in reorganizing the individual models but in dismantling them entirely, breaking the bodies down into parts like any good taxidermist and remoulding new ones that embody dual—and at times, even triple—categorical identities. Specifically, there are three sets of conflated identities in the text: the animal-object (such as the flamingo mallet), the human-object (such as the Queen of Hearts), and the human-animal (such as the anthropomorphic White Rabbit). I have arranged my discussion of each category in such a way that each grouping speaks to different approaches to Victorian taxidermy as it evolved throughout the century—the educational museum piece, the dramatic narrative display, and the anthropomorphic taxidermy of Ploucquet and Potter. In this way, we may observe the ways in which the tensions inherent in taxidermy changed over the course of the nineteenth century, and how Carroll's text invokes and subverts the tensions among the categories of human, animal, and object.

I turn first to discussing the animal-object, which most strongly exemplifies the major Victorian anxieties embodied by taxidermy *before* the Great Exhibition and, in particular, educational museum taxidermy. This category describes a state of being wherein the animal is understood to perform the function of an object. Erica Fudge describes, in reference to the Renaissance, the “concurrent status of animals as both agents and matter” as one reflective of an inability to separate animal from product (42). The “animal-made-object” (42), as she terms it, highlights the animal body as one with the capacity to become, at any time, a literal object—for example, the use of fur or skin to produce clothing, the shaping of bones into tools, or other matter that might be of “use” to a human party. In the Victorian period, the specific appeal of mounted animals was in their “authentic” animality—namely, as Schaffer describes in her work on Victorian handicrafts, that they (alongside other crafts that expressed this “naturalistic urge” [41]) “could be the thing, not merely represent it” (41). Many amateur taxidermists were young women who could find instructions in magazines like *Cassell's Household Guide*, which ran several articles with titles such as “Stuffing and Preserving Birds and Other Animals” (335). These articles instructed them, among other things, to remove the animal's brain, wings (if possessed), skin, ears, and eyeballs in an effort to produce stuffed bodies that were simultaneously understood as “authentic” animals and “[d]ecorative [a]rt” objects (Cassell's 335). On a smaller scale, these parts could also be transformed into new products entirely, such as fish-scale embroidery and pigeon-feather screens, a practice which highlights the animal's seemingly endless capacity to be transformed into multiple objects through processes of disassembly and reassembly. Thus, the individual components of an animal, when separated from the contextual whole of a living, breathing creature,

are instantly transformed when separated into objects. The taxidermic animal in the museum display, then, represents an attempt to construct the animal from the object, to reverse the transformation made when the animal was first taken apart, and to create, through the objectified body, an observably “authentic” animal, reassembled. This desire for authentic preservation, however, is ultimately troubled by the fundamentally objectified nature of taxidermic bodies, as mounted animals necessarily existed simultaneously as both animal and object.

Animal-objects in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* literalize the concept of animals-turned-objects in a way that recalls the status of the taxidermic animal as both creature and commodity. Carroll’s famous riddle, “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” (104), sets the tone for Wonderland’s absurdist museum: the inanimate object of the desk is placed alongside the animal raven in a way that—unlike the museum, which seeks separation and strict categorization—begs the reader to examine both entities and consider their possible similarities. Their imagined similarity implies a kind of interchangeable identity: a raven and a writing-desk, in Wonderland, are easily placed alongside one another in a way that troubles the scientific order and arrangement of a museum display. Animal-objects such as the Queen of Hearts’ flamingo croquet mallet and hedgehog croquet balls have not been physically broken down into parts and reassembled as mounted objects, but they nonetheless occupy a space somewhere within the imagined process of taxidermy itself, existing both as “authentic” creatures and embodied objects. Carroll makes a point of insisting that the hedgehogs and flamingoes are both “live” (117), and their dual identity as animal-object is one that the staunchly Victorian Alice struggles to interpret. Her first attempt to “use” the flamingo mallet is one that ignores its animality and engages it solely on the grounds of its objecthood. Describing her difficulty, Carroll writes:

She succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing . . . (117)

Here, Alice’s interactions with the flamingo mallet are concerned with the individual parts: the legs, the neck, and the head. She attempts to pose and position these objectified parts in a functional way, before the mallet rears its head and confronts her with its presence. The Queen’s game has rules that the playing cards know to follow—they leap into position readily—which implies that the flamingo and hedgehog must be accustomed to such usage as regular tools of an established game. Therefore, the flamingo’s puzzlement

might reasonably be assumed to originate not from any objection that Alice is “using” it at all but rather that Alice is using it *wrongly*. The flamingo’s dual identity, then, asserts itself strongly in this scene: it is, at once, both animal enough to assert itself and object enough to perform its function as that of a physical tool for which its consciousness is not required. In this way, Carroll invokes the tensions inherent in educational taxidermy—that of simultaneous “authentic” agent *and* unambiguous matter—through absurdist means, ascribing the curious creature with the unique capacity to direct its own use to the human agent. In doing so, it forces the Victorian Alice to shift her gaze and re-evaluate her approach to the assumed functionality of both animal and object. In this way, Carroll begins to introduce us to an empathetic cross-species network of understanding: Alice must dissolve and renegotiate her assumed role of power to properly “use” the animal-object in a way that acknowledges its dual identity.

We see a similarly empathetic reconfiguration in the Mock Turtle. The Mock Turtle’s capacity for taxidermal transformation is perhaps not immediately obvious, as he exists more as fantasy creature than literal animal. Regardless, the Mock Turtle’s origin as “the *thing* Mock Turtle Soup is made from” (126, emphasis added) situates him immediately as both an objectified thing and a participant in an imagined process of assembly and disassembly. The process of piecing together a mock turtle soup involves the separation and combination of disparate animal parts; Martha Lloyd suggests taking a calf’s head, scalding off the hair, cutting up the brains, and severing the horns into pieces, among other things (Lloyd, qtd. in Boyle). The animal body (whether turtle or calf) is understood as interchangeable parts, which, when assembled, create the soup—a process that recalls the deconstruction of the animal body into potential products. The Mock Turtle’s famous lamentation that “[o]nce . . . I was a real Turtle” (Carroll 128) therefore takes on a new meaning in the context of the animal body as *product*. The emphasis on “mock” turtle implies a lack of authenticity (particularly as mock turtle soup was invented as a substitution for “authentic” green turtle soup (Foy 38)), and yet the capacity—or former capacity—for “authentic” experience and identity remains, at least in memory. The Mock Turtle exhibits all signs of life and intelligence—he speaks, feels, and retains memory, amongst other things—and yet he insists upon an inauthentic identity, one that involves an implied experience of reassembly: he was once an animal, but has since become inauthentic, a “mock” turtle. The concept of the Mock Turtle existing as a physical being is one in which Carroll highlights his capacity to be rendered into parts and transformed into a kind of food-object. His potential objecthood is further emphasized by his description of himself as “too stiff” (130) to stretch or faint, a phrase that highlights his lack of vitality in a way that might recall an immovable object. The Mock Turtle is thus understood as embodying an assembled identity that combines both object and animal, one that invokes museum taxidermy’s conflation of animal and object. All

taxidermic animals are, after all, “mock” creatures, but the Mock Turtle’s lament over his objectified state, a mode of being that is emphasized by a literal gaze-reversal as the Turtle “look[s] at them with large eyes full of tears” (127), demands sympathy from Alice, who “pit[ies] him deeply” (127). Here, the Mock-Turtle’s piteous gaze forbids Alice from engaging with the Mock Turtle solely on the grounds of his imagined functionality as an assembled object, thereby complicating her relationship to both animal and object in a way that is antithetical to the natural history display.

The second conflated identity of the text, the human-object, reflects the increasing tendency of educational taxidermy to evoke emotion-driven narratives. The Victorians were certainly not unaware of the potential for taxidermy to undermine the position of humans as superior to that of both animal and object, even before anthropomorphic taxidermy became fashionable. Intriguingly, there was some debate between educators and taxidermists as to the appropriateness of “dramatic” taxidermy, which would pose the animal in such a way as to suggest an emotional narrative, such as one in which an animal expresses fear or anger when confronted by a predator. In 1852, W.S.W. Ruschenberger objected to these emotional narratives, accusing them of being the product of a “vulgar and ephemeral curiosity which manifests itself in a desire to see what is not commonly held in nature” (45). The vehemence of Ruschenberger’s sentiments reveals an underlying anxiety that the “authentic” human could be identified in the objectified body of an animal, which represents a state of being wherein “the human becomes a mouldable body” (Fudge 49) in the same way as the taxidermic animal. Ruschenberger here advocates that nature be simultaneously brought inside the walls of human civilization and then pushed out again, relegated to a space wholly separate from any kind of human experience or emotion. “For most of Victoria’s reign,” Carla Yanni explains, “men of science tried to keep natural knowledge safe from encroaching theatricality: a stage set would undermine the authenticity of the natural objects, and authenticity was the only reason for museums to exist” (30). Again, the notion of “authentic” taxidermy is being invoked—and yet, oddly, it was possible—and, in fact, even common—for taxidermic animals to be largely constructed from manufactured materials, which included such things as glass eyes, artificial armature, and wax moulded parts. If the animal can be wholly recreated by object materials, and the qualities of the human can be identified in the animal, then what prevents humans from being imagined in terms of objectified parts? Dramatic narrative taxidermy imagines that human qualities may be captured in the animal-object, thereby highlighting those qualities as capable of dissemination and insertion into objectified bodies in and of themselves. Essentially, it implies that the human, too, may be put on display and find itself subject to the demands of museum functionality.

This state of the human as matter is very much present in *Wonderland*, most memorably in the Queen of Hearts, and perhaps more subversively



in the mention of Time at the mad tea party. The Queen takes on a particularly dominant role in the text, and though she most resembles a human monarch, her humanity is both undermined and complicated by her objecthood. Carroll's illustrations of the Queen in his original manuscript (*Alice's Adventures Under Ground* 88) show a human figure with sharp, cut-out edges, which contrast with the smoother lines used to represent Alice, who is portrayed as a playing card removed from her backing. This portrayal of the Queen not only as a personification of the image on a playing card but as a literal playing card herself is also reflected in Tenniel's illustrations, wherein he "draws the card figures, including the King and the executioner, so that they appear two-dimensional and flattened in space" (Carter). The implicit separation of the Queen from her card highlights the object inherent in her physiognomy while simultaneously revealing the potential for humanity to assert itself *through* the object. Her power and dominance over others comes from her status as queen—a uniquely human identity—and yet, as Carroll reminds us, she remains one of the pack; of her playing-card gardeners, he writes, "for, as they were lying on their faces, and the pattern on their backs was the same as the rest of the pack, she could not tell whether they were gardeners, or soldiers, or courtiers, or three of her own children" (122). Notably, playing cards are printed with uniform backs so as to avoid signalling the value of the card-face, the implication in this context being that "human" playing cards—be they queen, gardener, or courtier—are at constant risk of being flipped over, thereby having their human identities erased in favour of an object identity that renders them one of many identical parts. The Queen's dominion over her object subjects—like that of the human who fancies her- or himself the dominant species—is undermined by her capacity to lose her empowering human identity if she finds herself "flipped." Further, the idea of the deck is one with a particular affinity for assembly and disassembly: specifically, through the assembling of cards in particular order to create identifiable hands and the disassembling of those hands when shuffled again. In Wonderland, Carroll extends the assembly of playing cards into the realm of human social structures in a way that undermines the political and social stability of human identities, be they queen or gardener. In other words, the presence of human identity in these easily assembled and disassembled objects speaks to the same anxieties invoked in dramatic taxidermy: that of the human being's value being undermined by his or her capacity for objectification, of being transformed into the object observed rather than the empowered observer. By the same token, however, Alice's will and that of other human characters, such as the Duchess, are frequently dominated by the object-queen, as the Queen of Hearts possesses the power to have the Duchess arrested, to direct the court of justice, and to force Alice to conform to her rules of croquet. When Alice decries the Queen and her playing cards as "nothing but a pack of cards" (74), she is essentially attempting to disempower the Queen and her fellow cards by denying their

humanity and identifying them solely on the grounds of their objecthood. The result of this is not a newly empowered human Alice, but rather one subdued and defeated by a sudden onslaught of playing-card soldiers piling on top of her, transforming her effectively into merely another card in the pack. Here, Carroll makes sport of the idea of any kind of imagined human superiority over the object world and punishes Alice's refusal to empathetically identify the cards as both object and human by ejecting her wholesale from Wonderland, as the attack serves to wake her from the dream.

The human-object is similarly found in the personified Time, who occupies an invisible place at the mad tea party. The initial depiction of time, in chapter 7, is that of an abstract concept, one that is represented and epitomized by the very physical object of the watch. The Hare, the Hatter, and Alice discuss the watch at length, only for the Hatter to later insist that Time is, in fact, a man, deserving of a humanizing pronoun: "If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him'" (106). Time, then, acts either as a human asserting itself through an object or as an object asserting itself through a human. He is omniscient, he is approachable, and yet his primary role is one of functionality: he tells the time. "Does your watch tell you what year it is?" (105) asks the Hatter, and the dual meaning of the word "tell" implies both a clock-face and literal human speech. The "telling of time" becomes a command to Time both as a watch and a human, as the Hatter later elaborates: "you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling!" (106). Here, Time's "voice" becomes synonymous with the machinations of the clock, and the movement of the watch is depicted as having conscious motivation and the capacity to understand and interpret human language. Carroll "mechanizes" Time's human qualities in a way that highlights their potential for functionality, thereby invoking the uncomfortable tensions created by the commodification of human qualities that was so feared by Ruschenberger and his fellow practitioners in emotional-narrative taxidermy. In effect, Time's ability to appropriate both object and human qualities in equal measures highlights the fundamental capacity for both identities to be assembled in a single being. Time's assembled identity as human-object is key to dismantling the power inherent in the museum gaze. The human element of his identity plays the dual role of observer and observed: while he is subject to the implied gaze of the human looking to the clock-face in order to tell the time, he also possesses the ability to observe others and form opinions on their characters. When Alice claims never to have spoken to Time (as one might to a human) but rather to have "beat time when [she] learn[ed] music," the Hatter suggests that this has offended Time, who "won't stand beating." He states, "if only you kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock" (106). This claim transmutes the notion of functionality into a gesture of human sympathy: if Time likes you, he will perform tasks for your benefit; if he doesn't, he will refuse. Here,

then, Time as a character serves to dismantle the museum barriers between human and object by turning functionality into an emotion-driven human quality, one that demands empathetic understanding of the human-object as a fully realized and actualized being.

We come at last, then, to the third conflated identity in the text: the human-animal, or the anthropomorphized animal. The evolution from traditional taxidermy to narrative taxidermy to anthropomorphic taxidermy occurred within Carroll's creative lifetime, and anthropomorphic taxidermy, as noted above, was at its peak popularity in the years immediately preceding *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's* publication. With the rise in popularity of domestic pet-keeping at the end of the eighteenth century (Seeber 10), which Kathleen Kete argues represents "a fantasy relationship of human and animal" (15), there was a growing potential within Victorian society for "new ways of thinking about the human-animal relationship and the proximity, rather than the inseparable gulf, between humans and animals" (Seeber 10–11). As Michelle Henning notes, "the anti-naturalistic taxidermy produced in the nineteenth century may be very revealing about nature—not nature as something eternal and outside human culture, but as something which is both cultural and historical" (664). Further, the popularity of humanized animals—or, perhaps, animalized humans—reflects a greater tendency in the mid-Victorian period to identify human qualities in animal subjects, revealing a far less secure conception of the natural world as truly, unambiguously categorical. In effect, anthropomorphic taxidermy brings the human into the realms of both the animal and the object, implying that the humanized subject may be stuffed, posed, and presented in the same manner as any objectified animal. The anthropomorphized animal, then, enjoys the most explicit triple identity of the three identified above: that of the animal, that of the human, and that of the object.

Wonderland certainly has no shortage of anthropomorphic animals. Their dual status as animal and human is most likely readily apparent to any reader familiar with the term *anthropomorphic*, but in Carroll's *Wonderland*, such creatures are also subject to a fundamentally objectified state of being. The Cheshire Cat, in particular, is introduced in the language of parts: Alice first notes its "very long claws and a great many teeth" (99), both points of emphasis in taxidermy. Later, when the Cat makes its reappearance, it does so through a literal process of assembly, appearing first as a disembodied set of teeth. Specifically, it addresses Alice "as soon as there was mouth enough for it to speak with" (118). The teeth represent a part separated from the whole, implying that a process of disassembly has occurred. The disassembled animal, as I have previously discussed, is almost always imagined in the language of objecthood, but here, the process of reassembly is such that the Cat's most human quality—its ability to speak—is emphasized over its capacity for objectification. The disassembled animal, then, is represented here as fundamentally humanlike. Carroll continues: "Alice waited till the

eyes appeared, and then nodded. 'It's no use speaking to it,' she thought, 'till its ears have come, or at least one of them.' In another minute the whole head appeared" (118). Here, we see that Alice's interactions with the Cat are designed to address the individual parts: its eyes and his ears in particular, separated from the contextual whole of his head, which is eventually assembled from these disparate parts. Alice's interactions with the parts again speak to the Cat's capacity for human identity: she waits for its eyes to communicate with a nod, and for its ears in order to speak to it, with the expectation that it will understand both verbal and non-verbal human communication. The Cat, then, operates to encapsulate the ways in which humanity can be identified in objectified parts, even if those parts are distinctively *animal* or *object* in nature. Alice's attempts to engage with distinctive animal or objectified parts on the grounds of its humanity—its capacity for speech or comprehension of human language—further demonstrate a greater capacity (however fleeting) in Alice to empathize with both animal and object.

Similar to the Cheshire Cat, many of Wonderland's human-animals are the victims of inconsistent, shifting pronouns, several of which transform them mid-scene from "it" to a specifically gendered "he." The Dormouse, in particular, is introduced in the language of objecthood, as his companions are "using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head" (103) while he sleeps on, unaware. In this moment, the Dormouse is being posed and positioned as a functional object while simultaneously exerting his own performance of life, as sleep is necessary only to the biological subject that requires energy to animate its body. Although the Dormouse is first referred to as "it" (103), he later spontaneously develops gender when "he consented to go on" (109, emphasis added), only to lose it again by the end of the chapter. Similar shifts occur to the March Hare and the White Rabbit, though stretched out over longer periods of the narrative, which makes the inconsistency a subtler one. While it was common to refer to animals as "it" in Victorian writing, the fluid shift between gendered and non-gendered identity takes on a different context when applied to anthropomorphized subjects; are they, as animals, more humanlike ("he") or objectlike ("it")? The pronouns are not a matter of indifference to the denizens of Wonderland, nor can they be considered interchangeable, even within the anarchy that is Wonderland logic. The Hatter, after all, insists that Time warrants a humanizing pronoun: "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him" (106). This pronoun fluidity, then, highlights a persistent destabilization of the categories of human and object to characterize animalized bodies. As in the world of anthropomorphic taxidermy, the capacity for animality, humanity, and objecthood becomes disassociated from referring specifically to animals, humans, and objects. Instead, they become combinations of qualities that any creature can enact and embody, which the creatures of Wonderland often do simultaneously. Thus, the qualities of

animality, objecthood, and humanity are not understood in terms of the museum's desired mutual exclusivity but as assembled features capable of forming blended identities, such as those found in the anthropomorphic taxidermal animal.

This democratic fluidity of identity is most obvious, perhaps, at the mad tea party in chapter 7, at which Carroll seats the March Hare, the Dormouse, and the Hatter on the same side of the table. As I have already established, the Dormouse and the March Hare are both subject to Carroll's slippery gender pronouns, and Time, as the silent fourth member of the party, is implicitly subject to the same fluidity, being represented as both a man and a watch. The Hatter, by comparison, appears curiously and simplistically singular in identity: he is human, with no apparent gesture toward animality or objecthood, except that he keeps exclusive company with these fluidly realized creatures. The Hatter, arguably, and despite his madness, appears closest to the Victorian conception of the human: utterly and unambiguously separate from animal and object. One might think that this entitles him to a distinguished position at the table, as a man among "lower" creatures. Victorian table etiquette demanded that "the host will take his seat at the foot of the table, and the hostess at the head" (T. Hill 159), an arrangement that relegated the guests to the sides of the table. In the context of a middle-to-upper class gathering, then, the host and hostess might be understood to hold positions of distinction and control over the guests, as they both plan and direct the execution of the meal through their servants. The metaphor of guests and hosts is one of implicit power: the host, like the human in the Victorian conception of the natural world, occupies a dominant and preferential role at the table. Significantly, however, this power is not enacted or invoked through Carroll's seating arrangements. He writes: "The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it" (103). We see that Alice herself takes an empty chair at "one end of the table" (103), which means that the end positions were not previously occupied by the Hatter, the Hare, or the Dormouse. The only other possibility is that Alice took the six o'clock position rather than the twelve o'clock position, which, given Carroll's description of the table as rather large, is unlikely, as she later appears close enough to "[look] over [the March Hare's] shoulder" (105). As the Dormouse is noted to be in the middle, this cements the initial order as Alice, Hare, Dormouse, and Hatter. Significantly, the Hatter is the farthest from the table's end, and when Alice takes the privileged spot for herself, the Hare accuses her of incivility—for Alice to assume a dominant position is considered *rude*. Furthermore, the two humans at the table, Alice and the Hatter, are positioned farthest away from one another to begin with—Alice in the end-seat, the Hatter on the side—as evidenced by his placement at the "crowded corner" of the otherwise "large" table (103). The table arrangement, then, becomes a mock museum display wherein the pieces are out of

position, arranged in nonsensical order rather than by biological similarity or species hierarchy.

The table arrangement is destabilized further when the Hatter demands they all move one seat over. As an allegory for the museum floor, the perpetual motion of the tea party draws attention to the party's lack of structure and order, particularly as it concerns any potential hierarchies of being. The motion of the tea party participants effectively removes Alice from the position of distinction at the head of the table while placing the Hatter in a position of imagined superiority. As Carroll writes, "The Hatter was the only one who got any advantage from the change: and Alice was a good deal worse off than before, as the March Hare had just upset the milk-jug into his plate" (109–10). Any advantage or disadvantage to the seating is thus realized as merely temporary: eventually, the Hatter will move on, inevitably claiming the table's end, but so too will the Dormouse and the March Hare. In fact, if the tea party has been going on since "last March" (106), then the table has presumably been circled multiple times. If they truly have "no time to wash the things between whiles" (108), is the Hatter's superior cup really cleaner than the rest? How much better can the Hatter's place truly be said to be? Any perceived advantage that the Hatter might have is arguably only imagined, and therefore the insistence that he has the best spot or the best cup becomes absurd. The illusion of advantage in this chaotic cycle is further underscored by the suddenness of the March Hare's mess, emphasizing that the attractiveness of any "place" along the table is random and subject to sudden change rather than dependent on any kind of placement or positioning of plates. This fantasy troubles the assumed dominant position of any one creature, representing a potential hierarchy as merely a cyclical, tangled cycle of chaos and complete disarray. The role of humans as a distinct, controlling force over an objectified nature is utterly disempowered at the Wonderland tea-table, further highlighting the humorous ways in which Carroll plays with the tensions of Victorian museum philosophies to establish his preference for chaotic empathy rather than rigid distinctions between classes of beings.

Even Alice, as Rose Lovell-Smith argues, is subject to transfiguration through the tenuous relationship between object and observer in Wonderland. Lovell-Smith observes that when the pigeon mistakes Alice for a serpent, "Carroll's reversal of the usual direction of the natural history gaze insinuates that humans may not be superior to 'nature' but may merely be animals themselves" (28). Through this reversal of the natural history gaze, Alice is fixed and disassembled, recategorized based on her individual parts rather than the substantive whole of her body or identity. The pigeon claims, "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that" (Carroll 90–91); it further claims that as both serpents and little girls eat eggs, the differences between them are immaterial. In effect,

Alice becomes the observed object due to her animal qualities, specifically her elongated neck, which “would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent” (90), and finds herself the subject of an absurdist museum gaze that seeks to redefine and reinterpret her as a blended creature rather than a separate entity. When Alice is categorized and made into a fixed object of observation by the animal gaze of the pigeon, the experience is so reorienting that she begins to doubt her own uncomplicated humanity: “‘I—I’m a little girl,’ said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day” (90). As a result, the blurred boundaries of Wonderland’s scattered museum floor become strikingly evocative of the nineteenth century’s changing “understandings of the relationship between the self and the physical world,” which, outside the museum, “were [being] fundamentally reconfigured through rapidly advancing industrialization, the unprecedented growth of consumer culture, and the rise of evolutionary theories, physiology, and other biological sciences” (Boehm 3). This moment of the natural history subject observing Alice and fixing her with an ambiguous categorization is certainly a direct and playful response to the nineteenth-century museum’s mandate to “distinguish quite clearly between people, as subjects, and things, as objects” as a means of “handling material culture” (K. Hill 154), which I have proposed is exemplified in taxidermic animals. In doing so, it opens up Alice’s capacity to relate and identify with the non-human creatures of Wonderland, and even, at times, to begin to resemble them.

The fantasy of anthropomorphic taxidermy dependent on conceptions of objectified and reassembled parts is similar to that which subtends a genre that is not often associated with *Alice*, but that ought to be: the it-narrative. Blackwell describes the it-narrative as “an odd subgenre of the novel, a type of prose fiction in which inanimate objects (coins, waistcoats, pins, corkscrews, coaches) . . . serve as the central characters. Sometimes these characters enjoy a consciousness—and thus a perspective—of their own” (10). Characterizing the nineteenth-century it-narrative as distinct from the eighteenth-century tradition of circulation narratives, John Plotz describes Victorian objects as “cozy, personable, and willfully individual” (“Discreet Jewels” 333), and asks us to “frame the comparison between early eighteenth-century object narratives and their Victorian successors around the question of what it means to possess empathy” (334). Victorian it-narratives (or object narratives) took a more sentimental, individualized approach to the object than their eighteenth-century predecessors, invoking an “era in which a sparkling grate and a glowing fire offer a level of intimate satisfaction that is not so evidently produced by the presence of human companions” (Plotz, “Discreet Jewels” 333). Objects in Victorian stories were more frequently imagined as “contain[ing] hitherto undreamt of depths of personality” at the same time as they embodied the “worry . . . [that these objects were] no better than cold material” (Plotz, *Portable Property* 28). As

Elaine Freedgood points out, this new iteration of it-narratives evolved concurrently with Victorian commodity culture: the 1900s saw the development of copyright law, photographic images, intellectual property, wage labour, and an increase in the sale of previously entailed land (1). The it-narrative, when situated within this context, reveals an underlying tension wherein humans struggle with “how to understand themselves as subjects who, more and more, [are] required to objectify and commodify parts of themselves” (83). When conscious objects turn their gazes upon human subjects, a process of exchange occurs: the object becomes humanized, and the human becomes objectified. This process becomes a mode of disassembling and reassembling identity that is made evident through the replication of an increasingly mutable nineteenth-century museum gaze. In our interactions with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, we must consider both the museum gaze and the gaze of the it-narrative as products of a similar tension, with *Alice* standing at the perfect intersection between these two emerging modes of observation. The Victorian it-narrative brings this increasingly empathetic museum gaze into the domestic space, refocusing it on human subjects in the same way as anthropomorphic taxidermy, culminating in an extended interrogation of the self in relation to the natural and material worlds around it. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* operates as a subversive extension of the it-narrative, exaggerating the structures of the genre in order to interrogate its own boundaries in the same way as taxidermy does implicitly. Beyond merely identifying the it-narrative dynamic as a kind of reversal of the museum gaze, I argue that the specific effect of reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as a museum-inspired it-narrative is twofold, at least as it concerns the Victorian genre. First, it prompts us to reimagine a state of objecthood wherein possession and ownership are no longer definitive factors in categorizing the object/thing. Second, it turns the concept of functionality away from human benefit and toward reimagining function as dependent on the agency of the *object*. This turn operates as the conclusion of Carroll’s experiment with chaotic empathy in the text to imagine sympathy and interchangeability between modes of being.

Ownership is not an obvious feature of objecthood in *Wonderland*. The Dormouse, though he enacts an object-like function, is represented as a fellow companion in the democratic tea party, with a seat all his own; the playing cards similarly have no owner or player figure but rather a queen, similar to a human social system. Pointedly, those elements of their physiognomy that a human might find useful—the suits on their bodies, to make pairs in a card game—have meaning only inasmuch as they identify them as subjects of the Queen’s asserted (and, again, arbitrary, if she happens to be flipped over) authority. This removal of ownership as a necessary component to the it-narrative warps the politics of the object gaze considerably. As Freedgood notes, it-narratives place the human in the position of being “witnessed intimately by their possessions” (83). Removing the possessive context of



this gaze, wherein the human owns the object and thereby maintains his or her dominance over it, allows the object-gaze to reverse the human-object gaze: the object as autonomous witness turns the human into a display, to be interpreted and examined by the sentient object in the same way that taxidermy displays were specifically positioned to enlighten the viewer as to their place in the natural order. This functions as a key reversal of the traditional human-object gaze, in which the object is admired for either its functional use or the aesthetic pleasure it provides, which—when lacking the structure of the owner/possession dynamic—allows for the possibility of the objectification of the human subject. In effect, the human becomes the natural history subject of the object, which places the object in control of categorization. In Carroll's *Wonderland*, a world that is largely absent of owners and possessions, the it-narrative gaze is removed from the context of any consistent power dynamic that would implicate humans as the dominant members of any biological or non-biological hierarchy.

Carroll also employs the tropes of the it-narrative to trouble the question of functionality in relation to objecthood. Brown writes that objects become "things" when "they stop working for us" (4), and as a result, "the story of objects asserting themselves as things . . . is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). Certainly, no one could accuse the denizens of *Wonderland* of being helpful to the human Alice, and their functionality is infused with a kind of willful agency. Returning to the flamingo mallet and the hedgehog ball, we see that Alice's efforts to make both objects work for her is characterized by conflict. The hedgehogs refuse to wait on Alice's leisure, even at the risk of her displeasure: "it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away" (117). This positions the notion of functionality as pertaining to human use as absurd, as the objects in question assert their agency through an unwillingness to be used improperly—or, at least, on someone else's terms. If we briefly look beyond *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we see that the insects of Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) highlight this agency-through-functionality particularly well, as the Rocking-horse fly "gets about by swinging itself from branch to branch" (35), defying the stationary nature of such a toy when used by a human child (when rocking back and forth, after all, one hardly expects to actually get anywhere). Similarly, the Bread-and-Butterfly, a slapdash creature whose "wings are thin slices of Bread-and-butter, [whose] body is a crust, and [whose] head is a lump of sugar" (36), is built from components that emphasize the human hand: bread must be baked, and sugar does not naturally take the form of lumps. In this way, the Bread-and-Butterfly represents the "parts" of a meal, defying its function of nourishment. The Bread-and-Butterfly does not exist for the nutritional benefit of any human, and, in fact, it subsists itself on "weak tea with cream in it" (36), a product of

human preparation. In this way, the creatures of Wonderland are functional in a way that benefits their survival and/or comfort. This understanding of functionality relates primarily to the creature's agency, turning the question of function into one of benefit to the self rather than to outward sources. In this way, the demonstration of selfhood is understood through Carroll's chaotic empathy as a process through which all creatures—human, animal, object—must negotiate for themselves.

Shifting the gaze of the it-narrative into the realm of natural history allows Carroll to extend the qualities of objecthood across a wider scope by imagining those who fall under the narrative eye as parts, either explicitly or implicitly. As his creatures uniformly express the capacity both to enact and to embody the object across all natural barriers, Carroll transforms a fundamentally categorizing gaze into one that understands its subjects as sutured rather than separate wholes. At its core, this network of chaotically empathetic beings literalizes many of the anxieties inherent in the Victorian anthropomorphized narrative as a whole, and thus operates as a lens through which we might understand the genre as a complex interrogation of a newly emerging triad of identity: human, animal, and object. As Freedgood notes:

If we read object narratives literally . . . the boundary between people and things seems remarkably permeable and this ontological uncertainty occurs in the very period that we generally think of as seeing the triumph and instantiation of commodity culture and the attendant harsh (and final) separation of people and things. (89)

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll seizes this persistent uncertainty, this potential for fluidity already being interrogated through the museum and the it-narrative, and turns it into a fantasy of nonsensical boundaries. In this way, he is able to twist increasingly empathetic modes of observation into a playful confrontation of his culture's anxieties about biological categorization and the objectification of human subjects. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* proposes a world of parts, haphazardly stitched together and equally capable of coming apart again, employing taxidermical imagery to compel a greater understanding of the mutability of categories such as human, animal, and object—and, by extension, to reimagine the definitions and functionalities of such categories entirely.

#### Notes

- 1 For more on it-narratives, which largely feature "owned" objects, see Plotz (*Portable Property*); Freedgood.
- 2 Ruschenberger would later become the president of the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia. Though he was American, Yanni reminds us that the same debate was occurring in England.

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