



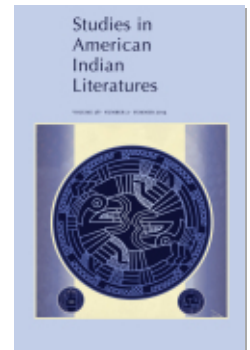
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Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality (review)

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Pauline Wakeham. *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. ISBN 978-0-8166-5054-5. 255 pp.

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In 1984 Donna Haraway published “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden,” her reading of the animals in Carl Akeley’s African dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History. In 2008 Pauline Wakeham, assistant professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, published her interpretation of a diorama of animals and humans in the Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum in Banff. According to Haraway, each of Akeley’s dioramas “has at least one animal that catches the viewer’s gaze . . . vigilant, ready to sound an alarm.” Nor are the “taxidermic specimens” in the Luxton diorama mere props, as they usually are in turn-of-the-century dioramas. In Banff plastic natives with blank stares are upstaged by stuffed animals who seem more alert and animated. In Wakeham’s reading, “the tableaux are accordingly overwritten by colonial discourse’s strategic conflation of the categories of animality and aboriginality—a discursive collapse that racializes native bodies and relegates them to a static space . . .” (2).

Haraway (whom Wakeham cites) stretched the meaning of *taxidermy* to include “social texts such as ethnographic photography and film.” Just as Haraway added a section on Akeley’s photography and his role in Martin Johnson’s safari film, Wakeham’s next chapter focuses on E. S. Curtis’s twenty-volume photographic collection, *The North American Indian* (1907–1930), and his film, *In the Land of the Headhunters: A Drama of Kwakiutl Life* (1914). Wakeham argues that these works demonstrate “the persistent appeal of colonialist and racist ideology that so ably buttresses the hegemonic status quo. It is the fantasy of allochronism and aboriginal death that abets the state and its apparatuses, as well as the forces of capital, in willfully overlooking the vital fact that Indigenous peoples are alive in North America today” (127). Film is also the subject of Wakeham’s next chapter. The restoration of the 1927 documentary *Nass River Indians* raises the disturbing question, “How might the work of postcolonial restoration be co-opted by the state to reclaim national plunder?” (163).

Wakeham departs from Haraway's pattern in her final chapter, stretching the term *taxidermy* to two different kinds of topics: "Kennebeck Man and the Reconstruction of Epidermalized Aboriginality" and "Kwaday Dan Ts'inchi and the Fetishization of Flesh." According to Wakeham, debates about these archaeological resurrections of American Indian bodies "constitute powerful examples of the ideological pitfalls and power asymmetries that continue to contour efforts to repatriate Aboriginal remains and cultural belongings" (201).

These valuable contributions to our understanding of American Indians suggest many more avenues for research, such as the wearing of the animal skin as "taxidermic sign" and the role of such signs in American Indian literature. To return one last time to the parallels with Haraway, the conclusion of her essay focuses on the exploitation of the natives in African safaris and on patriarchy in the American Museum of Natural History. However, in the center of her essay, immediately after stretching the term *taxidermy* to include photography and film, she turns to the stories in Akeley's *In Brightest Africa* and in his wife's biography of him. To future researchers, Wakeham's book may also suggest many links to stories. In *Black Elk Speaks*, for example, the wearing of animal skins is obviously at the center of the bison and elk ceremonies (xvii). Such stories from the past, of course, need not make us overlook "the vital fact that Indigenous peoples are alive in North America today." Ceremonies like those celebrated in *Black Elk Speaks* are the source of the wearing of skins in powwows today. Dressing in skins in these rituals suggests other avenues for research. For instance, one might contrast the powwow dancers to the wealthy city dwellers who strut about in furs. Behind this urban perversion of American Indian customs are, of course, the "forces of capital" that demand that animals be skinned alive for the sake of the fashion industry (127).