

**Getting Beyond the Plastinated Political Economy of
'Late Modern Cannibalism'¹**

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Bodies Inc.

Global capitalism and advanced biotechnology have released new medically incited “tastes” (a New Age gourmet cannibalism, perhaps) for human bodies, living and dead, for the skin and bones, flesh and blood, tissue, marrow and genetic material of “the other.” (Scheper-Hughes 2002b:54)

Premier Exhibitions, Inc., a multimillion dollar entertainment company based in Atlanta Georgia, is in the lucrative business of displaying flayed and preserved Chinese bodies in museums and shopping centers around the world.² Premier’s profits are growing on a quarterly basis as it increases the number of cities in which it launches *Bodies...the Exhibition*, which features a dozen or more ‘plastinated’ corpses in art-like poses demonstrative of active human life.³ *Bodies* is in fact so successful that the company’s most recent fiscal report for the first financial quarter of 2008 indicates that 80% of its 8.2 million dollar gross profit margin was generated from its nine macabre expositions touring Argentina, Spain, and the USA.⁴ The exhibits are justified by Premier and host institutions on the basis of educating the public about the intricacies of the human body and maintaining its health.

However, *Bodies* is protested in every city in which it is launched and was recently featured in an investigative report on the ABC news program *20/20* that aired across the USA in February of 2008. The report echoed the concerns of Elaine Catz, a former Education Coordinator for Science Content at Carnegie Science Center, who quit her job of 11 years after her institution hosted the exhibit in Pittsburgh despite the troubling circumstances around which the “specimens” for the exhibits are procured. Among her concerns and those of the people

protesting the expositions is that the bodies are rented by Premier from Dalian Medical University in China, which obtains cadavers from organizations of ill-repute, including the Chinese state police. All parties to the transfer of bodies, including the Chinese government, Dalian, and Premier agree that the subjects of the exhibition were “unclaimed” bodies processed and displayed without their expressed consent. There is also speculation that some of the plastinates are executed prisoners punished for acts of political and civil disobedience, including membership in organizations like Falun Gong.⁵

Protestors regularly picket in person the exhibits at locations like Cincinnati’s Museum Center, and virtually picket on websites including “The Anti-BODIES Virtual Protest Site.”⁶ A perusal of online postings and newspaper editorials reveal that criticisms concerning *Bodies* take a decidedly Western and liberal perspective, with a moral emphasis on respect for human dignity and the ethics of informed consent in relation to postmortem procedures. The following quote posted on a popular protest site is representative of this position:

To desecrate human bodies is immoral, irresponsible and an atrocity. Of course this desensitizes people to the value of fellow human beings. Of course it is a modern-day freak show. Of course it more than likely violates the wishes of the victims in the show to be displayed in such a manner.

Underpinning this logic is a consensus that the individual being is linked with a bounded and intact corporeal body- even after death- in what amounts to a metaphysical wholeness that contributes to a proper postmortem citizenship (Sheach Leith 2007). In this, the body is used as a moral/ethical metric for gauging the dilemmas posed by novel intersections of capitalist corporality and technology. These logics are laudable; but as Harvey (1996) reminds us, this Western view of the body dislocates it from its socionatural context and limits emancipatory praxis in subverting the social and material circumstances surrounding corporeal commodification. We thus need to intervene with a socially-just ontological basis for protest if

we desire to shut down corporations that seek to turn us into plastic for their profit. I therefore suggest as an alternative critique that we acknowledge that it is the *unbounded* composition of the human body that makes the destitute particularly vulnerable to cannibalistic forms of unjust social reproduction.

Wanted Dead ~~or~~ Alive

Harvey (2000), echoing Foucault's sentiments on the distribution of power, suggests that none of us- including our corporeal bodies- exists independently of uneven power relations with other bodies. And clearly, our bodies and their parts have long been produced and consumed in the (dis)empowering politics of commodification including slavery, wage labor, (il)legal organ trafficking, genetic biopiracy, among many others (Sharp 2000). In light of these horrible phenomena, why is a focus on commodification of dead bodies really that important? After all, cadavers are just lifeless meat, aren't they? Such an attitude is dangerous when we consider that uneven capitalist development today produces enormous numbers of vulnerable people with more market value *dead* than alive. Marx ([1887]1976) wrote of capital's penchant for producing an ever-growing underclass of expendable humanity; the annihilation of space with time makes it that much easier for markets to serve up their commodified bodies to hungry audiences around the world today. Unsurprisingly, there is a well-documented flow of bodies and/or their parts from the global South to the North (Cohen 2002).

But why have such gruesome markets been wildly successful? Patterson (1982) and Sharp (2000) aptly describe the success of markets in human bodies in terms of a process that objectifies the poor and marginalized with dehumanizing discourses that act to fetishize, or mask, the process of bodily commodification. "Extracted" bodily products (including organs, genetic materials, and even whole cadavers) are amputated from their larger physiological and

social attachments, leading to the “social death” of the “donating” subject. For example, organ trafficking markets within India rely on rhetoric of “gift relationships” and “reciprocity” whereby brokers and surgeons link the destitute Easterner bearing healthy kidneys to sick Westerners with lots of money. The claim is thus made that both parties “help” each other without acknowledging real power differences that render said “gift exchanges” less than reciprocal. Said rhetorical manipulation that objectifies body parts is central to what Sharp (2000:315) refers to as “semantic massage.” Marketing *Bodies* under the rubric of “health education” is just such a fetishism; it obfuscates the social (read health) conditions under which the people on display lived and eventually died, while claiming to benefit everyone else- or at least those people who can pay 25 dollars for admission. Klinenberg (2002:123) therefore stresses that we need to perform a “social autopsy” to discover the situations surrounding the deaths and dismemberments of “bodies that don’t matter.”

Capital’s Social Autopsy

A critical investigation into the death of people on display reveals what capital is really attempting when it replaces poor people’s bodily fluids with polymers. Haraway’s (1991:200) thesis on the production of bodies as “boundary projects” is particularly insightful here. She says boundaries that constitute the physical and social bodily subject come about only through “mapping practices” generated in social situations, hence bodies cannot pre-exist these conditions. In other words, late capitalist technologies constantly change and blur the boundaries between bodies and their environment; they penetrate, permeate, and fundamentally reconstitute the body in numerous profitable ways from cradle to grave. This is possible because the body’s boundaries are inherently porous, allowing for all manner of capitalist forays into the remotest reaches of our tissues (Martin 1998).

Capital, always seeking novel spatio-temporal investment opportunities, deploys plastination as a visualization technology to literally penetrate the porosity of the body, in turn exploding its space/time by feathering its muscles and replacing putrefying fluids with pleasant and permanent polymers. The technology turns these bodies into spatially expanded and temporally extended prostheses that support not life, but the extraction of monetary value where none existed before. This technological explosion of the body's space/time blurs corporeal boundaries in novel ways that permit crowds of voyeurs to safely peer into immortal versions of their own (un)bounded physiologies. Quite literally as Stern (2003:3) suggests then, plastination offers consumers the permanence of a "consumer heaven" that obfuscates the temporality and unevenness of our own social relations. As a result, poor people serve a perverse form of social reproduction whereby wealthier people cannibalistically consume the intimate details of their bodies in what amounts to a profitable and increasingly popular form of recreation.

We therefore need to start protecting the porosities of vulnerable living bodies by strengthening and defending vigorously the boundaries between those bodies and the infiltrating polymers. Fortunately, social relations have a way of breaking free from their plastinated bonds, revealing under the scrutiny of our social autopsy the brutal, corporeal realities that likely contribute to the transformation of indigent/incarcerated living bodies into modern-day wealth generating freak shows. We must therefore use what we learn from this autopsy to co-opt the body as an unfinished project from capital in order to remake it free from monetary value in whole or part, in life and in death.

The findings from our autopsy thus help to answer Harvey's questions (1996:277), "Whose body is it that is to be the measure of all things? And exactly how and what can it measure?" Let us consider these plastinated bodies as the dismal metric by which we launch a

resistance against predatory commodification of the corporeal through the establishment of new protective boundaries around all destitute bodies. In this difficult process we shall also consider plastinates a gruesome reminder of our failure to create a form of social reproduction that gets beyond cannibalizing its own global underclass. As geographers we potentially have much to contribute to the making of protective boundaries through our research. As sympathetic human beings, we must demand that governments, corporations, and body/organ brokers stop profiting from the sale of bodies and/or body parts procured from the destitute. The survival and prosperity of our species *as a whole* depends on it.

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¹ The term "late modern cannibalism" is coined in work by Scheper-Hughes (2002a; 2002b).

² Premier Exhibitions is traded on the NASDAQ under the prefix PRXI.

³ *Bodies... the Exhibition* should not be confused with Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds*, which obtains bodies from consenting Western donors.

⁴ Information taken from a transcript of Premier Exhibitions, Inc.'s first quarter 2008 earnings release conference call on 5 July 2007. <http://mysite.verizon.net/vzexqyla/anti-bodies-virtual-picket-line/id12.html> (last accessed on 3 March 2008).

⁵ There is growing evidence that prisoners in China are also proving a lucrative source of organs for illegal trafficking in human transplant tissues (Cohen 2001; Scheper-Hughes 2002b).

⁶ <http://mysite.verizon.net/vzexqyla/anti-bodies-virtual-picket-line/index.html> (last accessed 3 March 2008).